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Well, Old Boy, It Done Me a Great Deal of Good: Professor Attila, James J. Corbett and the Introduction of Systematic Strength Training for Athletics

Louis Durlacher, known as Professor Attila, is most often remembered as the mentor and trainer of the professional strongman Eugen Sandow. However, Attila's historical legacy reaches far beyond the shadow cast by Sandow's accomplishments. Attila trained Edmond Desbonnet, for instance, widely regarded as the "Father for French Physical Culture". He also influenced Theodore Sibert of Germany, and Alan Calvert of the United States, both of whom are regarded as the founding fathers of weight training in their respective countries. Attila also worked with most of the crowned heads of Europe including King Edward of England, King Haakon of Norway, King George of Greece, and the Princess Dagmar, who became Empress of Russia and the mother of Czar Nicholas. His private students included millionaires Cornelius Vanderbilt and Baron Rothschild of France. And, as he did with Sandow, Attila trained a number of men and women to be professional strength athletes in variety theatre and circus.

But Attila left behind another legacy as well — the introduction of scientific strength training methods for athletic improvement. Attila moved to New York in 1893 and opened a gymnasium there the following year. Richard K. Fox, editor of the *Police Gazette* became Attila's unofficial patron and through Fox, Attila became friendly with most of the prominent boxers of his era. Attila loved boxing and he soon had a number of these boxers, including James J. Corbett, training at what he called his "studio" of physical culture. When Corbett left New York and traveled to his training camp to get ready for his title fight against Charley Mitchell in Jacksonville, Florida, he took with him his dumbbells, an eighteen-pound "training stick" given to him by Attila. After winning the bout, Corbett wrote to Attila, "Well old boy, it done me a great deal of good and I must say it is a wonderfull [sic] method and might have not a little to do with my recent success."

As the twentieth century draws to a close, athletes around the world employ a variety of resistance training techniques to improve their performance in competition. As the nineteenth century drew to a close, very few athletes had yet to learn the secret. Those athletes who turned to weight training to aid their performances were, for the most part, trained by Attila. This paper considers Attila's role in this important transformation in American sport and argues that among his many credits, Attila can also claim that he was "America's First Strength Coach".

In addition to the Attila papers, the Sig Klein (Attila's son-in-law) Collection and the Ottley Coulter Papers, all of which are housed at the Todd-McLean Physical Culture Collection at the University of Texas at Austin, this paper is based on *The Police Gazette* and other turn-of-the-century magazines and newspapers.

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