

FRENCH CONNECTIONS

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Physiques for La Patrie: Edmond Desbonnet and French Physical Culture

Athletic men have developed their bodies throughout history, but it was not until the nineteenth century that this process became organized and studied on a scientific basis. Leading the nations in this physical rebirth was France, which has one of the longest traditions of gymnasium operation of any European country. The flamboyant gymnasiarch, Hippolyte Triat (1813-1881), for example, ran a vast and magnificent school of physical culture in Second-Empire Paris that featured all the latest equipment for gymnastics and weight training. Triat's gymnasium helped teach French men, women, and children the methods and benefits of weight training.

The most illustrious of Triat's spiritual successors was Edmond Desbonnet (1868-1953). Although he is little known in English-speaking countries, Desbonnet was renowned as a gymnasium operator, journalist and athlete in France of the *Belle Epoque*. His training techniques, literary output, and efforts to improve the physical condition of his fellow citizens brought Desbonnet to the forefront of sporting and literary France.

Edmond Desbonnet always maintained that he had been born a professor of physical culture; one thing is certain however: he was fascinated by strength from a very early age. Desbonnet was born in the northern French industrial city of Lille into a prosperous bourgeois family. Thanks to his obsession with strength and muscularity, he became interested in professional strongmen. These music-hall titans performed almost everywhere in France, Germany and the Low Countries, and most of them came through Lille where Desbonnet made it a point to meet them. As he did so he began to record facts about their lives and careers. These, he later collected into his remarkable history of theatrical strongmen, *Les Rois de la Force* (1911).

The French fascination with strength and muscularity had begun in the aftermath of the French Revolution. The *ancien régime* was seen as weak, effete, and feminine; it was swept away by the strong, purposeful, masculine forces of revolution. This triumph of the muscular was represented in the art and literature of the period. Strong, muscular men also began to appear as street performers and music hall entertainers. After the French debacle in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, there was added impetus to prepare the soldiers of French Fatherland for their coming *revanche* (revenge) against the Germans.

Desbonnet's particular version of physical culture was based on light and medium weight training. He called his system "organ gymnastics" because it was supposed to exercise and reinvigorate the internal tissues. Once the client had been sufficiently strengthened by these initial exercises, he usually graduated to the heavier equipment. Desbonnet wished his pupils to become healthy, strong, and beautiful, but his ultimate reason for physical improvement was so that France's voice in the concert of nations might be preserved. Throughout two bloody world wars, the professor continued to rail against the external threats to France. And despite being in the forefront of the fight against the German menace, Desbonnet's signature magazine, *La Culture Physique*, was one of the few that the Nazis allowed to be published throughout their occupation of France.

Desbonnet had always directed his focus toward a unique national school of physical training for France. His constant exhortations to regenerate the French nation were intended to keep his fractious nation away from the brink of physical, moral, and political disaster, which he saw yawning before it. Insofar as he succeeded, Edmond Desbonnet deserves a large share of credit for helping both Frenchmen and foreigners to understand the workings of their bodies and the nature of vitality itself.

Although the French sport history community has written extensively about Desbonnet and his contributions, most of the sources for this paper come from the gymnasiarch's own words as they were published in his books and magazine articles. These works include *La Force Physique* (1904), *Les Rois de la Force* (1911), *Pour Devenir Fort et le Rester* (1918) and *Comment On Devient Athlète* (1909) as well as excerpts and editorials from his magazines *La Culture Physique* (1904-1971) and *La Santé par les Sports* (1911-1924).