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One summer day in 1909, a skinny, 16-year old Italian immigrant boy took his girlfriend to the Coney Island beach. Without warning, a big, muscular lifeguard kicked sand in their faces. The youth felt helpless to react while his girlfriend became disturbed and embarrassed. The boy was Angelo Siciliano, and he later became known as Charles Atlas, one of the most famous bodybuilders in history.

In countless comic book advertisements, this bully-experience has been recounted with virtually the same theme. Charles Atlas—posing in his bikini-style leopard skin shorts while standing on white-hot sand—generally accompanied these multi-frame comic book pitches. The dramatic stories contained elements of defeat, determination, sympathy/empathy, and finally, heroic triumph. The advertisements became one of the longest running, best remembered and most successful campaigns of their kind in American marketing history. In fact, today, the cartoon stories are considered a major popular culture artifact.

Atlas ads in magazines—often in adventure, science, and sports publications—were usually not of the cartoon type. Instead, they generally contained detailed prose pitches with Atlas, pictured in muscle poses, appealing to older boys and young men. The ads promised healthier, more muscular bodies, and a better mental attitude, e.g., increased confidence.

The most famous of the cartoon advertisements included seven frames, depicting a skinny, defenseless young man and his girlfriend. The two are at the beach where a lifeguard is running by and kicking sand into their faces. The main dialogue goes like this: “Hey, quit kicking that sand in our faces,” the skinny male victim pleads. His girlfriend likely adds this about the well-built bully: “That man is the worst nuisance on the beach.” Then, after a face-to-face confrontation with the lifeguard, our thin hero decides to enroll in the Charles Atlas “Dynamic-Tension” course. Soon, the formerly skinny, weak boy ends up adding layers of new muscles. This gives him the ability to defend himself against future bullies crossing his path.

Incidentally, the sand-kicking scenario is not quite the way it was in real life, i.e., Charles Atlas actually did not return to seek revenge upon the bully lifeguard. Nevertheless, in those times, bullies picking on young immigrants was not uncommon. Once, when Atlas was 15 years old and on his way home from work, he was badly beaten by a neighborhood tough. As if this were not enough, when the boy arrived home, his uncle also beat him for getting into fights.

Such painful experiences so strongly impressed the sensitive youth that he swore nothing like that would ever again happen to him. In essence, he got quite a different type of revenge—that of really becoming strong and “looking good.” Such were the results of having vigorously worked out to change his skinny 97-pound weakling image to one of pleasing-looking muscle and strength.

Initially, Angelo faithfully worked out in a gym, but little change seemed to occur. Finally, one day while visiting Brooklyn’s Prospect Zoo, he noticed a lion undergoing its elaborate stretching maneuvers. Siciliano became impressed with how this accentuated the big cat’s massive muscles. Did the lion lift weights? His obvious response was “no.” The answer finally came to the young man, via the lion “pitching one muscle against another.” This led him to formulate his world-famous exercise program, later named “Dynamic Tension.” [Ed. Note: **This version of how Atlas developed Dynamic Tension and how Dynamic Tension developed him is at odds with iron gamers who knew that he developed most of his muscle size and strength with barbells and dumbbells.**]

After about a year of intensive workouts, the once puny Angelo had gained a new layer of rippling muscles. Finally, when he felt he had sufficiently developed his body, he was ready for a “public unveiling.” One day in 1912, the 19 year old Siciliano went to the Coney Island beach. There, he took off his shirt, exposing his “new” physique for a group of friends. They responded in amazement, and one exclaimed that Angelo looked like Atlas, for they were familiar with the statue of Atlas, atop the Atlas Hotel and a familiar neighborhood bank.

Now, what does this Atlas-like young man do with a great looking body? Could it help him make a living? For a while, Siciliano earned five dollars per week, bending into “U-shapes” 100-pennyweight steel spikes in front of a Coney Island sideshow. In addition, he tore thick Manhattan telephone books apart—and swept floors for a living.

The improved Angelo—also nick-named “Charlie”—became transformed into “Charles Atlas.” Soon, he was making \$100 per week as New York’s most coveted male model. He posed for numerous sculptures, including historic figures like Alexander Hamilton and Abraham Lincoln. Then, in 1921, Charles got his first big break, winning a major national bodybuilding contest. Flamboyant fitness enthusiast Bernarr Macfadden, and his *Physical Culture* magazine sponsored this “World’s Most Beautiful Man Contest” It required photographs for judging, rather than the contestants appearing in person. Not only did Atlas win in 1921, but also in 1922.

However, the second contest required competitors to appear in person at Madison Square Garden with Atlas winning against 750 contestants. After presenting him with his second straight \$1,000 prize, Macfadden called off further contests. He explained: “What’s the use, Atlas will win every time.” Incidentally, the name on the official winning certificate read: “Charles Siciliano Atlas.”

Thereafter, mainly as a result of these contests, the name “Charles Atlas” solely would identify the muscle-man, once named Angelo Siciliano. At last, he became nationally famous with a well-deserved good reputation. At the urging of friends, he opened a gym and offered his exercise course by mail. However, by 1928 the gym had failed, and the mail-order busi-

ness was in trouble. Then Atlas met a marketing genius, Charles P. Roman. The two complemented one another, for, while Atlas knew how to build muscles, Roman knew how to sell the exercise courses.

Roman ran the business while Atlas promoted it with numerous appearances, during which he occasionally performed stunts. One of the best known took place in 1938—towing a 145,000-pound railroad observation car of Broadway Limited for 112 feet at the Pennsylvania Railroad’s Sunnyside Yards. Over time, Atlas became an advertising and public relations figure, not only touting his “Dynamic-Tension” course, but physical fitness in general.

Essentially, his theme was “Manhood” the chance to become mentally and physically healthier as well as to increase strength and muscle. Signing up for an Atlas course not only entitled a man to fitness training, but also offered courage, self-reliance and self-confidence lessons. However, make no mistake about it, increasing muscular appearance was the main attraction of the course.

Charles Atlas’s biographer, Charles Gaines, asserts that the bodybuilder’s claims are basically legitimate: “I’ve had no problem in locating the specific virtue in any of them.” “Dynamic-Tension” lay at the heart of the Charles Atlas method. Although Atlas’s course was diligent and perhaps difficult, it was certainly honest. Joseph Gustaitis relates in an article in *American History Illustrated* (September 1986): “It had to be. It was a reflection of the man.”

Atlas did become a wealthy celebrity, enjoying one of nature’s finest bodies. However, he was also a quiet, modest family man. Although he did take off his shirt at the slightest prompting, this was not so much to show off his enviable physique, but to tout how well his exercise course worked.

He married Margaret Cassano in 1918, had two children—Hercules (Charles, Jr.) and Diana—and the family lived modestly in a simple, peaceful Brooklyn neighborhood. “Live clean think clean and don’t go to burlesque shows” was Charles Atlas’s advice to young men. He, himself, followed his advice faithfully. During most of his life, Atlas seemed to be a very contented man, and he often claimed that he had no worries. However, after his wife died in 1965, he never really seemed very happy. For 35 years, however—between 1930 and 1965—he essentially knew nothing but prosperous times and enjoyed numerous successes.

In 1970, Atlas sold his share of the “Dynamic-Tension” business to Roman who continued selling the mail-order courses into the 1990s. Atlas had a profound effect in inspiring youth to physical fitness. His ad man, Charles Roman, feels that it was Atlas’s influence which was indirectly responsible for today’s great fitness interest. In 1972, just before he died of a heart attack, Charles Atlas was informed that, over the years, three million skinny guys had answered his call to better bodily health, looks and mental attitude.

Even well into his sixties, Atlas could be seen exercising on Florida beaches. He claimed that he kept his same weight of 180 pounds in check, and that his body measurements—47-inch chest in normal position and 32-inch waist—varied little until his death on December 23, 1972 at 79 years of age. He was born on October 20, 1893, near Acri, Italy, and emigrated to America in 1903 at the age of 10.

Suggestions for additional reading:

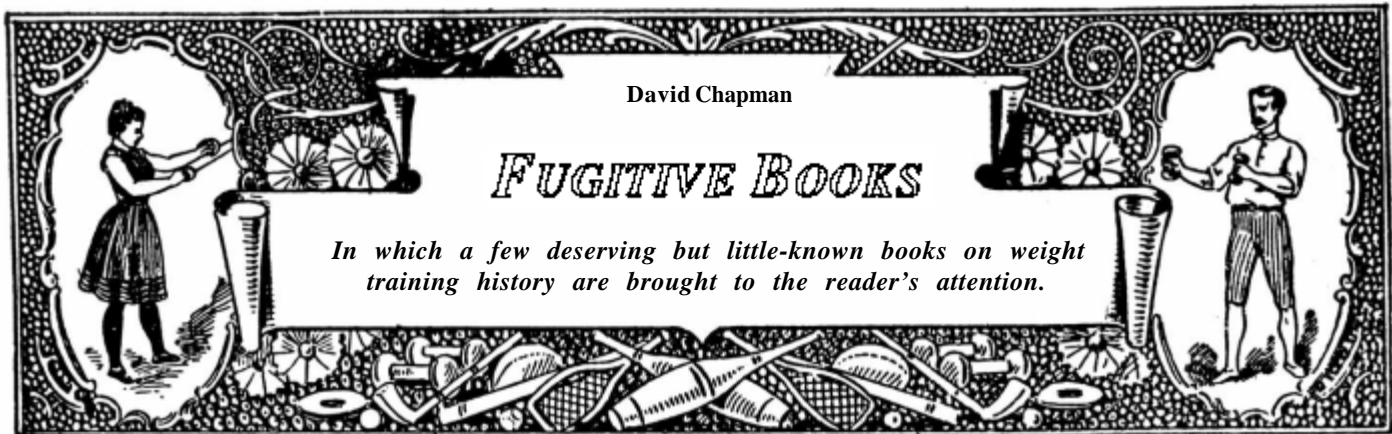
Bushyeager, Peter, “The World of Atlas,” *Men’s Health* (October 1991): 56-61.

“Charles Atlas, The Body-Builder and Weightlifter, Is Dead at 79,” *New York Times* (24 December 1972): Sect. 4, p. 40.

Gustaitis, Joseph, “Charles Atlas: ‘The World’s Most Perfectly Developed Man’” *American History Illustrated* 21(September, 1986): 16-17.

Gaines, Charles, *Yours in Perfect Manhood, Charles Atlas* (New York: Fireside Books, Simon and Schuster, 1982).

Webster, David *Bodybuilding: An Illustrated History* (New York Arco Inc., 1982), 59-61).



I suppose it's inevitable that most of us operate in vacuums of one sort or another. Those of us who are interested in sport history often resemble suburban tract dwellers who don't even know their next-door neighbors, but the truth is you can't know everyone or everything. This is especially true when the neighbors don't speak English. All of this is by way of saying that there are a number of books on the market today on the history of physical culture that are interesting and well written, but that would almost certainly pass unnoticed for one reason or another.

In the course of my research on the life and times of Edmond Desbonnet, France's leading physical culturist, I came across a number of wonderful volumes that deserve to have more attention than they currently receive. One of the most striking revelations that I have had is that English-speakers have a rich but far from complete library of materials at their service. Without a doubt, the French have done much more work in this field than we have, but how many of these excellent books are familiar to the average reader: Very few I would suspect.

The three books that I am going to report on are all in print (at least they were within the last year), but it is highly unlikely that they will ever show up on the shelves of most bookstores in this country. There are some hidden gems here written by scholars who are pursuing some fascinating topics in interesting ways.

Bernd Wedemeyer, *Starke Männer Starke Frauen: Eine Kulturgeschichte des Bodybuildings* [Strong Men, Strong Women: A Cultural History of Bodybuilding] (Munich: Beck, 1996) ISBN: 3 406 39246 2.

Western weight training has its roots firmly planted in Germany, but there has been a dearth of modern scholarship on the subject. Lothar Groth attempted to put together a history of circus strongmen in his noble effort *Die Starken Männer: Eine Geschichte der Kraftakrobatik* [Strong Men: A History of Strength Acrobatics], published in East Berlin in 1985 (with a second edition in 1988) both before the fall of the wall, but he was hampered by the inability to research his subject sufficiently. There the subject languished for a long time, but recently the history of German weight training has received a new champion in the form of Bernd Wedemeyer. This intelligent, perceptive, and energetic historian has produced one of the best sport histories to come out of Germany in many years—perhaps ever. His newest book, *Starke Männer Starke Frauen*, goes a considerable way toward closing the gap in scholarship that has long plagued German physical culture history.

Despite being only in his mid-thirties, Wedemeyer has already done some extremely interesting work based at the ancient University of Göttingen where he teaches at the prestigious Sports Science Institute. Several of his works have appeared in English journals, most notably in *The International Journal of Sport History*, but readers of *Iron Game History* might recognize the author from the fine history which he published in August of 1994. His current work, however, is the best he has so far produced.

Although the author is a thorough academic in his scholar-

ship, the principal virtue of this book is that it is written in a smooth, interesting, and readable style. The endnotes and bibliography make it very clear that Wedemeyer has based his work firmly and accurately in research, but he never lets this affect his narrative.

The book is organized along thematic lines rather than following a traditional chronological structure. The first section is on "The Principle of Narcissism," dealing with the various methods of muscular display from circus and music hall strongmen to women physique athletes. The second part is titled "The Race of Life" and covers the inspirational figures that have guided bodybuilding on its long course; these include Theodor Siebert, Eugen Sandow, Lou Ferrigno, and Arnold Schwarzenegger. Next is "The Veiled Religion: Bodybuilding as Panacea," dealing with the health claims that have been put forth throughout the sport's history. Finally, there is the last part, "Cultural Struggle: Bodybuilding as a Political Factor," dealing with the way strong physiques have been exploited by various political regimes from the Nazis to the Communists. This final section would get my vote as containing the greatest number of interesting revelations.

Wedemeyer begins each of his sections with brief anecdotes that reinforce the author's contentions. This attention to detail and the attempt to engage the reader are some of the many things that set this book apart from other works. Another interesting factor is that women's bodybuilding is given such an important place in the work. There is some discussion of the prejudices and difficulties that women bodybuilders have had to overcome and of the gender-identity problems which muscular women seem to evoke in many of us.

The author also gives prominent place to the three "Big S's" of early German bodybuilding: Sandow, Siebert, and Strongfort. To them he has also added the inevitable fourth (although an Austrian): Schwarzenegger. There is much biography and analysis of the Austrian Oak's career in both bodybuilding and the movies. Neither has Wedemeyer shrunk from attacking the problem of steroid use: he discusses the implications of drug usage at some length.

As excellent as the book is, there are a few things I wished were different. There is no index, although the long and interesting bibliography nearly makes up for this deficiency. The small paperback format hardly does the subject justice, and the publisher was very stingy with the pictures (there are only seventeen). Finally, to call this book a "history of bodybuilding" when it is actually a personal and sometimes highly individualized interpretation of the subject is a bit of a misnomer, but this is a very minor quibble. Conversely, this somewhat quirky approach to the subject gives the book a large portion of its winning charm.

The bottom line is if you can read German and find the history of weight training to be interesting, then this is a book that you should seek out. It is the best work on the history of German bodybuilding that I have read in a long, long time—in fact, ever.

Gilbert Adrieu, *L'homme et la force: Des marchands de la force au culte de la form (XIXe et XXe siècles)* [Man and Strength: From the Merchants of Strength to the Cult of the Body (19th

and 20th centuries)] (Joinville-le-Pont: Éditions Actio, 1988)
ISBN: 2 906411 02 7.

The French have taken up the history of physical culture and bodybuilding with a rigorous dedication and thoroughness that would be the pride of any national literature. There are more works that have been produced by the French on this subject than in any other country—at least that is the impression I get when I consider the many volumes that have been produced by Gallic writers. Georges Vigarello, Pierre Arnaud, and Jacques Ulmann are only a few of the historians who have attacked the subject with a brilliance and incisiveness that Anglophiles might find surprising. Among the best is *L'homme et la force [Man and Strength]*. This volume examines man's changing attitudes toward the acquisition of strength and what constitutes a strong man.

The author is a very well known figure in European sport history. He is a professor of physical education history, and according to the blurb on the back of the book, he is also the president of the French Society for the History of Sport. His work has appeared in many journals and his books are some of the best ever written on the history of physical education.

Andrieu has taken physical strength in its many forms and traced it from its beginnings. To do this, the author has divided the book into two sections, the first is entitled "To Be Strong," and it reviews the various methods for attaining or celebrating physical strength. Beginning with the fairs of the Middle Ages, this section of the book continues with the history of equestrianism as a means of attaining strength and vigor; in the chapter called "A virile nudity" Andrieu covers the history of swimming from its early days and of the gradual acceptance of bathing drawers. This has significance for physique building since he points out that nude bathing was the first chance most nineteenth century men had of seeing and comparing unclothed physiques.

For most fans of strength literature, the best part of the book is "The Conquest of a Market," which deals with the evolution of professional gyms and their attempt to turn physical culture into an enterprise capable of supporting its entrepreneurs in appropriate style. There is much here on the great "gymnasiarch" Hippolyte Triat and of his pioneering (and ultimately unsuccessful) struggles to turn bodybuilding into a commercially viable profession. Following this, there is a section on the growth of spas and hydrotherapy resorts.

The second half of the book is titled "To Be Healthy" and it turns to the curative side of gymnastics and weight training. The author examines the way exercise has evolved as a health-giving regimen down to the present. The first chapter in this section deals with a physiological analysis of exercise and an examination of the various techniques that were used. There follows analyses of various methods including the Swedish cure. After this comes a disquisition on the value of fencing as a health restorative. The final section concerns various medical or therapeutic methods for regaining health, such as taking cod liver oil, the sunlight cure, and other more radical ideas that were popular at the turn of the century.

Andrieu has done some fascinating and original research into the field of physical culture and its implications for both history and the present day. It would not be an overstatement to say that this is one of books that every serious scholar of the subject should read. Even so, there are a few drawbacks to this extremely important volume. It is unrelentingly Franco-centric in its outlook. The author has not looked very far beyond the borders of France to find examples, so those hoping to find references to the work of English, American, or German scholars will search in vain. There are very few illustrations that might otherwise enrich a volume such as this. Perhaps the most serious quibble I have with this book, however, is the author's overly academic approach to the subject. Andrieu's knowledge of his field is virtually encyclopedic, but the book would have been so much better had he chosen to use narrative or humor a little more. Despite these very minor drawbacks, this book is one of the most important contributions to the field of sport history that has come along in many years. If you can't read French it's almost

worth learning it so that you can read this and other books like it!

**Kenneth Dutton, *The Perfectible Body: The Western Ideal of Physical Development* (London: Cassell, 1995)
ISBN: 0 304 33230 5.**

Why has a muscular male body been honored and sought after in Western culture, but virtually ignored in others? Why have we come to accept the Greek ideal as our model rather than some other form of human representation? Why do we strive to have "perfect" bodies in an era when all other absolutes have fallen into disfavor? These are some of the extremely interesting questions which scholar, Ken Dutton, attempts to answer in his ambitious new book, *The Perfectible Body*.

Dutton is professor of French at the University of Newcastle in Australia, but his academic background belies a well-founded knowledge in both the physical and cerebral aspects of bodybuilding. This is clear from his impressive list of publications: in addition to penning a shelf of books on French language and literature, he has also found time to co-write, with partner Ron Laura, seven books on muscular training.

Dutton's current work is a welcome addition to the understanding of weight training, bodybuilding history, and gender studies. The author first traces the history of what he called "the developed body" from its earliest appearance in ancient Greece down to the present; he then pauses to examine the various meanings that have been attributed to the muscular physique.

There are three major divisions in the book. The first section, "The Evolving Body," concerns the history of bodybuilding, its admirers, and its stars down to the early twentieth century. The second section is entitled "The Legible Body," and it deals with the various ways the developed body has been used and interpreted throughout history. Dutton discusses the ways the muscular physique can be "read" and then put to use as a political, sexual, or individualistic statement. This is probably the most interesting part of the book from a theoretical point of view, and it contains many interesting observations about the physique and its significance. The final part of the book, "The Contemporary Body," covers the modern interpretations of the developed body, dealing with topics such as female reactions to male physique display and the ways in which gay sensibilities have molded bodybuilding and physique photography. I found this part to be both the provocative and controversial.

In addition to the well-written text, the book is aided by literally hundreds of beautiful photographs. Many of these pictures were taken expressly for this book, and they include some of Australia's (and the world's) best physiques. If nothing else, the pictures are worth the price of the volume.

There are better reasons for all serious lovers of body culture to read *The Perfectible Body*, however, not the least of which is the vast amount of scholarship that went into its production. The book is really a vast compendium of theories and ideas that Dutton has either devised or collected and which help us understand what building the body really means. In order to do this author uses a bewildering array of sources, from histories and sociological studies to popular culture including such diverse elements as movies, underwear ads, Chippendale's male bump-and-grind displays, and other sources.

Although others have dealt with the philosophical aspects of muscle building, Dutton is the first to make a serious book-length attempt to come to grips with the implications of bodybuilders on society at large. The author has put together an impressive body of scholarship to prove his points, and there is enough in the work to ignite any number of heated discussions. Although the author claims that the book was "written for the intelligent general reader rather than the academic specialist," most readers will find it heavy going. If you can't bring yourself to agree with one of the ideas in this piquant gumbo of theories, another one will swim along in a line or two that will have you nodding your head in agreement.

Watch for other works by Dutton. If they bubble with the same spicy intensity as this one, they will be well worth digesting.