

Bernd Wedemeyer, Ph.D.

Bodybuilding in Germany in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

Translated from the German by Anthony Haywood

Ed Note: We would like to thank Dr. Arnd Kruger from the Georg-August University in Gottingen, Germany, for suggesting to Dr. Bernd Wedemeyer that he submit his history of German bodybuilding to *Iron Game History*

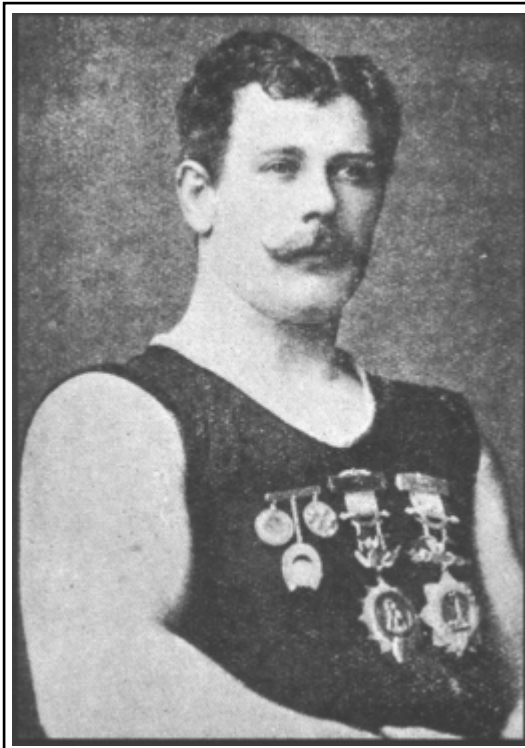


In the year 1924, the fourth volume of *The Handbook of Physical Education*, a general work edited by Carl Diem, founder of the German Academy for Physical Education in Berlin, appeared. This fourth volume was written by the Professor of Physical Education at Leipzig University, Hermann Altrock, and it included the fields of “wrestling and weightlifting.”

Altrock was a specialist in his subject and dealt with it both thoroughly and comprehensively. He produced accounts of strongmen performing on-stage or in circuses who, especially by the middle of the nineteenth century, had gained increasing popularity through their displays of skill and strength. Altrock also looked at tournaments held in the nineteenth century, the training programs for which had increasingly incorporated exercises with dumbbells and weights through the influence of philosophy professor, physical educationalist, teacher, and enthusiast of Greek antiquity, Otto Heinrich Jager (1828-1912). Altrock also provided an outline of German weightlifting and wrestling associations since their establishment in the 1880s. Due to a climbing membership rate, these associations were partly responsible for the inclusion of weightlifting as an Olympic sport in the 1896 Games. Altrock also dealt with the pentathlon, held in Germany since 1911 and comprised of weightlifting, shot-putting, hammer-throwing, weight-hurling, and tug-of-war. He also summarized exhibition bouts in wrestling, a sport gaining in popularity in the middle of the nineteenth century, and he provided a professional wrestler’s training program incorporating use of dumbbells and weights to attain increased strength. And finally, Altrock again described the rising popularity at the beginning of the

twentieth century of the use of light dumbbell exercises and bodybuilding for back complaints, the development of general robustness, or for toning and shaping the body.¹

Training with weights to increase strength and achieve an attractive body had become remarkably popular in Germany, England, and America between the late nineteenth and the first three decades of the twentieth century. In contrast to today’s thinking, the distinctions between weightlifting, bodybuilding, wrestling, and circus-strongman performances could not always be clearly drawn. The various disciplines were neither considered nor practiced separately and were sometimes even understood as an organic whole.



KARL ABS AT THE AGE OF THIRTY, DISPLAYING HIS LARGE ARM AND SOME OF HIS MEDALS.

PHOTO: TODD-MCLEAN COLLECTION

In this way the carpenter Carl Abs (1851-1895) of Hamburg first became recognized as a professional wrestler. In the 1880s he defeated a number of well-known wrestlers in exhibition matches and competed against the American wrestler William Muldoon during a visit to the United States. Abs, who became known as “The German Oak,” achieved his strength largely through dumbbell training, and he established several unofficial records for weightlifting, among other things. It was due in part to Abs’ popularity as a weightlifter that bodybuilding gained recognition as a means of strengthening the body and that so many weightlifting associations were founded in the period that immediately followed his successes Abs worked as a professional athlete on-stage, where he twisted horseshoes, juggled tree trunks and, by the use of a frame, lifted elephants. Abs working simultaneously as a wrestler, weightlifter, and strongman-acrobat did not suggest a contradiction but rather represented the complement of three related disciplines.²

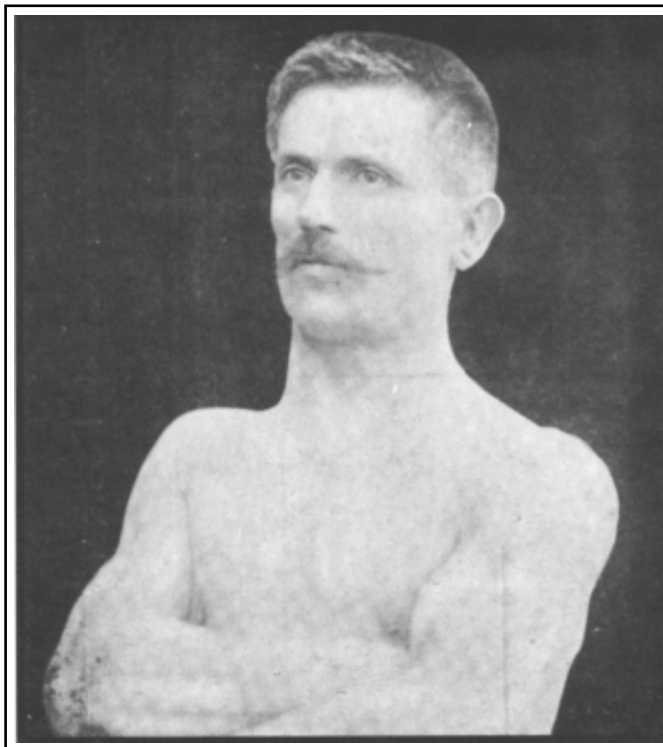
The strongman Bernhard Leitner (1865-

1959) first worked as a bank clerk in the local region of Elberfeld and was an active competitor in tournaments during his spare time. He then took up weightlifting and later appeared in the circus. His most famous acts involved breaking out of chains or using his body and planks to form a human see-saw that supported dancing horses or a small musical orchestra in full swing. In 1890, Leitner founded an athletics club in his hometown, where he continued to pursue weightlifting systematically. Leitner was just as active in the association as a weightlifter as he was on-stage as a circus artist. In 1897, he put his experience as a strongman and weightlifter to use by producing a modest book about his life and training techniques. The book was reprinted several times.³

The bodybuilder Theodor Siebert (1866-1961) was initially employed in his hometown of Alsleben, near Halle, as a restaurant proprietor and bookseller, but he earned his living as a bodybuilder/writer/teacher after 1892. Siebert wrote several exercise handbooks between 1898 and 1923, began publishing a monthly magazine on bodybuilding in 1902, and in 1901 founded a school for physical education in which, with the assistance of a medical practitioner, he helped the ill and incapacitated and trained professional athletes such as George Hackenschmidt and George Lurich. Siebert's books provided specialized instruction for bodybuilders interested in overall physical development weightlifters training within associations for competitions, and professional artists demonstrating their strength and skill with stage tricks. In many ways, Theodor Siebert was the first bodybuilder to begin developing such an overall approach to the subject.⁴

Even the incommensurably more popular and well-known athletes Friedrich Mueller, who performed as Eugen Sandow (1867-1925); George Hackenschmidt (1878-1968); and Max Unger (1878-1973), who took the stagename Lionel Strongfort, worked as international stage artists, wrestlers, and teachers. They lifted weights and competed for records, held lectures, founded specialist magazines and wrote exercise handbooks which were subsequently translated into several foreign languages. They also established academies and gave momentum to the bodybuilding movement through the sale of equipment or photographs and films which depicted their bodies.⁵

Selling books, opening training schools and moving closer to established sports and medical gymnastics not only allowed a unified view of the body to develop, it also ranked as an attempt by the bodybuilding movement to climb out of a ghetto and attain more recognition as a "serious" activity. Despite their popularity, professional performers—and all "strongmen" and "strongwomen"—were still considered social outsiders during the nineteenth and early twentieth century because neither their occupation, lifestyle, nor appearance corresponded to the audience's own bourgeois conceptions. The result was that many professional performers tried to secure a place for themselves within bourgeois society by "scientizing" their knowl-



THEODOR SIEBERT WAS FORTY-FOUR YEARS OLD IN THIS PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN IN 1909.

PHOTO: TODD-MCLEAN COLLECTION

edge, thereby escaping social stigmatization and, at the same time, improving themselves financially. This brought them in frequent contact with sports academics and physicians, tournament and gymnastics instructors, and wrestlers and weightlifters, all of whom, for their part, were keen to pick up on the idea. The above-cited description of wrestling and weightlifting provided by Hermann Altmann in 1924 clearly shows the reciprocal influences of this new direction, influences which were expressed in a wave of publications on the subject of bodybuilding.

Dozens of books appeared in Germany during the first three decades of the twentieth century, some reprinted in double figures, about wrestling, weightlifting, and bodybuilding. As was the case in America,⁶ these books contained tips on training and improving strength as well as suggestions on the "correct" healthy way of life, especially in regard to nutrition, hygiene general well-being, and an aware lifestyle. A "bodybuilding ideology" increasingly took shape, displaying an intellectual relationship to other contemporary models developed by alternative health movements. These numerous ideas and models were brought together around the turn of the century under the general term *Lebensreformbewegung*, or "Life Reform Movement."

The German Life Reform Movement, which reached its zenith between the late nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth century, was originally a movement to counteract industrialization and its side effects, such as a drift to the cities, poor nutrition, the housing crisis, sedentariness due to the nature of industrial or administrative work, increased urbanization, pollution, epidemics, and diseases of civilization. But the Reform Movement also strictly rejected cinema, theater, variety shows, prostitution, sexual liberation, tight-fitting garments, alcohol, and drugs and indulgences such as coffee or cigarettes as “unnatural,” amoral and, according to its own worldview, a hazard to people’s health. This decidedly moralistic approach occasionally gave the Life Reform Movement a reputation for backwardness: the “Lemonade Bourgeoisie” was the most popular term used to disparage its members.

Those who followed the Life Reform Movement wanted to “get back to nature,” and therefore embraced a “natural” lifestyle in rural settlements where they could indulge in fresh air, clothing which contained little or no synthetic fiber (or sometimes no clothing whatsoever), a healthy organic or vegetarian diet, natural remedies, and adequate exercise to ensure a strong and healthy body. Some of the movement’s principles also gained a footing in industrial society: comfortable “reform” clothing became commonly available and a chain of vegetarian restaurants was established, as were sanitariums and *kurorts* for the chronically ill. Conditions of hygiene were improved in the cities and a popular nudist movement took shape. A lively exchange of ideas tied the Life Reform Movement to a new “body-cult” which was expressed by a general enthusiasm for sport and the development of a variety of exercise methods designed to trim and strengthen the body. In terms of aims, methods and ideas, the bodybuilding movement contributed to this approach.

The primary aim of the bodybuilding movement was to develop an athletically perfect and healthy body while also overcoming illness, incapacity, and lack of condition. In the late nineteenth century, the emphasis still lay on increased strength, but symmetry, bodily aesthetics, and overall robustness were granted almost equal importance. The causes for what bodybuilders saw as “incapacity” were conclusively found in urbanization, lack of movement, the “modern” sedentary lifestyle, and disproportionate intellectual forms of work performed by “modern” people. This, according to the reformists’ theory, caused atrophy and disturbed the balance between body, soul, and spirit. The only possible means of escape was a systematic development of the bodies of men, women and children.⁷

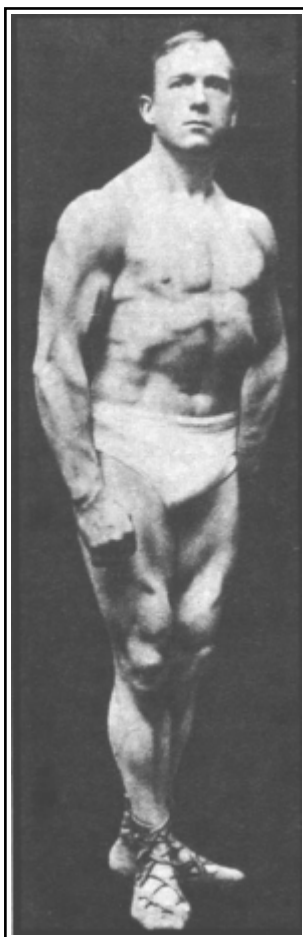
Training methods were developed by bodybuilders which were appropriate to the needs of men, women, and children. The doors of the gymnasium

founded in London by Eugen Sandow were thrown open to both sexes, and special exercises were developed for women which were intended to strengthen back muscles affected by use of the corset and to restore power to joints and muscles in the legs. At this time, corsets were also strictly rejected by many doctors and a few Life Reformers as unhealthy, unnatural, and ugly, but, notably, also as too erotic and arousing. Theodor Siebert instructed men, women, and children in his gymnasium, ensuring that they received exercises appropriate to their needs, and even George Hackenschmidt was convinced of the necessity for women to carry out weight training.⁸ Here, too, bodybuilders shared the same attitudes as the majority of body-cult adherents, some of whom demanded women’s exercises for many of those reasons above.⁹

Nevertheless, bodybuilders proved to be different from other bodycult “believers” in that their exercise methods laid the foundations for “progressive training”—the use of heavier and heavier weights to increase robustness. Most supporters of other training methods had rejected heavy dumbbells and heavy weights in general because they considered them too stressful and illness-causing. Such people were content with free-form exercises that were supposed to be performed only with light dumbbells, if with any at all. A number of health advocates felt that a muscular body was ugly, disproportionate and a disfiguration. Furthermore, little logic was seen in developing strong muscles as they were socially unnecessary and therefore pointless. However, support for bodybuilders did come from physiotherapists and doctors, who were using progressive weight training techniques to increase robustness or restore muscular function in the war-wounded or in patients whose muscles had become weak.

Bodybuilders trained with a variety of basic dumbbells, weights and expanders which applied pressure to individual muscle groups in isolation. This method, which could be seen as the precursor to present bodybuilding principles, subdivided the body into the regions of the chest, stomach, arms, shoulders, back and legs; and assigned specific dumbbell exercises to each region. Such a system had already been developed in the nineteenth century through Scandinavian and German gymnastics.¹⁰ Bodybuilders refined and enriched it in terms of using a progressive approach, and therefore brought about the possibility of specifically building up underdeveloped regions and consciously or methodically shaping the body. Not only should the body be enriched in terms of health, but it should also create an aesthetically worthwhile image: attractive, noble, and strong.¹¹

Ancient statues of athletes provided the aesthetic model, but so too did figures from German heroic epics. Bodybuilders and weightlifters adopted stage-names such as Milo, Samson, Siegfried or



AT 5'8" AND 180 POUNDS, MAX UNGER "LIONEL STRONGFORT" POSSESSED A SYMMETRICAL PHYSIQUE IN THE 1920s.

PHOTO: TODD-MCLEAN COLLECTION

Goliath, and they posed for photographs dressed in leopard skins, armed with spears, naked in chains, nestled among anvils, or courting ancient statues.

But weight work alone was not enough to create a new human image. The entire lifestyle had to be transformed in accordance to the principles of the Reform Movement. The “bodybuilding lifestyle” incorporated nutrition, clothing and bodycare tips; offered suggestions on controlled breathing; and recommended relaxation exercises which were supposed to relieve stress and produce a calming effect.

Value was placed on the consumption of fresh or, whenever possible, raw foodstuffs, little meat ample vegetables, fruits and nuts, whole foods, and clean water. Spices, sugar, coffee, alcohol, and cigarettes were strictly rejected. This brought bodybuilders into line with the contemporary advice of doctors, natural therapists, and Life Reformers.

Clothing should be loose, comfortable, and manufactured from natural material; and apartments and bedrooms had to be spacious, bright and dry, and, if possible, the air ought to be unpolluted by industry. Bodybuilders seemed to consider a natural state of undress as the most appropriate. In general, then, they comprised part of the general alternative trends of the time.

The principle stipulating a moderate lifestyle also included sexuality. Regular sexual intercourse and excessive emotionalism were judged to be symptomatic of decadence and industrial civilization. Hackenschmidt believed in a correlation between sexual abstinence and the development of strength, and therefore recommended exercising chastity. Siebert suggested a fourteen day abstinence from sex before carrying out any act of strength, and he approved of marriage as the correct channel for sexual intercourse. This brought the bodybuilders into line with general public views on sexuality. Abstinence was often called for out of a fear of immorality, venereal diseases, and the risk of hereditary damage.¹²

The “bodybuilder’s lifestyle” also touched generally upon a principle of anti-civilization and was directed at presumed values of those past cultures which were thought to have encouraged a natural way of life. Through this, bodybuilders contributed to an ideology of non-industrialization while paradoxically matching the efforts of their colleagues in other areas to create new opportunities to live a healthy, conscious life in an age of industrialization. Furthermore, bodybuilders were already then of the opinion that the development of the body automatically encouraged the development of such characteristics as bravery, self-respect, and self-confidence: a stable mind, a positive approach to life, and a greater potential for happiness were said to be among the benefits of bodybuilding.

However, the power unleashed by bodybuilding also had to serve the public, the place of employment, and ultimately the Fatherland. It was argued that a healthy body functioned better, was better equipped to perform, and—in discourse before 1914—could make a decisive contribution to victory in the event of a large-scale war. The bodybuilders’ condemnation of civilization therefore concurred directly with those interests of the modern industrial society in which they lived.

Bodybuilding’s first phase of popularity, which resulted in a large number of books and the development of an ideological foundation, reached a high point in Germany between 1900 and 1930, thus corresponding approximately to the zenith of the German Life Reform Movement. But due to the fact that many bodybuilders worked outside the associations, headed individual training schools, worked independently, or were active internationally, they proved difficult to integrate into the interests of the National Socialist state.

Eugen Sandow lived in England and was dead by 1925, George Lurich (1876-1919) died of typhus during a tour of the Caucasus, Lionel Strongfort and George Hackenschmidt passed most of their years in America and France, and Max Sick (1882-1961) emigrated to South America in 1933. Under National Socialism, many weightlifters and wrestlers went back to working for the circus, thus going into a form of internal exile. It was only in the 1970s and 1980s that bodybuilding in Germany recaptured the height of interest it had reached decades before. This is the level it maintains today.

Notes:

1. Herman Altröck, *Ring und Schwerathletik* (Berlin: 1924).
2. Lothar Groth, *Die starken Männer. Eine Geschichte der Kraftakrobatik* (Berlin: 1985): 42-45; Carl Abs, *Der unbesiegbare Meisterschaftsringer. Sein Leben und seine Taten. Nach Aufzeichnungen des Verstorbenen* (Hamburg: 1885).
3. Bernhard Leitner, *Wie wurde ich stark?* (Düsseldorf: 1897).
4. Theodor Siebert, *Katechismus der Athletik* (Leipzig: 1898); Theodor Siebert, *Der Kraftsport* (Leipzig: 1907); Theodor Siebert, *Der neue Kraftsport* (Leipzig: 1923).
5. Eugen Sandow, *Kraft und wie man sie erlangt* (Berlin: 1904); George Hackenschmidt, *Der Weg zur Kraft* (Leipzig: 1909); George Hackenschmidt, *Man and Cosmic Antagonism to Mind & Spirit*. (London: 1935); Lionel Strongfort, *Strongfortism* (Salzburg: circa 1928). See also: Terry Todd and Spencer Maxcy, “Muscles, Memory and and George Hackenschmidt,” *Iron Game History* 2(July 1992): 10-15.
6. Robert Ernst, *Weakness is a Crime: The Life of Bernarr Macfadden* (New York: 1991); Doug Bryant, “William Blaikie and Physical Fitness in late Nineteenth Century America,” *Iron Game History* 2(July 1992): 3-6.
7. Sandow, *Kraft*; 5-12; Hackenschmidt, *Weg*; 10; Siebert, *Kraftsport*, 11. See also: Josef Meiringer, *Höchste Muskelkraft durch 12 Hantelübungen* (Leipzig: 1900). 5.
8. Sandow, *Kraft*. 22; Siebert, *Kraftsport*, 119; Hackenschmidt. *Weg*, 27.
9. J.P. Müller, *Mein System* (Kopenhagen: 1904); Bess Mensendieck, *Körperlultur der Frau*, 6th ed. (München: 1919).
10. Daniel, Gottlob Moritz Schreiber, *Artzliche Zimmergymnastic* 6th ed. (Leipzig: 1859); E. Eiselen, *Hantelübungen für Turner und Zimmerturner* (Berlin: 1883); Moritz Kloss, *Hantel-Büchlein für Zimmerturner* (Leipzig: 1858).
11. Leitner. *Wie wurde ich stark?*, 5.
12. Hackenschmidt, *Weg*, 34-42; Siebert, *Kraftsport*, 92-102; Leitner, *Wie wurde ich stark?*. 8; Siebert, *Der neue Kraftsport*, 3-7.
13. Sandow, *Kraft*, 7-11; Leitner, *Wie wurde ich stark?*, 17-18; Siebert, *Kraftsport*, 14.