Weight-lifting "as a sport, as a means of body building, and as a profession":

Alan Calvert's *The Truth About Weight-Lifting*[1]

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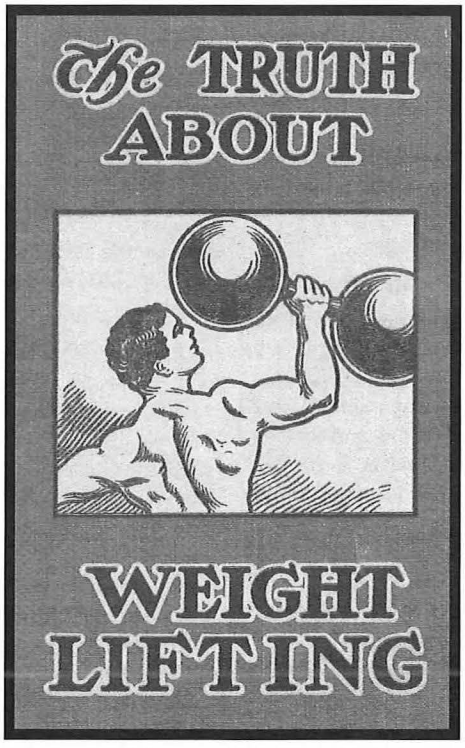
The first three decades of the twentieth century witnessed a steady increase in sporting awareness and opportunity for the American citizen. As interest and participation in various sporting activities escalated, new rules and standards were introduced. Weightlifting in particular has been described by sport historian John Fair as "undergoing a metamorphosis from the strongmanism of an earlier era to a more regulated and respectable status" during these years.[2] Fair traced this evolution by considering such influential organizations as Alan Calvert's Milo Barbell Company, George Jowett's American Continental Weight-Lifters Association, and Bob Hoffman's York Barbell Company.[3] The Milo Bar-bell Company in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, allowed American men, and undoubtedly a few women, to train and compete with adjustable barbells. According to Fair, however, it was Alan Calvert's publications, especially *Strength* magazine, which "exercised the greatest influence on the development of an early iron game culture."[4] *Strength* was by far Calvert's best known and most wide-spread publication, and it may well have had the greatest influence on lifting culture, but his first monograph, *The Truth About Weight-Lifting,* also had an important impact on the development of American weightlifting as a sport. As ground-breaking as this text was in its time, scholars have provided little information on the book or its contents. Attempting to resolve this neglect, this article provides an historical evaluation of the contents of Calvert's book and the text's influence on American lifting during a time in which the public was enamored with strength yet troubled by the problem of inauthenticity.



Alan Calvert's *The Truth About Weight-Lifting* played a pivotal role in the evolution of the sport of weightlifting.

The respected French physical culturist Professor Edmond Desbonnet hit the proverbial nail on the head when he published a few lines in 1911 about displays of strength and the power of impressions: "Physical prowess seems most often indisputable; a scientific or literary work does not tax the eyes the same way snatching a globe barbell tires the body, and the public hardly worries whether the book is worthy or whether the globes are empty—it is enough that the latter is large."[5] Some people who attended strength performances, and more than a few of those who actually lifted the weights, cared little about the truth, only about the impressions left behind. Although Alan Calvert agreed with the essence of Desbon-

net's assertion, he regretted that what the Professor asserted was true. Calvert had grown up watching and reading about strongmen and their crowd-pleasing antics, but after he opened the Milo Bar-bell Company in 1902, he became personally involved in the business of strongmanism. He supplied many of the performers with equipment and many of his early students trained to become professional strongmen; however, Calvert knew that strongmanism had a dark side. Because these men had to amaze the public in order to sell tickets, many of them exaggerated their lifts, claiming to be stronger than they were. Those on the inside knew that a healthy dose of skepticism was needed when hearing about the feats of professional strongmen. But Calvert worried, with good reason, that if the sport—and his company—were to grow, the activity had to be placed on a higher and more ethical level. If barbellism was to be promoted as a wholesome and beneficial sport, Calvert had to find a way to make people believe that the weights men lifted were accurately represented. You couldn't claim that training worked if everyone thought you—and your weights—were fake.

Calvert was particularly concerned about the effect of such false claims on amateur lifting. The public, Calvert feared, couldn't differentiate between the claims of the professional strongman and those of amateur lifters who made up the majority of Calvert's students and potential customers. Amateur lifters didn't try to make a living by giving strength exhibitions. They might informally compete against each other, but they didn't generally resort to exaggeration or questionable practices. They stayed within their strength limits and didn't have the same great need to be regarded as record holders or the "world's strongest man" that the professionals had. In September 1911, after worrying about the effect of what he considered to be a growing cynicism toward lifting, Calvert decided to tackle the problem head-on in a book called *The Truth About Weight-Lifting*, the first hard-cover examination of the secrets of the strongman trade.

Calvert described the work in its inaugural *Physical Culture* advertisement as "a series of interesting articles on weight-lifting, dealing with it as a sport, as a means of body building, and as a profession."[6] His purpose in writing the book was "to describe some of the greatest known feats of strength; how such feats are performed, which feats are genuine, and which feats are tricks, or fakes; also to endeavor to give the reader some idea of who are the strongest men of the present day and the records to prove them so."[7] In many ways, the book represented the first peal of the death knell for the professional strongman business. Calvert credited those men he believed to be truly strong, but he also exposed the fakers and exaggerators. *The Truth About Weight-Lifting*'s other great thrust was to call for the organization of "the sport of lifting." At the same time that he condemned the dishonest professional strongmen, Calvert argued for the standardization of weights and lifts and for the creation of an amateur lifting organization that would keep records and oversee competitions.

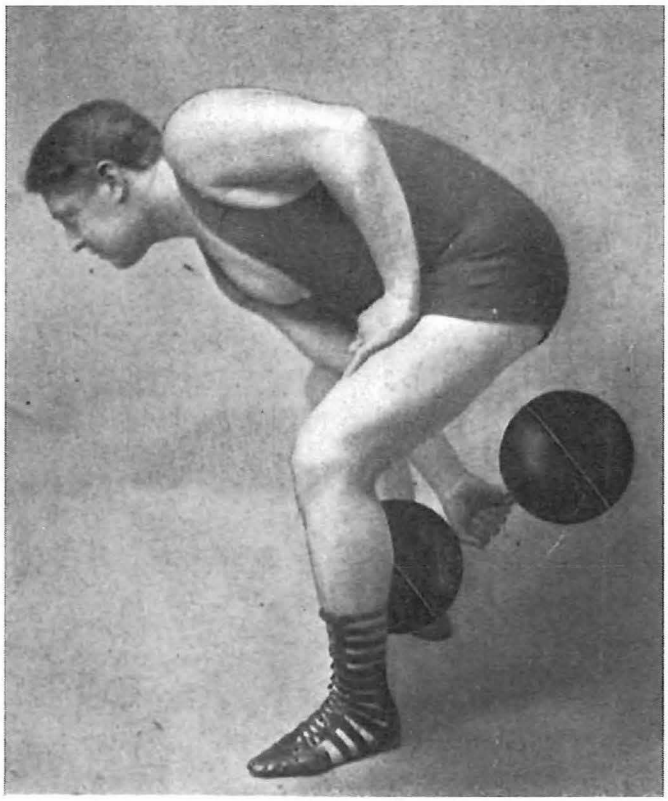
Calvert began the book with a description of his qualifications: "Originator of Progressive Weight Lifting in America. Inventor of the 'Milo' and 'Milo Triplex' combination dumbbells. Proprietor of the Milo Bar-Bell Co."[8] Although George Barker Windship has a more legitimate claim to the title of "father of resistance exercise in America," Calvert was by far the most important American figure in the first few decades of the twentieth century. The research he conducted both before and after he opened the company led him to develop a vast pool of knowledge about weight training. Although he didn't claim to know much when he opened his business—"my knowledge of bar-bell exercise and of lifting methods was rather limited"—he wrote that what he *did* know was "encyclopedic, when compared to what the average athlete knew about the subject."[9] He had continued to educate himself and, in so doing, put himself at the top of the weight lifter's resource guide, if there had been such a thing at the time. Readers of his new book were encouraged to accept what he had to say as being a truthful evaluation because he was writing about weight-lifting "from the inside." Calvert wrote that his volume was groundbreaking and sure to "create a sensation," because he was using previously unpublished information.[10]

The book sold for one dollar in 1911 before it went down to ten cents during a "September Special" in 1912. Calvert began his "series of interesting articles" by explaining the existing state of American weight-lifting as both a recreational and competitive activity. He firmly believed the United States had the "raw material," but not the history and know-how of lifting to create renowned record-breakers. American athletes tended to favor "light" athletics (i.e. track and field or baseball),

while European nations, especially Germany and Austria, favored "heavy" athletics, such as weight-lifting, in which they held many of the records.[11] Another reason for weight training's elevated status in Germany was that some of the *Turner* and lifting clubs had existed for fifty years or more; therefore, their members had had access to a wide assortment of training implements—including barbells and heavy dumbbells—for most of the second half of the nineteenth century.[12] Such heavy-lifting clubs were extremely rare in late nineteenth-century America; as a result, its populace had to wait for the opening of the Milo Bar-bell Company in order to purchase, and use with much consistency, heavily-weighted, adjustable barbells. More importantly, because of their longer experience with lifting, the Europeans had found that the most productive method of strength training was to gradually make "the exercise harder and harder."[13] Calvert argued that their highly developed, all-round strength beat out the more selective strength that Americans tended to build by targeting only one or two lifts.

The primary reason for these disparities, however, was the difference in the number of people involved in the activity on the two sides of the Atlantic. Calvert wrote that it was "no exaggeration to say that there are, in the average German lifting club, more first-class lifters than there are in the whole United States of America."[14] Historian David Willoughby has moreover reported that the German Athletic Association—*Deutschen Athletik Sport Verbandes*—founded in 1891 to bring all the *Kraftsport* (strength sports) clubs together, had a membership of over three hundred clubs and over twelve thousand athletes by 1900.[15] These German and Austrian lifting clubs held tournaments weekly and sometimes daily in the larger cities. On some occasions, as many as 150 to 200 entrants would compete in different weight classes performing various lifting feats. No such competitions occurred in the U.S. According to Calvert, though, the greatest factor for the neglected state of American lifting was the effect of the professional strongmen:

> Probably the principal reason [why weight-lifting as a sport is not popular in this country] is the very foolish and short-sighted attitude of the professional lifters in this country. These professionals have made a practice of deceiving and "buncoing" the public for so long a time, that the public has become disgusted with their methods and has come to the conclusion, either that all weight-lifters are fakirs, or else that weight-lifting is a peculiar kind of sport in which only a few men can excel.[16]



One of the few photos of Calvert known to exist is this shot of him performing a one-arm swing on page 32 of *The Truth About Weight-Lifting*. Although Calvert is not listed as the model in the book, David Willoughby wrote a pencil note identifying Calvert in a copy of the book given to James A. Cameron. Cameron's thank you letter to Willoughby, housed at the H. J. Lutcher Stark Center, allowed us to know that this was Calvert.

So, Calvert had to not only compete against barbell illiteracy as he launched his fledgling company but he had to also confront the image of the professional strongman as a charlatan.

Sport historians Allen Guttmann and Melvin Adelman might say that American weight-lifting before Calvert was operating with pre-modern tendencies. A "modern" sport, according to Guttmann, involves secularism, equality of opportunity to compete in standardized competitions, specialization of roles within the sport, rationalization of the rules and training for the sport, bureaucratic organizations to lead and unify the sport,

quantification of some sort, and the quest for records.[17] Adelman further argues that a "modern" sport involves multiple levels of organization; competes by written, formalized, and standardized rules; provides chances to compete at local, national, and international levels; exhibits role differentiations; regularly reports in local and national media as well as its own specialized literature; and publishes statistics and records on a regular basis.[18] The professional strongmen who performed in circuses and variety theaters were not trying to create a sport, of course. They were entertainers who used lifting as a means to an end—their paychecks. However, unlike jugglers and acrobats, where the performance is everything, lifting is an activity that requires quantification. Lifting is interesting primarily because it allows us to compare one man's strength to another's. Thus, professional strongmen had to claim to hold records and be title holders even though no association sanctioned their records. For Calvert, the fact that no agency regulated the various claims of the professional strongmen meant that it was harder to encourage a young person to take up heavy lifting. If the amateur had only the hyperbolic, unreachable records of the professional strongmen as a goal, it might seem pointless to train at all.

In the early twentieth century, Calvert did more to move weight-lifting toward being a modern sport than anyone else. His Milo barbells allowed men in different parts of America to train on identical equipment so that lifting conditions were standardized. In his educational out-reach activities, Calvert worked to standardize the lifts themselves, creating a canon of exercises which allowed men in different parts of America to replicate each other's feats and thus compare themselves to one another. In publishing *The Truth About Weight-Lifting*, Calvert took the nascent sport one step closer to modernization by supplying outsiders with "inside" information and by exposing the fraudulent claims of some of the professionals.

Strongman "Tricks"

Arguments about the validity of many lifts, even when seen in person, were commonplace in the early twentieth century. Calvert explained that the strongmen's easiest ruses "trade on the ignorance of the audience" by making absurd statements about the weight of their equipment.[19] Since most exhibition bars tended to have globe ends, just counting the visible plate-weights, as would be done today, was impossible. If a photograph was to be published in a newspaper or magazine, an art editor, or the photographer himself, often wrote the poundage of the bar on the globes in the photograph so that all would know the bar's claimed weight. It was therefore easy for the performer to simply tell the photographer an exaggerated weight which was then relayed to the art editor. As an example, Calvert told of a weight-lifter who borrowed a 160-pound barbell to put on a strength exhibition. A reporter took pictures of the strength show and Calvert saw the resulting photos in the newspaper describing the barbell as weighing 260-pounds—one hundred pounds more than the actual weight.[20]

Another such incident which amused Calvert and added to the fuel for his book involved a reporter and a "Herculean 'hand-balancer'" who performed at a local theatre. The reporter asked the hand-balancer to pose for some photos to publish with an article he had written. When the reporter, hand-balancer, and Calvert met at the photographer's studio they found that the theatre manager had forgotten to send the gymnast's 75-pound kettle-bells to be used in the pictures. A call to the theatre assured them the bells would be brought post-haste by a team of horses. After 10 to 15 minutes had passed, Calvert and the others saw a young boy employed by the theatre parading down the street with two kettle-bells in one hand and a third in the other hand—each kettle-bell had 75-pounds stenciled on its globe. Calvert only commented, "If this gymnast's muscles are as strong as the language he used on that occasion he must be a wonder."[21]

Calvert also exposed the fact that many professional strongmen had their own stage weights specially made. A strongman's reputation and marketability depended on his remaining undefeated in regards to the challenges he tossed at fellow performers and audiences. To preserve their images of invincibility, many strongmen had unique "tricks" built into their equipment. Anyone not knowing about the trick could not lift the bar on the first try, which was all they were likely to get. One method was to make a dumbbell ten to twenty pounds heavier on one end. A challenger would lose the balance of the bar when he gripped the handle in the middle and tried to lift it. The strongman, knowing that the bar was heavier on one end, could make the lift look effortless by gripping the handle closer to the heavier end.[22] Some large-handed strongmen had thick handles on their equipment, often two inches and more in diameter. This was not exactly a trick, but only those with very large, strong hands had any hope of picking up the

implement. Men with average-sized hands who might be invited to the stage to "test" the weight would consequently have little chance of success.[23] Other strongmen were even known to put a liquid of some sort (e.g. mercury) in a hollow handle to throw the balance off when the bar was in motion and the challenger tried to keep the bar level.[24] In this case, the strongman was able to control the weight by simply keeping one end of the bar lower than the other so that the mercury would not flow from one end of the bar to the other.

If anyone questioned Calvert's source for this information, his advertisements for the book explained that he had inside knowledge. He had supplied "exhibition dumb-bells for many of the most prominent professional 'strong-men'" and "celebrated lifters" and, therefore, knew who gave fake representations to the public as to what their equipment weighed.[25] He estimated that "not more than one professional lifter out of five will tell the truth, or anything like the truth" about the weight of their equipment.[26] With so many "tricks" being employed by the performing strongmen, it was only natural that portions of society began to believe that there was a "catch" or "knack" to lifting. By publishing *The Truth About Weight-Lifting* Calvert didn't make many friends among the professional strongman circles; in his words, he became "extremely unpopular with many of the professionals."[27] A number of the strongmen wrote to defend themselves and their acts and called Calvert a "bum sport."[28] One professional who Calvert saw perform in person and who turned down Calvert's offer to verify his purported records even explained that he wasn't really a strongman at all, but a "showman."[29] For the strongmen unaccustomed to such scrutiny and criticism, Calvert was the harbinger of tough times to come. To the amateur lifter and uninitiated audience, though, Calvert was most likely a welcome font of knowledge.

Calvert also explained the difference between true lifting feats and the showier supporting tricks. True lifts tested one's muscular strength while supporting feats shifted the emphasis to the bones of the skeleton, which are structurally much stronger than the muscles. Popular supporting acts included "bridging," in which weight of some kind—men, automobiles, animals, etc.—was added to planks situated across the knees, shoulders, and/or feet of the strongman who held or supported the whole apparatus for the audience. Bridge acts took quite a bit of preparation and careful consideration to create the best visual impression for the audience. According to Calvert, though, these feats also represented times when "a professional will work [hard physically] in order to create an impression."[30] Supporting feats, to take one prominent example, included one-armed stunts in which great amounts of weight were supported at arm's length overhead. The famous strongman and physique artist Eugen Sandow always included several of these stunts in his performances since he believed he could support "almost any amount of weight" above his head "on a straight arm if it was lifted into position" for him.[31] To Calvert's way of thinking, these acts were great for leaving an impression with the audience, but did "not prove that he [the strongman] is a particle stronger than the average sturdy day-laborer."[32]

Strongman stunts such as coin-breaking, chain-breaking, and card-tearing also received Calvert's attention. Acts like these, he assured his readers, were usually accomplished with the help of some deception. Those claiming to break coins were usually good at sleight of hand tricks. A previously torn coin (compliments of a vise and pliers before the show) was palmed while the strongman acted like he was ripping a whole coin. During some contrived struggling the previously-torn coin replaced the whole coin with the audience oblivious of what had taken place.[33] Men who wrapped a chain around their biceps with the intention of breaking it had usually doctored the chain first by filing through a link, subjecting the chain to acid, or replacing a steel link with a much weaker lead link.[34] Card tearing, on the other hand, could be accomplished a number of ways—some legitimate, some not. Calvert believed that anyone who trained for three months with heavy dumbells should be able to rip a deck of cards and that an advanced lifter, able to put a 150-pound dumbell overhead with one hand, should be able to rip two decks. Calvert explained the mechanics of how the trick was honestly completed and introduced factors which contributed to one's ability to tear decks of cards: the material of the cards, their age, and whether or not they had been baked in an oven before the show.[35]

When Calvert discussed who should be considered the "strongest man in the world," he asserted that "there is no man who stands head and shoulders above all other men in point of strength."[36] However, he gave credit to several famous lifters for what he believed to be their true accomplishments. Relying upon European standards because "they [lifters from the Old World] understand such things," Calvert recognized Joseph Steinbach of Vienna as "the strongest man" because he was the strongest two-handed lifter. He could put overhead in a two-hand jerk 390 pounds and he could two-hand press 328¾ pounds.[37] Others believed Arthur Sax-

on of the famed Saxon Trio to be the strongest man of this era. Saxon held the record in the bent press with 371 pounds.[38] Calvert conceded that Saxon "possesses muscular strength in abundance" and was immensely impressed with Saxon as a "dumbbell lifter" and for his penchant to perform "straight shows;" however, since his best lifts were one-armed exercises he was automatically excluded from consideration for the overall strongest man title.[39] While one-armed exercises demanded skill and agility, Calvert's opinion was that two-handed exercises demonstrated a greater amount of brute strength. He thus argued, "When a man gets a heavy bar-bell of 250 pounds, or more, to his chest, no tricks, skill or quickness in movement will enable him to get the bell aloft in the two-hand 'press.'"[40] Calvert mentioned John Marx's record-breaking abilities in back-lifting and tearing horseshoes, but since he rarely practiced with barbells and dumbbells he wasn't a serious contender for the title either. The only other contender for the title was Karl Swoboda; he had lifted 400 pounds overhead in the two-handed jerk, ten pounds more than Steinbach.[41] However, Swoboda outweighed Steinbach by fifty pounds, so Calvert thought the title should remain with Steinbach for being stronger pound-for-pound.[42]

Calvert called attention to the fact that there weren't any Americans in consideration for the title. In Calvert's opinion, this was primarily because "an absolutely first-class 'strong man'" did not exist in the whole of the United States.[43] He blamed this on the population's tendency to favor the supporting feats instead of the purer strength lifts. However, he believed that the standardization of rules, events, and equipment would take care of that problem; but that the desired results would not, and indeed, could not, be seen overnight. Trying to help his readers understand that "weight-lifters are not developed in a day," and to brag on his hometown, Calvert used an analogy with the national pastime of baseball. The Germans, he argued, would need at least three years to develop a baseball team to compare with the two-time World Champion Philadelphia Athletics, just as the United States needed the same span of time to produce "five absolutely first-class lifters" to compete with the German strength stars.[44] Since the Milo Bar-bell Company had opened its doors in 1902, Calvert assumed that the eventuality of American lifters actually competing against the European lifters was nearing. To speed up the process, he openly challenged the American lifters:

> I would at any time gladly pay $100.00 to see an American lifter raise from his shoulder to arm's length above the head with the right arm a 300-lb. bar-bell, or to see any American lifter raise from the ground to arm's length above the head a bar-bell weighing 400 lbs. Any aspiring young strong men who think they can perform either of these feats can take a chance any time they are in Philadelphia by calling at my factory, and I can assure such lifters that they will receive absolutely fair treatment, and that they can have the pick of the kind of bells they want to use, and that if they succeed in performing either of the above feats I will not only hand over the money, but will also do the utmost in my power to assist them to establish their claim for American records in these feats. I feel that my money is pretty safe for some years to come.[45]

Calvert also included a chapter discussing bodily measurements in *The Truth About Weight-Lifting*. Anthropometry was popular in early twentieth century America and when strongmen began to display their physiques as well as put on strength exhibitions, many of them included their physical measurements in their publicity materials. Because of the public's interest in anthropometry, strongmen found that people would flock to the circus or variety theater not just to see phenomenal lifting, but also to see a man with a 46-inch chest and 24-inch thighs. Calvert reminded his readers that the numbers on a seamstress's measuring tape could also be manipulated by strongmen to their advantage.

Calvert wrote, for instance, about how Sandow reported in his book on physical culture that he had a 48-inch normal chest, a 60-inch expanded chest, 19-inch arms, 28-inch thighs, and that he weighed 200 pounds. However, in the back of Sandow's book, Calvert confided to his readers, one could find Sandow's measurements as they were certified by the famed Dr. Dudley Allen Sargent. According to Sargent, Sandow weighed only 180 pounds on the day he weighed him and Sandow possessed a 44-inch normal chest, a 47-inch expanded chest, a 16 ¾-inch arm, and 24-inch thighs.[46] Obviously, most of Sargent's measurements were dramatically different from those claimed by Sandow. A person's bodyweight—and measurements—do often

fluctuate during his or her lifetime, but in Sandow's case we have an extensive photographic record of his body and that record does not indicate that he put on 20 pounds. In fact, Sandow's claim of a 60-inch expanded chest is illogical since modern strongmen with 60-inch chest measurements normally weigh over 300 pounds, and most of these are bench press specialists who have particularly built the pectoral muscles of the chest. Sandow did not do bench presses; the exercise had not yet been invented. In any case, after claiming to have "examined the measurements of several hundred amateur and professional lifters" Calvert found their average measurements to be a 42-inch chest, a 15-inch arm, and 23-inch thighs.[47] Even so, Calvert conceded that a good deal of strength derived from one's skeletal structure, and therefore physical measurements didn't tell the whole story.

Although Calvert didn't discuss his philosophy of perfect proportions and ideal measurements in *The Truth About Weight-Lifting*, he did relate some ideas on proper amounts and types of muscle. Due to his interest in building strength, Calvert admonished his readers that "*quality* counts for more than *quantity*" where muscles were concerned.[48] The function and ability of the muscles to work together were more important considerations than their volume and appearance. Indeed, the concept that size mattered less than "know-how" was one of the recurring themes in Calvert's writings. Training with heavy weights, he believed, forced a person to learn how to use muscles in groups by the proper application of force.

In an era riddled with fears of constipation and other digestive maladies, Calvert also attributed one's strength and health to a "square-built, powerful waist."[49] Therefore, a person should not have more than eight or nine inches difference between the chest and waist measurements. If the waist was 12 or more inches less than the chest measurement, one had inadequate waist development, according to Calvert. However, he pointed out that strongmen often quoted *expanded* chest measurements—not the more natural, relaxed chest as one might expect—which would throw the waist-to-chest ratio off a bit. In order to take an expanded measurement the strongman took a deep breath and flexed the latissimus dorsi of the upper back which made the measurement much larger.[50] Exaggeration of measuring tape readings was fairly easy to accomplish, but deceiving the actual eye of the beholder took more imagination.

In order to make their physiques appear larger and more defined to the naked eye, Calvert explained, the strongmen commonly employed several tricks. For instance, they often posed during their live acts in a three-sided posing cabinet in which lighting threw the muscles in shadowed relief and gave an impression of greater size. Photographers often took pictures of the strongmen in a similar cabinet for the same effect. Sometimes a photographer would even enhance a physique by applying shadows or lines of definition directly on the actual photo. Some unscrupulous professionals retouched their photos to an even greater extent, providing muscle where none was before. Calvert explained that this often resulted in "truly fearful and wonderful" muscle shapes not often found on a human. Another method to enhance the visual impact of live performances involved the rubbing of powder or burnt cork on the strongman's body and then having an assistant wipe away portions of the substance while he flexed his muscles. This practice, done just before a performance, left dark shadows in the valleys between muscles which, when lit properly, appeared more defined and significantly larger.[51]

Amateur Lifting and Standardization

Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of *The Truth About Weight-Lifting* was Calvert's plea for the standardization of lifting in America. If weight-lifters knew how to do a core number of competitive lifts, they could be better prepared for any competition that might arise. Relying upon Europe's history of conducting strength contests, Calvert described the eight "standard lifts" recognized by the Old World lifters: right-arm snatch, left-arm snatch, right-arm jerk, left-arm jerk, right-arm swing, left-arm swing, two-arm press, and two-arm jerk. As he explained each exercise, Calvert gave important information about how different countries performed the lift, along with records and details of exceptional lifts generally accepted to be true. He also made occasional references to professional strongmen who found some tricky way to perform a particular exercise more easily or more impressively for the audience. One such example began with a discussion of the form displayed while performing the snatch. After explaining the basics of the lift Calvert wrote that in Europe credit was given to the athlete not only for the amount of weight lifted, but also "for the manner in which he lifts it." Bad form sometimes correlated to moving one's feet during the lift, such as when "an amateur, or a badly trained professional" makes a "tremendous effort to get a bell above his head, and then after he has gotten the bell aloft he will have to take a few rapid steps in order

to maintain his balance." Calvert went on to accuse American professional strongmen of abusing this show of effort in their performances by "using a light bell and making a tremendous effort when lifting," thus giving "the impression to the audience that he is raising a tremendous weight."[52]

Calvert described the snatch, the swing, and the jerk as the "quick lifts." The quick lifts "put a premium on activity and skill," and since the smaller, lighter man had an easier time developing both, such lifts allowed him to compete against a larger, heavier man. The man who made best use of his strength—whether he was small but quick and explosive, or large and powerfully strong—was the best man in the competition, according to Calvert. With the exception of the swing, these same quick-lift exercises involving the use of two hands comprise today's Olympic sport of weightlifting. The only thing different in today's sport is that the "clean and jerk" replaces just "the jerk." The clean portion of the exercise, while treated cursorily by Calvert in his description of the overhead jerk and overhead press, addresses the accepted methods of getting the bar to the shoulders for either one of these two overhead lifts to commence. Calvert explained that some countries allowed a "continental clean" in which the bar could touch and/or rest on the body one or more times en route to the shoulders. A "true" clean meant that the bar traveled directly—cleanly, without touching the body—from the floor to the shoulders. Eventually, the "clean" was universally adopted and included in the name of one of the two present day Olympic weightlifting events.

After discussing the core competitive lifts, Calvert moved on to explain other well-known lifts. He described in detail several presses, including the bent-press, the military press, and the ordinary press, and commented that they were rarely seen in Europe anymore, but that America seemed to still enjoy contesting them.[53] Sandow had been a good bent-presser and claimed he could press over three hundred pounds, but Calvert only credited him with the 271-pounds he did in a public exhibition in London in 1891.[54] Although Calvert believed Sandow had a fabulous physique, he also believed that as Sandow still belonged in the professional strongman category he was prone to stretching the truth about his lifts as well as his measurements. Calvert also illustrated stunts like "muscling out" the bells, harness lifting, back-lifting, and dead-weight lifting. Continuing his diatribe against professional strongmen, Calvert described these special lifts, gave their records if he knew them, and then proceeded to tell how the professional would do the lift in order to make a good impression. If Calvert didn't know of a way to fake or cheat on an exercise he accepted the lift as a "test of pure strength." Such pure tests included dead-weight lifting—like today's partial deadlift, or Windship's health lift of fifty years earlier—and dead-weight lifting to the cross position—like a modern stiff-legged deadlift.[55]

Calvert also argued for standardization in the competition itself. He differentiated between contests of strength and contests of endurance. It made sense to Calvert that weightlifters should be testing the amount of weight they could lift rather than the number of times they could lift a particular weight—which was often done in strongman contests where only fixed-weight barbells were available. Calvert argued that contests should consist of exercises chosen from the standard lifts with the goal of seeing who could lift the most in each movement. Above all, in order to keep the lifting contest a true test of strength, it should not mix different types of lifting such as dumbell lifting and back-lifting.[56] These mixed types of competitions were the primary avenues professional strongmen used to win the challenges they threw at each other on the rare occasions when they actually met in competition. In an effort to get publicity in a local or national newspaper, the strongmen were "prolific with challenges," but when it came time to actually "put up or shut up," according to Calvert, "most American professional lifters avoid competitions as they do poison."[57]

As for dumbell lifting, Calvert maintained that it needed to be performed with equipment that was "uniform and of standard style." Each lifter should be "compelled" to use the same equipment, argued Calvert, "thus placing every lifter on absolutely equal footing regarding apparatus."[58] This was quite a novel idea in 1911 and, more than likely, Calvert envisioned all the competitions using Milo barbells. By restricting the kinds of lifts possible and making all competitors use the same equipment, Calvert could foresee regular and sensible competitions taking place across America. Each person would be properly trained in the lifts and records could be easily verified. This was the only way, Calvert believed, that the United States could develop lifters to compete against the European strength stars.

Taking the concept of standardization another step, Calvert discussed the future organization of American weightlifting. He stressed the need for a Board of Control so that standardized competitions would be held and rules enforced—an important aspect to a sport enter-

Calvert included these two images in *The Truth About Weight-Lifting* to expose some of the showman's tricks. The photo above is titled, "This is the way the theatre poster shows it." The one on the right is captioned, "This is the way it is really done. (Notice weight resting on upper arm.)

ing the modern era. Calvert reminded his readers about the beneficial effects of such organization on track-and-field. Athletes in that sport knew the rules of performance for each of the competitive events and knew what steps to take in order to establish records. However, until William B. Curtis and the Amateur Athletic Union organized track-and-field, the sport was like lifting—a morass of claims, counter-claims, and unverified records that made it impossible to follow as an organized, competitive activity. Calvert pointed out that, as of 1911, American weightlifting had no set competitive lifts, no rules of performance, and no supply of qualified referees; this meant that a reliable and comprehensive set of records could not be kept. A Board of Control, he explained, would establish the lifts and their rules of performance, and would allow referees to be trained and certified. This was an important aspect to the standardization process, according to Calvert, who also argued for the separation of professional and amateur lifters and the development of weight classes. Willing to assist in the formation of a "national association," Calvert believed it "would do more than anything else to develop champion lifters in the United States." He even suggested that the European system of governing lifting contests be followed, with the rules of performance patterned after the German rules.[59]

Breaking New Ground

The Truth About Weight-Lifting broke new ground in many other ways as well. Before Calvert came on the scene, the term "dumbell" meant more than just a short-handled weight to most lifting aficionados. Generally more inclusive at that time, the term was also used when talking about the long-handled version, presently referred to as a barbell. Calvert was one of the first to begin making distinctions between the terms

"dumbbell" and "barbell." In *The Truth* he explained the differences in barbells, dumbells, and kettle-bells and their various effects on the body. Barbells, he argued, were better for heavy, overhead weight work since the lifter often had to "concentrate all his attention and will-power on making the lifting muscles contract strongly enough to raise the weight."[60] If only one piece of equipment was used the lifter's focus stayed narrow, but if a pair of dumbells was used the focus would be divided and he would, as a result, be less likely to succeed.

Calvert differentiated between "weight-lifting" and "heavy dumbbell exercises." "Weight-lifting" involved "the lifting of heavy dumbbells" in the standard competitive lifts. Although six of the eight exercises were performed with only one arm, most of them were described as being done with a long-handled barbell. "Heavy dumbbell exercises," on the other hand, involved the use of "moderately heavy dumbbells, or bar-bells, and are intended to prepare the muscles for the more arduous work of weight-lifting." Calvert recommended weight-lifting proper for those 16 years and older, but heavy dumbell work was acceptable for those as young as 14 years. A person's best heavy work, Calvert believed, was accomplished between the ages of 30 and 40, but great benefits from weight training could be gained by those older than 40 years.[61] In keeping with this philosophy, Calvert had redesigned his original training courses by 1911 to reflect the different levels of preparation—developmental exercise, competitive exercise, and exhibition strongman work.

The book also furthered a theme expected of the proprietor of the Milo Bar-bell Company and common to nearly all of Calvert's writing—opposition to the notion that lifting light weights would develop significant muscle tissue. Calvert wrote that light dumbell training was "valuable as a means of benefiting the health and keeping the body in good working condition, but . . . valueless for the purpose of developing great muscular strength and energy."[62] As the years progressed Calvert associated muscular strength with muscular growth and development and realized that a lifter generally did not get one without the other. He tried to relay this information to his students and the book's readers. Train for muscular development and the strength will come. The muscles needed to be worked in groups, Calvert emphasized, and only the use of moderately-heavy to heavy weights forced an increase in strength and muscle growth to occur.[63]

In an attempt to overcome other superstitions and myths surrounding weight training Calvert attacked the concept of muscle binding. He explained that the quick lifts encouraged the development of speed and agility; therefore, they could not be associated with the muscle-bound state.[64] Another criticism of weight-lifting by some of the public included the unsightly development of a "knotty" physique. Calvert explained that the bearers of these "knots" were just used to tensing up their muscles while posing in front of people or a camera. Strong men had muscles that were smooth when not in a tensed state, Calvert confidently assured the readers.[65] Also, much like the aches, pains, and strains associated with today's weekend warrior syndrome, Calvert revealed that the ever-dreaded "strain" was caused by "the conceit which prompts the untrained individual" to handle too much weight too quickly or to show off to their friends.[66] Although "strain" was often associated with abdominal ruptures, or hernias, during this time period, Calvert didn't seem to include this malady in his version of the term. Whereas he had warned readers of "abdominal rupture" earlier in the book while discussing the proper back alignment for one of the deadlifting exercises, Calvert referred to strain as the foolishness that surrounds men who chance upon a heavy dumbell.[67] Even though untrained, they will all strain themselves trying to lift the heavy object since "the average man is secretly very proud of his strength and very loath to admit that any one of his fellows can outdo him in any feat where strength alone is required."[68] These types of incidents, in Calvert's opinion, did much to give weight-lifting an unwarranted, bad reputation. Other types of strains, such as those on the heart, would be thwarted by systematic and rhythmic breathing during exercise.[69] Calvert also warned that athletes had to specialize and begin training according to their sporting interests. Although subsequent events would prove him wrong, Calvert asserted that if an athlete wanted extreme strength then he had to give up some speed. He also believed that if the athlete wanted to be the fastest man on the track then he had to forget the idea of being enormously strong. However, Calvert emphasized to the reader, correctly, that a good mix of the two abilities—speed and strength—led to great benefits and produced powerful, above average men.[70]

Calvert finished the book by giving tips to those interested in entering the realm of the performing strongman. Although he claimed not to be preparing young men for the strongman profession, Calvert noted that others believed this was the sole aim of his business. In reality, he advised young men to avoid entering the profession because it would take away from their enjoyment

of the activity of lifting weights. "Weight lifting as a sport is not only one of the most beneficial forms of exercise, but is also one of the most fascinating of pastimes," stated Calvert.[71] Becoming a professional strongman would require the young lifter to resort to exaggeration and trickery because the public demanded sensational acts filled with danger—not an honest, straightforward heavy lifting act. To prove his point he recounted a story about a touring vaudeville strongman who traveled "on his shape." He was "gifted by nature with a superb figure, and by doing a moderate amount of heavy dumbbell work he was able to keep his muscles in the finest, clear-cut condition." The man claimed he could lift a ton, but Calvert knew that he was "all 'looks.'" Making an average of $100 to $150 a week, he "trades on his appearance" and is "very clever in giving the audience the impression that he is working very hard" with his weights.[72] In making his argument, Calvert contrasted this depiction with the story of a young strongman who "has been lifting dumbbells for years; he is remarkably clever in his work and lifts so correctly and gracefully that you cannot realize how much strength he is putting forth." Because of his non-remarkable build and the effortless ease with which he lifted the weights he couldn't get "a paying engagement on the stage" because the customers would believe him to be a faker.[73] In this way, Calvert reminded his readers that the public demanded beautifully-built and heavily muscled-men, and that a lifter must "look the part" if he hoped to make it as a professional.[74]

Although Calvert understood that the professional strongmen tried to make a living by their performances, and that they believed it was necessary to exaggerate and falsify claims, he was fervently opposed to the effects such farces had upon the amateur or novice lifter. He believed that many young men declined to pick up a bell because of their fear of not being able to equal the strength of a famous or idolized professional. It was these individuals Calvert targeted when he wrote the parting statement for his book, "If this little volume encourages any number of young men to take up this fascinating sport, I will consider that the time and trouble spent in producing it have been well repaid."[75]

Professional strongmen may have suffered to a degree at the hands of Alan Calvert and his groundbreaking book, but amateur lifting and the Milo Bar-bell Company benefited significantly from its publication. Calvert's entreaty for a Board of Control for the emerging American competitive lifting community went virtually unheard for another ten years, but ultimately George Jowett, Ottley Coulter, and David Willoughby answered the call by forming the American Continental Weight-Lifters Association in 1922. Probably most important, however, is that because Calvert had the courage to tell "The Truth About Weight-Lifting," more men began buying his barbells and training with weights.

Notes:

1 Alan Calvert, "Advertisement for *The Truth About Weight-Lifting*," *Physical Culture,* (September 1911), inside front cover. This article is adapted from chapter four of the author's dissertation: Kimberly Beckwith, "Alan Calvert, the Milo Bar-bell Company, and the Modernization of American Weight Training," (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2006).

2 John Fair, "George Jowett, Ottley Coulter, David Willoughby and the Organization of American Weightlifting, 1911-1924," *Iron Game History* 2 (May 1993): 3.

3 Ibid, 3-15; John Fair, "Father-Figure or Phony? George Jowett, the ACWLA and the Milo Barbell Company, 1924-1927," *Iron Game History* 3 (December 1994): 13-25; and John Fair, "From Philadelphia to York: George Jowett, Mark Berry, Bob Hoffman, and the Rebirth of American Weightlifting, 1927-1936," *Iron Game History* 4 (April 1996): 3-17.

4 John Fair, "George Jowett, Ottley Coulter, David Willoughby," 3. For more information on Alan Calvert and *Strength* magazine see also Kim Beckwith and Jan Todd, "*Strength*, America's First Muscle Magazine: 1914-1935," *Iron Game History* 9 (August 2005): 11-28.

5 Edmond Desbonnet, *Les Rois De La Force* (*The Kings of Strength),* trans. David Chapman, (Paris: Librairie Berger-Levrault/Librairie Athletique, 1911), 2. The translation is unpublished and the page numbers found in the notes will refer to the translated copy unless otherwise indicated.

6 Calvert, "*The Truth* Advertisement."

7 Alan Calvert, *The Truth about Weight-Lifting* (Philadelphia: by the author, 1911), 9.

8 Ibid., title page, 3.

9 Alan Calvert, *An Article on Natural Strength versus "Made" Strength* (Philadelphia: by the author, n.d.), 3.

10 Calvert, "*The Truth* Advertisement."

11 Calvert, *The Truth*, 11-4.

12 Jurgen Giessing and Jan Todd, "The Origins of German Bodybuilding: 1790-1970," *Iron Game History* 9 (December 2005): 11.

13 Calvert, *The Truth*, 12.

14 Ibid., 13-14.

15 David P. Willoughby, "The Kings of Strength - Chapter XIII - When Weightlifting Was First Organized in Germany and Austria, 1891-1906," *Iron Man* 18(April-May 1959): 30, as quoted in Terence Colquitt Todd, "The History of Resistance Exercise: And Its Role in United States Education" (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas at Austin,

1966), 54.

[16] Calvert, *The Truth*, 15.

[17] Allen Guttmann, *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 16-55.

[18] Melvin L. Adelman, *A Sporting Time: New York City and the Rise of Modern Athletics, 1820-70*, Illini Books ed., *Sport and Society* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 6.

[19] Calvert, *The Truth*, 17.

[20] Ibid., 16.

[21] Ibid., 151.

[22] Ibid., 20-21.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid., 152-54. See also Wilfrid Diamond, "Thomas Inch and the Strong Men He Knew," *Muscle Power* 3 (September 1947): 34.

[25] Calvert, "Advertisement, *The Truth*"; Calvert, *The Truth*, 18.

[26] Calvert, *The Truth*, 18.

[27] Alan Calvert, *Confidential Information on Lifting and Lifters* (Philadelphia: by the author, 1926): 13.

[28] Ibid., 14.

[29] Ibid., 13-14.

[30] Calvert, *The Truth*, 63.

[31] Ibid., 71-72.

[32] Ibid., 72.

[33] Ibid., 73-74. See also: Terry Todd, "The Quest for the Quarter Master," *Iron Game History* 9 (December 2005): 21-31; David P. Willoughby, *The Super-Athletes* (South Brunswick: A. S. Barnes, 1970), 225-28.

[34] Calvert, *The Truth*, 74-75. For more analysis on chain-breaking see Willoughby, *Super-Athletes*, 220-21.

[35] Calvert, *The Truth*, 75-77. See also Willoughby, *The Super-Athletes*, 228-31.

[36] Calvert, *The Truth*, 89.

[37] Ibid,, 83.

[38] Calvert only credits Saxon with a 336-pound bent press record. See Calvert, *The Truth*, 50. However, David Willoughby discusses Arthur Saxon's 371-pound bent press record performed in December 1905 as well as Saxon's unofficial 1906 record of 386 pounds. See Willoughby, *The Super-Athletes*, 78-79.

[39] Calvert, *The Truth*, 84-85.

[40] Ibid., 84.

[41] According to Willoughby's *The Super-Athletes*, 87-90, Karl Swoboda lifted 409 pounds in 1912—the year after Calvert published *The Truth About Weight-Lifting*.

[42] Calvert, *The Truth, 87*. Calvert spells Swoboda's first name, Karl, with a "C" but most historians traditionally accept it as beginning with a "K." See Willoughby, *The Super-Athletes*, 87-90.

[43] Calvert, *The Truth*, 91.

[44] Ibid., 92.

[45] Ibid., 91.

[46] Ibid., 93.

[47] Ibid., 94.

[48] Ibid., 93.

[49] Ibid., 99-100. For turn of the century health ailments see: James C. Whorton, *Inner Hygiene: Constipation and the Pursuit of Health in Modern Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[50] Calvert, *The Truth*, 98-101.

[51] Ibid., 103.

[52] Ibid., 30-31.

[53] Ibid., 43-50.

[54] Ibid., 49. Willoughby only credits Sandow with 269 pounds. See: Willoughby, *Super-Athletes*, 61.

[55] Calvert, *The Truth*, 50-59.

[56] Ibid., 78-80.

[57] Ibid., 78.

[58] Ibid., 79.

[59] Ibid., 105. See especially pages 104-13 regarding the formation of a national association.

[60] Ibid., 119-20.

[61] Ibid., 114-23. See also pages 26-42 for the competitive lifts' descriptions and illustrations.

[62] Ibid., 114.

[63] Ibid., 116-17.

[64] Ibid., 130.

[65] Ibid., 130-31.

[66] Ibid., 132. For weekend warrior syndrome see: www.med-hunters.com/articles/weekendWarriorSyndrome.html.

[67] Ibid., 57.

[68] Ibid., 131-32.

[69] Ibid., 141.

[70] Ibid., 138-39, 142-43.

[71] Ibid., 146.

[72] Ibid., 147-48.

[73] Ibid., 148.

[74] Ibid., 147.

[75] Ibid., 160.