

Getting girls was almost impossible for him and Stevens hints that this, perhaps above all else, spurred him to take action. The chance came one day when he was invited to view the film *Conan the Barbarian*, starring Arnold Schwarzenegger. It was a life-changing experience. Stevens was convinced that being tall could have its advantages if you built muscles into your large frame. He immediately began a punishing programme of pumping iron and within months the biceps had begun to swell. Bizarrely, idiots still challenged him to fights, but now he was able to deal with them in the knowledge that he would always win.

At University the former nerd, who as a teenager could neither catch, kick or throw a ball, became a sports freak – he became immersed in football, cricket and skateboarding. He joined the Army Reserve unit; he leant sword and melee fighting; did some karate and kick-boxing. In the end, he left University without a degree and became a professional wrestler. The shy, skinny youth now had the frame of a powerlifter with self-confidence to match. He was still set on becoming an actor, but saw few opportunities in Australia. Self-help books and tapes were a great inspiration at this time. He was introduced to the words of Jim Rohn: “Don’t wish that life was easier, wish that you were better.” This sentiment, he confesses, “has become the cornerstone of my life.” He left his homeland, began to travel the world. And he joined Mensa.

With the confirmation that he had a powerful brain in a powerful body, he now had no doubts about his abilities to do anything he set his mind to doing. Sadly, many people still insisted on seeing this giant as a ‘dumb hunk’. Even the producers of a recent film, *Bangkok Adrenaline*, which he wrote and starred in, dismissed him as “a big, stupid lug”... until he revealed his Mensa credentials. He feels that if such people won’t believe that Sylvester Stallone has an IQ of 160, and that psychologists now believe that the very intelligent are often athletes as well, that’s their problem.

Stevens told me of one particularly hilarious encounter with an American woman in a lift. On



asking him which floor he wanted he replied the eighth. On preparing to exit at the fourth she then spoke very slowly to him as if he was retarded – to which Stevens responded appropriately.

One wonders how he would have reacted if this insult had emerged from the mouth of a six foot guy in his forties rather than a little old woman. Might there have been blood in that lift? Apparently not. Stevens told me that violence never works. He just wants to get on with pursuing his dream.

His ambition is to make it big in Hollywood, but like all those waitresses, handymen, life guards and gas attendants who dream of acting alongside Matt Dillon or Gwyneth Paltrow he has no illusions about how easy it’s going to be. Although he is much more than just beefcake (he took acting lessons at primary school and can perform a variety of foreign accents) he knows that for most actors it’s a slog even to make a

living. He has some valuable advice for budding stars. For one thing, he says, you must never be too proud.

“As a young actor you will have to take any role you can get, often you won’t even be allowed to audition for an acting part, and will get ‘parts’ where you are brought in on the cattle truck with a hundred other extras. If you do see yourself in the finished product it will probably be the back of your head as you are sat in the background sipping coffee as the movie star walks past a coffee shop.”

According to Stevens you must always ask yourself whether you truly want to be an actor. If you do, you won’t mind starving as long as you are doing what you love. If full-time work gets in the way of your acting ambitions, you must work part time in menial jobs and take time off to attend auditions – for years if necessary. Accept any part if it helps pay the rent and gets you seen by the people that matter.

Conan did just that and after years of TV commercials for mattresses, biscuits and sportswear, bit parts in action movies, TV and theatre (he even appeared in Julian Clary’s *Sticky Moments*) he finally landed a decent role in a movie that paid \$10,000 for four weeks filming. For playing a swamp monster in a film version of the *Marvel* Comic *Man-Thing* he had to spend four weeks waist deep in water and covered in mud, getting up at unearthly hours in the morning or shooting at 11 at night.

This break was the first real step along the road to success - but it had its drawbacks. Having been in a bigger role he couldn’t go back to being an extra for \$100 a day; nor could he be a waiter again. Nevertheless, having money gives actors on their way up a feeling of euphoria, he says.

“The first month you go out and buy all those things you have not had for years – new shoes so you don’t get wet feet through the holes in your old ones, new socks and underwear, new jeans. You can even afford to start dating again. Life is pretty cool when you are a successful actor.”

Then the reality of your situation dawns. You have burnt your boats and must rely on gaining another big-paying part to stay afloat. But things don’t always go according to plan.

# Conan the Mensan