

# Watershed Days in Weight Training- Billy Cannon and Istrouma High

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The most famous athlete of the Sixth Century B.C. was the wrestler Milo, of Crotona, who is often called the father of progressive resistance as a result of his reported practice of daily carrying a heifer calf as it grew to its full size. Milo's carrying of the calf symbolized the Classical period's familiarity with the use of resistance exercise to improve athletic performance. The Romans also used resistance exercises to improve physical performance, but their aim was military, not athletic, success.

After the Renaissance began, interest in conditioning for athletics gradually revived, and, in the Nineteenth century, pioneers such as William Buckingham Curtis demonstrated that the lifting of heavy weights was of benefit in many forms of athletics. As the physical culture movement grew, however, many unscrupulous lifters, finding that there was little profit to be made from the manufacture and mail order sale of barbells, began to manufacture inferior forms of training equipment and market this equipment by maintaining that the use of heavy weights would somehow bind the muscles and be of harm to an athlete.

This dishonest advertising, over time, had the effect of convincing athletes, coaches and physical educators that the lifting of heavy weights had no place in the preparation for sports; and for the first half of this century this attitude was virtually universal, being disputed only by the few mavericks who had actually lifted barbells.

This was the environment in which Alvin Roy of Baton Rouge, Louisiana approached James and Ellis Brown, coach and principal, respectively, of one of the local schools—Istrouma High—with an offer to put the school's entire football team on a weight training program. Roy owned a gym in Baton Rouge and he had been introduced to the "iron game" during the five weeks he served as liaison for the U.S. weightlifting team at the world championships in Paris in 1946. Reluctantly, the Browns agreed and after a spring and summer in the weight room, Istrouma had an undefeated season and won the state championship. One of the reasons for the team's success was Billy Cannon, who was a high school All-American that fall and then went on to win the state track meet in the 100, the 200 and the shotput.

Cannon enrolled at Louisiana State in Baton Rouge but even though he continued to lift and play well, the LSU team fared poorly until Al Roy convinced the coach, Paul Dietzel, to do what Istrouma High had done—lift as a team. Dietzel, as the Browns had been, was fearful of the weights, but Cannon's success and speed and Roy's salesmanship convinced him to implement the first program of heavy lifting ever used by a college football team. The next fall, 1958, the LSU team was undefeated; Cannon became a unanimous All-American and Dietzel was chosen as Coach of the Year. Following these successes, Dietzel was a frequent speaker at coaches' clinics and his open admission of the part weight training played in his team's success ushered in the modern era of resistance exercise for football.