

The Sanitary Reformers: America's Strength Seekers

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In the mid-1850s to 1870 there was the development of a strength cult in the Northeastern United States operating under the guise of health advocates. The social, moral, and physical conditions of the period made the public more receptive to exercise and sport than it had been in the past. With the general acceptance of the concept, "strength is health," the sanitary reformers who preached the benefits of weight lifting as the fastest and surest way to health caught the public's imagination. The leading disciple and foremost advocate of the theory that strength and health were synonymous was George Barker Windship, a fourth generation graduate of the Harvard Medical School. He lectured and performed amazing feats of strength from 1859 into the 1870s throughout the midwest and northeast United States and into southeast and central Canada. He earned the reputation of being the strongest man in the world for his size. Windship established a gymnasium in Boston that became known as one of the most famous schools for strength seekers in the United States. Other noted strength seekers in the area were C. H. Bacon of the old Tremont Gymnasium; D. B. Butler with his Lifting Cure; J. F. Paul and his Health Lift; and other lesser known proprietors of gymnasiums devoted to curing disease and promoting health through strength development. The general public, educators, and YMCA directors were influenced by the teachings of the sanitary reformers. Consequently, these strength seekers were able to play a historic role in the philosophical development of physical education and its resulting curricula.