

Joseph Smith: The Athletic Prophet

Joseph Smith, founding prophet of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, was renowned for his love of rigorous physical activity and athletic prowess. His contemporaries frequently recalled his participation in wrestling matches, stick pulling contests, and various feats of strength that characterized antebellum America.



A Man of Remarkable Physical Stature

Historical sources reveal Joseph Smith possessed an impressive physical constitution. Standing over six feet tall—considerably above average for the 1830s—he weighed approximately 200 pounds with broad shoulders, muscular chest, and strong limbs.

Three factors contributed to his exceptional physique: genetic inheritance from his father Joseph Smith Sr. (6'2", 200 lbs), years of demanding farm labor including chopping wood and clearing land, and divine providence in preparing him for the physical trials ahead.

6'2

Height

Above average for his era

200

Weight (lbs)

Muscular build

Contemporary Descriptions

“

George Q. Cannon

"When he had achieved the prime of his manhood, he seemed to combine all attractions and excellencies. His physical person was the fit habitation of his exalted spirit. He was more than six feet in height, with an expansive chest and clean cut limbs—a staunch and graceful figure."

”

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Saint Louis Weekly Gazette, May 1844

"General Smith is in stature and proportion a very large man; and his figure would probably be called a fine one. His chest and shoulders are broad and muscular."

”



The Competitive Spirit

Beyond physical capability, Joseph Smith possessed an intensely competitive spirit that found great enjoyment in athletic competition. He excelled particularly in wrestling, stick pulling, and jumping contests—sports that showcased both strength and technique.

His natural athleticism combined with his competitive nature made him a formidable opponent in any physical contest, whether facing friends or foes.

Wrestling Styles of the Era

Side-Hold Wrestling

Contestants stood with outside feet together, grasping each other's upper forearm. Victory came by pulling, jerking, or throwing the opponent without losing balance.

Free-Style "Catch-as-Catch-Can"

Joseph's preferred style allowed almost any grip except strangle holds. The object was to throw the opponent from a pre-formed ring or circle rather than pin them to the ground.

Victory Over the Champion



The Brassfield Match

Major Joseph McGee of Gallatin, Missouri, recalled a memorable wrestling contest between Joseph Smith and John Brassfield, "the champion wrestler of the country."

Despite Brassfield's reputation, the Mormon leader won handily, throwing him "the first two falls out of a match of three." This victory demonstrated Joseph's exceptional skill even against the region's most accomplished wrestlers.

The Persistent Challenger

Wandle Mace, a Latter-day Saint who considered himself as strong as the Prophet, remembered Joseph's constant enthusiasm for competition. Whenever they met, Joseph would shake his hands and "pull me to him for a wrestle," though Mace consistently declined the invitation.

This persistence revealed Joseph's genuine love of sport and his desire to test his strength against worthy opponents, even those within his own faith community.



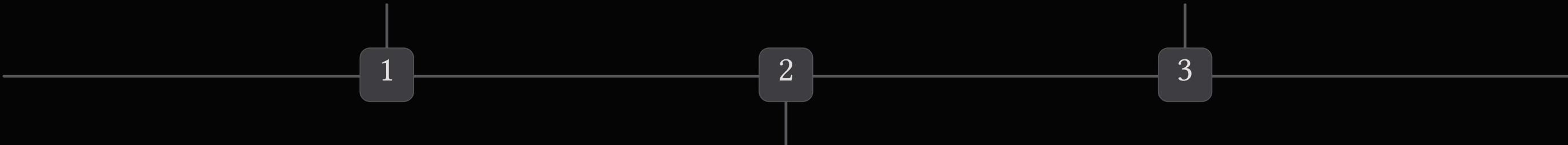
An Unfortunate Accident

The Challenge

Joseph challenged Howard Coray to wrestle, despite the significant size difference—Joseph at 200 lbs versus Coray's 130 lbs.

The Aftermath

Joseph immediately carried Coray inside, removed his boot, set the break with splinters and bandages, and visited him repeatedly that day to console him.



The Match

Joseph secured a lock on Coray's right leg and threw him around, breaking his leg three inches above the ankle joint.



Confronting His Enemies

Joseph Smith was particularly competitive with challengers who held hostile attitudes toward the Latter-day Saints. In April 1839, after five months of imprisonment in Missouri jails, he faced one such opponent.

The Daviess County Champion

The Setup

While being transported from Liberty to Gallatin for trial, Joseph and fellow prisoners were handed over to guards including the champion wrestler of Daviess County. Despite his weakened condition from months of unhealthy confinement, the guard repeatedly challenged him to a match.

The Victory

After several solicitations and a promise of no hard feelings, Joseph agreed. The Missourian made several attempts using trickery, but Joseph took the offensive and on his first pass threw the man flat on his back into a pool of water, much to the delight of the other guards.

Even Prophets Can Lose

Joseph Smith III remembered one man who prevailed over his father: Cornelius P. Lott, an elderly gentleman of considerable strength despite his age.

1

The Challenge

After defeating several men in wrestling, Joseph challenged the elderly Lott, who responded: "Well, my boy, if you'll take it catch-as-catch-can you can't throw old man Lott!"

2

The Contest

They ran together several times, but the best Joseph could do was get the old man down to his knees. He eventually gave up his efforts.

3

The Ribbing

Lott exclaimed triumphantly: "I told you, my boy, that you couldn't throw old man Lott!" The men gave Joseph good-natured badgering for his defeat.



Mastery of Stick Pulling

Joseph Smith was perhaps even more skilled at stick pulling than wrestling. In this contest, two men sat facing each other with feet touching, gripping a stick placed above their feet. Victory came when one pulled the other off the ground or forced them to lose their grip.

The activity could be done indoors or outdoors without getting dirty, making it ideal for impromptu competitions even while wearing nice clothes.

Documented Victories

1

March 11, 1843

"In the evening, when pulling sticks, I pulled up Justus A. Morse, the strongest man in Ramus, with one hand."

2

Upon Returning to Nauvoo

"I pulled sticks with the men coming along, and I pulled up with one hand the strongest man that could be found. Then two men tried, but they could not pull me up."

3

Benjamin F. Johnson's Testimony

In all the many occasions he witnessed Joseph compete in stick pulling, he never saw him beaten, noting Joseph "would allow no arrogance or undue liberties."

Jumping at a Mark

Joseph occasionally challenged others at jumping at a mark, similar to today's standing broad jump. One memorable incident involved sectarian ministers who visited to trap him with difficult scriptural questions.

After answering their inquiries and stumping them with his own questions, Joseph went outside, drew a mark on the ground, coiled his legs, leaped a considerable distance, and challenged: "Which one of you can beat that!"

The ministers were shocked at such conduct on the Sabbath day—which was exactly what Joseph expected. He could read their hearts and gave them opportunity to criticize.



Exercise for Mind, Body, and Spirit

Mental Clarity

Physical activity provided necessary breaks from intense study and administrative duties, refreshing his mind for continued work.

Spiritual Balance

Joseph recognized that keeping his "bow strung up all the time" would cause it to lose elasticity—the same principle applied to his mind and spirit.

Physical Health

As his lifestyle shifted from farmer to administrator, intentional exercise compensated for reduced physical labor.



Playing with the Children

John Hess recalled that when Joseph "got tired of studying he would go and play with the children in their games about the house, to give himself exercise. Then he would go back to his studies as before."

On February 8, 1843, Joseph's history recorded: "At four in the afternoon, I went out with my little Frederick, to exercise myself by sliding on the ice."

The Parable of the Prophet's Bow

"A certain prophet was sitting under the shade of a tree amusing himself when a hunter came along with his bow and arrow, and reproved him. The prophet asked if he kept his bow strung up all the time. The hunter said he did not. The prophet asked why, and he said it would lose its elasticity if he did. The prophet said it was just so with his mind, he did not want it strung up all the time."

Through this story, Joseph explained to Church members why he engaged in recreational activities—constant tension without relief diminishes effectiveness.



Lifting Spirits Through Activity

In October 1838, LDS militiamen encamped at Adam-ondi-Ahman faced cold rain that caused despondency. John D. Lee remembered Joseph's intervention:

"The Prophet came up while the brethren were moping around, and caught first one and then another and shook them up, and said, 'Get out of here, and wrestle, jump, run, do anything but mope around; warm yourselves up; this inactivity will not do for soldiers.'"

The Wrestling Tournament

01

The Challenge

Joseph's words put life and energy into the men. A ring was formed according to custom.

03

The Victory

Each contestant was thrown by the Prophet until he had defeated several of the stoutest men present.

02

The Competition

The Prophet stepped into the ring, ready for a tussle with any comer. Several went in to try their strength.

04

The Confrontation

Sidney Rigdon, angered that Joseph would encourage such activity on the Sabbath, attempted to break it up. Joseph intervened, defending the men's right to recreation.

The Snowball Battle



Days later, several inches of snow fell, causing the company to become despondent again. Eighteen-year-old Edward Stevenson remembered Joseph's solution:

"The Prophet seeing our forlorn condition called on us to form into two parties in Battle array, Lyman Wight at the head of one line and he heading the other line and have a sham battle, the weapons to be used were snowballs. And we set to with a will full of glee and fun."

Challenging Religious Sanctimony

Joseph hoped to dispel sanctimonious attitudes of religionists who believed athletics were inconsistent with Christianity. Many believed music, drama, dancing, and sports were inappropriate for believers—and absolutely impermissible for clergymen.

The Shocked Converts

Around 1833, a family came to Kirtland to meet the Prophet. Finding him romping and playing on the floor with his children, they were so shocked they apostatized from the Church.

Rachel Grant's Admission

Mother of President Heber J. Grant admitted Joseph's behavior initially caused her to question his prophetship. Hyrum impressed her more because he was more sedate and serious. "You see, there was a great deal of sectarianism about me."

The Baptist Minister

After conversing with Joseph, a Baptist minister was challenged to wrestle. Joseph started the contest and wrestled him to the ground. The visitor said "his piety had been awfully shocked" at such behavior from a man of God.



Bonding with Youth

Joseph saw athletic activities as a means of deepening bonds of love between himself and young LDS boys. When Hyrum chastised him for playing ball with children, Joseph explained:

"Brother Hyrum, my mingling with the boys in a harmless sport like this does not injure me in any way, but on the other hand it makes them happy and draws their hearts nearer to mine; and who knows but there may be young men among them who may sometime lay down their lives for me!"

Inventing New Games



The Problem

Children playing with a wooden ball over a house roof were told to leave by the proprietor concerned about damage.



The Solution

Joseph took them to a carpenter's shop and had wooden balls made on a lathe while he fashioned paddles from scrap wood.



The Game

He taught them to hit the ball with paddles, run to it, and hit it again until reaching a distant goal.



The Result

The activity gave them good exercise, tested their skills, and kept them busy for hours, keeping them out of mischief.

A Prophet Is Not Always a Prophet

The Principle

Joseph Smith taught: "A prophet is only a prophet when he is acting as such." This means prophets don't always act in their official capacity as prophet, seer, and revelator for the Lord.

They live in family units as sons, brothers, husbands, fathers, and grandfathers. As citizens, they have legal rights and responsibilities, can exercise privileges, state opinions, enjoy friendships, and pursue personal interests.

The Application

In simple terms, prophets are entitled to live like normal men and display "human" behavior separate from their ecclesiastical authority.

Joseph's callings of translator, first elder, apostle, Church President, prophet, seer, and revelator were given by divine commission—but he was also entitled to enjoy the pleasures and activities life offered outside his prophetic role.



The Complete Man

Joseph Smith's athleticism reveals profound truths about prophetic leadership. His physical strength, competitive spirit, and love of recreation weren't contradictions to his spiritual calling—they were integral parts of his humanity.

Through wrestling matches and snowball fights, stick pulling contests and games with children, Joseph demonstrated that spiritual leadership doesn't require abandoning joy, competition, or physical vitality. Instead, these activities deepened relationships, lifted spirits, challenged sanctimony, and reminded everyone that prophets, while divinely called, remain wonderfully, authentically human.