

Let them grunt: Showering cheap grace on sweating sinners

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [January 23, 2007](#) issue

When I was young I spent two summers “icing” refrigerated cars on Burlington trains. We shuttled, shirtless, atop railroad cars under the Sioux City sun to the 16-degree ice-making room, from which we dragged out 300-pound cakes of ice. Our Heil truck took the ice and us to the edge of bunkers, where we piked or smashed the cakes. The first few days were purgatorial, since the year-rounders tested us summer timers as we struggled, learning how to flip the ice cakes with our tongs, using thigh muscles instead of back muscles. Using back muscles was like weight lifting, and at first—like weight lifters—we grunted. Anyone who was still grunting in the second week, however, was derided, ostracized and shamed into leaving.

Albert Argibay was excommunicated from a Wappingers Falls, New York, gym for grunting. His humiliation made page one in the *New York Times* and I filed it. Because of circumstances too complex to narrate here, I am located ominously near a fitness center and may soon be inescapably committed to frequenting it. Before I become a sweating communicant I want to learn its grunt or no-grunt policy to know how I can fit in.

Oh, the embarrassment for Mr. Argibay! It took courage for the club to deal with him, for the toughie can hoist 500-pound weights on his shoulders, a feat to rival that of Atlas when compared to my lifting one end of 300-pound ice cakes. The priestess, a.k.a. manager, of the Planet Fitness sanctuary took on Argibay for violating “one of the club’s most sacred and strictly enforced rules. He was grunting.” Mr. A responded: “I’m not grunting, I’m breathing heavy.” The manager: “Meet me up front, I’m canceling your membership.” When he kept lifting and grunting, she called the police. *Times* reporter Anahad O’Connor reported that grunting, “rude as it may be,” is commonplace, part of the ritual in gyms. But the club’s manager insisted that grunters “can go elsewhere.” She will sound the “lunk alarm,” a siren that goes off when someone does anything that might offend or intimidate other members.

Enter science: a consulted expert says that “weight lifters produce between 2 and 5 percent more force when they grunt,” because the deep breathing stabilizes the spine.

Though I do not lift weights, I’d like to think that people are free to grunt, to work more efficiently, without facing expulsion and exile. The whole incident invoked biblical and theological themes, such invocation being a natural way to pass time while on fitness machines. “Judge not,” when someone near you is grunting. Realize that “fitness lunks” are engaging in work righteousness. Whoever engages in that ought to suffer. Their suffering pleases us snobby grace-full sorts. We are tempted to do that when we see someone grunting under the weight of evil-doing, which is biblically known as suffering “under the burden of sin.”

The Bible seems to have it in for pigs, and rules them out—along with their grunts. We imagine them grunting at lunch time or munch time as they share husks with the Prodigal Son, who grunts under the weight of his stupidity. Since it is not mentioned, we assume that grunting is such a despicable act that even among the lowest of the low, the piggier of the pig-companions, reference to it would be taboo.

Any club that will have me will find that I am into avoidance when it comes to anything grunt-producing. But if I’m accepted into the club I will be forgiving, showering “cheap grace” on the sweating sinners who do 2 to 5 percent better if I judge not and let them grunt. Sign me up.