

HIPPOLYTE TRIAT

From: Edmond Desbonnet's
Les Rois de la Force

[*The Kings of Strength*]

Paris: Librairie Berger-Levrault, 1911

Translated and introduced by David Chapman

Weight training is the child of gymnastics. We sometimes forget that before strongmen lifted weights, they went to the palestra to race, vault, climb and practice all the other traditional forms of gymnastics. These early athletes gradually discovered that they could grow stronger and shapelier if they began lifting and working with weight. Gymnasts had trained with primitive weights the days of the ancient Greeks, but no one had created a rational system for using them. Like most endeavors, weight training was not an immediate discovery, rather it evolved over many years. But the quest for health, strength, and beauty received a dramatic impetus in the middle of the nineteenth century largely through the agency of an extraordinary man named Hippolyte Triat.

In many ways, Triat's biography reads like one of the "ripping yarns" that Victorians were so fond of: he was orphaned as a child, then kidnapped by gypsies who forced him to wear a dress and perform as a girl. In Spain he rescued a rich lady from a runaway horse, and she rewarded the plucky lad by paying for his education in an aristocratic school. Triat then went back to show business and worked as a strongman until he landed in Liège where he opened his first gymnasium in 1833. From there he opened other establishments in Brussels and Paris. He knew great success but also bitter failure and after falling afoul of the authorities for supporting the Paris Commune, he died alone and forgotten. As his biographer, Edmond Desbonnet, correctly notes, "Triat's life is a veritable romance. He knew the greatest joys and the most abject suffering, the greatest fortune and the most lamentable misery."¹ But

Triat's genius is derived not from his life, as colorful as that might have been. He is worth remembering for his pioneering work in introducing weight training to the fashionable, middle class world and in making a business success out of his enterprise. Triat's techniques in both realms were later imitated by other practitioners. His unfortunate end is a bitter example of a man who is ahead of his time; Triat's was the voice of the prophet crying in a world that had tired of listening. It would not heed his ideas for many more years to come, but by then his words came from the mouths of other men.

In order to understand Triat and his achievements, it is



HIPPOLYTE TRIAT'S BODY, SHOWN TO PERFECTION IN THIS EARLY PHOTOGRAPH, COMBINED POWER, SYMMETRY AND MASSIVE MUSCULARITY.
PHOTO COURTESY DAVID CHAPMAN

necessary to take a look at his times. The first decades of the nineteenth century were very unsettling. Napoleon Bonaparte was in the process of ravaging Europe, but he was also awakening victor and vanquished alike to the necessity of producing strong, reliant young men who could endure the many physical hardships of battle. It was amid this unrest and violence that the gymnastics movement was spawned. Friedrich Ludwig Jahn (1778-1852) began his Turnverein as a direct outcome of the Napoleonic Wars, and soon men in other countries likewise awoke to the possibilities of improving the potential recruits in their own nations.

Defeat in the wars slowed down France's interest in building strength and endurance among its soldiers, but France would not remain behind for long. It was at this time that an extraordinary Spanish immigrant named Francisco Amoros (1770-1848) appeared out of nowhere and convinced the French military to open a "normal school of gymnastics" in

1826. This organization was operated by the French Army which wanted the Spaniard to turn out fighting men who were fit and vigorous. The normal gymnasium operated until 1838 after which Amoros went to Paris where he opened a private establishment called the *Gymnase Civil et Orthopédique* which he oversaw until his death. The presence of this gymnasium in the French capital made the idea of working out commonplace to military men, but more important, to their civilian brothers as well. His was the first of many huge gymnasiums that were destined to become very popular.

Amoros put great faith in gymnastic apparatuses, especially the trapeze. This device had been invented by Italian tightrope walkers a century before, and had been appropriated by the Spanish instructor who believed in its ability to reform the French physique. Such was his faith in the device that Amoros reportedly had fifty-two ways to grip the trapeze, each producing a slightly different effect. The gymnasiums where these exercises were conducted were models of Spartan efficiency—comforts and niceties were rare. They were huge, drafty buildings filled with trapezes, ropes, beams, rope ladders, and masts. There were great piles of sawdust everywhere so as to break the fall of overconfident gymnasts, but an early visitor to the gym identified only as Dr. Wauquier, recalled that the sawdust was never changed, and thus was filthy with dust and other debris. The structure had many windows and skylights since gas lighting was in its infancy, and because of this the gym was icy in winter and baking in the summer. Wauquier was certain that the primitive building was responsible for his contracting rheumatism at the age of seventeen. “The workouts consisted of hanging by the hands or the knees on apparatuses suspended from crossbars. These gymnastics could be qualified as ‘monkey gymnastics’ and consisted of acrobatics and feats of strength; later there would be contests and public shows with parades accompanied by the sound of bugles and flags flying in the wind.”² By the 1840s Amoros had managed to prepare the French public for gymnasia and gymnastics, but it was Triat who was destined to put the sport into a palatable form of recreation for a much wider audience.

France in the mid-nineteenth century was still in great turmoil. There were political and social upheavals that threatened to rend the nation apart, but with the emergence of the Second Empire in 1848, a degree of stability was attained as the people of France settled down to make money and spend much of it on amusements. The tenor of the times might have been basically hedonistic, but Amoros had done his work well, and it soon became popular among the “yuppies” of the day to take up a course of gymnastics. Under the Second Empire, growing numbers of people were willing to submit to a grueling physical regimen in order to grow stronger and shapelier. The people who formed this fashionable pool of potential athletes were nearly all members of the newly enriched and enfranchised middle class. A sizeable segment of the population finally had the time and the money to spend on making muscles, and since they were ready to pay dearly to swing Indian clubs and lift dumbbells, Hippolyte Triat was there to cash in on this trend.

With a background as a theatrical strongman, Triat knew how to please the public. He had a finely tuned sense of showmanship, and he knew how to use it to attract large crowds to his establishments. But Triat was much more than simply a vaudeville per-

former; he was a man with a mission. He understood that exercise and fitness were salable products if the right marketing strategies could be devised, and that became one of his great contributions to the athletic world. Triat realized that people do not exercise simply to get strong, and he always maintained that his system was designed to encourage three things: strength, health, and beauty. Amoros and the other pioneers were only interested in making better soldiers; Triat knew that he could achieve much more than that.

As others saw the success Triat achieved with his fashionable gymnasium, they decided to do the same. Soon there were other establishments in Paris catering to the athletic needs of its well-heeled customers. The directors of these institutions became known as “gymnasiarchs,” and their word was law to the many pupils who came to them. This proliferation of gymnasiums was unprecedented, and would not be repeated again until the twentieth century.

One of the main ways Triat earned his great success as a gymnasiarch was to turn gymnastics into a sort of theatrical spectacle. As the architect Renard’s rendering of Triat’s gymnasium shows, his workout sessions were always popular even with nonparticipants since spectators were encouraged to stand in the galleries at the side of the vast room and to watch the show on the gym floor. There, they could see columns of barechested, uniformed men stamping out their rhythmical exercises to the sound of a rolling snare drum. In this way Triat had managed to combine elements of the theater and ballet in an impressive display of athletic skill.

The location of these displays was a huge, luxurious vaulted hall that was rich in detail and filled with every possible device that would strengthen the body. One Swiss visitor estimated that it had cost one hundred thousand francs to furnish the interior of the gymnasium? Because of these rich appointments, Triat’s middle-class patrons would feel at home there. In addition, Triat was one of the few gymnasiarchs who encouraged women and children to participate in his exercises. He took care to have qualified female instructors, and he devised separate routines for them.

The core of Triat’s method was what he called “floor gymnastics” (*gymnastique de plancher*). As has been noted, Amoros emphasized trapeze work, but Triat discovered that his customers enjoyed working as a group. Their workouts must have been similar to today’s aerobics classes where participants act in unison under the direction of a single leader. As dramatic and aesthetic as it all must have been, Triat’s floor gymnastics had a few drawbacks. They required a trained instructor to lead them, the exercises could not be performed anywhere but in the huge, expensive gymnasium, and as Edmond Desbonnet later remarked, “The number of movements which made up the floor lesson were so numerous that it was necessary to have a good memory to remember them all, and this required a great deal of cerebral work.”⁴ Furthermore, there were so many movements to run through that participants only had time to repeat them one or two times before going on to the next one.

Despite the problems inherent in his system, Triat was such a tremendous innovator, that the drawbacks can be overlooked. He was an extremely creative individual, and he often took existing equipment (such as dumbbells) and gave them a new, increased importance. More often, he simply invented his own devices. There is con-

siderable evidence to support the contention that Triat was the inventor of the globe barbell,⁵ and Desbonnet is insistent on Triat's invention and use of pulley devices.

Perhaps equal in importance to the use of weights were Triat's commercial innovations. Because of his huge overhead in running such a massive operation, Triat was forced to be very creative when it came to financing. To do this the great gymnasiarch became one of the first to sell shares in his company. Starting in July of 1855, Triat eventually raised five million francs by this method. This sum represented 250,000 shares at twenty francs each and divided into five series. Another proof of Triat's genius was that the sham could be redeemed for a quarterly course in gymnastics. So in other words, Triat increased his capital by proposing to collect in advance in the form of shares that could be redeemed by gymnastics lessons.⁶ The sale of redeemable shares became a common practice for gym owners for generations to come. Triat showed that running a gymnasium could be a profitable investment if it were done correctly. Unfortunately, the great man was continually strapped for cash because his expenses were so great. Had he downsized his operation, he might have survived longer.

Finances were not Triat's only problems, however. It was largely thanks to his political stand that the gymnastics master lost all during the turbulent days of the commune. After losing the Franco-Prussian war in 1871, Emperor Napoleon III abdicated and the Second Empire crashed to the ground. In the ensuing chaos, the people of Paris attempted a noble but doomed experiment known as the Commune. Triat had already been attracted to the political left, and he had allied himself with the half-mad radical Jules Allix (the two Allix daughters were instructors in his gymnasium). Some have also detected in the floor exercises themselves evidence of republican tendencies in the leveling effects of athletics where bourgeois and aristocrat both exert themselves in sweaty equality. "The fact is," writes Gilbert Andrieu, "floor gymnastics had an ideology. . ."⁷ Because of his leftist sympathies, Triat let his gymnasium be used as a meeting place for the Communards, and he paid dearly for this indiscretion in the bloody aftermath of the Commune when his beautiful gymnasium was confiscated by the vengeful Parisian authorities.

Despite the attempts to destroy him, Triat returned to the athletic scene with another (albeit smaller) gymnasium after the turmoil. But he might not have lasted long anyway since the era of the gymnasiarchs was rapidly coming to an end. He found his clientele falling off, and finally, in 1879 Triat was forced to sell his business at a loss. He retired to live out his remaining years in misery, depression, and poverty.

Although he has been largely forgotten especially in the English-speaking world, Triat left an enduring legacy. Thanks to his inspiration, a great many gyms opened in conscious imitation of the master. These included several in Paris and at least one in Liverpool, England, which was almost an exact copy of the original Triat Gymnasium.⁸ Triat constantly complained that his business rivals were copying his ideas and stealing his inventions, so there must have been considerable interest in building bodies using the great man's system. That borrowing continues, and to this day elements of his system are still detectable in gymnasiums all over the world.

Throughout his career, Triat had also been obsessed with

the concept of establishing a normal school of gymnastics. He wanted to turn out instructors who could then spread the good news all over France and Europe. His first attempt came shortly after opening his Brussels facility in 1840. Triat proposed to King Leopold I to found a normal school, but when that idea met with little success, the gymnasiarch went to Paris where he hoped for better fortune.⁹ His luck was little better when he attempted to build a massive sports complex on the Island of Billancourt many years later, but by then the era of the gymnasiarchs was waning, and France was interested in other things. Desbonnet boils with nationalistic rage when he contemplates what might have been, but it is difficult to believe that France's future could have changed much with the addition of this sports center located just a short distance from the capital.

So by putting his emphasis on strength, health, and beauty, Triat set the course that other bodybuilding entrepreneurs would later take. His floor gymnastics also showed a pioneering spirit by abandoning the trapeze work that was popular earlier. Finally, by putting his faith in dumbbells and barbells of graduated weights, Triat was clearly light years ahead of his competitors. Triat used all these elements to form a system of exercise that was popular with the rising bourgeoisie, and this in turn made the work of later gym owners easier. The era of the old gymnasiarchs had an early flowering in the 1830s and 40s. Their popularity then gradually decreased until it died out entirely in the 1880s, and Triat's name and deeds might easily have been lost to posterity. Fortunately, Triat's ideas were rediscovered by Desbonnet who revived the good man's reputation in the early years of the twentieth century.

Desbonnet enjoyed telling the story of his introduction to the work of his illustrious predecessor. Sometime around 1881, young Edmond was casually leafing through an old copy of *The Family Museum* from 1856 when he chanced upon the article by Paul Féval which he reproduces in his account of Triat Desbonnet was instantly fascinated, and in a blinding flash of recognition he realized that he had discovered his destiny. He, too, would devote himself to teaching physical culture. He would perpetuate Triat's unfinished work.¹⁰ Desbonnet never forgot his dedication to his long-departed mentor, and when he came to write his history of strongmen, *The Kings of Strength*, in 1911, he gave Triat a place of honor. Perhaps, as Desbonnet confirms in *How to Become a Strongman*, "(Triat) might have rested anonymously for all had I not respectfully plucked his name and his deeds from oblivion."¹¹ For the rest of us, Hippolyte Triat will always remain a brilliant but unlucky precursor of physical culture and bodybuilding, and if we remember him today, it is largely thanks to Desbonnet.

—David Chapman

"Hippolyte Triat"

from: *The Kings of Strength*

Those who nowadays enjoy the blessings of physical culture and owe to it health, beauty and strength, have as a primary duty to pay homage, appreciation, and respect to the originators of this method of physical renewal. The living honor themselves when they glorify their worthy benefactors who live no more, and few people deserve our praise more than the man whose life we now recount here.

Hippolyte-Antoine Triat was born in Saint-Chaptes, a little village near Nîmes (Gard) in 1813. He was the youngest in a large family. He was only four when his parents died, and he was taken to be raised by his eldest sister who lived in Nîmes. At the age of six he was kidnapped at a carnival by gypsies who either gave or sold him to a troupe of traveling Italian performers in Nice. He stayed with them for seven years, traveling to Italy, Austria, and Spain. During these years, Triat was dressed as a girl and performed in a wire-walking act under the name of "Young Isela."

In 1825 the troupe split up and the boy remained with a Spaniard named Consuelo. Together with the older man and his two sons, Triat formed a weightlifting and physique posing group called "The Alcides." Triat quickly took to this work, and he succeeded so well that shortly afterward he was known all over Spain as *l'Enfant* (the Child).

While he was in Burgos in 1828, Triat had an accident which forced him to remain in that city much longer than he had expected. The young man's left leg was broken by a horse's hooves when he attempted to stop it from running away. The lady who was thus saved was Mme. Montsento, and she interested herself in him, and after he recovered, his wealthy benefactor paid for the young man's education at the Jesuit college of Burgos where he remained until he was twenty-two years old.

During his stay with the Jesuits, Triat was educated in French as well as Spanish thanks to a French priest who taught at the school. Although Triat was able to send word to his family, and even to receive visits from his sisters, he chose not the return to France. He found several ancient volumes in the school's library which explained the gymnastic exercises of the old Greeks and Romans. Among these books were the works of Mercurialis, Plexotis, d'Andry, and a Spanish translation of the famous *Treatise on the Art of Tumbling* by the tutor of François I, the Chevalier Capriani. Triat was able to read these books and to profit by them. During his stay at the college, he continued to exercise and even instructed a few disciples, but all the while Triat was planning and putting together the ideas that later found their way into his plan for physical education.

When Triat left Burgos in 1834 he again took up his old profession as performer and strongman, and he had devised a new act consisting of physique posing which was very similar to the one that was later used by Sandow. One part of his turn featured a revolving column from which he would hang by his hands, feet, or chin and lift horses and men. Thanks to this device he garnered a huge success first in Spain and later in England where he had a considerable stay. Finally, he settled in Belgium.

In this last country Triat founded a gymnasium which became a great success in a remarkably brief period of time. All of fashionable Brussels frequented his establishment which was located at 7 Rue de Ligne where it stayed from 1840 to 1849. At that time he gave up his business and moved to Paris where he opened his superb gymnasium at 55 and 57 Avenue Montaigne which soon became all the rage. Triat's revolutionary methods and his scientific gymnastic exercises were suddenly in favor, and he had for customers all of Parisian high society. For a long time after the arrival of the Second Empire, Triat could boast that a large part of the court including the emperor himself was enrolled under his care.

His magnificent gymnasium measured exactly forty meters long, twenty-one wide, and ten meters high, and it contained a complete collection of weights and devices of all sorts. There was a collection of dumbbells, barbells, Indian clubs, and other apparatuses worth well over one thousand francs. Over the entrance to the gymnasium were inscribed the words "*Regeneration of Man*" (this motto had been approved at a meeting with Dr. Castel).

Because of the work that was necessary to keep up these premises, Triat decided to move his operation across the street to number 36. This gymnasium was much smaller but still extremely beautiful and adequate in every particular. The new establishment was begun around 1855 and was located on the exact spot where one now finds the Rue François 1er.

Then came the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 and the Commune. Triat was implicated when he lent his gymnasium for meetings and especially for being named, at the instigation of Jules Allix (1818-1897), member of the Central Committee, as the director of gymnastic exercises for the City of Paris (see the *Journal officiel de la Commune* for April 7, 1871 in which the grounds for naming Triat to this post are quite curious).¹² He was afterwards taken prisoner by faces loyal to the National Assembly and imprisoned at Versailles for a time. He returned to Paris in July and took over the direction of a new gymnasium at 22 Rue Bouloi.

Triat left the profession once and for all in 1879, and he died in his home at 27 Rue Jean-Jacques-Rousseau in Paris on January 11, 1881 at the age of 68. His funeral was on January 13, 1881, and he was buried in the Cimetière du Nord [Northern Cemetery] (called the Cimetière Montmartre, boulevard de Clichy, Avenue Rachel) in the plot of the Allix family, 24th division, 17th line, Avenue du Tunnel, 5. We are grateful to Mr. Mouquin, the director general of research for the prefecture of police, for this precious information.

Christmann, the proprietor of the gymnasium in the faubourg Saint-Denis, wrote an obituary for Triat in *The Gymnast* for February 15, 1881. The funeral card which we currently have before us mentions that Triat was the widower of Marie-Françoise-Cornélie Pasquet.

The great novelist Paul Féval (1816-1887) was one of Triat's students and a great admirer of this little known genius.¹³ Here is the description of the Triat Gymnasium which he did in 1856 in a magazine of the time, *The Family Museum*.

THE TRIAT GYMNASIUM

The ox and the camel (apologies to Plutarch)—The body and the soul—The law of movement—Gymnastics: ancient, Medieval, Renaissance, Pre-revolutionary—True immobility—Its deadly results—Gymnastic rehabilitation—Col. Amoros Real modern gymnastics—Triat Gymnasium—Curious spectacle—Marvelous effects—Advice to families.

An ox and a camel walked together down a road, both driven by the same master. The ox, who was cruelly overloaded, observed the camel advancing with a light step toward him. The weary animal beseeched his fellow traveler to take but a part of his burden. The camel refused saying, "Every beast for himself."

"You selfish fool!" replied the ox. "You will soon find your-

self carrying not only my part of the load but the entire cargo, and soon after that I'll ride atop everything."

As he predicted, the next day the ox collapsed from overwork, and the master placed his butchered body as well as his former load on the camel's back.

The great Plutarch, author of that fable, thus explained the relationship of the soul and the body. The soul is the camel, and the ox is the body. If the first refuses to lend assistance to the second, the soul will end up losing its own freedom under a double burden of an overloaded body as well as its pains and fatigues. Plutarch thereby concludes that we must work our body and our soul together, driving them harmoniously as if they were two steeds pulling the same carriage. This is the principle and the origin of all known exercises gathered under the name of gymnastics.

Is it, in fact, possible to examine the admirable human machine without recognizing that it is constructed for movement and action? This, above all, has been an immutable law of nature ever since the constellations began revolving in their spheres and the humble ants first burrowed in the earth.

However, since man leads a life that is both corporal and spiritual, physical and moral, Plutarch's parable is thus made clear. The two natures that form this duality and which are so profoundly distinct in their characters, are however connected so intimately that the action of one is reflected in the other. While everything seems to prove that the spirit is the primary mover of the body, yet it is impossible to negate the reciprocal and permanent influence of the body over the spirit. It follows that physical exercise affects the entire man—body and soul—matter and spirit.

With that settled it is easy to understand that when it is rationally applied, this exercise system comprises the art which is gymnastics; this art, if it is developed seriously, affects man's physical, intellectual, and moral education; it contributes to the maintenance of health, cures a great number of maladies, and leads to the perfection of both the race and the individual.

Among the ancients, gymnastics formed a considerable part of education and of public and private hygiene. The *palestra* was the training school of movement where one was instructed in all the exercises of the body by studying strength, nimbleness, and agility. Military gymnastics included jumping, the discus, wrestling, the javelin, boxing, and racing on foot, on horse, and in chariots. The Thebans attributed their victory at Leuctra to their superiority in wrestling.

The purpose of athletic gymnastics was to prepare contestants for various combats in the circuses. These athletes were celebrated in rhapsodies and glorified in archives and historic inscriptions. The men were chosen from among free and honorable families and educated under the direction of a magistrate. They took an oath, fought in the nude, served as models to heroes and warriors. Their victory prizes included crowns of pine, laurel or olive as well as arms, clothing armor, horses, or slaves. The winners were adorned with flowers and other presents in the amphitheater and then returned to their homes in triumphal chariots, escorted by the populace through a breach knocked into the wall surrounding their native city.

Theseus, Hercules, Jason etc. were none other than athletes like these. Milo of Croton was one of the most famous. He truly did dispatch an ox with one blow of his fist, but he did not eat it for his

dinner as the rest of the story goes. So it was with all those like him, he maintained his strength by sobriety and temperance. These are the athletic virtues about which Saint Paul has spoken so highly.

From the Middle Ages and the Renaissance up to the time of the French Revolution, gymnastics consisted of tournaments, jousts, fancy riding, ballets, and all the exercises of horsemanship and arms, tennis, dancing, etc., etc. The invention of gun powder both before and after the Revolution supplanted nearly all these activities and left a gaping hole in education and in hygiene. This is a void which played a major role in both weakening and diminishing the health of the present generation.

For upwards of a hundred years, particularly in France, physical exercise has been relegated to soldiers, laborers, and peasants. With the possible exception of a little swimming, fencing, and riding, physical immobility seems to have become the rule among the upper and middle classes and among liberals and intellectuals. These are precisely the groups which have the greatest need to exercise their bodies in order to compensate their overworked brains and stomachs. These are also the same classes which at one time had the privileges of warring, hunting, riding, fencing, and so forth.

Even children in schools and other institutions hardly ever participate in ball games, hopscotch, climbing bars, leapfrog, ropes, or other healthy recreations. These are the same diversions which gave our parents the vigor which has perished in ourselves. Let each man look around him, and he will easily see the crowd of unhealthy souls which surround us. These are the invalids who walk about, go to work, and live with weakness every day. These unfortunates have accepted their physical infirmity as a natural and normal thing. They are people who have fallen so low that they view good health as an elusive dream.

You know them well—businessmen, artists, writers—all sad and pale victims of the poison which we call immobility. They are weakened daily by nervous emotion, artificial heat, vitiated air, and over-excitation of the brain. You recognize them! You know that they *look well*—aside from their neuralgia, their dyspepsia, their biliousness, their bronchitis, and a thousand and one other chronic miseries which afflict them. They look well. So why continually speak of these infirmities which have entered their lives and which they are incapable of curing? After all, they look well. They write, they argue cases, they produce, they compose, they use the bow, the chisel, the pliers, and they still look well; yet, it is not so.

It is true that men from the country also look remarkably well, but the difference is that when peasants look well, they are not ill. Peasants have the advantage of air and movement, they breathe fresh air and they use the muscles which God has given them. In Paris to *look well* means to *suffer out of one's bed*. In reality, good health consists of standing firmly on one's own legs.

Toward the end of the last century, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and several German associates had warned humanity of the decadence that was rampant during the Restoration. Then, starting in 1830, Col. Amoros returned gymnastics to a place of honor in the army and attempted to introduce it in civilian institutions. Unfortunately, this venture achieved only a partial success because it was limited to a pitifully meager number of Parisian establishments. The fact is, the plans of Amoros and his imitators lacked a great deal in

terms of suitability. They were as far from promoting rational and productive gymnastics as a blind clarinet player is from keeping in time in an orchestra.

The tree rebirth of gymnastics, or rather the creation of modern gymnastics, was reserved for a man who is already famous in Brussels and Paris and will soon be just as popular all over France and Europe. In order to judge this innovator and his system, it is necessary for one and all to see his works. It is for this reason that we find ourselves on the champs Elysées. Coming from the Rond Pont, we turn left onto the Avenue Montaigne, and hem we are in front of Mr. H. Triat's monument.

"Monument," is certainly the right word, though such a curious and utilitarian monument never saw its like in this world. It is a theater where each participant can be an actor. It is a unique pleasure palace—unique because elsewhere self-indulgence drains the energy, but here the pursuit of pleasure restores and fortifies. It is a shelter for the idler, an altar to hard work, the arena of robust youth, the well where downtrodden virility can drink in new strength. It is, in short, a gymnasium, but a gymnasium in the largest and most beautiful sense of that term.

It is a vast cathedral nave designed for us by Mr. Renard with all the taste and amplitude so characteristic of him. The "transept" is airy and spacious with three ranks of elegant observation balconies encircling the exercise floor. The ground floor is divided into two sections. The first has hardwood floors while the second is filled with a carpeting of sawdust a foot deep thus forming an immense and downy mattress.

What strikes one first of all is the profusion of ropes hanging in all directions. These ropes extend across the hall like a curious lace curtain and the spectator finds himself delighted and intrigued by this pulsing network. This maze of ropes is worth the fortune of a lifetime. The cordage hangs in the form of ladders and garlands as they stretch around the exercise floor and scallop across the gymnasium, ascending and descending in decorative festoons. You can see them from below as the rope bundles follow the bold curve of the vault and descend to the floor. These rough cords, however, dangle lazily at the slightest pressure, as when brushed by a mere child, thereby resembling birds lost in the void. Many other cables hang down for use by the acrobats, still others descend vertically for the "iron arm" (gymnast extends his body horizontally while gripping the vertical rope) and horizontally as barriers. Some of the ropes have shining leather rings attached to them and are used for the hanging exercises that Mr. Triat has developed to the supreme degree of perfection.

On the other side of this hempen tracery one sees from the entrance a masterpiece of carpentry in the form of a monumental wooden stairway. This is built to resemble a Gothic trefoil with all its usual decorative embellishments. If one were to place the steps of this stairway end to end, they would rise higher than the tallest spire atop the cathedral of Notre Dame. The portable parallel bars (invented by Mr. Triat) are at the foot of the stairway. By varying the position of these bars, one can perform over 150 different exercises.

Finally, in the middle of the floor stands a horse of immense proportions who daily witnesses the miracles of strength and agility which surround him. We will not speak of the poles, the horizontal

iron bars, nor the instruments which one would recognize from less magnificent gymnasiums. Because they beggar our descriptive power, we will likewise pass in silence over the many different devices of the greatest ingenuity which Mr. Triat has invented for those who are too weak to follow his regular regimen.

Such is the nave, but only in its purely material aspect. When eight o'clock sounds, however, and the innumerable gas jets flood the exercise floor with light, the portals of this temple of rejuvenation open to admit the throng of students. The observation galleries fill up and are quickly adorned with flowers, lace, and admiring female smiles. It is then that the great, immobile nave awakens with a start,

Suddenly, the silent palace takes voice, and the inanimate weights begin to move and breathe. The activity resembles at once a carnival and a battle as this bold and audacious army advances to capture health and strength! Adolescents, adults, and middle-aged men all wearing red tights and with bare chests tumble into the arena and commence their work on the ladders, the poles, and the ropes.

Onward! The pliant ash wood of the parallel bars glistens and bends, the polished poles squeak under the hands, the hanging rings swing back and forth while the skilled gymnast performs an aerial somersault. Athletes vault over the horse in a single bound while laughing wrestlers thrash about in the sawdust.

Onward! Onward! Here are happiness, life, and renewed youth! Here is healthful activity: stiffen your soft muscles, find your balance, touch your foot lightly on the springboards elastic surface, build up your chest, fill your lungs with air, strengthen yourself, work, live.

Behold the master, himself. Stop and look at him. Here is a man much like yourself, but why is his strength triple or quadruple that of yours? Why does his physique rival ancient statuary in muscularity and suppleness? Why does his heroic vigor shame our own decadence? Because he has learned from experience what he attempts to teach you. This peerless athlete, this modern day Hercules is the legitimate son of his own method. By working on himself, Mr. Triat has literally been able to strengthen his own muscles and harden his selfsame flesh.

But observe: where even the most agile hesitate, Triat advances. He launches himself in the air like a bounding tiger and seizes a rope and then rapidly mounts it up to the ceiling. Then he seems to swim in midair, but as if to equal these aerial antics, Triat alights onto one of the balcony railings and from there he vaults head first to the floor below. With a terrific clamor, his feet strike the parquet, and he rebounds by jumping over the horse, his torso at full meter above the animal's hindquarters.

But the sound of the whistle brings us back to our duties. The time for play is over, and the signal for the lessons to begin is given. While the busy students are choosing their exercise equipment, let us go down to the door and cast an eye on that well stocked arsenal of peaceful weapons. It is here that the visitor will find a veritable fortune in cast iron alone. Judge for yourself whether Mr. Triat should fear his competitors! There are dumbbells, rowing weights in all shapes and sizes, and iron bars with globes of carefully graduated size attached to the ends.

The curious visitor might then catch sight with a mixture of admiration and terror of the mass of cast iron called *Mr. Triat's*

weight. It is thus named because Mr. Triat is the only person in the world who has ever lifted it to arm's length overhead. Many who have seen the modern Hercules accomplish this prodigious feat cannot forget that their hearts pounded in their breasts as if they were witnessing the most moving scene of a heart-wrenching tragedy.

The normal lesson or *the floor exercises* are always led by Mr. Triat himself. The director's purpose is to exercise one by one and in a logical and therapeutic order all the muscles of the human body. This lesson elicits much admiration from men of art. In addition to being of superior utility, these exercises are beautiful and seductive as a performance. Fifty students arrange themselves in two rows, and at the sound of the master's voice, they bow to him. Triat, clad in an unusual though splendidly elegant costume, takes up his position in the middle of the arena. Indeed, he cuts a striking figure with his head carried high while in his right hand he waves a staff covered in silver filigree. His vibrant and sonorous voice fills the hall like a trumpet fanfare.

Each exercise leads to the next with fiery rapidity: large and small dumbbells, the gladiator's dance, running in long lines that double back on themselves like the coils of a serpent, the short bar, fighting with the bar, club swinging, and finally the heavy barbell. Every movement in this series is done with an energy which seems almost magical. Many of the participants are overcome by fatigue, but they do not even have the time to wipe the sweat which drenches them. A magnetic current seems to run from the teacher to each student. The power of the master separates them and causes them to pour out the last drop of energy. Every student hears a mysterious voice within



A SATIRICAL CARTOON FROM THE FRENCH MAGAZINE *LA VIE PARISIENNE* 1863 POKES FUN AT THE TWO DANDIES WHO HAVE COME TO SEE THE WOMEN TRAIN AT TRIAT'S GYM. TRIAT WAS A PIONEER IN WOMEN'S PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND ENCOURAGED WOMEN TO PARTICIPATE IN VIGOROUS, STRENGTH-PRODUCING EXERCISES.

him that says, "Keep going! Keep going!" And, in fact, no one stops until the gymnasium assistants turn on the taps of cool water which soothe the eager, steaming bodies.

Without taking up a question that has been resolved a thousand times by experience, let us say that these ablutions with cool water after the workout are one of the most refined pleasures which it is possible to imagine. Not only is there no danger whatsoever to this behavior, there is, in fact, a decided advantage. After bathing, fatigue departs and one can continue with great heartiness.

Such is the establishment and such is Mr. Triat's gymnas-

tic system according to the testimony of a man who adds *experto crede Roberto* (“Believe Robert who has tried it.”)

This system combines all the experience of the past with all the science of the present. Triat’s plan is marvelously appropriate to the needs of our era where time is so precious. The fact is that in less than an hour Mr. Triat has concentrated all the work and all the pleasures in a series of logical and harmonious movements. He has combined all the challenges and results of the Greek palestra, the Roman circus, the Medieval jousts, of fencing, riding, hunting, tennis, diving, climbing, dancing, and every exercise which builds strength, suppleness, grace, energy, good humor, and health. Already Triat’s experience has accomplished just this with the most salutary results for thousands of young men and girls (for he also has a women’s class in his gymnasium). Many hundreds of weakened men and even aged grandfathers who believed themselves to be at death’s door have also benefitted from Triat’s guidance.

It would be difficult to count those who have been returned to vigor and productivity by frequenting Triat’s gymnasium. The list includes princes great personages, financiers, generals, administrators, magistrates, and illustrious writers who in informal groups have improved their physical and intellectual faculties. Witness the dumbbells, the barbells, and the rowing weights which one sees in the antechamber and gardens of certain mansions and even of certain palaces which we could name here.¹⁴

One example will suffice to prove our statements. The Maréchal de Saint-Arnaud was worn out and near death, but after he began training under Triat’s guidance, he recovered his strength. Eventually, he was strong enough to mount his horse once more, and he later went on to win the victory of Alma and to lead the French Army to the ramparts of Sebastopol.

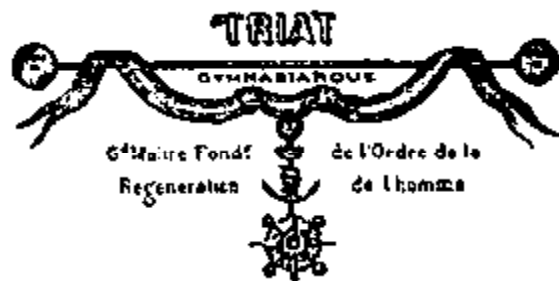
We are therefore not at all surprised to learn that an eminent organization comprised of the most important and enlightened people in the scientific and official world has dedicated itself to disseminating Triat’s ideas. They wish to elevate his gymnasium to a national institution and create similar establishments all over France.

Just like the illustrious adherents of modern gymnastics, we are convinced that the day will come when Triat’s system will operate in military barracks, in schools, in boarding houses, in towns and population centers. Then the strength and well-being of our soldiers and our young people will double, and our teachers and doctors will have found one of the most effective remedies to the physical and moral plagues of our generation.

It was the duty of this little work to remind parents of the antiquity and effectiveness of gymnastics. This is a lesson that has been forgotten in our time, so we wish to recommend the method of Mr. Triat which can attach the greatest happiness to our habits and our morals.

At some point, everyone can go and judge for himself with his own eyes. The lessons of the Triat Gymnasium are public and open to every passerby, and Mr. Triat himself is a devoted apostle to his mission. He regards the fallen state of our poor species much as an athlete would view a dwarf, but he is ever ready to lend a hand to whoever can assist him in regenerating nineteenth-century man.

[Part One of “Hippolyte Triat”]



1. Edmond Desbonnet, *Comment on Devient Athlète* 8th ed. (Paris: Librairie Athlétique, 1938), 5.
2. Dr. Waucquier, “Il faut simplifier pour perfectionner,” *La Culture Physique* 28(1 November 1924): 302.
3. Gilbert Andrieu, *L’homme et la Force* (Joinville-le-Pont: Éditions Actio, 1988), 107.
4. Edmond Desbonnet, “Les Origines de la Culture Physique,” *La Culture Physique* 31(September 1937): 262.
5. See Jan Todd, “From Milo to Milo,” *Iron Game History* 3(April 1995): 10.
6. Andrieu, *L’homme et la Force*, 107.
7. *Ibid.*, 106.
8. *Ibid.*, 107.
9. Roland Renson, *Le corps académique Stadion* XVII (1991), 1: 87.
10. Georges Dardenne, *Historique de la Culture Physique* (Ayeneux, Belgium: author, 1986), 21.
11. Desbonnet, *Comment On Devient Athlète*, 5.

12. Jules Allix was one of the most amazing eccentrics to emerge from nineteenth-century France. His early life gave few hints of his coming madness. In 1848, at the age of thirty he entered politics by being elected to local office as a Communist, and he was shortly thereafter mixed up in the insurrection of 1849. He was pursued by the police and was eventually banished for eight years. When he returned, his behavior was noticeably more peculiar.

He was confined to a lunatic asylum in 1869, but he was released after a short stay. Apparently, his eccentricities were of an endearing kind, and he remained popular in left-wing political circles. During the Paris Commune of 1871, he was appointed mayor of the eighth arrondissement and colonel of a regiment. When the advancing Versailles retook Paris, Allix was judged incompetent and confined to the asylum at Charenton.

In 1880 he was back at his old tricks when he displayed at the Triat Gymnasium a “perpetual motor. . . freely usable by all industries.” Allix might have remained another anonymous madman had the public not heard of another “invention,” his *sympathetic snails*. This was supposedly a long-distance communication machine which he claimed was better and cheaper than Mr. Morse’s device. All one needed was a wooden type case with one snail for each letter of the alphabet. This would be placed in Paris and a similar device in Peking (or some other remote location). When the sender touched the snail marked “E” in Paris, the corresponding snail in Peking would twitch; it only remained to mark down the ensuing twitches to read the message. Allix died convinced of his invention’s value. J. Balteau, M. Barroux, and M. Prevost (eds.) *Dictionnaire de Biographie Française* (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1936), 222-224.

13. Paul Féval suffered from a sickly childhood and an overprotective mother. He later broke away from his family’s influence and came to Paris where he found little success as a writer. At one point, he nearly starved to death. His first great success came with the publication of *The Mysteries of London*. This marked the first success in a long and prolific career as a novelist. Later, Féval became one of Hippolyte Triat’s greatest champions and he described the basics of Triat’s form of gymnastics in several of his works, most notably in his novel *Coeur et acier (Heart and Steel)* published in 1866. *Dictionnaire de Biographie Française*, 554. Also, Gilbert Andrieu, “La Gymnastique de Plancher,” *Stadion*, XI (1985), 1: 53.

14. **Desbonnets note:** Tuileries Palace where the Emperor Napoleon III took lessons in gymnastics from Triat.