

IRON GAME HISTORY

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IRON GAME HISTORY: THE JOURNAL OF PHYSICAL CULTURE...

was founded in 1990 by Terry and Jan Todd who wanted to promote academic scholarship related to the history of the strength sports, exercise, nutrition, training for sport, and other aspects of physical culture. Like the Stark Center itself, *Iron Game History* defines physical culture as “the various activities people have employed over the centuries to strengthen their bodies, enhance their physiques, increase their endurance, enhance their health, fight against aging, and become better athletes.” The journal has published a wide variety of articles over the past thirty years exploring physical culture from historical, sociological, anthropological, and gender and race-based approaches.

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THE WHEEL OF PAIN KEEPS ON TURNING: ON HUMAN POTENTIAL AT THE ARNOLD SPORTS FESTIVAL

BY TOLGA OZYURTCU

What is possible for us humans? This was the driving question for adherents of the Human Potential Movement of the 1960s. Emerging at the intersection of the counterculture and humanistic psychology (think Maslow's theory of self-actualization), the underlying premise of Human Potential was that the great lot of us were underdeveloped, operating at a sliver of our full capacity. But, if our full potential was developed, a life of true happiness and fulfillment was to be had, driving positive societal changes as the human flywheel turned. In and of itself, this view always struck me as a fair one, especially if interpreted optimistically. Most Human Potential progenitors focused their attention on the emotional and intellectual dimensions of our existence, but credit is due to George Leonard, who compellingly argued for the role of the physical in realizing our potential. In 1975's *The Ultimate Athlete*, Leonard challenged readers to reconsider the potential of the active body: "The athlete that dwells in each of us is more than an abstract ideal. It is a living presence that can change the way we feel and live. Searching for our inner athlete may lead us into sports and regular exercise and thus to the health promised by physical-fitness organizations—and that might be justification enough. But what I have in mind goes beyond fitness: it involves entering

the realms of music and poetry, of the turning of the planets, of the understanding of death."

Recently, on the occasion of my first visit to the Arnold Sports Festival in Columbus, Ohio, I found myself thinking a lot about human potential and returning to Leonard's words in particular. Human potential—especially that of the physical variety—is front and center at the Arnold, almost to an overwhelming degree. While the event program is a bit pared down from its peak a few years back, it is still staggering in its scope. Over 10,000 athletes compete in every variety of strength sport and physique competition, alongside majorettes, martial artists, medieval fighters, and more. (And yes, medieval fighting is more or less what you imagine.) It is hard to imagine another place and time where such a range of human physical potential is so richly concentrated: both the potential of what a body can be (or appear to be) and what a body can



Spectators of the professional Arnold Strongman and Strongwoman Classic passed by this huge display on the way to their seats. Mark Henry on the right was the first Classic winner in 2002 and Hafthor Bjornsson was a three-time winner, 2018-2020.

do. Of course, the *potential* of human potential is also very much on sale at the Festival; the vast exhibit hall floor was dominated by booths hawking training implements and apparel, protein powders, and energy drinks. So many energy drinks. The commerce of the physical and physical culture intertwine almost seamlessly at the Arnold. On just one walk in pursuit of a free, nuclear-candy-flavored energy drink, I passed

alongside majorettes, martial artists, medieval fighters, and more. (And yes, medieval fighting is more or less what you imagine.) It is hard to imagine another place and time where such a range of human physical potential is so richly concentrated: both the potential of what a body can be (or appear to be) and what a body can

by young martial artists straining for leverage, a display of technicolor posing trunks, Highland Gamers adjusting their kilts and opening up their hips, a pitchman for home water purification, bikini competitors getting their spray-tans touched up, and the aforementioned medieval fighters setting their helmets aside to scarf down some Subway—turkey breast a begrudgingly accepted substitute for a turkey leg.

I spent most of my time at the Arnold alongside the men and women competing at the Arnold Strongman and Strongwoman Classic, tagging along with my colleagues from the *Iron Game History* masthead. I'll reiterate here that this was the Arnold Strongman and Strongwoman Classic, the first time that women have been featured at one of the sport's premiere events. Our *IGH* executive editor Jan Todd directs the event as she has since the inaugural in 2002 when she and the late Terry Todd began the Arnold Strongman Classic. Their co-organizer Steve Slater joined the effort in 2003. Of course, Terry Todd's legacy still looms as large on the Arnold Strongman stage as it does in the pages of this journal. My fellow editors-in-chief, Kim Beckwith and Jason Shurley, lead a judging and scoring team of dedicated Iron Game lifers. I'm grateful to them for letting me tag along in a semi-official capacity (emphasis on the semi). I was occasionally called on to help with a sundry task, but for the most part, I had the luxury of taking in what might be the finest display of human potential in the world.

Like many folks my age, I first encountered Strongman competitions in the early 1990s, during the halcyon days of cable television. The then recently launched ESPN2 filled its airtime with whatever it could acquire for a fair price and that included both current and vintage showings of the World's Strongest Man. I imagine I wasn't the only teenager up past his bedtime marveling at some fellow named

Magnus ver Magnusson dominating the competition. The sport was far out and the men who competed in it were somehow more far out.

Today, Strongman is still pretty far out, but is decidedly less on the fringe of the mainstream than it was when I first encountered it. (And yes, Magnus is still around, a robustly fit elder statesman who helps with the judging at the Arnold and many other major contests.) As with much of the world of physical culture, the Internet has helped, allowing previously isolated folks to share training knowledge and providing a lucrative platform for the more popular athletes in the sport. There are competitions at the amateur and professional ranks all over

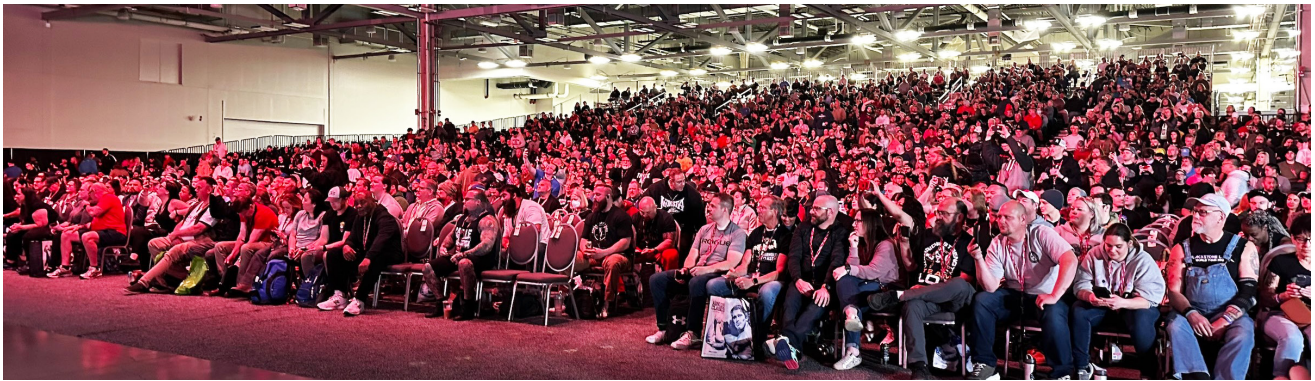


Medieval Fighting enjoyed its second year at the 2023 Arnold Sports Festival. They had events for men and women in several different styles of weaponry and attack formations. This unknown group of participants was preparing for upcoming bouts.

the world. There are fans, actual fans who follow the sport, and don't just stumble on to some late-night programming novelty. The bleachers were packed all weekend long in Columbus.

I'll spare you my commentary on much of the competition itself. If you missed it as it happened, you can head to event sponsor Rogue Fitness' YouTube page for their excellent coverage of the event. By the time you read this, the CBS Sports special on the contest should also be available to watch as well. Spoiler alert: you'll see Canadian Mitchell Hooper win, by putting in a solid all-around performance, winning only the Wheel of Pain, but finishing no worse than third place in the remaining four events. On the women's side, American Victoria Long took first place. Following a disappointing seventh place finish in the Wheel of Pain, Long won three out of the four final events and set a world record 259 kilograms (571 pounds) in the Elephant Bar Deadlift.

As entertaining as the men's competition was, I found myself really engaged on the women's side of things. There was certainly something special about this being the inaugural competition, a legitimizing moment for the women in the sport. And while the crowds were slightly bigger for the men's events, they were



Both the men's and women's contests were conducted in front of packed seating with many more in "standing room only" areas. Stage announcer Mark Henry was heard to say that there were seats for 3000 spectators.

just as loud while the women were competing. If we're measuring by decibels, American Hannah Linzay was the fan-favorite of the weekend, blowing the roof off the convention center as she blew out every capillary in her nose on her final deadlift. Credit to Kim Beckwith, who was judging the event, for not flinching when the blood-soaked athlete offered her a fist bump.

Throughout the contest, for the men and women alike, event after event, that idea of human potential would sneak into my head. Where else could one encounter such a group: objectively, quantifiably pushing and exceeding the limits of what we think is possible for humans? And it's not just the strongmen and strongwomen, it's everyone pushing the limits at the Arnold—or even in their home gym—engaged in the perpetual act of overcoming that links the diverse disciplines of physical culture. Overcoming gravity, the competition, ourselves, what is thought to be humanly possible.

Or perhaps it need not be so complicated, a simpler philosophy is often best. Before the deadlift event, I found myself sitting next to WWE superstar and the first Arnold Strongman Classic winner Mark Henry, now serving as the stage announcer for the event. He said that the deadlift was the only event that made him want to step back on the stage. I asked if he thought it was more legitimate than the newer, more novel events. He didn't really give me a direct answer, but stared off across the stage at the loaded bar and said, "Pick it up off the ground . . . as pure as the driven snow."



As with every issue of *IGH*, the exploration of human potential through physical

culture can be found throughout the current volume. In "Giving Attitudes," K. Mitchell Snow offers a fascinating look at so-called "living statues" in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, situating their evolution within the arts as an antecedent to modern displays of physique. We are excited to share Ottley Coulter's "Reminiscences and Impressions Over the Years." Dating from 1944, "Reminiscences" is an archival treasure from the Iron Game pioneer. As John Fair notes in his introduction to the piece, much of Coulter's archive lives at the Stark Center, but Fair uncovered this gem in Bob Hoffman's manuscripts. While sadly the result of an unrealized full-length biography, David Chapman's "Chris Dickerson: A Remembrance and an Appreciation," offers a look at the life and legacy of the late bodybuilding legend, ably capturing the spirit of both Dickerson the athlete and Dickerson the man. Fair and Chapman appear once more in Fair's review of the McFarland reprinting of Edmond Desbonnet's *The Kings of Strength*, edited and translated by Chapman. Fair finds the edition a welcome volume, noting that calling the book an "iron game *tour de force* would be an understatement." In "Mary Macfadden and the Media Narrative of the Physical Culture Family," Lucy Boucher and Jan Todd offer a new perspective on the life and times of Bernarr Macfadden, exploring how the beleaguered publisher deployed his marriage and family in service of his image and public reputation. As Boucher and Todd demonstrate, the gap between reality and public perception is often wide and invariably complex. After attending The Arnold, I realized a similar gap separates the common, blurry-eyed viewership of strongman events on late night television and the genuine awe I experienced upon walking among the modern goliaths of this year's Strongman Classic.

GIVING ATTITUDES: LIVING STATUES AND THE ORIGINS OF PHYSIQUE POSING 1708-1830

BY K. MITCHELL SNOW

When Arnold Schwarzenegger “sailed into a perfect imitation” of Auguste Rodin’s *The Thinker* the packed audience for the Whitney Museum of American Art’s symposium *Articulate Muscle: The Male Body in Art* in 1975 reportedly broke into wild applause.¹ Here was an illustration of the thesis that the event’s promoter, Charles Gaines, sought to validate. Bodybuilders, the author of *Pumping Iron* proposed, were contemporary master sculptors working in human flesh rather than marble and bronze.² Writing for *Sports Illustrated*, Katherine Lowery described Frank Zane, who, along with Ed Corney, had also posed, as looking “as if someone had magic-wanded a perfect marble statue into flesh.”³ The art historians on hand were less favorable in their judgments. Colin Eisler of New York University’s Institute of Fine Arts dismissed their posing as “the personification of 19th century camp.”⁴

Eisler, a specialist in early Netherlandish art, was an odd choice to comment on the classical sculptural tradition, or its neoclassical revival in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Lowery came closer to capturing the long-standing historical relationship between classical statuary and physique posing when she declared, “If one doesn’t accept body building as fine art, posing should at least be considered a performing art.”⁵

Entertainers performing as statues had been engaging audiences since well before modern bodybuilding began. The earliest reference we have comparing performing artists to the statuary of the classical world predates the oft cited comparisons of late-nineteenth century strongman Eugen Sandow by more than a millennia. Libanius, the fourth century CE sophist critic, praised Roman-era pantomime dancers—soloists, mostly male,

who wordlessly performed all of the roles in what was typically a tragedy from mythological sources, backed by singers and musicians—for surpassing the era’s visual artists.⁶ He claimed the pantomime dancer made it possible to see “all the gods on stage, for he does not imitate them by means of stone but represents them in his own self, in such a way that even the best of sculptors would yield the first place to the dancers in a contest of statuary beauty.”⁷ Classicist Ismene Lada-Richards proposes that one of the “thrills of pantomime entertainment would have consisted in watching the dancer’s flowing movement stilled for a digit of time” as the performer became a statue—much as a contemporary bodybuilder hits and momentarily holds a pose before transitioning to another—“and then artfully resumed” his dancing.⁸

Much like the male dancers in classical ballet today, the pantomime dancers were expected to perform athletic leaps and rapid turns, feats that were also useful on the battlefield.⁹ They trained alongside the elite youth of the late imperial Rome in the same gymnasiums. Their training was such that at least one of the pantomime dancers made a mid-career switch to the gladiatorial arena.¹⁰ According to classicist Ruth Webb, the audience for pantomime dancers shared much more in common with today’s sports fans than they did with today’s audience for dance: “From the late second century CE, most pantomime performances were staged as contests between two or more dancers, and the star performers attracted fanatical followers.”¹¹ Even the chariot racing factions—the Blues, Greens, Reds and Whites—of cities such as Rome and Constantinople had their own “team” pantomime dancers.¹²

Theater historian David Wiles laments how little we know of non-literary performing traditions from Roman times, but we can be

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assured pantomime dancing was immensely popular.¹³ A part of what we do know derives from laws enacted to regulate the unruly crowds attracted by its performances.¹⁴ Pantomime dancing was so popular that it survived the fall of Rome by centuries. The medieval world used one Latin word *ludi* to describe everything from sports to drama, often making it difficult to determine what exactly was entertaining the populace in any given reference.¹⁵ Still, at the beginning of the twelfth century we have evidence that a pantomime evoking the goddess Venus was being performed in France. Even later, kings and their retinues would ritually enter a city through triumphal arches decorated with “unpredictable” living statue performers who fixed the attention of their audience.¹⁶

In England, forces aligned early in the eighteenth century to consciously emulate the traditions of the Roman world, reviving the pantomime and leading to the performances of what were then called “attitudes” in both elite and popular settings. Samuel Johnson’s watershed *Dictionary* first printed in London in 1755 advises that an attitude represented “the posture or action in which a statue or painted figure is placed.”¹⁷

Theater historian Joseph Roach traces the popularity of statue-derived attitudes in England to the operatic performances of the *castrato* Nicolini Grimaldi, known as Nicolino, who first performed in London in 1708-09.¹⁸ Nicolino sang in Italian, relying on his repertoire of expressive poses to convey his meaning. In a January 1709 issue of *The Tattler*, drama critic Richard Steele noted that “[t]here is scarce a beautiful posture in an old statue which he does not plant himself in, as the different circumstances of the story give occasion for it.”¹⁹

At a remove of more than three centuries, it is challenging to imagine what kind of antique statue poses Nicolino, likely dressed in a powdered wig and a full-skirted, knee length frock coat, might have used to convey the meaning of his lyrics to his English audience. It is not in the athletic nudes that we should seek illumination, but the statues of toga clad orators. Art historian Arline Meyer points out that the eighteenth century “hand in waistcoat” pose—think of Napoleon with

his hand tucked inside his clothing—originated in an assertion of Aeschines of Macedon in the fourth century BCE. In a speech familiar to upper-class English schoolboys, he argued that the statue raised to Solon in the marketplace of Salamis demonstrated that “the arm inside the cloak was the decorous gesture of decent public men.”²⁰ By 1738, a treatise on *Genteel Behaviour* asserted that this pose denoted “manly boldness tempered with modesty.”²¹ It was such nuanced, yet fully understood, gestures like this that bore meaning for Nicolino’s audience.

Slightly later, British dancing master John Weaver began composing pieces “in imitation of” Roman pantomime dancing, that he staged “as a way of restoring an art that has fallen into decay.”²² On one front, Weaver’s productions influenced the future course of classical ballet; on another, of popular theatre. In its theatrical form, early British pantomime typically alternated between serious scenes that were sung and comic scenes performed by the silent Harlequin character drawn from Italian



Gerard van der Gucht’s frontispiece for the 1735 third edition of James Morris’s verse satire on contemporary English theater, *Harlequin Horace*, depicts pantomime actor John Rich in character as Harlequin (center) and Punch forcibly ejecting fine art, represented by Apollo, from the British stage. Courtesy University of Cambridge Repository.

commedia dell'arte.²³ Harlequin sometimes masqueraded as Mercury in such “scandalous” works as the 1717 *Perseus and Andromeda*, and Mercury would become a favorite persona adopted by fairground performers.

By the mid-eighteenth century a steady stream of acting manuals began to issue from English presses and their authors consistently agreed that the study of both classical literature and artworks were central to a successful acting career.²⁴ In his 1775 *The Elements of Dramatic Criticism*, William Cooke offered specific statues that merited study by the theatrical community. He directed men to the *Farnese Hercules*, the *Apollo Belvedere*, and the *Fighting and Dying Gladiators*, among others; while he pointed women to the *Venus de Medici*, the *Venus Callipyge*, *Diana*, *Flora*, and the *Three Graces* “as some of the most perfect in their kind, in their various expressions.”²⁵ All of these statues would become standard components of living statue acts over the ensuing years.



François Perrier’s book of engravings, *Segmenta Nobilium Signorum et Statuarum*, published in 1638, was the first book showing the statues of Ancient Greece and Rome and helped create an accepted canon for ancient statuary. *The Borghese Gladiator*, shown here, may also be interpreted as a swordsman attacking a mounted opponent. Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

The formation of a kind of canon of classical sculpture reflected in Cooke’s book predated neoclassicism by more than a century. François Perrier’s 1638 *Segmenta* gathered his renditions of famous classical sculptures in book form that proved to be enormously popular.²⁶ It was reprinted multiple times to meet public demand by century’s end. One of the few works to join the canon set by Perrier was the *Discobolus*, uncovered by the Massimo family in 1781 at its villa on Rome’s Esquiline Hill during the formative years of Neoclassicism. These statues were widely reproduced and copies could be found in private and public collections and parks throughout Europe.

It is against this background that the modern “attitude” developed as an independent mode of performance not necessarily tethered to a narrative form of theater. It could be presented as a *pose plastique*, or living statue, or its fraternal twin a *tableaux vivant*, or living picture, depending on its original source.

The best documented, and by far the most deeply studied, proponent of the late eighteenth century attitude was the courtesan who called herself Emma Hart, the future Lady Hamilton. Writing about the Neapolitan home of British ambassador Lord William Hamilton in March of 1787, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe waxed rhapsodic about her performances there: “One beholds here in perfection, in movement, in ravishing variety, all that the greatest of artists have rejoiced to be able to produce.”²⁷

Goethe’s description of Hart’s attitudes makes it clear that she was more than passingly familiar with the host of classical antiquities that had become the common currency of elite discourse at the time. His report that Lord Hamilton “holds the light for her, and enters into the exhibition with his whole soul,” also demonstrates in a less explicit form that Hart wished to emphasize her performance as a work of art in its own right. Diarist Melesina Chenevix St. George Trench provided more detail on the high contrast environment in which Hart desired her attitudes to be seen “with a strong light to her left, and every other window closed.”²⁸ It would appear that another early component of Hart’s performance accessories, a kind of posing box, was specifically designed to produce exactly this effect. Goethe described it as “standing upright, open in front, painted black inside;”



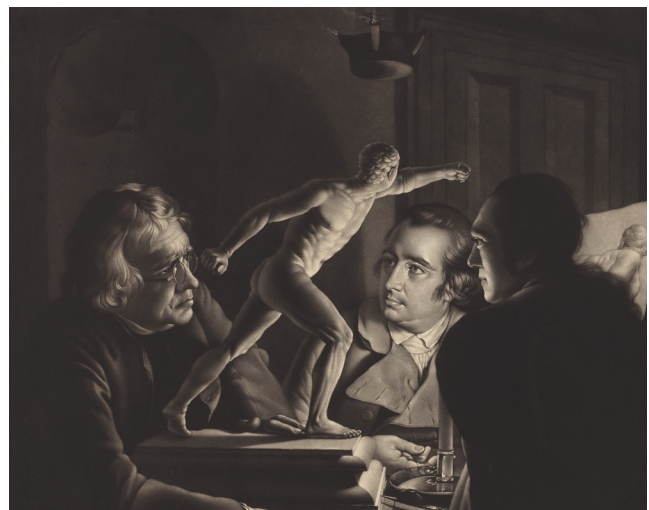
Pietro Antonio Novelli (1729-1804) was a well-known Italian painter and engraver. Emma Hart, who married British ambassador **William Hamilton**, gave performances at their home in Naples, Italy, in which she duplicated the attitudes or postures of classical statues. Novelli undoubtedly saw her perform and immortalized her act by creating this well-known set of engravings, now called *The Attitudes of Lady Hamilton*. Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

it proved too “heavy to remove and set up in a proper light” and was abandoned early in Hart’s career.²⁹ Sandow would resurrect something very like Hart’s posing box more than a century later, this time lit with newly available incandescent light bulbs, to ensure better display of his musculature.³⁰

Theater historian Kristen Holmström, proposed that Hart’s lighting scheme derived from the fashion of nocturnal, torchlit tours of sculpture galleries during the 1780s. Given that Hart had extensive experience as an artist’s model prior to her encounter with Lord Hamilton, she had first-hand knowledge of their professional practices and it is more likely that this was what informed her performance style. Art academies regularly assigned their students the task of capturing classical statues in high-contrast light and this became part of their approach to making art. Joseph Wright of Derby’s evocations of this practice in *Three Persons Viewing the Gladiator by Candlelight* (1765) and *Academy by Lamplight* (1769, second version 1771) deftly illuminate its dramatic potential, the resultant shadows modeling the human form in high relief.

In a much clearer instance of Hart

wishing to present her performance as an artistic creation in its own right, Goethe also specified that her posing box was completed by a “splendid” golden frame. For Goethe, this allowed Lord Hamilton “to gratify his taste by beholding her as a bright inimitable picture.”³¹



William Pether, engraving after the original oil painting by **Joseph Wright of Derby**, *Three Persons Viewing the Gladiator by Candlelight*, 1769. The viewer in glasses on the left has been identified by some authors as a self portrait of Wright. Courtesy National Gallery of Art, the Paul Mellon Fund, Washington, DC.



William Pether, engraving after the original oil painting by Joseph Wright of Derby, *An Academy by Lamplight*, 1772. Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Like the high contrast performing environment, the idea of literally framing a living statue performer as an independent piece of artwork survived and would appear repeatedly in the performances of living statue performers well into the twentieth century.

Art historian Edward Lucie-Smith asserts that itinerant strongmen clad in animal skins in imitation of Hercules were standard figures on European fairgrounds at the same time that Hart was entertaining her elite audiences.³² It is unlikely these men were readers of acting manuals or were privy to written reports of Lady Hamilton's attitudes. Nor were they likely to present themselves at the home of the Duke of Richmond to study his collection of plaster casts of classical sculptures as Cooke recommended.³³ "Elite" entertainments at the time, however, were quite diverse. Their entr'actes and afterpieces called upon multiple talents. Steele's review of Nicolino opens with the observation that attendance

at the opera on the evening he was there was "thin" because "the tumbler was not to make his appearance that night."³⁴ As participants in a highly competitive marketplace it is likely fairground performers were both exposed to and aware of any innovations that occurred in public entertainment and updated their presentations accordingly.

Lucie-Smith noted that in all probability fairground strongmen used fleshings beneath their costumes because the "rules for public nudity in life were complex and often contradictory." These tightly fitting bodysuits gave the impression of human skin without actually exposing the body. An 1804 broadside of the Paduan giant, strongman and conjurer Giovanni Battista Belzoni, who had arrived in England as the "Patagonian Sampson" the year before depicts him in animal skins and gladiator sandals, a costume that would become iconic for circus strongmen.³⁵ Lines around his neck and wrists suggest that fleshings were indeed part of his costume. By the time Belzoni departed England around 1813, eventually to pursue what proved to be a highly successful career putting his strength to use as a tomb raider in Egypt, his strongman act featured "several striking Attitudes."³⁶ According to a poster advertising his act, his attitudes were drawn "from the most



William Hogarth, *Southwark Fair*, 1733/1734. The entertainment opportunities available at this 1733 fair include allusions to the classical, with an image of the Trojan horse advertising a drama. Immediately to its right is a banner promoting an appearance by Adam and Eve, whose representation by living statue performers a century later would provoke controversy. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Rosenwald Collection.



Unknown artist, *Mr. Ricketts Bearing his Apprentice in the Attitude of A Flying Mercury*, detail from a poster announcing the 4 August 1797 appearance of Ricketts's Circus. Courtesy Houghton Library, Harvard University.

admired antique statues; amongst others the celebrated Fighting Gladiator" he also presented poses inspired in the labors of Hercules.

Male imitators of classical gods weren't limited to performing strongmen, nor were they confined to Europe. In 1793 when English equestrian John B. Ricketts opened his multi-act circus in Philadelphia, the first documented in the Anglo-Americas, he starred in the "attitude of MERCURY" in which he leapt "from his horse to the ground and with the same spring remounts with his face towards the horse's tail."³⁷ A few days later, he bounded back onto the saddle, then hoisted a young apprentice "on his shoulders IN THE ATTITUDE OF MERCURY. Standing on two horses, in full Gallop."³⁸ Ricketts began using Mercury as a kind of trademark, adorning his permanent circus building in Philadelphia with a weathervane of himself riding as Mercury.³⁹

In *The Shows of London* (1978) literary scholar Richard Altick designated equestrian acrobat Andrew Ducrow, as the "inventor of the pose plastique," though, as the examples of Belzoni and Ricketts illustrate, male statue posing was already a presence on the fairgrounds.⁴⁰ Ducrow's father Peter, known as the "Flemish Hercules," had incorporated his son into his shows as a child. According to Charles Dickens's biography of Ducrow, Peter trained him "with an understanding that any mistake

that he might make, or any accident that might happen, would be promptly followed by bodily chastisement of a most merciless kind."⁴¹ The result was a fearless equestrian performer also adept at vaulting, tumbling, slack and tight rope, balancing, fencing, and boxing. Half a decade after Ricketts carried a young rider in the attitude of Mercury atop his horses in the US, the five-year-old "INFANT HERCULES" appeared in the same pose atop one of his father's riders when the family troupe appeared in Hull on 25 October 1798.⁴² Andrew reincorporated the Mercury pose into his stunt riding act in his teens and substantially expanded his statuary repertory as he continued performing.

Based on French and British reviews from that period, circus historian Arthur Hartley Saxon provided a reconstruction of a performance known as the "Carnival of Venice," which concluded with

Another Proteus-like change . . . accomplished by another startling contrast, this time the athletic and graceful attitudes of Adonis . . . with his bow, including an amazing feat of equilibrium when Ducrow standing on one toe, leaned out over the sides of the horse and seemed genuinely on the verge of taking flight. Finally, at the moment he let fly the arrow he assumed the pose of the *Apollo Belvedere*, while the applause from the ecstatic spectators came down like thunder. The changes of costume and accessories were made without Ducrow's once quitting his horse.⁴³

Ducrow did set himself apart with one innovation that likely earned him his position as an "inventor." When circus historian T. Alston Brown described Ricketts' Mercury attitude in 1860 he specified that "he never offended the eye by ungraceful postures or by the nude style of dressing [i.e. fleshings and leotards] that now prevails at the circus. His costumes were like that of the actors on the stage—pantalets, trunks full disposed, and neat cut jacket—which were sufficient to make ample display of his figure for all purposes of agility and grace."⁴⁴ According to historian David Webster, during a family tour to Scotland when Ducrow was in his teens, "the noted anatomist Dr. Bartlett



This engraving by T.C. Wageman portrays Andrew Ducrow as the showy horseman who created acts on horseback that are still seen in the circus today. Courtesy The Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

saw the young circus star and told his anatomy students to go see the act so they could study the perfect human body."⁴⁵ By the close of the 1820s, it appears Ducrow began to present himself wearing little more than fleshings to facilitate just such gazing.

German prince Hermann Ludwig Heinrich von Pückler-Muskau described Ducrow's performance of his living statue routine, without horses, in Dublin in October of 1828 as:

a high enjoyment to a lover of art, and far surpasses the 'Tableaux' which are in such favour on the continent. When the curtain draws up, you see a motionless statue on a lofty pedestal in the centre of the stage. This is Ducrow; and it is hardly credible how an elastic dress can fit so exquisitely and so perfectly represent marble, only here and there broken by a bluish vein. He appeared first as the Hercules Farnese. With the greatest skill and precision he then gradually quitted his attitude from one gradation to another, of display of strength; but at the moment in which he presented a perfect copy of the most celebrated

statues of antiquity, he suddenly became fixed as if changed to marble. Helmet, sword, and shield, were now given to him, and transformed him in a moment into the wrathful Achilles, Ajax, and other Homeric heroes. Then came the Discobolus and others, all equally perfect and true. The last was the attitude of the fighting Gladiator, succeeded by a master representation of the dying Gladiator. This man must be an admirable model for painters and sculptors: his form is faultless, and he can throw himself into any attitude with the utmost ease and grace. . . . It gave me pain to see this fine artist, (for he certainly merits no less a name,) ride nine horses at once, in the character of a Chinese sorcerer; drive twelve at once in that of a Russian courier; and lastly, go to bed with a poney [sic] dressed as an old woman.⁴⁶

The performance von Pückler-Muskau witnessed in Dublin seems to have provided the basis for a full-scale theatrical work known as *Raphael's Dream! Or the Mummy & Study of Living Pictures* (1830), which premiered at Astley's Amphitheatre in London.⁴⁷ It was narrated by an actor portraying Raphael who guided audiences through his personal art collection as embodied by Ducrow. At one point in the proceedings, a servant interrupted the artist to advise him that a new frame had arrived. Raphael had it set up in his studio so Ducrow could occupy its confines to present the remainder of his statue interpretations. As cultural historian Elena Stevens points out, the narration "tended to give the impression that each of Ducrow's characters was linked with, or exemplified by, one particular character trait," heroic strength in the case of Hercules, lightness in that of Mercury, "and Ducrow's immobile representations corroborated this impression."⁴⁸

Stevens describes Ducrow's performance in *Raphael's Dream!* as having abridged "the Classics, facilitating broader access to ancient and mythological works" for his largely lower class audience.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, William the Fourth, who was certainly afforded an elite education, had a pavilion erected at Brighton

specifically so he could enjoy Ducrow's living statue performance, along with his equestrian feats, in royal privacy.⁵⁰

"Old Cerberus," the pseudonymous theatrical reviewer for *The Edinburgh Literary Journal*, encapsulated Ducrow's attitudes in *Raphael's Dream!* as:

the most wonderful thing we ever saw. We need not say of the sort, for they are altogether unique; no man ever attempted any thing like them before, and no man will ever be able to do any thing half so good again. We have had actors and actresses, who acquired celebrity by their talents in melodrama and pantomime, but the very best of them were uncouth, unenlightened, and vulgar, compared with Ducrow.⁵¹

Strength athletes were just as willing as Ducrow to match their imitative talents with the sculptors of antiquity for the benefit of their British audiences. Two performing strongmen and one "teacher of gymnastic exercises" were hailed as "three remarkable foreigners" in the 1 February 1823 edition of London's *Literary Review*, that advised the "professors and lovers of the Fine Arts" to take note of their arrival.⁵² The unnamed author assured his readers that the strongmen had "exhibited themselves, and sat as models to artists of great reputation abroad and at various continental academies of the Fine Arts." There they had been acclaimed for the "beauty and grandeur of their forms, and the spirit and genius with which they display them in attitudes, similar to those of the finest of the antique statues which have descended to us, and in others of a great and energetic character."

The three of them had appeared separately "at the rooms of Mr. Henry Sass . . . before his scholars and many other persons who had assembled there, including, on the day first mentioned, several Members of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts." The author's particular favorite "M. [Charles] Roussel [sic] . . . *L'Hercule du Nord*" had been the most recent visitor to Sass's preparatory school for postulants to the Royal Academy. There, Rousselle

successively placed himself in the attitudes of the fighting and dying gladiators, to the Hercules Farnese and other antique

statues, as well as in that of the Atlas of Michael Angelo [sic]; and he rapidly threw himself into numerous postures of his own invention, representing athletes or warriors engaged in combat or expiring; and into others of an equally fine character, which excited the admiration of the judicious and enlightened assembly and merited the applause which was bestowed on him.

His competition at this exhibition was provided by "plaster casts of many antique statues" that surrounded him in Sass's schoolroom. The author did not specify the statues in the collection, but Sass had singled out the *Apollo Belvedere* and the *Farnese Hercules* for praise during his 1817 visit to Italy, so copies of these works were likely among their number.⁵³ Sass's plaster casts provided Rousselle's observers "a fair opportunity . . . of comparing his form with that of several of those so much celebrated; and it is but justice to observe, that although he might in some instances appear inferior in that which has been made ideal beauty, yet he excelled in energy and expression."⁵⁴

Two weeks later, Sass himself took to the pages of the *Literary Review* to argue for the superiority of physical education instructor Phokhion-Heinrich Clias over Rousselle:



Unknown artist, *Mr. Ducrow as Adonis Going to the Chase* (Undated print published by M & M Skelt). Courtesy Houghton Library, Harvard University.



François Joseph Bosio, *Hercules Fighting Acheloo's Snake Transformed into a Snake*, 1824. Edmond Desbonnet identified Charles Rous-selle as Bosio's model for Hercules in *The Kings of Strength*. Courtesy of the Louvre Museum, Paris.

The form of M. Clias is by far the most perfect of the three, or indeed of any who have ever been exhibited in England. In him we discover all those markings which we see in the antique figures, of the correctness of which there had been expressed such doubts, because they could not be seen in the dissected subject . . . from their bodies not being sufficiently developed by a regular system of scientific exercises, such as M. Clias has practiced from the example of the Greeks.

The form of M. Roussel [sic], whom I afterwards exhibited at my house . . . partakes greatly of the character of the Hercules Farnese, and which a celebrated sculptor said he had never thought true to nature until he saw M. Roussel [sic].

The upper part of the figure of M. Debrayat [sic?] . . . is the form of Jove himself. It would be difficult to imagine any thing more grand.

Thus it has been my good fortune to introduce to my brother artists' admiration living examples of three characters of Grecian sculpture — beautiful simple Nature, Heroic, and Divine.⁵⁵

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, artists were pointing to athletes as proof that classical statuary was based on living individuals rather than imagined ideals. Their ideological precursor Johann Winckelmann had asserted in his 1755 *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst* (Thoughts on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture) that it was by exercise that the Greeks “got the great and manly contour observed in their statues” and that their gymnasia were “schools of art.”⁵⁶ At century's close, Sandow, Edmond Desbonnet and their colleagues inverted this formula and pointed to classical statuary as evidence of human potential.

Regardless of where they performed, Lady Hamilton in her elite home; Belzoni, Ricketts and Ducrow on fairgrounds and circuses; or Clias, Debrayat and Rousselle in both popular and elite venues, they forged identifiable places for themselves within the culture of their time. Ducrow in particular achieved widespread celebrity status as a performer and, as unparalleled as his supporters thought him to be, sparked a host of imitators throughout Europe and in the United States. They too adopted Ducrow's fleshings for their performances. When professional female statue posers, clad in the same skin tight outfits, joined forces with the men in the 1840s controversy ensued, but that did not prevent statue posing from proliferating throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century. A living statue concept even provided the plot for the record-breaking run of the Broadway musical *Adonis* (1884). It was in an afterpiece for its 1893 revival—one of several for this musical—that Sandow made his US debut.⁵⁷

NOTES

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2. John D. Fair, *Mr. America: The Tragic History of a Bodybuilding Icon* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 229.
3. Lowery, "Show of Muscles," 4.
4. Cited in Fair, *Mr. America*, 229.
5. Lowery, "Show of Muscles," 7.
6. See Edith Hall, "Pantomime: Visualizing Myth in the Roman Era," in *Performance in Greek and Roman Theater*, ed. George Harrison and Vayos Liapis (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 466, for an overview of the evidence for female performers.
7. Translated in Ismene Lada-Richards, "ΜΥΘΩΝ ΕΙΚΩΝ: Pantomime Dancing and the Figurative Arts in Imperial and Late Antiquity," *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* Third Series, 12, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 18.
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11. *Ibid.*, 2.
12. *Ibid.*, 42.
13. David Wiles, "Theatre in Roman and Christian Europe," in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Theatre*, ed. John Russell Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 58.
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19. Richard Steele, *The Tattler and the Guardian* (Edinburgh: Morrison and Gibb, 1880), 240.
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21. *Ibid.*, 53.
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23. John O'Brien, "Harlequin Britain: Eighteenth Century Pantomime and the Cultural Location of Entertainment(s)," *Theatre Journal* 50 (1998): 489-510.
24. Alan S. Downer, "Nature to Advantage Dressed: Eighteenth-Century Acting," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 58, no. 4 (December 1943): 1002-1037.
25. William Cooke, *The Elements of Dramatic Criticism* (London: G. Kearsly and G. Robinson, 1775), 200-201.
26. Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny, *Taste and the Antique, The Lure of Classical Sculpture, 1500-1200*, 2d ed., (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1982), 20-22.
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28. Cited in Ersy Contogouris, "Emma Hamilton, a Model of Agency in Late Eighteenth-Century Europe" (PhD diss., Département d'histoire de l'art et d'études cinématographiques, Université de Montréal, 2114), 109.
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30. David Chapman, *Sandow the Magnificent: Eugen Sandow and the Beginnings of Bodybuilding* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 136.
31. Goethe, *Goethe's Travels in Italy*, 330.
32. Edward Lucie-Smith, *Adam: The Male Figure in Art* (Vancouver, BC: Raincoast Books, 1998), 47.
33. Cooke, *The Elements of Dramatic Criticism*, 200.
34. Steele, *The Tattler and the Guardian*, 240.
35. Richard Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge, MA: Belnap Press of Harvard University Press, 1978), 243; Benedictus Antonio van Assen, *Giovanni Battista Belzoni. The celebrated Patagonian Sampson*, viewed at https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1841-0313-1.
36. Cited in Altick, *The Shows of London*, 343.
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38. *Ibid.*, 189.
39. T. Allston Brown, "A Complete History of the Amphitheatre and Circus, From its Earliest Date, With Sketches of Some of the Principal Performers," *New York Clipper*, 29 December 1860: 296.
40. Altick, *The Shows of London*, 491.
41. Charles Dickens, "Andrew Ducrow," *All the Year Round*, 3 February 1872: 224. Strength sport historian David Webster tentatively, and probably incorrectly, suggested that the senior Ducrow was the first strongman to be represented in the "so-called block pose." He based this on what he described only as a "very detailed circus picture circa 1815" supposedly by François Pannemaker, a Flemish graphic artist who was born in 1822. See David P. Webster, "The Flemish Hercules," *Iron Game History* 6, no.2 (January 2000): 27.
42. The poster was offered at auction by Dreweatts Auction House in London in 2016. Viewed at <https://www.invaluable.com/auction-lot/eighteenth-century-circus-ducrow-the-last-night-b-105-c-9934fa0afe>.
43. A.H. Saxon, "The Circus as Theatre: Astley's and Its Actors in the Age of Romanticism," *Educational Theatre Journal* 27, no. 3 (October 1975): 299-312.
44. Brown, "A Complete History of the Ampitheatre and Circus," 296.
45. Webster, "The Flemish Hercules," 30.
46. Hermann Ludwig Heinrich von Pückler-Muskau, *Tour in England, Ireland and France, in the Years 1826, 1827, 1828, and 1829 by a German Prince* (Philadelphia: Carey, Lea and Blanchard, 1833), 426-27.
47. Elena Stevens, "Striking an Attitude: Tableaux Vivants in the British Long Nineteenth Century" (PhD diss., Faculty of Humanities, University of Southampton, 2017), 69-71.
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49. *Ibid.*, 23.
50. Dickens, "Andrew Ducrow," 226.
51. Old Cerberus, "The Edinburgh Drama," *The Edinburgh Literary Journal* (December 1830): 378.
52. "Remarkable Foreigners," *Literary Review and Journal of Belle Lettres, Arts, Sciences, &c.* (1 February 1823): 73-74.
53. Henry Sass, *A Journey to Rome and Naples, Performed in 1817* (London: Longman, Hurst, Reese, Orme & Brown, 1818), 120-22, 168.
54. "Remarkable foreigners," 74.
55. Henry Sass, "Remarkable Foreigners," *The Literary Review and Journal of Belle Lettres, Arts, Sciences, &c.* (15 February 1823): 106. Debrayat, or more probably Dubrayat, whom the anonymous author of the 1 February article presents as a Lyonese strongman known as "L' Hercule du Midi," does not appear in the pages of Edmond Desbonnet's *The Kings of Strength: A History of All Strong Men from Ancient Times to Our Own*, ed./trans David L. Chapman (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2022), Kindle edition. In part four of his book, Desbonnet acknowledged that very little was known of strongmen prior to 1845. Desbonnet's extensive reportage on Rousselle was facilitated by the fact that both hailed from Lille. I thank David Chapman for providing a more likely spelling of the Debrayat surname.
56. Johann Winckelmann, *Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks*, trans. Henry Fusseli, (London: A. Millar, 1765), 6 and 9.
57. John Kasson, *Houdini, Tarzan and the Perfect Man: The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 22-25.

A TOKEN REMEMBRANCE OF AN IRON GAME PIONEER: AN INTRODUCTION

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Although his name is not immediately recognizable to most modern physical culturists, Ottley Russell Coulter was a significant figure in the emergence of the Iron Game as a legitimate sporting endeavor during the early twentieth century. The most succinct treatment of Coulter's life and career as a strongman and physical culturist can be found in volume one of Bill Pearl's *Legends of the Iron Game*, where Coulter shares the spotlight with such notables as Eugen Sandow, Louis Cyr, George Hackenschmidt, and Bob Hoffman.¹ Descended from middle-class stock in northeast Ohio, Coulter was under-developed as a youth and described by Pearl as "the runt of the family." Despite his modest physical beginnings, Coulter was able to develop his physique and strength, eventually proclaiming that he was, "the mightiest man in the world at my body weight."² While Coulter

admittedly was not the absolute strongest man of his era, he is an important figure in the history of the Iron Game because he laid the groundwork for a national lifting organization in the aftermath of World War I. As discussed in a 1993 article in *Iron Game History*, his efforts to foster such an organization began with his 1917 arti-

cle in *Strength* titled, "Honesty in Weight Lifting and the Necessity of Making Lifters Prove Their Claims." Coulter built on an earlier appeal from Milo Bar Bell Company founder Alan Calvert,

which called for standardization in the Iron Game. As both Calvert and Coulter observed, many men claimed to be the strongest in the world, but there was no standardization with respect to equipment or lifts so that any man might prove his claims. "There can be no real rivalry [among strongmen]," asserted Coulter, "without a basis of equality." To that end, Coulter worked assiduously with George Jowett and David Willoughby in the 1920s to bring life to the American Continental Weightlifting Association (ACWLA), in the hopes of establishing official lifts and records. The ACWLA was eventually subsumed by the national weightlifting committee of the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU), which

took over governance of weightlifting in 1929.³ No less important to the development of the Iron Game is the massive collection of strength memorabilia Ottley assembled over a half century, which became the foundation for the H.J. Lutchter Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports (Stark Center) archives. Coulter's collection provided the basis for the 2001 "Portrait of a Strongman" article by Jan Todd and Michael Murphy in *Iron Game History*, which provides



This rare publicity still, taken in the Teens when Ottley Coulter was working as a professional strongman is both a photograph and a challenge to other contenders. On the sign in the background he has written "Ottley Coulter: Open Competition to the World at 145 lbs. Lifting Dumbbells and All-Around Lifting from the Ground."

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the most thorough treatment of Coulter's early career as a circus performer.⁴ Coulter's circus experiences, preserved mainly in his extensive correspondence at the Stark Center, provide a context for his subsequent activities as a collector and connoisseur of strongman memorabilia.⁵

While books and magazines make up the largest portion of the Coulter archive, it is the collection of his correspondence that includes the most revealing and useful information for scholars. As Todd and Murphy observed, "for the historian, letters are more precious than gold," and the Stark Center collection includes extensive communications between Coulter and George Jowett running from the early 1920s to 1968, as well as Coulter's general correspondence from 1899 to 1974, and his voluminous scrapbooks from 1879 to 1963. Not included in the Stark Center archives, however, is a copy of the "reminiscences and impressions" he compiled in 1944, which I have uncovered in my collection of Bob Hoffman manuscripts in Auburn, Alabama. This original document encompasses nearly three decades of Iron Game development.⁶ As a complement to the Stark Center collections, it reveals a rich cultural backdrop for Coulter's life and times in the wake of his strongman career in the circus.

In addition to his vast correspondence with like-minded compatriots, the compilation reveals that most of Coulter's early information came from, and thus his views were greatly shaped by, Richard K. Fox's *Police Gazette* and Bernarr Macfadden's *Physical Culture* which were kaleidescopic in coverage of physical culture events and personages. Although his recollections are by no means perfect or comprehensive, Coulter identifies numerous long-forgotten strongmen of note,

including Andy Kondrat, Wilfred Cabana, Ed Zello, and The Great Santell.⁷ Coulter's "reminiscences" also shed new light on the *Police Gazette* Heavyweight Strong Man Championship belt which was created for a Cyr-Sandow show-

down, but awarded by default to Warren Lincoln Travis in 1907. The belt, along with the 1,600-pound Travis dumbbell, are currently housed in the York Barbell Weightlifting Museum & Hall of Fame.⁸ Regarding Travis' lifts, Coulter refers to "Strong Men of Old" as a source of information below, but it is likely he was referring to Bob Hoffman's 1940 publication, *Mighty Men of Old*.⁹

Like many other Iron Game authors, Coulter lavishes much attention on Eugen Sandow and his mentor, Professor Attila (Louis Durlacher), but he also fills a void in our knowledge of another early strongman through his discussion of Adolph Nordquest, whom Coulter regards as "one of the greatest all around strength athletes that the world has ever seen."¹⁰ In his recollection of Nordquest's lifting accomplishments, Coulter also reminds us that early strongman feats were often performed in such varied settings as a cafe in Manhattan and a museum on Coney Island, which, after all, is the essence of strongmanism.

We already know a great deal about Ottley Coulter's life and lifting career from previous articles that utilized the Stark Center collection.¹¹ The personal record that follows, however, is significant because this record was com-

plied by the man himself, who obviously knew this information better than anyone else. That record serves to underscore and fill in gaps, especially about Ottley's background. There are some omissions and oversights, of course, most notably his failure to include the date of his birth on 6 June 1890. This information was



Although not a large man, Coulter's physique was symmetrical and impressive. This photo, taken at the Penwood Studio in Wilkesburg, Pennsylvania, was probably taken around 1920 when Coulter was the Physical Director of the Milo Gymnasium in Pittsburg. Wilkesburg is now a Pittsburgh suburb.



Although Coulter's strongman career began in the circus, he developed a hand balancing act with the diminutive Robert Schaffer at the end of the Teens while he was working in Pittsburgh and helping to run the Milo Gym. Coulter stands on the left side of Schaffer in the photo on the far left; Schaffer supports Coulter in the middle two photos; and Coulter supports Schaffer in the photo on the far right.

provided for his wife Ethel and three children, but not by Coulter for himself. One wonders too about the circumstances that led him to quit so many places of employment, and what he was doing during the domestic deprivations stemming from World War I. Overlooked also is any mention of the many profit-making opportunities he sought to no avail within the Iron Game. It is this recurring problem for physical culturists that Samuel J. Katz, a graduate student at the University of Texas, brought to light when he observed, "Coulter needed to reconcile his deep interest in physical culture with his financial responsibilities."¹²

With the formation of the ACWLA, Coulter endorsed a line of training equipment certified by the new organization. These frequent attempts to commercialize and capitalize on the growing interest in physical culture seem in conflict with the nobler agenda of a "sincere desire for promoting the sport at heart." Yet Coulter never abandoned his genuine interest in promotion of physical culture. He answered virtually all inquiries, many of which led to extended correspondence. These relationships frequently departed from commercial interests with Coulter trading physical culture memorabilia with his clients.¹³

Admittedly, Ottley's personal sketch was compiled in 1944, but curiously its final entry lists his employment with H. C. Frick and U. S. Steel until 6 June 1955. Coulter's recollections open the window slightly more to what we need to know about the strength athletes of his era. We can only hope that his revelations will stimulate further research into what it was like during this embryonic period in our sport's history.

NOTES

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2. *Ibid.*
3. John D. Fair, "George Jowett, Ottley Coulter, David Willoughby and the Organization of American Weightlifting, 1911-1924," *Iron Game History* 2, no. 6 (May 1993): 4; John D. Fair, "From Philadelphia to York: George Jowett, Mark Berry, Bob Hoffman, and the Rebirth of American Weightlifting, 1927-1936," *Iron Game History* 4, no. 3 (April 1996): 7.
4. Jan Todd and Michael Murphy, "Portrait of a Strongman: The Circus Career of Ottley Russell Coulter: 1912-1916," *Iron Game History* 7, no. 1 (June 2001): 4-21.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Ottley Coulter Collection, H. J. Lutchter Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX., at: <https://starkcenter.org/research/collections/ottley-coulter-collection/>.
7. For a more extensive survey of early twentieth-century strength athletes, along with an abundance of photographs, see: Alan Calvert, *Super Strength* (Philadelphia: Milo Publishing Co., 1924).
8. York Barbell Weightlifting Museum and Hall of Fame, York Barbell Company, York, PA., at: <https://yorkbarbell.com/our-location/weightlifting-hall-of-fame/>. The much anticipated match between Cyr and Sandow that never materialized was also discussed by Edmond Desbonnet and Ben Weider, see: Edmond Desbonnet, *The Kings of Strength, A History of All Strong Men from Ancient Times to Our Own*, ed. David L. Chapman (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Publishing Co., 2022), 417; Ben Weider, *The Strongest Man in History: Louis Cyr, "Amazing Canadian"* (Vancouver: Mitchell Press, 1976).
9. Bob Hoffman, *Mighty Men of Old, Being a Gallery of Pictures and Biographies of Outstanding Old Time Strong Men* (York: Strength & Health Publishing Co., 1940).
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11. Todd and Murphy, "Portrait of a Strongman."
12. Samuel J. Katz, "Ottley Coulter and the Evolution of Twentieth Century Weight Lifting," *Proceedings and Newsletter of the American Society for Sport History* (1996): 4-5.
13. *Ibid.*

REMINISCENCES AND IMPRESSIONS OVER THE YEARS

BY OTTLEY COULTER

The *Police Gazette* and *Physical Culture* publications increased my interest in strength and physical training. Although they were very limited in the amount of subject matter dealing with strength and muscle, they did furnish the means for future contacts, which eventually furnished me with means and methods of training for strength.

The *Police Gazette* was essentially a sporting publication. It was published weekly in those days, although it is only published monthly at present. There was very little in it about the training methods of strongmen, but it did have pictures of strong men from time to time mixed in among more numerous pictures of boxers and wrestlers. There was seldom such information about any of those strong men and often nothing but the name and city of residence was given. If my memory serves me rightly, there was nothing about their methods published during my early contact with the publication.

My reading of the *Police Gazette* did afford some knowledge of the lifters and muscle men of that day. The leading strong men, as published by the *Police Gazette*, were professionals. Lifting was not organized at that time and nearly all men of ability with any serious intentions became professionals during my early days.

It is true that there was some amateur lifting, but any man with real lifting ability was

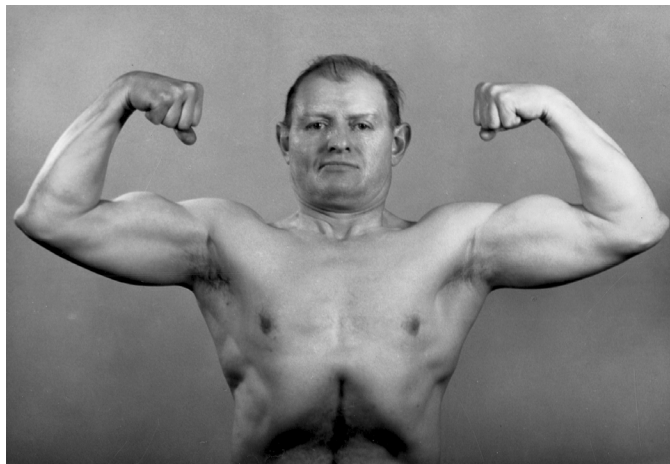
almost forced to become a professional in order to receive any public recognition. The Amateur Athletic Union did have a casual interest in lifting, but apparently had few if any officials with any great interest or real knowledge of lifting. The United States had some amateurs entered in the Olympic Games of 1904 at St. Louis, MO, but the meager information concerning the names of their lifts and their method of accomplishment shows a lack of understanding on the part of the A. A. U. officials responsible

for the listing of the records in the official Athletic Almanac.

Fred Winters and O. C. Osthoff competed for the United States in the 1904 Olympics and established some lifts in the official Athletic Almanac for 1905. These dumbbell lifts, which were listed, are somewhat uncertain as to manner of accomplishment. One of the lifts listed credits Winters with pushing up slowly with one hand

from the shoulder 126½ pounds but gives no information to the position of the body during the pushing.

Another listed under "Dumbbells" credits Osthoff with putting up in a bridge with two hands 177 pounds six times. Probably, this was performed in wrestlers bridge position but the reader can only guess. Perikles Kakousis is credited in the same issue with lifting a barbell of 246 pounds but nothing is stated as to style of lift. The lifting was vastly different from the present Olympics in both poundages and styles.



Taken in 1945, when he was nearly 55 years old, this photograph and the solid, muscular body it captures, clearly shows that Coulter had not forsaken the weights.



The 1904 Olympic Games were held in conjunction with the World's Fair in St. Louis, Missouri. In these early days of the Olympic movement, there were relatively few full teams in any event in the Games, and in Weightlifting, only five men actually participated. There were three Americans, one German, and Periklis Kakousis from Greece who took the gold medal in the "two-hands" lift (competitors could use any style to get the barbell overhead) of 111.7 kilos (246.25 pounds).

Actually the lifting in 1904 was not the first to receive some recognition as amateur records. "Father" William Curtis is credited with two lifts performed many years earlier. He is credited with a harness lift of 3,239 pounds performed 20 December 1868 and "Curling and putting up from shoulder to full arm's length above the shoulder, two dumbbells at the same time, one in each hand weighing 100 pounds" performed 10 September 1859.

This "curling" has been a source of contention for later students of weightlifting. As Curtis only weighed about 165, curling of two bells totalling 200 pounds appears to be an impossibility, if performed in accordance with later requirements of genuine curling. Certainly, Curtis was a very strong man—especially so, considering his weight and the early date of performance. The description of the manner of accomplishment indicates that his harness lift was a genuine lift without any of the leverage advantages, as used by some of the professionals.

This harness lift of Curtis and a lifting with the hands alone of 1,034 pounds by H.[enry] Leussing at Cincinnati, Ohio on 31 March 1880 indicate the professional influence of the time. Apparently, the public knowledge of lifting, which was almost entirely due to the activities of the professionals during my first interest in lifting, was a heritage from earlier days.

Lifting was of so little interest to the A. A. U. officials of the time that there was no more American representation in the Olympics until many years later. The interest manifested by

the A. A. U. in my early days was vastly different from that accorded weight lifting at the present time. Probably, the present interest of the A. A. U. is a result of the influence of George Jowett, Mark Berry and Dietrich Wortmann rather than from any real concern of the leading officials of the A. A. U. However, regardless of the cause, the A. A. U. is doing a great job for amateur lifting and I am strong for it. My greater interest as a result of training and early associations is for lifts other than the three amateur lifts, but I am pleased with the encouragement that has been given the amateur lifters and regret that conditions of time and location permit me to attend so few amateur lifting exhibitions.

The interest created by the inclusion of weight lifting in the Olympics of 1904 was so little that there appears to be no further publicity of Osthoff and Fred Winters would have been forgotten except for the publicity given him by Prof. [Henry W.] Titus, who advertised him as one of his star pupils. This publicity was definitely commercial, but it certainly increased Winter's reputation, especially among men and boys, who had some interest in strength and muscle.

It was necessary for me to subscribe to the *Police Gazette* because it was my desire to learn as much as possible about weight lifters and muscle men as possible and the *Police Gazette* and *Physical Culture* were the only publications known to me at the time, which furnished such information.

There were some publications in Europe at the time, which devoted more space

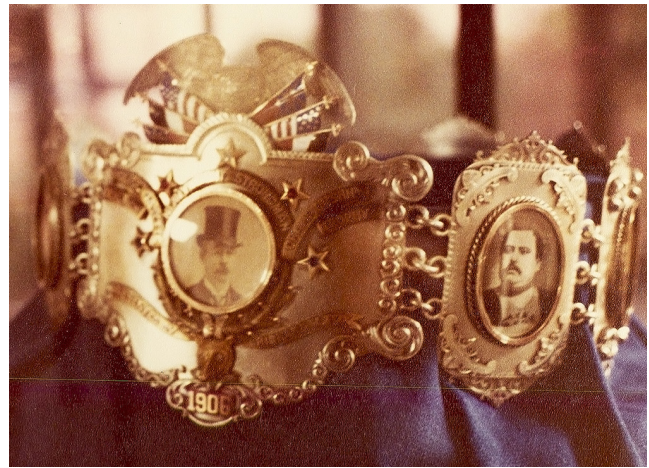
to strong men and their training. *Health & Strength*, *Apollo's Magazine*, *Illustrierte Sportzeitung*, *La Sante los Sports*, *La Culture Physique*, and a few others published then devoted considerable space to the doings of the muscle men, but I did not learn of these magazines until some years later.

The *Police Gazette* and *Physical Culture* were very poor mediums of lifting and muscle information and have no comparison with *Muscle Power*, *Muscle Builder* or any of the other present day publications devoted to progressive training with weights. *Physical Culture* was a strong advocate of hygienic living and had some influence on my living habits. Its emphasis on the vegetarian diet was some contrast to the high protein diet which has proved so useful in building muscle.

The *Police Gazette*, although devoted mainly to boxing, did give some space to strong men and their activities. As previously mentioned, Cyr was sponsored by Richard K. Fox, the publisher, and, consequently, received his share of the strong man publicity.

Warren Travis, Louis Attila, Andy Kondrat, Arthur Dandurand, Wilfred Cabana, George Hackenschmidt, George Lurich, Adolph Nordquest, Ed Zello, [Edward] "Spike" Howard, John Y. Smith, The Great Santell [Arthur Blackmer, Jr., aka Arthur Santell], Lionel Strongfort and others were mentioned from time to time during my early reading of the *Police Gazette*. Pictures of these men usually accompanied the news items, which seldom gave much information.

Warren Travis was more active than Cyr shortly after my introduction to the *Police Gazette*, mainly because of Cyr's failing health. New items concerning Travis were quite frequent at the time and the *Police Gazette* recognized him as middleweight champion back and harness lifter of the world. Fox awarded him a diamond medal for his middleweight records of 2700 pounds, identical poundages for both the back and harness lifts. These poundages may cause surprise to readers of *Strong Men of Old* wherein mention is made of Travis lifting more on these lifts at a lower body weight, but the fact remains that the diamond medal was awarded for a 2700 back lift and a 2700 harness lift and the figure 2700 was engraved on the medal, as I personally know. I also have the *Police Gazette* supplement reproduction of the belt for proof of the actual official poundages. Possibly, Travis lifted greater poundages at a lighter body weight, but if so, they were not recognized by Richard K. Fox in awarding the middleweight



Richard K. Fox, publisher of *The Police Gazette*, created championship belts for many sports that were used to build competition and interest in the activity. One such belt was made with images of Louis Cyr as a challenge to other strongmen. Fox hoped Sandow might challenge Cyr for the belt, but when that did not materialize, Fox gave it to Warren Lincoln Travis. Travis had to agree, as the holder of the belt, that he would meet anyone in competition who wished to try and win it from him. No one did. The belt is now on display at the York Barbell Hall of Fame.

back and harness lifting championship.

Later, Travis was awarded the *Police Gazette* Heavyweight Strong Man Championship belt, which Richard K. Fox purchased to award the winner of a planned contest between Cyr and Sandow. This contest, which most certainly would have been won by Cyr, did not take place because Sandow would not compete against Cyr. This belt was given to Travis with the stipulation that it would be his as long as he defended it against all competition. Although Travis gave open competition to the world, he was never defeated in an official contest and the belt was in his possession at the time of his death. My admiration for Travis did not lead to meeting him until years afterwards but more about that later.

Prof. Louis Attila, who is perhaps best known as the trainer of Sandow, was a strong man in his own right. He was considered the leading trainer by Mr. Fox and, consequently, was accorded considerable publicity by the *Police Gazette*. Many of the best known strong men of his time were trained by or received advice from him. Prof. Attila first appeared as a professional strong man in Europe. Sandow was the most famous strong man managed and trained by him but was not the strongest. Cyr and Travis both received some instructions from Attila, but Cyr's strength was mainly a matter of heredity and previous training and Travis gave his allegiance to Prof. Anthony Barker.

Prof. Attila was associated in an adviso-

THE MARVEL OF THE 20TH CENTURY.


THE PHENOMENAL

❖ BROOKLYN STRONG BOY. ❖

A CHAMPION OF CHAMPIONS.

POLICE GAZETTE TROPHY
BACK LIFTING CONTEST

AND
HARNESSE LIFT




WON BY
WARREN TRAVIS
BROOKLYN N.Y.

RECORD POUNDS

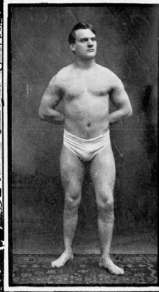
THE WORLD'S
MIDDLE WEIGHT CHAMPION

DESIGNED BY RICHARD K. FOX



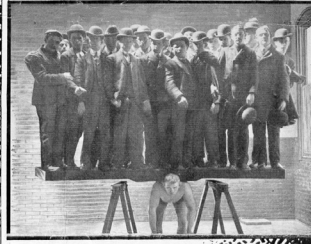
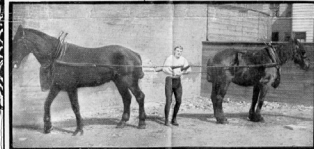
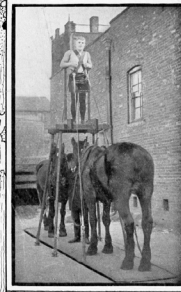
EXACT SIZE.
Value, \$1,000.00.

SOMETHING NOVEL AND NEW.



WARREN TRAVIS

WORLD'S CHAMPION
MIDDLE WEIGHT
BACK LIFTER.



2700 LBS.



AGGREGATE WEIGHT
MEN & DUMB-BELL: 608 LBS.

New York, 190



Warren Lincoln Travis's act was sensational as this original poster for "The Phenomenal Brooklyn Strong Boy" demonstrates. The poster displays several of the strongman feats that Travis performed at the height of his career and includes a photograph of the *Police Gazette* medal given to Travis for making world records in the back lift and harness lift. He made 2700 pounds in each.

ry capacity with other strong men both before and after he acted as a manager to Sandow. The Professor groomed Luigi Borra, an Italian wrestler and weight lifter, to contest Sandow after the latter had cast himself adrift from the Professor. Sandow did not contest Borra and did not enter any more contests after his unsatisfactory contest with McCann.

It has been claimed that Theodore Siebert and Professor Desbonnet received instruction from Prof. Attila. Certainly, there was some similarity in their methods but their association with Prof. Attila is not clear to me. No mention of it was ever made in any correspondence to me from Siebert or Desbonnet, but Attila was certainly known to Desbonnet.

Louis Attila was well known in Europe and some men came from there to New York and received instruction at his gym in New York. The best known pupils of the New York gym were men of the United States or Canada, who became famous as professional strong men. Arthur Dandurand and Horace Barre both received some training at the Attila establishment. Lionel Strongfort was another famous pupil of Attila. There were numerous other pupils who had a reputation for strength and development.

The only publication by Attila was *Prof. Attila's Five Pound Dumb Bell Exercise*. This was published by the *Police Gazette* and was considered the standard work on the subject at the time. It contained proper movements for development of the muscles and was concise enough to prevent any confusion as to what exercises to use. Certainly, the proper use of this manual would give some increases in development in undeveloped persons, but the necessary amount of repetitions required to stimulate the growth of the muscles soon becomes monotonous and cannot give the results obtained from progressive training with dumbbells.

Training with weights was taught in the Attila gym and the Professor was also personally familiar with the use of the chest expander and it would probably saved some of us some lost time, if he had published a book giving his knowledge of training with weights. However, training with five-pound bells was advocated by many of the leading American trainers at the time. Perhaps this was due to the Attila influence but there was considerable aversion to heavy exercise at that time and lighter exercise was no doubt easier to sell to the general public.

My first knowledge of Andy Kondrat came in the *Police Gazette*. He was a very strong

man but practically unknown by the physical culture public. He was trained by Warren Travis and was very good on some of the poundage lifts but never trained consistently enough to properly develop his natural strength. He could lift 250 pounds from the floor with his little finger, which is much more difficult than lifting with the middle finger as usually used. He was a very large man with a heavy physique. Unfortunately, the poundages of some of his other lifts are not available at this time because my scrap book of his clippings were destroyed in a fire. Kondrat soon gave up strong man activities, which were more of a hobby than a business with him, to devote his time to his prosperous saloon business in Brooklyn.

Andy Kondrat's saloon in Brooklyn was somewhat of a gathering place for men interested in strength. He had some strong man pictures on the wall and some heavy dumbbells in a back room. He also had a block weight lifted by James Walter Kennedy in an open contest sponsored by the *Police Gazette*. It was claimed that this weight was never lifted in the same manner by any other man. Certainly, none of the other contestants, which included some well known lifters and strong men of the time, were able to lift it. However the original crossbar or handle had been removed and two loops attached to the weight at the time of my observation in 1919. I was informed that Kondrat had lifted it with the loops but I never questioned him about it and never saw him lift it. The height and weight of the weight would prevent any short man from lifting it. My legs would not have reached the ground in the straddle position, as required by the rules at the time of Kennedy's winning.

The last time I saw Andy Kondrat he was giving me encouragement in the *Police Gazette* Strong Man Tourney Open to the World in 1918. Andy, accompanied by Warren Travis, was also present when I opened with the Frank A. Robbins Circus in Jersey City in 1912. Andy later moved to Chicago and I lost track of him, much to my regret, as he was one of the finest friends that I met in my professional career.

Adolph Nordquest is an older brother of Joe Nordquest, who is somewhat better known to the physical training enthusiasts but Adolph is better known to the professional fraternity and to the general public through his high class vaudeville act with that great athlete Otis Lambert. They presented an absolutely first class act, which consisted mainly of lifting each other in novel and difficult positions. Like the most

of the better known professionals of his day, he obtained advice and encouragement from the great Prof. Attila.

He was better known to the *Police Gazette* as "Young Sandow." He had a magnificent physique and a moustache and complexion that made him the nearest American likeness of Eugen Sandow. He was very good at the bent press and was capable of about 255, although he never practiced it to the extent that the other great exponents did.

The Milo Barbell Co. sponsored an exhibition many years ago at which he made a deadlift with a barbell, which was not made quite in accordance with official dead lift rules of lifting associations but was regarded as the best lift of its kind at the time. The remarkable thing about this lift that he used the over grip with both hands and lifted over 600 pounds.

In my opinion Adolph Nordquest was one of the greatest all around strength athletes that the world has ever seen. Probably G. W. Rolandow was the only strong man equal to him in all-around ability, but Rolandow was not a native American. Nordquest was capable of running the hundred yards in 10 seconds and was an accomplished jumper. He was also a good hand balancer and tumbler.

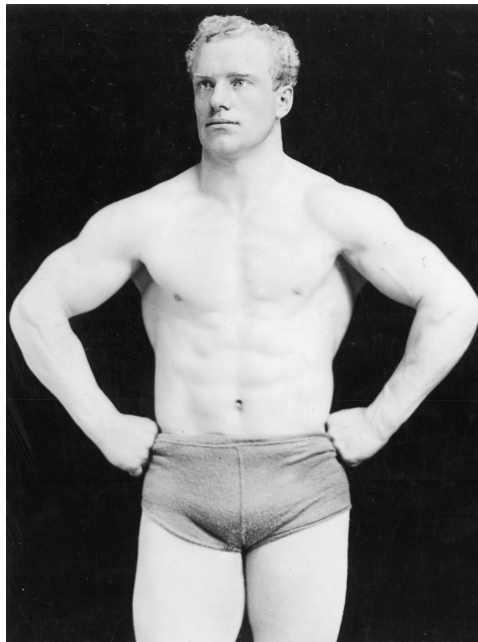
All of the lifts of Adolph Nordquest appear to have been accomplished with very little intensive practice with weights. He stated that he spent only two months of his time in any serious attempt to create records with the weights. Public exhibitions, especially vaudeville, offer very poor opportunity for training with weights. The cost of transportation eliminates excess baggage and that is why so many of the strong man acts of vaudeville days consisted of hand-to-hand balancing and other feats of using human beings for weight.

Some of the deadweight lifts of Nordquest were accomplished in a very offhand manner. There used to be a solid dumbbell weighing 648 pounds at O'Rourke's Café on Park Row, New York City. In 1917, Nordquest lift-

ed this several inches from the floor by grasping the handle with both hands and without any previous practice on this weight. This was said to be the first time it was ever lifted in this manner. He performed at Humber's [Hubert's] Museum at Coney Island in 1917 and on one occasion lifted from the floor with both hands in the overgrip, a barbell with 1 1/16-inch handle, weighing 586 pounds. He probably would have established some very high records in dead lifting, if he had trained as many of the dead lifters have trained.

Adolph Nordquest was highly regarded as a strong man by Warren Travis. In fact, Warren told me that he offered to join with him in a strong man act. Warren stated that he knew that he and Nordquest could put on an act that could not be duplicated. Nordquest did not join with Travis and, consequently, lost an opportunity to continue longer in show business and possibly attain an even greater career.

It is not generally known among muscle builders and strength fans that Nordquest was so highly regarded as a strength athlete by Richard K. Fox that he published *Strength and Health* by Young Sandow. It was the policy of Richard K. Fox at that time to publish manuals on sports and physical training and leaders like [Frank] Gotch and [James J.] Corbett authored books on wrestling and boxing. Nordquest's book was on the market at about the same time as the Attila dumbbell book. The exercises in Nordquest's book



Handsome Adolph Nordquest had a body to rival Sandow's and was frequently pictured in *Strength* magazine during Alan Calvert's years as editor. Like others remembered by Coulter, Nordquest also worked as a strongman in vaudeville and the circus.

were all posed by him and this was inspiring to youthful enthusiasts. The exercises were performed without any apparatus aside from two ordinary chairs. Some of the exercises pitted muscles against each other. Others considered [sic] of using the body as resistance, as dips, knee bends, hand stands and wrestlers bridge. The book was also illustrated with some of the most notable strength athletes of the time, but the most striking thing about the book was the numerous pictures of Nordquest and their noticeable resemblance to the original Eugen Sandow.

Personal Record Sept. 1944.

Ottley Russel Coulter Soc. Sec. No. xxx-xx-xxxx
 5 ft. 6 in. 175 lbs. brown hair, gray eyes
 Resident of state since December 1918
 Ancestry: Father-Irish Mother-German & Scotch-Irish
 Military Service-None
 Father-David Coulter Born at Chaddsford, Pa.
 Mother-Effie E. Ohl Born at Parkman, Ohio.
 Wife's maiden Name-Ethel Alexander Which Parents are Living-None

Children & Dependents

Ethel Grace Coulter	born Sept. 27, 1898	wife Scotland, Pa.
Olive Pearl Alexander	born Oct. 17, 1917	sister-in-law
Athelda Elizabeth Klink	born July 24 th , 1918	daughter
David Alexander Coulter	born January 23 rd , 1923	son
John Robert Coulter	born June 14 th , 1925	son

Group Insurance - X

EDUCATION

			Course
Parkman Public (Grade)	1896 to 1904 inc.	8 years credit	Academic
" " (high)	1905 to 1907 inc.	3 years "	"
Hiram College (college)	1908 to 1910 inc.	2 years "	Scientific
(1 st year at Hiram was high school work as Parkman High School ranked third grade and did not meet Hiram College requirements)			
(Other)	American College conferred honorary B. P. E. degree for work in Physical Education.		
	Speak	Read	Write
English	x	x	x

Service with Subsidiaries of the U. S. Steel Corp. - None except with the H. C. Frick Coke Co.
 Address - Lemont Furnace, R. R. 1., Pa. Phone-None

PREVIOUS EMPLOYERS OTHER THAN U.S. STEEL CORPORATION

From	To	Company	Location	Position	Immed. Superior	Salary	Reason
Sept. 1917	Oct? 1918	N.Y. C.R.R. & Gov. Agcy.	World War 1.	Foreman	Frank Baldwin Mr. Stevens	\$110 to \$195	Quit
Dec. 1918	Feb? 1921	Milo Gymnasium	Pgh. Pa.	Phy. Dir.	H.B. Barzen	\$140 \$25 weekly & bonus	Owner
June 1919	May 1924	M.H. Pickering Co.	Pgh. Pa.	Collector	Mr. Aimsworth		Quit
Jun 1920	April 1922	STRENGTH MAG.	Phila. Pa.	Writer.	J.C. Egan.	\$20	Change of Policy
May or J'24	June '26	City of	Uniontown, Pa.	Ptl. & PhyDir.		\$140?	Quit under political pressure

BUSINESS REFERENCES - NOT RELATIVES

Berwin S. Detweiler	Uniontown, Pa.	Automobile Dealer
Central Garage	Uniontown, Pa.	Automobile Dealer

RELATIVES PENSIONED BY U.S. STEEL CORP. DISABLED OR DIED IN SERVICE OF U.S. STEEL CORP.

Edward Ohl 2nd cousin (deceased) Service terminated? Cause of termination-retired?
 Company & Works - Superintendent at Sharon, Pa.
 Later said to have been Director of U.S. Steel Corporation

This two-page document was put together by Ottley Coulter in September of 1944. It appears that it began as a job application for the U.S. Steel Corporation, but it is also a remarkable record of his working life. Only minor editing and slight formatting changes were applied to make reading easier and to fit on these pages. Ottley Coulter was known for his long letters with friends; he could really pack a lot of information into one or two pages.

In Case of Emergency Notify-Ethel G. Coulter Relation-wife
 Address-Lemont Furnace, R. R. 1., Pa. Nearest Phone

Started	N. Y. C. R. R.	Sept. 18, 1917	Quit Oct.? 1918
Started	Milo Gymnasium	Dec. 1918.	Quit Feb. ? 1921
Started	M. H. Pickering Co.	June 11, 1919	Quit May 1924
Started	STRENGTH MAGAZINE	Jan. 1920	Quit Apr. 1922
Started	Uniontown Police Dept.	May or June 1924	Quit June 1, 1926

Married at Hagerstown, Md. March 17th, 1917.
 Graduated from Parkman, Ohio High School in May 1908.
 Attended Hiram College, Hiram, Ohio 1909 and 1910.

1911 worked for D. Coulter & Son, Andover, Ohio.
 1912 strong man with Frank A Robbins Circus.
 1913 strong man with circus of Walter L. Main.
 1914 worked for D. Coulter & So, Andover, Ohio.
 1915 strong man and wrestler with Superior United Shows and Legette & Brown Shows.
 1916 night manager at restaurant in Hagerstown, Md.
 1917 foreman at freight house of N.Y.C. R. R., Youngstown, Ohio.
 1918 asst. claim agent for Mahoning and Shenango Railway & Light Co., Youngstown, Ohio.
 1919 Physical Director of Milo Gymnasium, Pittsburgh, Pa.
 1920 " " " " "
 1921 " " " " " " and also started to work as
 collector for M. H. Pickering Co. (worked only evenings at the Milo Gymnasium)
 1922 collector for M. H. Pickering Co.
 1923 " " "
 1924 " " " until May or June
 and started on Uniontown Police Dept in May or June as Phy. Inst.
 1925 patrolman on Uniontown Police Dept.
 1926 patrolman on Uniontown Police Dept. until May 30th.
 Started with H. C. Frick Coke Co. as Coal and Iron Policemen about June 2nd or 3rd.
 1927 H. C. Frick
 1928 "
 1929 "
 1930 "
 1931 "
 1932 "
 1933 "
 1934 "
 1935 "
 1936 "
 1937 "
 1938 " (Unemployed Dec. 1938 to Aug. 1939 because of reduction in personnel)
 1939 worked until Jan 16 and furloughed again because of personnel reduction.
 Sept. 1939? until June 6, 1955 employed by H. C. Frick Coke Co. United States Steel Co. and
 United States Steel Corporation.

CHRIS DICKERSON: A REMEMBRANCE AND AN APPRECIATION

BY DAVID CHAPMAN

On 23 December 2021 Henri Christophe (Chris) Dickerson, one of bodybuilding's greatest pioneers, passed away in a hospital in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. He was 82. Although he once possessed a strong, muscular body, recent troubles including a broken hip and COVID-19 had contributed to the heart failure that eventually took his life. This marked the end of a great athlete and an equally great career. Although he could not conquer death, throughout his career Chris Dickerson had triumphed over many other terrible forces like racism, sexism, and ageism. He was the first African American to win the Mr. America title in 1970; in 1982—at 41 years of age—he was the oldest man ever to be judged Mr. Olympia; and he was an openly gay contestant in a sport that has always been very touchy about acknowledging the racism and homophobia that have long been in its midst.¹

I first met Chris in 2007 when we made plans to collaborate on his biography, which I was going to write. I visited him a few times in Florida and he stayed with us in Seattle several times on his way to Alaska to visit his mother and brother. Unfortunately, the book never happened, but I was able to interview Chris both by correspondence and over the telephone, and I collected a good deal of information about his life that has never been disclosed before. This was not an easy process for Dickerson since he was a private individual and never really cottoned to the role of self-promoter that other successful athletes learned to assume. Gradually, I came to realize that writing his life story would be a difficult task because Chris seemed to be unclear about how much he wanted to reveal and how much he preferred to keep to himself. Still, this did not detract from my admiration for the man who quietly broke many barriers and became a role model for others.

Correspondence to: David Chapman, Seattle, WA. Email: davidlchap@aol.com.

Chris Dickerson's triumphs, as well as his reluctance to discuss his private life, were almost certainly a result of the era into which he was born. Gradually improving material prosperity and the civil rights movement made it possible for minorities to enter many social and sporting arenas that had been hitherto closed to them. Bodybuilding was one of these; since its beginning in 1939, no Black man had ever won the Mr. America contest, the most prestigious competition in the country. In a sport where appearance is the principal attribute that determines a winner or a loser, white judges found it hard to give the top prize to a Black man—until Dickerson came along, that is. The other reason for Chris's victories had more to do with his personality, his intelligence, and his public persona as a modest, reasonable and unthreatening figure; in short, he was much more palatable to the largely white power structure of the bodybuilding world. Dickerson did not have a Southern or stereotypically African American accent, and although he was always acutely aware of his status as a member of an often-oppressed minority, he seldom expressed those views in public.² He was an expert at playing the game and at acting the part that the athletic world wanted. That he was a superb athlete who possessed an extraordinary physique was a quality that allowed him to succeed despite all the impediments that were liberally strewn in his path. Those massive obstacles began early in his life.

GROWING UP IN THE JIM CROW SOUTH

It is difficult to overstate Chris Dickerson's importance as both a sports figure and a pioneer in the battle against ingrained prejudice against those who look or act differently. The earliest barrier holding him back was racial intolerance. As he said, "For a Black person, racism is never not there." To make matters worse, the issue of racial prejudice was much more of

a problem when he was born in Montgomery, Alabama, in August of 1939. Sometimes referred to as “The Heart of the Confederacy,” the state capital was small in feel and thoroughly Southern in temperament. It was a city where Blacks and whites had always lived separate lives—with separate neighborhoods, schools, churches, and attitudes. There was little mixing except in terms of commerce and transportation. As Chris explained, “If a Negro lady went shopping downtown and behaved in a seemingly manner, then she would be treated courteously by the white store clerks, but no one would ever dream of socializing with a friend of another race.”

Montgomery was also the home of a fairly large and stable Black middle class, and it was into this world that Chris Dickerson was born. His mother Mahala Ashley was the daughter of a prominent merchant, and she had been raised to expect respect from all those around her; she was also better educated than most girls in the Black section of town. This was largely thanks to Miss White, a genteel Caucasian Bostonian who

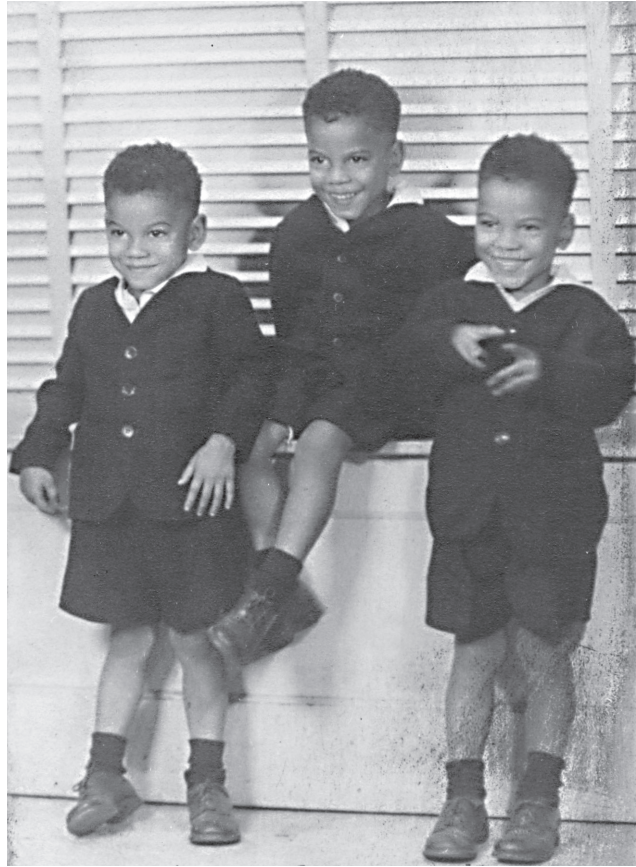
had come south and operated a school for Negro girls. Mahala enrolled in the school, earning good grades in academic and social subjects. One of her classmates at Miss White’s school would later attain fame of her own. Rosa Parks was a lifelong friend who kept in touch with Mahala throughout both their lives. Mahala later went to Fisk University, one of the South’s premier Black schools.

In addition to being well educated, Mahala had acquired an independent streak that caused her to do things that others in the family considered to be rash and ill-advised. One of these was her marriage to Henry Dickerson,

a handsome but not overly ambitious elevator operator at the posh Jefferson Davis Hotel in downtown Montgomery. Henry Dickerson clearly did not have the advantages that his young wife possessed, but he must have made up for his lack of a pedigree with other gifts. In her autobiography, Mahala writes that she

was strongly attracted to her husband. “I had never seen such strength and health exuberating from a human body.” Six weeks after meeting, the two were married in October 1938.³ No one seems to know if the couple was happy at first, but if anyone expected the two to settle down to a life of quiet domesticity, that image was soon shattered. They separated before their first anniversary, but by that time she had other distractions.

On 25 August 1939 Mahala became one of the most famous women—Black or white—in Montgomery when she gave birth to triplets. The event was so momentous that there was a great deal of press coverage. The Carnation Milk company agreed to give the children free milk until the age of twelve, and

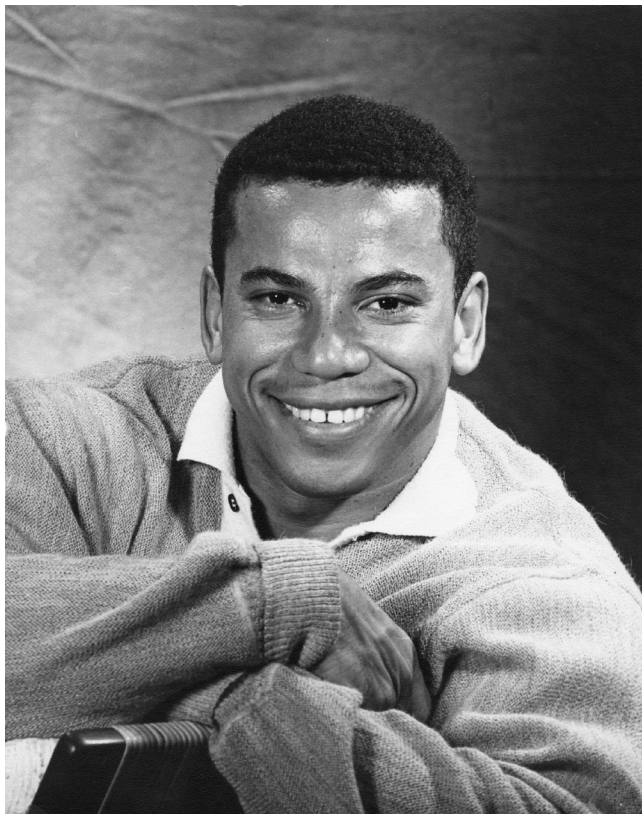


The Dickerson Triplets were famous in Montgomery, Alabama, following their birth in August of 1939. Identical triplets were so rare in this era that they were visited by Governor Jim Folsom and the Carnation Milk company donated free milk to the family until the boys turned twelve. At approximately three years of age, Chris stands on the left, John is seated in the middle, and Alfred stands on the right.

even the governor of Alabama, Jim Folsom, visited the triplets for a well publicized photo-op. The three boys, Alfred, John and Henri-Christophe were famous all over Montgomery, and like Alabamian versions of the famous Dionne quintuplets of Canada, the three boys were the darlings of the entire community. Mahala’s school friend, Rosa Parks, sometimes looked after the children when their mother was away from home.

Thanks to their celebrity, the boys were spared many of the institutional cruelties that segregation entailed, but as they grew older, they came to realize that their special status

had its limits in a Jim Crow society. Other problems were surfacing, too. Mahala divorced her husband shortly after the boys were born, and he all but disappeared from the children's lives. Their mother was also largely absent, and the children were raised by their mother's family. Chris's recollections of his childhood revolve mainly around his loving grandparents, not his mother who was often distracted by her own drama and struggles. Beyond their household, this was not an easy time for African Americans. On the cusp of the Civil Rights Movement that would soon plunge the nation into a maelstrom of violence, unrest, and soul searching, Mahala's father could see danger on the horizon. "The sooner you get those boys out of the South the better," he warned his daughter. So partly to protect her sons from a brewing storm, partly to distance herself from a failed marriage, and partly to launch a new life, Mahala left Montgomery for Indianapolis, Indiana, and a new husband in 1952. Three years later, Rosa Parks and the Montgomery bus boycott lit the fuse that sparked the Civil Rights Movement, and the children's grandfather's prophecy came true with depressing finality.



Although this picture is not dated, it appears to be what actors call a "head shot" and was probably taken shortly after Chris left Ohio in 1957 to attend acting school in New York City.

EDUCATION AT OLNEY

By 1955 Mahala was far from the social tempests of Alabama, but she was living a life that was far from peaceful. She had divorced her second husband and moved away from Indianapolis. She decided to attend Howard University in Washington, D.C., to earn her law degree. While doing so, she sent her children to The Olney Friends School, a boarding school near Barnesville, Ohio. The Olney School was a small but respected institution run by the Quakers, and thanks to the beliefs of the Society of Friends, the school almost certainly shielded Chris and his brothers from the worst aspects of racism that existed in the 1950s. Even so, it was a wrenching experience for the teen-aged triplets to be living in a dormitory, far away from home and their loved ones. Another problem was that thanks to the inferior education they had received in the segregated public schools of Alabama, the Dickerson boys found that they were far behind their classmates academically. It took some time to catch up, but this was only one of the problems that they faced. It was hard to get used to the regimentation of bells, classes, and schedules—so different from their lives in Montgomery. In addition, out of an entire student body of about seventy-five students, there was only one other Black student. The Dickerson triplets and a lone African American girl rounded out the entire Black population of Olney School. Small wonder that Chris gradually lost his Southern accent and began to feel more estranged than ever from his Alabama roots.

Despite the initial academic problems, the foreignness, and the isolation, Chris soon settled in and began to receive the excellent liberal education that would make him so different from most of his future athletic peers. Thanks to their democratic beliefs and relative freedom from prejudice, the Quakers were perfect people to guide the boys' education; they provided a good environment that insulated the Black children in their care from the racism of the outside world and showed them that they were the equals of any other students. Eventually, Chris's brothers moved away to different schools, but Chris remained until he had completed all four years of his high school education.

As comforting as life was at Olney, it was not entirely without troubles. One of the minor irritations that Chris remembered was trying to get a decent haircut. None of the local barbers were adept at cutting African American hair, so every time he needed a trim, Dickerson

had to ask his Aunt Erna (who lived nearby) to come and pick him up in the car and take him to Indianapolis where he could find a good barber. The principal had tried to cut Chris's hair, but the results were not satisfactory, so this remained a constant problem. It was on one of these trips to the barber that Chris recalled another example of the racism that raged outside the school. Aunt Erna was as determined as her sister Mahala to work her own will, and during the Montgomery bus boycott, she had chauffeured hundreds of Black workers to and from their jobs in her own car. She was a good driver, but on one particular trip, she was stopped by a policeman because he believed that she had committed some infraction. When Erna politely explained that the man must have been mistaken, he angrily retorted, "You're a liar, lady." Chris expected his aunt to rise to the occasion, but instead she meekly lowered her head in silence. Everyone knew that a Negro was not supposed to question a white man's word under any circumstances. Sitting in the back seat of the car, the Dickerson boys realized that they were expected to take this sort of abuse in silence, and although it was far less violent than many other confrontations, it still left a bitter memory and a psychological scar.

Another more menacing racial incident occurred when Chris was older and had begun to date a white classmate at Olney. It was easy to believe that racism did not really exist when he was within the confines of school, but once he left its walls, the world was a different place. Olney is located about ten miles from Barnesville, and Chris, his girlfriend, and a male friend all walked down the main street of the town; Chris walked hand-in-hand with the girl. Ahead they could see three young toughs from town and Chris knew that something ugly was in the works. When the two groups got closer,

one of the town boys spoke up. "What do you mean by holding a white girl's hand?" he asked. By this time, the frightened girl was backing up and the school friend was nowhere to be seen. "We're going to have to teach you a lesson," snarled another youth.

Dickerson realized that a fight was brewing, and that it meant a certain beating for him. Instead of confronting the young men physically, Chris tried another approach. "It's three against one," he said. "I don't have a chance. If you mean to beat me up, then there's nothing I can do about it." The fact that he did not back down must have made the attackers feel embarrassed, and this saved him. The boys looked at one another sheepishly. "We just don't want

to see you going out with a white girl," said one of the kids. "Now get out of here!" There was never a doubt in Chris's mind that the boys had in mind to beat him, but as he put it modestly, "I managed to talk my way out of it." His biggest disappointment was that his supposed friend failed to back him up in his moment of need.

Chris's libido was also starting to reveal itself to him and after a bit of heterosexual experimentation, he realized that he was gay. He also wanted to make his body more muscular. As early as 1953, Chris's first year at Olney, he had become interested in sports. He discovered that his

body responded quickly to exercise, and he became a star athlete, but physical culture was not widely taught in those days, and weight training was completely off the map in terms of a school activity. He also realized having a well-formed body made it much easier to find romantic partners.

LIFE WITH MAHALA

While Dickerson was at Olney, Mahala had earned a law degree and begun to practice



Chris's mother, Mahala, was an impressive woman. She was involved with the Civil Rights Movement, was the first Black woman admitted to the bar in Alabama, and she was the first Black woman attorney in Alaska. She is shown here with John (left) and Chris on the right. Missing is Alfred, her third son, who died at age 20 in Alaska.

in Alabama. She was, in fact, the first African American woman to do so in the state's history. Her clients, as well as the racist powers in Montgomery, soon came to recognize in her a zealous warrior for the underdog. She had also begun to toy with a momentous personal decision. The quickly growing territory of Alaska was in need of lawyers and Mahala's sense of adventure was tickling her. In 1958 she decided to make the move from the deep South to the far North, and she packed all her belongings and moved to Anchorage. From being the only female Black lawyer in Alabama, she found herself in much the same situation in Alaska. In 1960 Mahala's penchant for adventure caused her to file for a 160-acre homestead in Wasilla, just outside of Alaska's largest city. When the region achieved statehood in 1961, she was already established as a prominent legal figure in the new state, and a leader of the tiny African American community in the far North.⁴

Chris's relationship with his mother was always fraught, especially in his youth. As he later explained, "there was a deep appreciation and admiration for my mother, but not the

bonding between mother and sons (or daughters) that typically happens." Mahala's children were raised mostly by others, especially by her parents since she was almost always away either at school or pursuing her own life and pleasures. She even enjoyed her vacations away from her three sons. Chris speculated that there was bitterness on her part due to her growing hatred of his father and it was this wedge of loathing that had restricted the normal bond of love between the mother and her children. It was only in adulthood that the Dickersons were able to appreciate one another and to achieve a state of admiration, and later, according to what Chris said, the birth of real love. Much of Mahala's emotional distance might have sprung from her guilt at virtually abandoning her family, and the exaggerated hatred that she felt for her ex-husband must have been, at least in part, a reaction to her own regrets and mistakes.⁵ Certainly, Mahala needed to have a career that could support the children, and perhaps she convinced herself that she was doing the right thing, but one fact is certain: she would never win any awards for being a constant and loving



Chris Dickerson and Bill Pearl (right) met in the early 1960s. Chris moved to Los Angeles to be able to work with Pearl, and in doing so, he improved his physique significantly and began winning the bigger contests. Pearl became Chris's best friend and father figure during the years they worked together.



At 29 years of age, Chris placed second to 22-year-old Boyer Coe at the 1969 Jr. Mr. America contest held in Brentwood, New Jersey. Coe and Dickerson would receive the same placings at the Mr. America contest held later in the year. (L-R): James Morris, Terry Moore, Coe, Dickerson, Robert Moore.

parent. Perhaps to emphasize her growing estrangement to her children and her former life, she put as much geography between herself and her family when she moved to Alaska.⁶

A LIFE IN BODYBUILDING

Mahala made sure that her children had a good upbringing and they were all imbued with a love of learning and a desire to excel. After he had finished at Olney in 1957, Chris decided to explore a career in the arts, and to do that he needed to leave rural Ohio and move to a larger city. New York was just the place for this. While at school, he had acquired an interest in the performing arts, so it seemed only natural that he would continue that work after high school. In 1959 he began attending Mannes College of Music in New York City and also took classes at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts where he studied acting, ballet, and singing. He developed a rich baritone voice and was especially adept in operatic roles. One of his voice teachers suggested that he might improve his poise, deportment, and singing ability if he be-

gan to work out. Therefore, Dickerson took up weight-training for this purpose, but when he saw a photo of Bill Pearl (1930-2022) in a muscle magazine, a whole new world opened up for him. He gradually realized that bodybuilding was a good fit for his personality. He could turn inward and use his powers of concentration to improve his strength and appearance.

While he was in New York, Dickerson explored many aspects of life in the Big Apple. His agenda calendar from those years reveal that he frequently went to dramatic and musical events like plays and the opera.⁷ Chris also served as an usher at the NBC television studios while pursuing his theatrical studies. After he won the 1970 Mr. America title, Johnny Carson requested that Chris appear on *The Tonight Show*, and in order to make the human-interest angle more pronounced, the new Mr. America was briefly rehired as a page and given a page's uniform (black sport coat and red tie), so that when Carson interviewed him, he could rightly claim that Chris was still an NBC employee. In reality, Dickerson had gone on to other things. A

fellow page remembers Dickerson, who he said always looked muscular and healthy when they both served at Rockefeller Center in 1969.⁸ Soon after this, Chris left for California, where he could devote himself to daily workouts in preparation for the Mr. America contest.

The 1960s also marked the time that Dickerson had his first long-term relationship, but there were many other things taking up his time and energies as well.⁹ He began to work out under the direction of people who knew how to help him use his natural talents and athletic ability, and in a relatively short period of time, Dickerson acquired the basis of a good physique and began to attract the attention of prominent people within the sport of bodybuilding. The young man devoted more and more of his attention to exercising and working with weights and less to purely artistic endeavors. He regularly crisscrossed the country between New York, the center of his theatrical interests, and Los Angeles, where his sporting career was centered. However, building his physique became his principal obsession.

As he later explained, bodybuilding “was



In 1974, Chris won NABBA's Professional Mr. Universe title. His body continued to grow and get leaner under the tutelage of Bill Pearl.



On 13 May 1967, Chris was crowned Mr. California. This contest was one of his first major wins and fueled his desire to keep training and improving.

an individual effort, and it was up to me to do what was necessary. So it had that appeal and I changed my dream [from acting to bodybuilding].” At the age of 24, he made the decision to leave New York and move to Los Angeles, where he began training at Bill Pearl’s new gym in Inglewood. Pearl almost at once saw the possibilities of turning Chris into a major physique competitor. Many earlier Black competitors had well-developed upper bodies, but their lower extremities were often not as good as those of their white opponents. Pearl saw that his new protégé’s legs, and especially his calf muscles, were better than anyone’s he had ever seen, and this gave Dickerson an immediate advantage.

Dickerson’s physique grew quickly thanks to his energy, determination, and good genes; he also benefited from Pearl’s expert coaching and direction. In addition to helping the young man pack on muscle, Pearl taught Dickerson how to manipulate the rules and play the game so that he could achieve great things in the bodybuilding world. Bill Pearl was one of the first to believe in Chris. For a young man



Chris became a favorite model for Cliff Swan, a photographer known for his bodybuilder artistry. This image was taken on the Santa Monica Beach in California in the late 1960s.

who had never known the experiences of a loving family life and a strong father figure, Chris soon came to see his coach as something more than a knowledgeable and caring instructor. Dickerson later admitted that Pearl “has been everything to me: father, confidant, brother.”¹⁰

Under Pearl’s direction, Chris Dickerson’s first contest was a suitably modest one. In 1965 he entered the Mr. Long Beach competition where he placed third. Thanks to a great deal of hard work, he continued to improve and began to win bigger, more impressive contests. In 1967 he was victorious in the Mr. California competition and he was judged Mr. USA the follow-

ing year, but his greatest victory to date came in 1970 when he became the first Black man to win the Amateur Athletic Union’s Mr. America contest—then the most prestigious physique title in the country.

MR. AMERICA AND BEYOND

There had been other Black bodybuilding champions, but none had ever been awarded the Mr. America title or risen as high in the physique sports. For Black athletes at the time, there was a glass ceiling that was nearly impossible to shatter; they often won local contests or took lower places in the major competitions, but the bigger prizes lay just beyond their grasp. The Amateur Athletic Union had long been controlled by older white men who saw no reason to promote athletes of color, and they certainly saw much social and financial peril in doing so. Thus, no African American or Latino bodybuilder ever rose very high in the sport.¹¹ But by the late 1960s, attitudes were beginning to change, and it was possible to see some improvement on the horizon. By the time Chris Dickerson began competing in the early and mid-1960s, the Civil Rights Movement had begun to raise the consciousness of mainstream America and a growing militancy began to force open previously locked doors for African Americans across the social spectrum. One of those doors led to the top honors in the sport of bodybuilding.

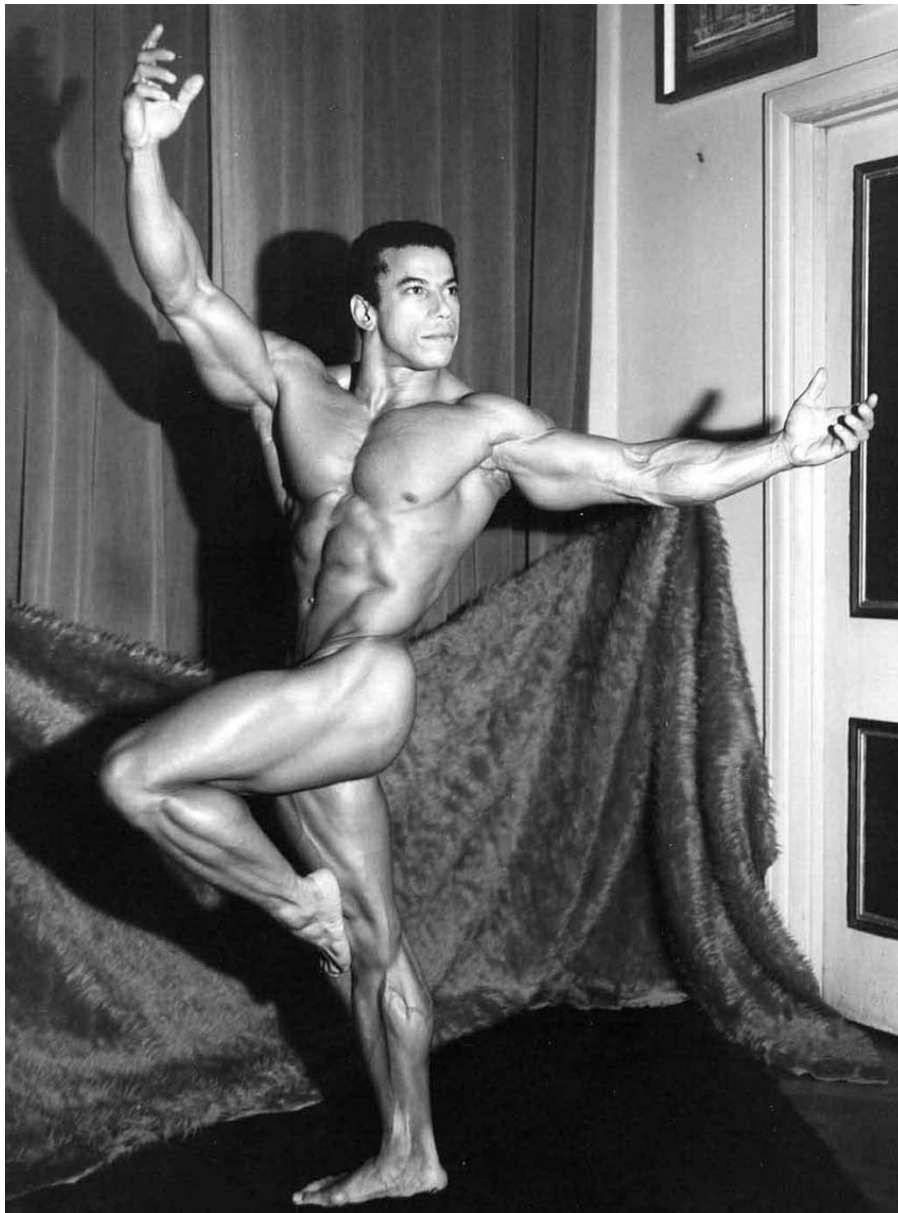
From its start in 1939, the Mr. America contest represented the pinnacle of bodybuilding excellence, and while Black athletes had been participating in the Mr. America contest almost from the start, not one of them had succeeded in winning the contest in the 30-plus years of its existence; many had come tantalizingly close, but it seemed that the top prize remained just out of reach. As Dickerson stated, “An African-American athlete had to be twice as good to win the Mr. America contest.” Fortunately, there sometimes *is* an athlete who is twice as good, and Chris was the right person at the right time.

Many people began to see Dickerson

as the Jackie Robinson of bodybuilding, since he had broken through the color barrier just as decisively as the great baseball star. Many still wondered, however, why it had taken so long for this great achievement to happen. Part of the reason came from the entrenched racism that informed American society at this time, but perhaps even more important were the stated goals of the contest itself. Character, education, career aspirations, and athletic ability should all be considered when judging the man who would represent America. The winner would ideally be as articulate as Abraham Lincoln and as pure and chaste as a Boy Scout. Since many

African American athletes found it difficult to get a good middle-class education or the kind of coaching they needed, Blacks were consistently left out of the running. Added to this was the problem of traveling to contests (especially for men in the South) and the scarcity of African American judges.¹² When Chris Dickerson came along, it must have seemed as if the time for a change had finally arrived, for here was an educated, well-spoken, handsome man with an impressive physique, who could quiet the voices who claimed that bodybuilding (especially in the AAU) was racist. Chris was clearly ready to play according to the rules laid down by a group of white entrepreneurs and sportsmen. He did not want to burst down the doors of inequality, he was perfectly happy to turn the key quietly and open the portals of equality without making the power brokers think that they were in danger of losing control. Once the door was opened, however, others were ready to step over the threshold.¹³

After the Mr. America contest, the list of Dickerson's victories began to lengthen, and he soon took many other titles, including Mr. Universe in 1974. All the same, he started to get discouraged by many of the out-of-date and hidebound values of the AAU; therefore, he looked to change his affiliation to another bodybuilding organization that promised greater benefits to the winners of its competitions. In 1979 Chris switched to Joe and Ben Weider's International Federation of Bodybuilding (IFBB) and began competing in their contests exclusively. In the IFBB, he won the Canada Cup and a series of other contests, beating the world's best bodybuilders in seven out of ten contests in 1980 and 1981. Chris had been competing as a professional since the 1974 Mr. Universe and short-



Like many other bodybuilders of his era, Dickerson frequently modelled in the nude as a way to supplement his income. This elegant image from early in his career, shows his physique beautifully and also reveals his athletic grace.



The use of a broken column in bodybuilding photography is a trope used to link the beauty of Greek sculpture to the bodies of modern athletes. Photographer Lon Hanagan uses it in this photo of Dickerson to help demonstrate the fullness of his calf and the thickness of his deltoids and triceps as he presses lightly against the column.

ly thereafter he decided to try for the highest award in pro bodybuilding, the Mr. Olympia title.¹⁴

Aside from racism, ageism (Chris was nearing 40), and homophobia, Dickerson faced another barrier in 1980; he had to get past the colossal persona of Arnold Schwarzenegger. Arnold had “retired” previously, but at the last minute, he entered the 1980 Mr. Olympia. Despite not being in top contest shape, Arnold relied on his reputation, charisma, and (as many have speculated) help from some overly indulgent allies among the judges, to win the contest. Whatever the reason, Chris came in sec-

ond behind Arnold at the 1980 Mr. Olympia in a decision that the bodybuilding community has generally agreed was rotten with corruption and cronyism.¹⁵ Publicly, Dickerson claimed that he was happy to have been judged number two, but in private he, like many others, thought that he had been robbed of the title because most of the judges had been prejudiced against him and in favor of Arnold. In addition, Dickerson admitted that Paul Graham, the promoter of the contest, “was a real low life—a bigot who had a real dislike for me—partly on racial grounds and partly for my sexual orientation.” Graham even told another official that “Chris couldn’t win because he was a fag.”¹⁶ With forces like these arrayed against him, Dickerson never had a chance.

Unfortunately, there were even greater disappointments in store for him at the Mr. Olympia in 1981, when Arnold’s best friend Franco Columbu won another extremely controversial decision.¹⁷ Coming just a year after his disputed loss to Arnold, Chris admitted to feeling angry because of his second-place showing. This time he felt real resentment and wondered if those in power consistently refused to accept a short, Black, gay man as victor. He later remarked, “I figured [the judges] were trying to tell me something, and I did not like it at all.” Like several other top bodybuilders who had decided to give up on the Mr. Olympia title, Chris was ready to walk away, but then he realized that if he were to surrender, he would just make it easier for the injustice to continue, so he returned the next year.¹⁸ That proved to be a good decision because he finally won first place. His perseverance had been rewarded at last.

Dickerson went on to compete in other contests, but after the Mr. Olympia victory, everything else must have seemed rather anticlimactic.¹⁹ Besides, by this time Chris was over the age of forty and most bodybuilders had retired from competition by that age. Chris had a good deal to be proud of, so he decided to take some of his winnings and buy a house in the Fort Lauderdale suburb of Wilton Manors. He occasionally received invitations to do muscle-building seminars, radio or web interviews, or to appear at testimonial dinners, but he never really felt that he was given his due. There were no lucrative movie contracts, cushy job offers, product endorsements, or other deals to make his post-competition life any easier. In addition, the many years of heavy exercise and steroid use had taken a toll on his body, and the bones,

joints, and tissues were starting to break down as he aged. Even so, he continued to battle his ailments, and he took the time to visit his mother in Alaska once or twice a year even though it meant traveling all the way across North America from Florida to the far North. Chris's brother John had moved to be with their mother, so the family was occasionally united in a way that was never possible before. The only one who was absent was the eldest of the triplets, Alfred, who had died in 1959 when he was 20 years old in a boating accident. Chris was very close with his brother John, who had performed as a professional dancer and was also gay.²⁰ These reunions ended in 2007 when Mahala Dickerson died. Her death was a heavy blow for Chris.

SKILLFUL USE OF VISUAL IMAGERY

Despite his mother's physical and emotional distance, she had a great effect on all of her sons. Her energy, drive, and self-assurance were all things that Chris admired. He had acquired on his own a fine aesthetic sense, and when he combined this with his athletic talents, it gave him a unique advantage. He certainly was not shy about displaying his body in artistically pleasing ways, and this was most obvious in the photographic record that he left behind. According to fellow physique star Shawn Ray, "Chris was adamant that the way to success as a pro in bodybuilding was to have everything photographed, master the art of posing and help others on their way up."²¹ Clearly, Dickerson knew the value of images, and he sought out the best lensmen who could give him both the publicity and the recognition that he needed, but also to demonstrate graphically his growing musculature. By the mid-1960s, as Chris was beginning to enter and win contests, there was increasing demand for photos that could be published in the various bodybuilding magazines. Over the years he was photographed by Cliff Swan, Russ Warner, Doug White, and Craig Dietz, and many others who specialized in bodybuilding photography.²² The task these image-makers had was to capture an athlete's musculature clearly and artistically. Sometimes this involved merely snapping photos at a contest, and other times it meant long hours in a studio where lighting, props, and poses could be carefully controlled and used to show (and perhaps flatter) the subject's body. There was never a sustained or overt effort to make the athlete's body sensual; although, any time the body of a human thoroughbred of either sex is recorded, there is likely to be some erotic ele-

ment that slips through the lens.

As historian John Fair has noted, there is "a fine line that has always existed between artistic and prurient exposure of the body."²³ For as long as the male body has been photographed, there have always been many genres, and some of these were considerably less chaste than regular bodybuilding photos. One of these was the physique photograph, which is much more overt in its exploitation of muscularity and sensuality; often the subjects are recorded nude but more often with genitalia coyly concealed. The principal consumers of these sexy images were gay men, and this type of photography flourished from roughly the 1930s to the 1970s. Fortunately, Chris arrived on the bodybuilding scene in the late 1960s-early 1970s, just in time for the final years of physique photography's golden age.²⁴

Although Dickerson was always quiet, gentlemanly, and reserved in his demeanor, he had a wilder and more Dionysian side to his personality, and this was sometimes revealed in the photography of LGBT camera artists. Chris was always a willing participant in these photo sessions in which he could display some of the exuberance that he kept concealed from the rest of the world. One of the first places where the budding young physique star was captured on film was in Los Angeles at The Athletic Model Guild (AMG) by the godfather of physique photography, Bob Mizer. Chris first delivered himself into Mizer's able hands in 1957, shortly after Dickerson had begun training seriously, but his photos did not appear in the AMG magazine, *Physique Pictorial*, until April of 1967.²⁵

Since he was flying back and forth between both coasts in the mid-1960s, Chris had the opportunity to be photographed in New York by another great physique photographer, Lon Hanagan. The noted camera man had recorded the physiques of such giants as John Grimek, George Paine, Mark Forest, and many others. Hanagan had also photographed many of his models in the nude, and this caused problems with the police, who deemed the images "pornographic." By 1965, when he photographed Chris, Hanagan had been through so much trouble that he was almost certainly reluctant to take photos of Dickerson in a similar state of undress. Thus, the images of Dickerson are all done in posing trunks and are surprisingly tame.²⁶ They were certainly sedate enough to be published in bodybuilding magazines of the time, so perhaps this was one of the motivations for both the subject and the photographer.²⁷

Hanagan and Mizer both represented the older generation of physique photographers, but in 1967 Dickerson began posing for a newer and bolder lensman, Jim French (1932-2017). By this time, it was possible for photographers to take frontal nudes of their subjects and to make them more overtly sexual. French was the founder of Colt Studios, which specialized in tasteful and beautifully composed nudes of muscular and thoroughly masculine models. These images were sold through the mail to a largely gay clientele, and starting around 1970, Chris became one of the most popular models, as well as one of the few bodybuilding superstars ever to pose for photos of this sort. In 1973 the Australian photographer Wayne Gallasch conducted a film shoot of Dickerson in the athlete's New York apartment as he posed in the nude.²⁸ Clearly, Chris had an exhibitionist side to his character, and this was made even more obvious by the many nude photos that he posed for and which were distributed to an eager (largely gay) public. He even participated in a gay porn film directed by Jim French sometime in the mid-to-late 1970s, which also featured John Tristram (1935-1985) and Ken Sprague (1945-).²⁹

Eventually, Dickerson's physique was recorded by just about every talented physique and bodybuilding photographer working at the time. In 1982 Chris even posed for photographer Robert Mapplethorpe (1946-1989), although contrary to the controversial photographer's usually daring portraits, he shot Dickerson modestly attired in a tee-shirt. Even the famous gay artist Tom of Finland produced a striking nude portrait of Chris in 1972 that was based on earlier physique photos by Jim French, so Dickerson was acquiring an impressive portfolio of artists who had immortalized his form.³⁰

CHRIS DICKERSON'S LEGACY

Most of Dickerson's bodybuilding fans probably had no exact knowledge of or interest in his personal life or his extracurricular activities. All through his life Chris had learned to split his personality between two poles, one for public consumption and the other for the chosen few, and this is why Chris did not come out publicly as a gay man until later in life.³¹ Chris Dickerson was a complex man who embodied many contradictions; he presented himself to the world as a quiet, competent, intelligent, and supremely disciplined man (and he really was all of those things), but he remained a very private person. He had been accustomed to keeping things to

himself and never giving up too many of the secrets that would expose him to the contempt of mainstream American society. When the subject of his homosexuality arose in interviews, Chris never actually denied the claim, but he would often divert the conversation to other related subjects, like the many erroneous stereotypes that society has about bodybuilders in general: "Some people like flashy cars, some like flashy hairdos; we [bodybuilders] like healthy bodies. Everybody's got their own thing, and ours is no funnier than anybody else's."³² Like most gay men of his generation, Chris had learned to keep a well-established firewall between his inner and outer lives.

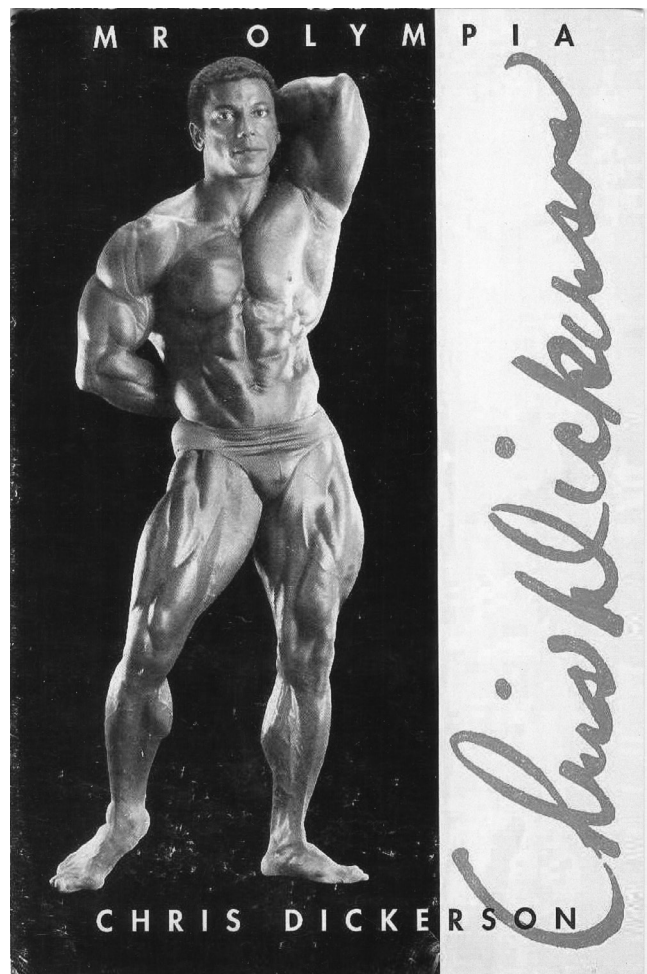
Throughout his 82 years, Dickerson taught himself to be self-reliant and to live his life with little assistance from others, and this can probably be traced back to having a mother who interacted with her children only when it fit into her busy schedule. Chris was often on his own—or at least he felt so. I always had the impression that he was basically a very lonely man who was surrounded by people but who found it difficult to make lasting and meaningful human connections. Bodybuilding is perhaps the most solitary of all sports, so it was a perfect fit for him. Conversely, his desire for attention also led him to enjoy showing off to others, and his artistic temperament meant that he saw the advantages that balletic grace and drama could mean to his posing routines. He learned the value of patience rather than confrontation as a tool to achieve his goals, and he internalized the lessons he felt as a double outsider. When disappointments arrived, he knew how to deflect the criticism (as he did when facing down racist bullies in Ohio) or to swallow his anger (as his aunt did when confronted by a policeman) in order to survive and fight another day. Dickerson was a man who always knew his own worth, and he refused to let others cheapen it. He was also a man who allowed few others to see very deeply into his soul.

Like all of us, Chris Dickerson was a cluster of contradictions—of confidence and insecurity, strength and weakness, modesty and brashness, temperance and indulgence. But he also had more bravery and determination than most of us, and the barriers that these noble qualities led him to break through permitted other outsiders to feel a little more comfortable even though they might not have had his strength, courage and perseverance. I feel very privileged to have known this pivotal figure in American sport.

CHRIS DICKERSON'S BODYBUILDING TITLES

1966 Mr North America - AAU, 2nd
 1966 Mr New York State - AAU, **Overall Winner**
 1966 Mr Eastern America - AAU, **Overall Winner**
 1966 Mr Atlantic Coast - AAU, **Overall Winner**
 1966 Junior Mr USA - AAU, Most Muscular, **1st**
 1966 Junior Mr USA - AAU, **Winner**
 1967 Mr California - AAU, **Winner**
 1967 Mr America - AAU, Most Muscular, 4th
 1967 Mr America - AAU, 6th
 1967 Junior Mr America - AAU, Most Muscular, 5th
 1967 Junior Mr America - AAU, 4th
 1968 Mr USA - AAU, Most Muscular, 2nd
 1968 Mr USA - AAU, **Winner**
 1968 Mr America - AAU, Most Muscular, 3rd
 1968 Mr America - AAU, 3rd
 1968 Junior Mr America - AAU, 3rd
 1969 Mr America - AAU, 2nd
 1969 Junior Mr America - AAU, 2nd
 1970 Universe - NABBA, Short, **1st**
 1970 Mr America - AAU, Most Muscular, **1st**
 1970 Mr America - AAU, **Winner**
 1970 Junior Mr America - AAU, Most Muscular, **1st**
 1970 Junior Mr America - AAU, **Winner**
 1971 Universe - NABBA, Short, **1st**
 1973 Universe - NABBA, Short, **1st**
 1973 Universe - NABBA, **Overall Winner**
 1973 Pro Mr America - WBBG, **Winner**
 1974 Universe - Pro - NABBA, Short, **1st**
 1974 Universe - Pro - NABBA, **Overall Winner**
 1975 World Championships - WBBG, 2nd
 1975 Universe - Pro - PBBA, 2nd
 1976 Universe - Pro - NABBA, Short, 2nd
 1976 Universe - Pro - NABBA, 3rd
 1976 Olympus - WBBG, 4th
 1979 Mr. Olympia - IFBB, Lightweight, 4th
 1979 Grand Prix Vancouver - IFBB, 2nd
 1979 Canada Pro Cup - IFBB, **Winner**
 1979 Canada Diamond Pro Cup - IFBB, 2nd
 1980 Pittsburgh Pro Invitational - IFBB, 2nd
 1980 Mr. Olympia - IFBB, 2nd
 1980 Night of Champions - IFBB, **Winner**
 1980 Grand Prix New York - IFBB, **Winner**
 1980 Grand Prix Miami - IFBB, **Winner**

1980 Grand Prix Louisiana - IFBB, 2nd
 1980 Grand Prix California - IFBB, **Winner**
 1980 Florida Pro Invitational - IFBB, **Winner**
 1980 Canada Pro Cup - IFBB, **Winner**
 1981 Professional World Cup - IFBB, 2nd
 1981 Mr. Olympia - IFBB, 2nd
 1981 Night of Champions - IFBB, **Winner**
 1981 Grand Prix World Cup - IFBB, 2nd
 1981 Grand Prix Washington - IFBB, **Winner**
 1981 Grand Prix New York - IFBB, **Winner**
 1981 Grand Prix New England - IFBB, 2nd
 1981 Grand Prix Louisiana - IFBB, **Winner**
 1981 Grand Prix California - IFBB, **Winner**
 1982 Mr. Olympia - IFBB, **Winner**
 1984 Mr. Olympia - IFBB, 11th
 1990 Arnold Classic - IFBB, 8th
 1994 Masters Olympia - IFBB, Overall, 4th



Chris had these promotional pamphlets made to hand out to his fans after winning the Mr. Olympia title.

NOTES

1. Much of the information in this account is based on interviews and conversations with Chris Dickerson that I held either in person or over the telephone between 2007 and 2010. If the quote or information is not credited, it means that it was obtained from these meetings.
2. After his reputation was made and he had mainly retired from the competitive world of bodybuilding, Dickerson became more outspoken. He spoke more openly of his feelings as a Black American and as a gay athlete operating in what was (and still is) a deeply homophobic sport.
3. M. Ashley Dickerson, *Delayed Justice for Sale: An Autobiography* (Anchorage: Al-Acres, 1998), 29.
4. *Ibid.*, 156-165.
5. Quotes and paraphrases from an email to the author from Chris Dickerson, 12 June 2007.
6. Dickerson, *Delayed Justice*, 156. Mahala did not totally abandon her family; she frequently arranged for her boys to visit her in Alaska.
7. I was able to examine Chris's annual agenda calendars when I visited him at his home in Wilton Manors, FL. There were dozens of these books that he had kept over the years. They were not included when Dickerson gave his trophies, photographs and other materials to the Stark Center at the University of Texas. Their present whereabouts are unknown. Also see <https://starkcenter.org/2022/01/remembering-chris-dickerson-and-his-gift-to-bodybuilding-history/>.
8. Also see on Facebook "Once an NBC Page, always an NBC Page," <https://www.facebook.com/groups/2209692484/>.
9. The great love of Dickerson's life was a man named Miguel. I have been unable to find his last name. I saw a few photos of him, and my impression is that the two were together while Chris was living in New York. It is known that Dickerson also had relationships with many other men, including bodybuilder John Tristram (1935-1985).
10. David Robson, "An Interview with 1982 Mr. Olympia, Chris Dickerson" 14 March 2019, www.bodybuilding.com/fun/drobson270.htm.
11. John D. Fair, *Mr. America: The Tragic History of a Bodybuilding Icon* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 188-191.
12. See John Fair, "Mr. America: Idealism or Racism? Color Consciousness and the AAU Mr. America Contest, 1939-1982," *Iron Game History* 8, no. 1 (June/July 2003): 9-30.
13. As soon as 1973 another superbly muscled Black athlete, Jim Morris, was judged Mr. America. Unknown to many at the time, he was also a gay man.
14. A list of Dickerson's bodybuilding records and speculation on his steroid use at www.evolutionary.org/chris-dickerson-death-steroids.
15. There have been many explanations for Arnold's unaccountable victory in the 1980 Mr. Olympia, but most commentators agree that he was far from the right choice. See www.barbend.com/1980-mr-olympia-controversy/.
16. John Fair, "The Intangible Arnold: The Controversial Mr. Olympia Contest of 1980," *Iron Game History* 11, no. 1 (September 2009): 15.
17. www.ironmanmagazine.com/1981-mr-olympia-report-part-2/.
18. Robson, "An Interview."
19. A concise list of Dickerson's contest victories is found at www.musclememory.com/show.php?a=Dickerson,+Chris.
20. John A. Dickerson was as fascinating a character as his brother. He died in 2019, and his obituary reveals that he studied and danced briefly with the Joffrey Ballet, but he became interested in massage therapy and served in that capacity for many years on the ocean liner *Queen Elizabeth II*. He later married a French woman with whom he had a daughter. Chris told me that John was gay, so perhaps that explains his estrangement from his European family. I asked about his other brother Alfred, and he told me that he did not identify as gay. Alfred died on an early trip to Alaska in 1959. John and Mahala are both buried on Mahala's homestead in the "Alfred Dickerson Memorial Cemetery." None of this information is in Mahala's autobiography. www.frontiersman.com/obituaries/john-a-dickerson/article_a94eae76-153c-11ea-806c-07a807a1aa69.html.
21. <https://www.digitalmuscle.com/master-archive/remembering-mr-olympia-chris-dickerson-rip/>.
22. Chris always believed that Cliff Swan was one of the men who greatly influenced his career. Swan took excellent photos of Dickerson early in his career and helped advance it in the magazines. See Robson, "An Interview."
23. Fair, *Mr. America*, 203. I am not implying that nude images are "prurient," but that erotic elements of a photograph can often be subtly mixed with the athletic.
24. Chris first started posing for physique photographs in 1957, before the discreetly covered models were allowed to take off their posing pouches and reveal what was under them. This happened around 1967 when a Supreme Court ruling deemed nude photographs not obscene. It was only a matter of a year or two until the nudes transitioned to out-and-out porn. For a history of this progression, see David K. Johnson, *Buying Gay: How Physique Entrepreneurs Sparked a Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).
25. Although his first session with Bob Mizer was in 1957, Dickerson returned several times for other photo shoots, most of these happening in the mid-1960s. Chris made one physique film at AMG with Henry Bunkers around 1965. When I showed Chris a still from the movie, he admitted that he was rather nervous when the film and subsequent stills were being shot, and his discomfort is apparent in the nervous smiles and embarrassed acting that he displays. Mizer interviewed his models and then used a personality and sexuality code which he often appended to the photos. In Chris's first appearance in the magazine, Mizer indicates (by arcane symbols decipherable only to those in the know) that Dickerson was reluctant to give any personal information, and the most prominent symbols show that Mizer found him to be "aesthetic" in character and very "mother oriented." His next appearance included a new set of photos in *Physique Pictorial* (Aug. 1977) and Mizer indicated that Chris had lost his mother orientation and was a good deal more adventurous in his sexual preferences.
26. Hanagan's biographer, Reed Massengill, confirms that the photos of Dickerson are not very daring probably because in 1961 Hanagan was arrested for images that the authorities considered pornographic. For several years thereafter the photographer avoided all frontal nudes. Email to author 19 July 2022.
27. The photos by Lon began to appear in *Muscular Development* as early as September 1965.
28. Gallasch had also made several other more "legitimate" bodybuilding films of Dickerson, most importantly at the 1982 Mr. Universe competition in London.
29. French says that the film did not end up quite the way he had planned since he served the men pot-laced brownies, and then they all started giggling instead of attending to their business. Unfortunately, there was no happy ending for either the actors or the film. Robert Mainardi (ed), *Jim French Diaries: The Creator of Colt Studio* (Berlin: Bruno Gmünder, 2011), 184.
30. For Tom of Finland, see www.tomoffinland.org/chris-dickerson-1939-2021/.
31. Coming out is usually a gradual process, so determining a firm date is difficult and ultimately unrealistic. Some sources mention times from the late 1970s to the early 1990s. Dickerson was a co-presenter in the physique contest at the Gay Games III in Vancouver, BC in 1990, so this is probably as good a date as any.
32. Quoted in the obituary in the *Washington Post*. www.washingtonpost.com/obituaries/2022/01/11/chris-dickerson-bodybuilder-dead/.

REVIEW OF
*EDMOND DESBONNET, THE KINGS OF STRENGTH:
A HISTORY OF ALL STRONG MEN FROM ANCIENT TIMES TO
OUR OWN*

EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY DAVID L. CHAPMAN
(JEFFERSON, NC: MCFARLAND & CO., 2022)

BY JOHN D. FAIR,
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

Regrettably, the historical interest and knowledge of many iron game enthusiasts extends barely beyond the era of Arnold Schwarzenegger. For serious scholars it might include the impact of such figures as Steve Reeves, John Grimek, Tommy Kono, and Milo Steinborn. Admittedly, my own awareness never went beyond Louis Cyr, Eugen Sandow, and the so-called strongman era of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Any inkling of preceding strength achievements seemed beyond the pale for most of us, and relegated to a dark ages that prevailed since the Herculean myths of the ancient Greeks. David Chapman has rectified this by editing and translating Edmond Desbonnet's classic, *The Kings of Strength*. Chapman's translation makes the history of strength training and strength feats more accessible, and provides insights about how lifters from centuries past have shaped the contemporary Iron Game.

The principal value of this book is the historical perspective it provides by an author who, like many of the strongmen he writes about, struggled to bring acceptance of physical culture to the fore. Desbonnet's coverage is encyclopedic and at times overwhelming, exhibiting an appreciation of the manifold feats of strength that were performed under often less than optimal circumstances. The immensity of this task is obvious from Chapman's admission at the outset that translating *Kings of Strength* from French took him (off and on) about thirty years, "so seeing it in print is one of the long-awaited goals of [his] literary life" (p. 1). No less critical to the book's accessibility is the editor's rich introductory narrative of Des-

bonnet's life and times, which provides a background of his indebtedness to early strongman Hippolyte Triat and mission "to regenerate the health, strength, and beauty of all mankind" (p. 4). This idealistic aim, however, was reinforced by the more immediate need for national regeneration following his country's humiliating defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. That Desbonnet's inspiration took a physical culture turn is ironic, in that it owed much to the precedent set by Friedrich Ludwig Jahn's gymnastics movement decades earlier. Jahn's gymnastics were crucial in arousing German nationalistic sentiment against Napoleon Bonaparte in the 1810s. "Throughout his lifetime," Chapman explains, "Desbonnet had been taught that fitness was linked to patriotism and that France and its citizens must be ever on guard against the Germans" (p. 32). This theme of national regeneration continues in the editor's informative essay, "A Fascination with Strength, How the French Were Restored to Their Muscles," which provides an essential context for how and why the feats of strongmen depicted in this volume went beyond mere healthful exercise. "To praise French strength was to celebrate the human body, muscular strength, and national honor," Chapman concludes (p. 53). For Desbonnet, the inspiration for this Gallic resurrection could be encapsulated in one word - "Hercules!" (p. 55)

In succeeding synopses, Desbonnet first traces his country's commitment to strength to Greek mythology, then renders a rationale of how that commitment was personified through heroic strongmen during the Middle Ages, and finally into modern times where the feats of tavern operator Thomas Topham loom large. On 21 May 1741 while living in Derby, England, Topham harness-lifted three barrels of water weighing 1,836 pounds. It is not surpris-

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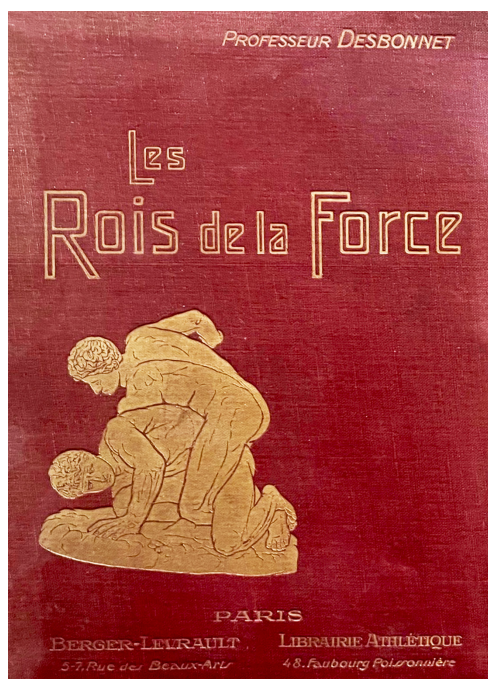
ing in Desbonnet's coverage of nineteenth century athletes that much attention is focused on Hippolyte Triat who charted the course for his own claim to fame. Undoubtedly, Triat's most notable achievement was the luxurious gymnasium he established in Paris which allegedly featured over 100,000 francs worth of exercise devices. Desbonnet points out that it was Triat who introduced dumbbells, globe barbells, and pulley apparatuses to France. "He had in a special room in his gymnasium at least 150 sorts of pulleys in order to work every part of the body and to deal with all cases of orthopedic and curative gymnastics" (p. 128). Triat also served as a model for his students by his superb musculature and strength. Desbonnet describes "a remarkable feat that no other person has ever duplicated: using a little iron column, he assumed the flag position with his right hand below and his left hand above and his body extended horizontally. Triat then released his right hand and smoothly lowered his body while thus supporting his entire weight on the arm that was bent" (p. 127). In lieu of modern equipment, subsequent strongmen described by Desbonnet performed their feats with human bodies or anything else that was heavy, including axles, chains, barrels, cannons, cannonballs, globe dumbbells, block weights, and stones. One of his subjects, Franco Nino, supported seven men seated in an enormous revolving Ferris wheel, while another, Auguste Paris, is pictured beside a boat weighing 2,080 pounds including twelve men that he back-lifted.

What is most striking about these biographical sketches is not only the prodigious weights these strongmen hoisted, but the ingenious ways they lifted them, the dangers they encountered, and that so much of their activity centered in Belgium, adjacent to Desbonnet's hometown of Lille. Many of their performances were impromptu in a public venue, while others

took place in more formal settings of festivals, sideshows, and circuses. In all cases, they provided a rich source of entertainment and validation of the burgeoning practice of physical culture. Henri Toch, a native of Hainaut, Belgium, was known as "the Canon Man." He worked in a foundry and on Sundays performed at carnivals where he perfected a death-defying stunt of hoisting a 365-kilogram (803-pound) cannon on his shoulders eight or ten times a day whereupon his son would light the fuse to release the

charge. Once at a carnival at Quaregnon near Mons, however, the cannon was mistakenly loaded twice. "A tremendous explosion reverberated, and Henri Toch was thrown three or four meters back by the recoil, but by a superhuman effort he was able to keep the cannon on his shoulder." Spectators fled from the tent in panic, local windows and mirrors were shattered, and finally when Toch dropped the cannon to the ground "he was as pale as a corpse and shaking like a leaf," recounts Desbonnet (p. 221). More believable are the feats performed by Lille native, Charles Estienne (alias: Batta) alleged to be the dean of French strongmen. "Mere child's play for Batta" was a stunt where he carried three 20-kilogram cannon balls on his outstretched arms. In a more challenging feat, Batta assumed a "tomb of Hercules" position with a plank across his abdomen supporting a cannon, gun carriage, and weights totaling up to 1,000 kilograms. According to Desbonnet, "Batta knows no obstacles. He seeks out difficulty in order to have the pleasure of vanquishing it." It was most obvious where Batta performed a bent press amidst six double-sided daggers where "the slightest tremble or a momentary upset would reduce him to a cadaver" (pp. 296-297). Spectators were understandably aghast at this foolhardy form of showmanship.

Other strongmen exhibited less dangerous, though dazzling, physical skills. Once,



French magazine publisher, strength expert, and gymnasium owner, Edmond Desbonnet lived at the height of the gas-light theater and circus era and was familiar with most of the professional strongmen and strongwomen who performed in Europe at the turn of the twentieth century. In 1911, he compiled both new writings and previously published articles about these early pioneers—and their strongman predecessors—in *The Kings of Strength (Le Rois de la Force)*. In Desbonnet's lifetime it went through several editions but was never translated into English. Thankfully, David Chapman has now completed this difficult task.

Desbonnet witnessed an unforgettable competition between two Lille gymnasts named Merrheim and Brunin. They matched each other with three pull-ups on both right and left hands, followed by an iron cross and finishing with a forward planche held for a minute. “Brunin then swung on the rings with all his strength and assumed the iron cross” which forced Merrheim to retire. Yet Desbonnet greatly admired the latter as one of the handsomest gymnasts of his era who was an all-round athlete—a weightlifter, wrestler, gymnast, and tumbler. He regretted that few athletes could match what these two rivals, weighing only about 80 kilograms, did on that day. “At that time, true muscular gymnastics was not sacrificed in favor of group movements or ballet (with or without music) simply to amuse the gawkers.” Strongmen of yesteryear who “worked to develop their muscles and strength movements were appreciated for themselves. We can but regret the abandonment of strength gymnastics in favor of acrobatic gymnastics, where skill alone counts” (p. 337). Desbonnet doubles-down on his insistence that fan appeal cannot be used as a measure of true strength by citing the example of juggler Bernard Troba. Troba, who substituted hollow iron balls for real ones in his act, did so because he found it “less taxing” and because “the ever-ignorant audience claps even louder as a direct result of the ease with which a feat is done. The easier a feat is (provided that it is done with lots of flash) the more the vulgar audience shows its pleasure” (p. 367). Faked feats of strength easily aroused Desbonnet’s sense of indignation.

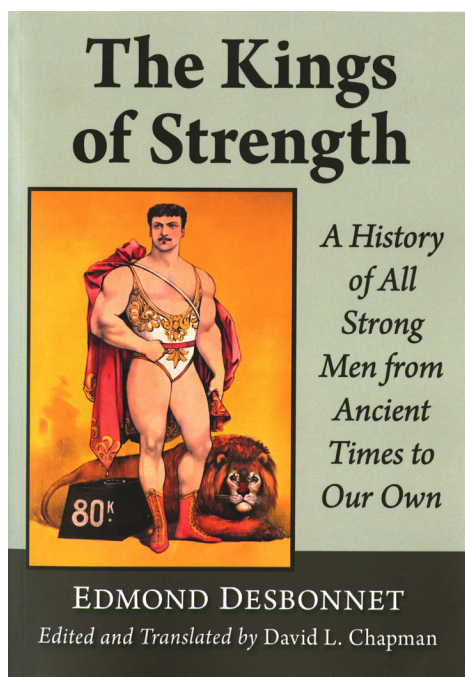
Lest his nostalgic perspective be viewed as anti-modernist, Desbonnet also made much of the achievements of strongwomen, most notably Katie (Brumbach) Sandwina whose presenting-arms-stunt with her diminutive husband Max (Heymann) gained much popular acclaim. What most *Kings of Strength* readers likely will not know was that Katie, with biceps

measuring nearly 40 centimeters (15.7 inches), derived much of her strength and athletic ability from her parents, Johanna and Philip Brumbach. To Desbonnet, she was “probably the strongest woman in the whole world. Larger than her mother and even her father, she seems to have added their strength to her own; her height has reached 1 meter 80 [5.9 feet] and her weight is 100 kilos.” Further, according to Desbonnet, Sandwina once clean-and-jerked 210 pounds (p. 362).

Another notable strongwoman was Belgian-born Athleta van Huffelen, whom Desbonnet also dubs “the strongest woman in the world.” He alleges that Athleta “supports on her chest and knees an iron bridge on which stand a man and two ponies for a total weight of around 400 kilos” and that she also “dances about while carrying an iron barbell and four men on her back” in her act (p. 374). That women were often regarded as frail and lacking physical strength elicited a righteous rebuttal from Desbonnet whose numerous examples of strongwomen questioned the widely-used term “weaker sex.”

By no means does Desbonnet overlook the achievements of the most heralded kings of strength, noting that “no other strongman in the world has earned a reputation equal to that of Sandow. He owes his reputation solely

to his splendid physique, which is beyond any criticism” (p. 278). On Sandow’s strength attributes, however, Desbonnet’s coverage is less definitive on several counts. He professes no knowledge of his records and makes no mention of his failure to challenge Canadian strongman Louis Cyr to a much-anticipated lifting contest. More surprising is the scant recognition of Sandow’s indebtedness to Louis Durlacher (Attila), his mentor. Compensation for this lacunae is provided in the introduction by the book’s editor, but in *Sandow the Magnificent*, Chapman casts doubt on Sandow’s claim that the strongman was once “extremely delicate” and, until age ten, “hardly knew what strength

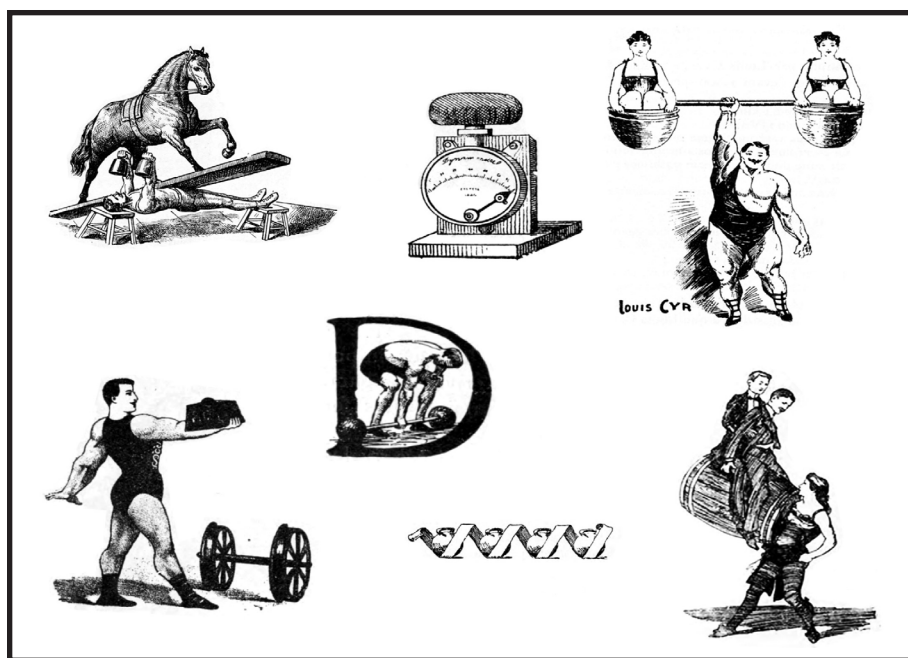


David Chapman worked “off and on” for more than 30 years translating *The Kings of Strength*. Just released by McFarland Publishing, the new edition is a strength historians delight. Filled with original photographs collected by Chapman, the stunning 470-page volume deserves to be on the shelf of every serious Iron Gamer. To order go to: <https://mcfarlandbooks.com/product/the-kings-of-strength/>.

was" (p. 276).¹ No such consideration seems necessary in Desbonnet's coverage of the Saxon trio—Kurt, Hermann, and Arthur—and especially Arthur whom he deems "king of the bent press" (p. 356), although no mention is made of his heavy consumption of beer, which likely contributed to his early demise.

By far Desbonnet's greatest attention (35 pages) is devoted to Belgian-born Louis Uni (Apollon), alleged to have been a descendant of the ancient Roman gladiator Unicus who was known for his physical beauty and vigor. Included amidst a detailed list of Uni's many feats, Desbonnet describes the 172-pound snatch he witnessed Apollon perform in 1896 at his physical culture school in Lille. What was most impressive about Apollon's extraordinary strength was the way he "always worked with his muscles alone. Unlike many strongmen who supplement their muscular strength by an exaggerated expenditure of nerve muscles, Apollon never needed to tap his nervous energy." Unlike other strongmen, he "lifted with his muscles, pressing his weights to the maximum every day. One could ask him to press or jerk 172 kilos [378.4 pounds] at any time of the day, he would do it at once without the slightest fatigue" (pp. 398-399). To Desbonnet this attribute provided a true test of real natural strength, devoid of any trickery or excessive strain. He lacked sufficient superlatives to describe his admiration for this strongman whose character and strength stood out amidst the hundreds of others highlighted in this book. "There has only been one Apollon; surely there will never come another" (p. 414).

It would be easy to find fault with much of what Desbonnet recorded for posterity. There is reason to doubt many of the miraculous feats of the strongmen he featured, and his perspective is perhaps unduly influenced by those who were most renowned in his little corner of Europe. There is also a tendency to overlook or minimize others in such "cradles" of strongmen as Germany, Austria, and Canada. Understand-



One of the joys of Desbonnet's early publications are the hand-drawn illustrations he used in both his magazines and *The Kings of Strength*. This montage shows a small sample of some of this art, including the letter D that was one of many "lifting letters" created to use at the beginning of an article.

ably, Desbonnet's vision was limited by not only the paucity of accurate information, but his access to it. This handicap is most apparent when *Kings of Strength* is compared to the only other comprehensive compilation of strongman over a half century later in David P. Willoughby's *The Super Athletes* when far more sources could be utilized. But compensation for many of the shortcomings of the former are provided by the editor's excellent introduction and extensive footnotes, along with hundreds of related pictures. These enhancements enable readers to comprehend Desbonnet's achievement of revealing an aspect of Iron Game history of which we have heretofore only had a vague appreciation. To say that *Kings of Strength* is an Iron Game *tour de force* would be an understatement. Finally, much credit should be given to McFarland Press for producing such a fine quality edition at a reasonable price, a fitting complement to its priceless subject matter.

NOTES

1. Chapman characterizes Sandow's claim of frailty as a child to a frequently used commercial gimmick of strongmen "to show that anyone could attain superior strength—even one whose life was 'despaired of'—provided of course he followed Sandow's system of physical training." David L. Chapman, *Sandow the Magnificent, Eugen Sandow and the Beginnings of Bodybuilding* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 4-5.

MARY MACFADDEN AND THE MEDIA NARRATIVE OF THE PHYSICAL CULTURE FAMILY

BY LUCY BOUCHER & JAN TODD

"I Married a Health Fiend," read the lurid headline of a British newspaper on 23 October 1955. The story was not a quasi-fictional confessional piece published in one of physical culturist Bernarr Macfadden's various tabloid magazines, but, rather, the shocking tale of how his former wife, Mary Macfadden, claimed after their 34 years of marriage ended in divorce court, that the self-proclaimed "father of physical culture" "humiliated me, starved me, even swindled me."¹

Bernarr Macfadden was once a neglected figure in the field of physical culture studies. Following Jan Todd's 1986 essay on Macfadden as a key proponent of women's exercise, however, other scholars also began examining the muscular millionaire's cultural impact and lasting significance.² In the late 1980s, Robert Ernst and William R. Hunt provided detailed biographical insights into Macfadden's life. More recently, scholars such as Shannon L. Walsh have investigated the eugenic implications of Macfadden's *Physical Culture* magazine, while media scholar Kathleen L. Endres has examined *Physical Culture* magazine as a form of female empowerment.³ A neglected area of scholarly enquiry, however, has been Mary Macfadden and her children who came to be known as the "physical culture family."

This paper aims to present the physical

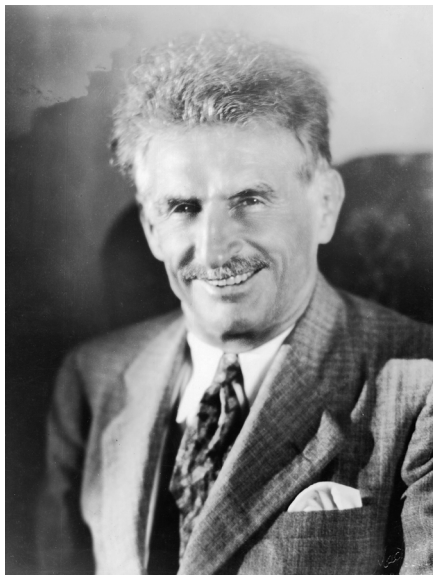
culture family as a calculated media strategy that served two key purposes. The first was the rehabilitation of Macfadden's public image in the wake of several obscenity trials, which saw

him accused of publishing indecent materials. Publicizing the physical culture family allowed him to reinvent himself as a domestic authority, cloaking his less reputable views on sex education and nudity in a veneer of respectability. While Macfadden had gathered many followers in mainstream America by the mid-teens, a larger number of Americans still viewed him as a "crackpot" and morally suspect. Marrying Mary Williamson, a wholesome athletic Yorkshire lass in 1913 and raising a family of strong, healthy children, helped to establish Macfadden's credibility in both the realm of physical culture and on the global stage as he set his ambitions towards political life. Mary Macfadden later claimed that

Bernarr viewed his family as just another way to "exemplify my teachings and my beliefs."⁴

COMSTOCK AND FLIGHT TO ENGLAND

The 1909 obscenity trial that eventually saw Macfadden flee to the United Kingdom was not the first time that the "father of physical culture" had run afoul of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. Anthony Comstock was a puritanical despot who had dedicated his life to seeking out and quashing anything he considered indecent. He was appointed as the first secretary for the Society for the Sup-



Bernarr Macfadden in an undated publicity still. This flattering photo may have been taken at the height of his campaign to rebrand himself as a father figure and family man.

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pression of Vice in 1873 and served as a Special Agent for the United States Postal Office Department. Both positions gave him enormous power over Macfadden who preached ideas on sex education and the human body that jarred with Victorian sensibilities. Though the two men were diametrically opposed in their views, they shared a monomaniacal drive in their separate crusades. Macfadden was determined to end “prudery” and encouraged families to speak openly of sexual health. It was not, however, until 1905 that the two men’s paths crossed.

In October, Macfadden was preparing to stage a follow-up to his 1903 Physical Culture Exhibition in Madison Square Gardens.⁵ The event was intended to promote both physical culture and Macfadden’s magazine and featured a posing competition for men and women. Comstock’s attention was drawn by the “obscene posters of women attired in tight-fitting, sash-waisted underclothing” plastered around the city.⁶ Macfadden, no stranger to using sexual titillation as a sales tactic, had not reckoned on the ire of the censors. Days before the contest, Comstock and his squad stormed the *Physical Culture* offices and arrested Macfadden, seizing five hundred pounds of “obscene” material (posters for the show) in the process. Macfadden posted the \$1000 bail, and the show went on. The event and the furor surrounding

it were reported in salacious detail by the *New York Times*. While this had the positive effect of attracting a crowd of 20,000 desperate to see for themselves if the women were obscene, it also damaged the credibility of Macfadden and his physical culture ideas. On 28 March 1906 the courts found Macfadden “technically” guilty of obscenity, but the sentence was suspended, much to the dismay of Comstock, who stood up in court to protest.⁷

This was not the only legal problem Macfadden faced in 1906. A case was also brought against Macfadden by a former employee, Frank Leonard, who demanded a refund of the fees he and his wife, Anna, had paid for a course at Macfadden’s Physical Culture Institute in Spotswood, New Jersey. A dispute between Macfadden and Mr. and Mrs. Leonard caused them to leave early, and they demanded a refund. The jury gave Leonard a verdict of \$17.60 and costs, but Macfadden appealed the decision. When the case was taken up again in October 1906, the court could not proceed because “Mr. Macfadden was in Europe.”⁸ English newspapers reveal that Macfadden had begun a lecture tour in Britain dating from April 1906.⁹

Beyond the constant legal disputes in which Macfadden found himself embroiled, the press were continually printing lascivious reports of his utopian experiment, Physi-



Macfadden’s utopian experiment, Physical Culture City, had the Bernarr Macfadden Institute (left) and the Physical Culture Publishing Company, along with a Physical Culture restaurant, a train station, a large building called a health home to house 100 patients, and “fresh air” living quarters. All of these facilities were erected and run through the efforts of the community’s citizens.

cal Culture City, describing it as a “City of Few Clothes.”¹⁰ Several residents were even arrested for public indecency for wearing bathing suits outside the borders of the community.¹¹ A newspaper account described the residents in Physical Culture City as dressed in a “sketchy and Aboriginal manner” that caused the Spotswood townsfolk to hide their blushes in their handkerchiefs.¹² Macfadden escaped to England for the first time since his visit in 1897 because of these scandals and another charge related to sending pornography through the mail. For the next decade this established a pattern of trans-Atlantic travel for Macfadden as he took refuge in the more welcoming United Kingdom, where his ideas and reputation had not been so seriously tarnished.

Although Macfadden survived his first encounter with Comstock, his reputation was bruised by it. Undeterred, Macfadden intensified his campaign against the curse of “prudery” upon returning to America in the fall of 1906. One of the core tenets of the physical culturist’s philosophy was that if man lived according to the laws of nature, he would be healthy and moral. Refusing to speak of sexual matters, Macfadden believed, led to ignorance, vice, and venereal diseases, all of which threatened the nation’s health. Sexual education, not suppression, was the answer. It was with this in mind that Macfadden commissioned John R. Coryell to write the novel *Wild Oats: or Growing to Manhood in Civilized Society*, which was serialized in *Physical Culture* magazine in 1906. The novel dealt with the taint of venereal disease brought about by a young man’s ignorance of sexual matters and was intended to be educational. The censors disagreed, and Macfadden was arrested on the property of Physical Culture City in February 1907, and charged with mailing objectionable literature. Macfadden was charged with the same offense in Canada, again damaging both his reputation and his business.¹³

Macfadden contested his innocence in the courts and in public, even organizing a Sterling Purity League to rehabilitate his image but he was eventually indicted by a Federal Grand Jury in New Jersey in November 1907, fined \$2000, and sentenced to two years hard labor.¹⁴ Macfadden continued to fight his case, but the protracted legal battles and the blow to his business caused by his inability to circulate his magazine through the U.S. postal system led the physical culturist to the brink of ruin.

In August 1912, Macfadden divested himself of all stock in the Macfadden Publish-

ing Company and announced he was stepping down as editor of *Physical Culture* with the intent of “getting into a sphere where I can wield greater influence.”¹⁵ In the article he made no mention of his intention to leave for England, instead embarking upon a lecture tour across the United States. The inciting incident that led Macfadden to abandon his home country seems to have been his arrest before giving a lecture in Washington on 12 June 1912. He told reporters after he posted bail that, “I am better known in England . . . and have always received better treatment there than here.”¹⁶ In September Macfadden sailed for Europe, leaving his problems and his publishing concerns in the hands of the company’s treasurer, Charles Desgrey, with the tacit agreement that he would regain control of the company once the scandal died down.

Macfadden later described his decision to move to England in 1912 as a “prolonged vacation,” but Macfadden already had business interests in Britain and he did not stay idle for long after arriving.¹⁷ Welsh boxer Freddie Welsh, a vegetarian and follower of Macfadden’s teachings, also returned to Britain in 1912, and used Macfadden’s Health Home in Chesham, Bucks, as his training camp. Macfadden had opened the resort at some point before 1908 and Welsh gave it publicity whenever he was interviewed prior to the three fights he fought in England that year.¹⁸ Macfadden published a U.K. edition of his *Physical Culture* magazine, and another called *Woman’s Health and Beauty*. In the summer of 1903, he claimed that the circulation of his British publications was almost 70,000 a month, “what no other American publisher has ever successfully accomplished.”¹⁹ It was within the pages of his women’s magazine that Macfadden began orchestrating his campaign to rehabilitate his public image and return to America as a respectable family man.

GREAT BRITAIN’S PERFECT WOMAN

The search for Great Britain’s Perfect Woman launched in either December 1912 or January 1913, in the pages of Macfadden’s British *Woman’s Health and Beauty* magazine. Macfadden’s future wife, 19-year-old Mary Williamson, was urged to enter by her beau who was convinced that the beautiful champion swimmer would win the £100 prize.²⁰

Whether Macfadden planned the contest as an elaborate marriage plot is unclear. One of Mary’s confidantes later told the FBI, who kept a substantial file on Macfadden and

his activities, that “some man had put an ad. in the paper for a wife and she should be a good swimmer.”²¹ In a 1929 article, Fulton Oursler, Macfadden’s biographer and publicist, framed Macfadden’s marriage to Great Britain’s Perfect Woman as “a wholly unexpected surprise.”²² Whatever the truth of Mary and Macfadden’s first encounter, the contest essentially became a glorified personal advertisement for Macfadden who was desperate to rehabilitate his tarnished image.

Macfadden had two failed marriages already behind him by the time he settled in England. Viewed through the lens of history, it appears that Macfadden planned to find a third wife young enough to be pliable to his ideas, whom he could shape into an ideal—the perfect example of “physical culture womanhood.” The winner of the 1913 competition would not disappoint him as his other wives had. She was “The Perfect Woman” and would be presented as the ideal wife and mother of his forthcoming physical culture family.

Mary Williamson was born on 13 July 1892 in Keighley, Yorkshire.²³ Her early life, described both in her memoir and by Macfadden’s journalists, is yet another example of the “exercise saved me” trope—a tale told by nearly all physical culture entrepreneurs. Mary’s version began with her report that she suffered from various childhood illnesses but determined to build her body “from the puny frame I was born with” to possess the “treasures of motherhood.”²⁴ In her autobiography, Mary claimed she led an “athletic life from about eleven years of age,” beginning as a runner, but discovering swimming when she moved to the nearby town of Halifax and found that her new school was equipped with a pool.²⁵ At the age of 13, after having only practiced 12 times, she reportedly became both the Schoolgirls’ Champion and the Ladies’ Champion of Halifax. By the age of 15 she had won 20 prizes and was the youngest girl to win the Award of Merit from the Royal Life Saving Society after rescuing a drowning child. She reportedly went on to accumulate 60 medals and trophies by the time she was 19 and had taken part in an annual 15-mile swim in the Thames, twice, which she completed in only four hours and twenty minutes on her second attempt.²⁶ Whether Mary believed during her teenage years that she was swimming to become a “perfect woman” or a “champion mother” is unknown and probably unlikely. However, when the opportunity came to capitalize on the body that swimming created, she did not shy away

from the challenge.

To become Great Britain’s Perfect Woman, Mary Williamson was required to submit her measurements and a photograph of herself in flesh-colored tights to a judging panel which included Macfadden himself.²⁷ Mary reportedly sent in a photo of herself in a more modest, four-ounce bathing suit, “complying with the legal proprieties of the time.”²⁸ If this first act of disobedience portended ill for their future physical culture marriage, Macfadden determined not to heed it. He liked her photograph enough to send Dr. Horace G. Church, the manager of



Mary Williamson, born in 1892, was a champion swimmer who won a “contest” to find Britain’s Perfect Woman in 1913. After being named the champion, Williamson was taken on a tour across Britain, appearing alongside 45-year-old Bernarr Macfadden and spreading the gospel of physical culture. They married on 5 March 1913.

the Bernarr Macfadden Health Home in Chesham, to inspect Mary.²⁹ Passing Dr. Church's inspection, Mary travelled to London in January 1913 and began working in the Macfadden offices. Her first job was to teach gymnastics to a young girl who would accompany Macfadden on the lecture tour planned to display the winner of his perfect woman contest.

On 19 February 1913, Mary was chosen as "Great Britain's Perfect Woman" over six other competitors, but her close involvement with Macfadden before the contest made the "judging" a mere formality. Two weeks after the contest, Mary and Macfadden began a four-and-a-half-month tour of the British Isles, spreading the gospel of physical culture.³⁰ During the tour, Macfadden took Mary on a 20-mile hike and asked her to be his wife. The proposal was more pragmatic than romantic. In her memoir, Mary claims that she had been asking about her prize money when the 45-year-old Macfadden told the 19-year-old that he had almost given up on the hope of "raising a perfect physical culture family." Mary, who had always wanted a large family, was the perfect wife to fulfill his "great purpose."³¹

The pair married on 5 March 1913, but there was no public announcement. Mary believed that Macfadden wanted to keep the marriage a secret until after the tour for fear that it would detract from ticket sales. Postal cards of Mary posing in her union suit and sash were sent for sale to towns ahead of their lectures, in hopes of luring in a male audience.³² Positioning his wife as a sexual object may have run counterintuitive to Macfadden's plans to use Mary's wholesome, "Yorkshire lass" image to boost his own tarnished credibility, but if it increased ticket sales, it is almost certain Macfadden would have chosen the most lucrative option. He had condemned patent medicines for years, for example, yet readily advertised them in the pages of his magazines.



This image of Mary holding her first child, baby daughter Byrnece, appeared in the April 1915 issue of *Physical Culture*.

THE PHYSICAL CULTURE FAMILY: PUBLIC IMAGE VERSUS PRIVATE PROBLEMS

Whether the union was based on love or purely a business transaction for Macfadden is difficult to tell. According to Mary, he was open about his intentions behind the physical culture family and his reasons for choosing her as his wife. Mary reports that when the couple planned to return to America in 1914, Macfadden told her, "I must build up my reputation. We must have a physical culture family and you and the children must exemplify my teachings and my beliefs and my ideas, and with that I can build up the esteem of the public."³³ Mary's testimony was bolstered by

Macfadden's former business manager Charles Desgrey's claim that "Mrs. Macfadden and he were going to reorganize the business . . . play up the physical culture family, the sanctity of the home" and raise a large family to "wipe out the stigma of—as he called it—the unfair persecution to which he had been subjected while in America."³⁴ While damning, it should be noted that these assertions were made during an acrimonious divorce battle and that Desgrey also felt slighted by Macfadden.

The first physical culture child, Byrnece, was born on 26 December 1913. Mary was placed under a strict vegetarian diet during her pregnancy and followed an exacting regime of 200 knee-bends a day and long walks. Macfadden even persuaded a five-and-a-half months pregnant Mary to leap 60 feet from the Long West Pier in Brighton into the Channel before a cheering crowd. The stunt was intended to prove that pregnant women were capable of vigorous exercise and did not need to confine themselves to bed rest. It also drummed up publicity for the health home the pair established in Brighton, allowing Macfadden to attract more customers and increase his fees.³⁵

Despite following physical culture principles, Mary suffered a traumatic and agonizing



By 1923, when this photograph was taken, the Macfadden family were living in Nyack, New York, in this large two-story home. The house, shown here from the back, was made with screened sleeping porches and a roof-top observation deck. Note the swimming pool in the foreground and the small tent for outdoor camping. Macfadden prized fresh air and outdoor living as part of the pathway to health. The home still stands in Nyack, although it has now been broken into apartments.

birth. She labored for over 47 hours with only midwives to attend her.³⁶ In the hagiographical *Chats with the Macfadden Family*, Grace Perkins claimed that “so natural was the delivery” that five days later Mary happily went out and walked two miles in the snow carrying the

baby.³⁷ After their divorce, Mary reclaimed her own narrative, using her memoir and the media to disavow her husband’s version of their lives. In contrast to Perkins’ idyllic portrait, Mary claimed that when Macfadden forced her out of bed 72 hours after the birth, she felt too weak to



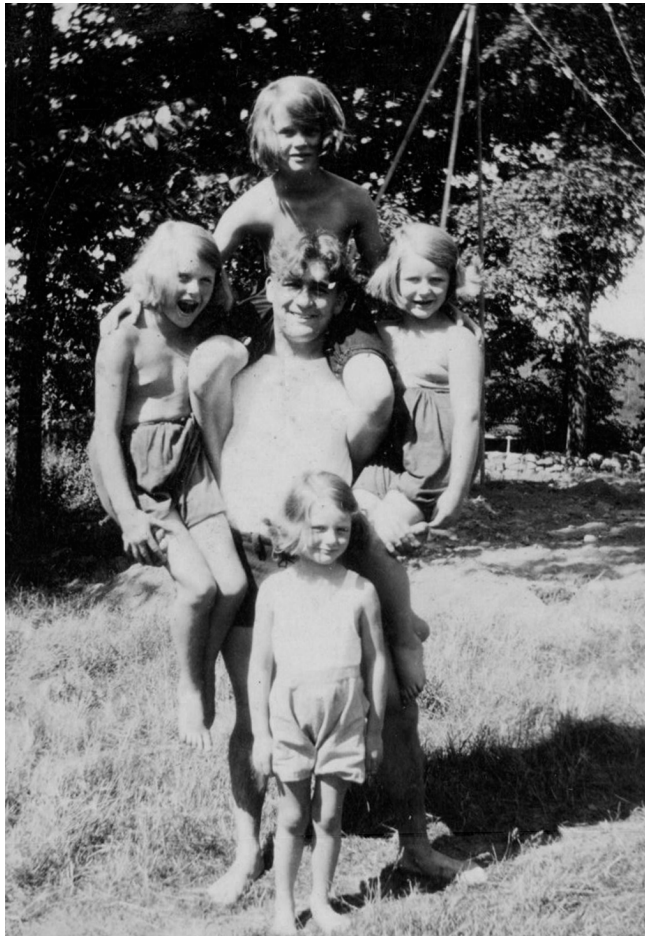
When one has a swimming pool, one must have swimming parties. The Macfaddens often invited staff from the publishing company over for a dip in the pool. This photograph was taken on 26 August 1923, left to right: Joe Linahan, Alice Williamson, Braunda, Miss Kellog (behind), Helen, Beverly, Byrnece, Mary Macfadden (behind), Beulah, Mrs Elder, Mr. Elder, Jesse Mercer Gehman, Bernarr Macfadden, Mr. Stoul

lift herself up in her chair.³⁸

Mary was also expected to raise Helen Macfadden, the consequence of Macfadden's affair with his secretary, Susie Wood, during his second marriage.³⁹ Helen was successfully integrated into the physical culture family and featured alongside her half-sisters, but Macfadden struggled to navigate the contradictions between his new family man image and his illegitimate child. Mary was told that the new addition to their family was an orphan girl whose mother had died of typhoid in Macfadden's Physical Culture City. The physical culturist had selflessly volunteered to raise the child himself and Mary was impressed by his largesse.⁴⁰ Mary never publicly addressed Helen's illegitimacy, but in later court testimony she described Helen as her husband's "natural child."⁴¹ Macfadden had argued that illegitimate children should not be persecuted for the sins of their parents, yet he



Posed against a black backdrop, Helen and other girls often appeared in exercise pictures for Macfadden's magazines.



Naturopath and *Physical Culture* editor, Jesse Mercer Gehman was a family friend and could often be found at the Macfadden household. The girls found it great fun to spend time with him, and they're shown here helping him demonstrate his strength. From his private collection, Gehman wrote on the back of this 1923 image: "An Armful."

knew that in order to speak with moral authority on domestic matters, he could not admit Helen's dubious birth. He continued to obscure the truth of her parentage throughout her life, simultaneously claiming through biographers such as Perkins that she was a daughter "from a previous marriage," or Mary's biological child.⁴²

While it remains unclear whether Macfadden embarked upon his third marriage with the definite idea of exploiting his wife and future family for commercial and reputational gain, it is certain that by the time Macfadden returned home in 1914, he had determined to use his newly acquired family-man image to re-establish himself as an expert on domestic health. After regaining control of *Physical Culture* magazine in October 1916, Macfadden repositioned the magazine's content to focus on family health, leveraging his new authority as both a scientific expert and a father with lived experience.⁴³ While the magazine had always included articles on child-rearing, Macfadden explicitly declared in the September 1918 editorial that *Physical Culture* was a "home magazine."⁴⁴ His intent to use the veneer of respectability afforded to him by domestic life was not covert. In September 1917 he countered the claims of critics who denigrated him as a "common degenerate" by claiming that he was "a simple, home loving man. My principal delights are found at home with my wife and my kiddies."⁴⁵ He also used his family as examples



Macfadden didn't call them his family—they were his “Physical Culture Family.” This family photo taken in 1923 shows all the children then living, although two of their images have been added in to the photo. Macfadden understood the power of “photo shopping” a picture even before the software had been invented.

of his health claims. His articles combined the language of 25 years of “scientific investigation” with the folksy rhetoric of his experience as a father of “four kiddies” whose “bedroom has been honored by the presence of a baby” for the last five years.⁴⁶

Macfadden's approach to dealing with his children's health was not just rhetorical. Mary claimed her husband plunged their two-day-old baby into a bath of ice water and starved the children for three weeks to cure them of the whooping cough. The children caught the whooping cough, she claimed, from being in the studio to perform on Macfadden's WOR radio show in 1923.⁴⁷

Macfadden's exploitation of his family-man image went beyond using anecdotes about his children to lend credibility to his medical views. While Macfadden may not have deliberately targeted Mary as part of a media campaign, it seems that by the time the couple returned to America, Macfadden had realized the potential of leveraging his newly acquired family-man image to cloak his more disrepu-

table ideas on nudity and sex education and re-establish himself in his home country. Mary claims that the first use of the physical culture family to “build up the esteem of the public” came in an April 1915 article in *Physical Culture* magazine.⁴⁸ The interview with Macfadden on the future of physical culture made no mention of his marriage but featured photos of “Mrs. Bernarr Macfadden” in classical dress and cradling baby Byrnece.⁴⁹

After a miscarriage, which, in Mary's estimation, was brought about by following Macfadden's prescription of vigorous medicine ball exercises, a quick succession of physical culture children followed the birth of Byrnece. Beulah Macfadden was born on 19 April 1915.⁵⁰ Her sister Braunda arrived on 6 October 1916.⁵¹ During this third pregnancy Mary was permitted to eat meat when she felt she needed it and she believed this contributed to Braunda's impressive birth weight of 13 pounds. Macfadden was proud of this hearty specimen of physical culture who learned to walk early, was a strong swimmer, and supposedly could hold her head

erect at birth; therefore, her name reflected her strength.⁵² In a 1922 article, Macfadden featured three photographs of his five-year old daughter, describing her as “a husky representative of the Macfadden method of beauty building.”⁵³ The final Macfaddenette was born on 26 January 1918, and named Beverly, after the road where they were staying at the time.⁵⁴

Disappointed that his physical culture family had produced only girls, Macfadden allowed Mary a break from her consecutive pregnancies. The children, however, were kept busy. Macfadden wasted no time in organizing them into a dance troupe called “The Macfaddenettes.” The children were home-schooled in a strict physical culture curriculum. Mary and the children took dance lessons from many instructors, including Helen Moller, a famous dancer who shared Macfadden’s views on the tyranny of clothes.⁵⁵ Byrnece recalled that the children did “eight hours of exercise a day” on “diets of milk, raw foods, water and honey,” and “whenever the family had company, he would have all the girls perform collectively and individually.”⁵⁶

The girls’ performances were not kept private for long. In the 1920s, Macfadden expanded his media empire into movie production, creating short films with physical culture themes. The reception for the motion picture *Men Women Love!* became the venue for, as

Mary recalled, “Bernarr’s first employment of his physical culture family for publicity purposes.”⁵⁷ The Macfaddenettes entertained the revelers by springing through an oil portrait of their father and dancing in “scanty costumes.”⁵⁸ The family was also featured in the physical culture movie, *Health is the Greatest Wealth*, with Macfadden playing the role of “a desperate physical culturist . . . rushing home to cure his sick wife before soft-headed servants telephoned for the doctors.”⁵⁹

Despite Perkins’ assertion that “occasional photographs” were the only glimpse of Macfadden’s family the public was permitted to see, the physical culture family was—according to Mary’s lawyer—“advertised as Macfadden’s chief asset . . . his reputation was built up . . . founded in that idea of the great Macfadden Physical Culture Family.”⁶⁰ The Macfaddenettes were required to perform at many large public events, such as the 1924 Christmas party in Central Park for Macfadden’s newly established newspaper, *The Graphic*. Mary recalled with horror that the children danced in Grecian tunics, their bare arms and legs exposed to zero-degree temperatures.⁶¹ Perkins, in more laudatory tones, praised the girls’ hardy physical culture constitutions, exclaiming that they danced in “icy winds” and “never caught a cold.”⁶²

The Macfaddenettes were often used

Four of Bernarr Macfadden’s daughters appeared in advertising for Kellogg’s Shredded Krumbles in the late Teens. Americans were informed that Bernarr’s “rosy, hearty youngsters keep well and strong by eating Krumbles.”

as models in their father's magazines; either demonstrating exercises or posing alongside their father as emblems of vital health. Mary claimed that Arthur Leslie, Macfadden's press agent, would circulate photographs of the family to be used by various newspapers and advertisers—running contrary to Perkins' assertion that the family was rarely seen. The Macfadden children were even used to advertise Kellogg's Shredded Krumbles cereal—a competitor to Macfadden's own ill-advised Strengthfude—although Mary swore no one in the family had ever tasted them.⁶³

SEX DETERMINATION AND THE DEATH OF "LITTLE BILLY"

After the birth of his fourth daughter, Macfadden permitted Mary a respite from childbirth for over three years. Accounts vary over who was the most determined to try for a physical culture son. Mary says that Macfadden stopped wanting to try for more children



After the death of his son Billy, Macfadden did not follow the usual norms for mourning and announced one day that the family needed to go on a long walk. All were forced to participate. This photo from Gehman's collection may be related to that time. On the back, he wrote: "The Completion of 400 Miles." He further added that it was 22 November 1923 and taken in Central Park, NY.

after Beverly, but that she believed their marriage could be saved by a son.⁶⁴ Macfadden claimed that Mary refused to have any more children unless they could be certain it would be a boy. Macfadden's interest in siring a son was also rooted in drumming up publicity for his theory of sex determination. Mary reported that her husband often talked of the Emperor of Japan's struggle to conceive a son and how much he might pay for the guarantee of a male heir.⁶⁵ Macfadden himself admitted that such a method would be of "incalculable value" and that parents would "make great sacrifices" to discover this information.⁶⁶

Byron "Billy" Macfadden was born on 29 December 1921. Macfadden published an article in *Physical Culture* magazine publicizing the birth of this "lusty fellow" and trumpeting the success of his theories on sex determination.⁶⁷ The couple's joy at the birth of their first son was short-lived. The apparently healthy child died suddenly at the age of 11 months after suffering a series of convulsions. Macfadden refused to call for the doctor. The death of "Little Billy" caused further ruptures between Bernarr and Mary, who had become skeptical of her husband's child-rearing methods. Aware of the bad publicity the death of a physical culture child would bring, Macfadden spent the days after his son's death scouring the newsstands to ensure the press had not gotten wind of the tragedy.⁶⁸ He was determined to control the narrative surrounding Billy's death, crafting it into a lesson in physical culture, rather than a failure of his own parenting. In February 1923, Macfadden published "The Story of Little Billy" in which he directly blamed his wife for their son's death. He claimed that Mary's overwhelming "mother love" caused her to overfeed her son, weakening his health. Macfadden's only culpability was that his "protest was not vigorous enough."⁶⁹ Fulton Oursler, Macfadden's most ardent yes-man, urged him not to run the editorial, believing "it was a mistake for him to publicly blame Mrs. Macfadden."⁷⁰ Macfadden, however, felt it was more important to protect his public image than the feelings of his grieving wife.

Billy was not the only child that Macfadden lost. Byrne Macfadden, the daughter from his first marriage to Marguerite Kelly, had been raised in Canada by her mother and had little contact with her father while growing up, but moved to New York in the early 1920s to work for his publications. Byrne was not a dedicated physical culturist—she enjoyed drinking, dancing, and smoking, much to her father's chagrin.



Byrne Macfadden (left), Bernarr's daughter from his marriage with Marguerite Kelly, moved to New York in the early 1920s to work for the publishing company. This photograph with Helen (right) and "Little Piggie" was taken 30 October 1923, just two-and-a-half years before her death due to a heart condition.

Despite this, Macfadden featured her in the article, "I Don't Know What Medicine Tastes Like," where she claimed to abstain from tea and coffee and live a wholesome lifestyle.⁷¹ In a tragically ironic twist, Byrne was born with a weak heart and fainted frequently. When she suffered a hemorrhage, her father stopped her salary to make sure she did not see a doctor. He promised to cure her with physical culture methods, but Byrne Macfadden died on 20 June 1926 at age 22.⁷² Macfadden refused to attend the funeral and forbade his office workers from speaking of Byrne. Vera Caspary, the editor of Macfadden's *Dance* magazine, reported that Macfadden told his grieving daughters that "it's better she's gone. She'd have disgraced me."⁷³ Image apparently came before everything for Macfadden, even before family.

The death of two children dealt a devastating blow to the ideal of the physical culture family. As the family became increasingly dysfunctional, the shine of their public image began to tarnish, and Macfadden invested less time in promoting himself as a "family man." He was to have two more sons after the death of Billy, but the spotlight was never to shine upon them as it had their sisters. Berwyn Macfadden was born prematurely on 13 October 1923. His birth was announced using an old photo-

graph of his sister Byrnece while the office staff gossiped that the child "was in no condition to boast about."⁷⁴ In her memoir, Mary claimed that Macfadden forced himself upon her, convinced that another child would lessen the grief of losing their son.⁷⁵ Two years later, the final physical culture child was born on 18 May 1925 and christened Bruce "Brewster" Macfadden.⁷⁶

THE END OF THE PHYSICAL CULTURE FAMILY

The course of Mary's marriage was charted by a growing sense of disillusionment and skepticism of her husband's physical culture methods. While the young Mary had unquestioningly obeyed his dictates of doing two-hundred knee bends a day while heavily pregnant, the birth of her first child changed her priorities. Mary recalls that when Macfadden attempted to plunge the two-day-old Byrnece in a bucket of ice water, she realized "this was my child. I had to save it . . . from him."⁷⁷

As the fault lines in the physical culture family began to grow, Macfadden became increasingly frustrated by the distance between the public image of his perfect family and the reality of their private lives. While his marriage disintegrated, and his children began to rebel against their physical culture regime through drinking, smoking, and overeating, Macfadden continued to promote his supposedly perfect family.⁷⁸ When Mary became suicidal over the death of their child, she was instructed by the Vice President of Macfadden Publications to think of the company's public image. She said, "I was identified in the public mind as the symbol of physical culture motherhood," and her death would be bad publicity.⁷⁹

The latter years of the Macfaddens' marriage were marred by bitter disputes. In one of the couple's many legal battles, Macfadden argued that his wife's weight gain of 50-100lbs—caused by her almost constant pregnancies—was a source of "humiliation" to him and meant that he could "no longer draw attention to his family."⁸⁰

Another source of contention between the couple was the question of raising their children. In court testimony, Mary claimed that they would have become "social misfits" and "confused mentally" if their father's dictates were always obeyed.⁸¹ Macfadden, despite be-



Bernarr's family appeared on the 25th anniversary cover of *Physical Culture*, November 1923, the same month that his first-born son, Byron "Billy" Macfadden, died.

ing a millionaire, worried that Mary encouraged the children to be frivolous with money and asked the children's governess to report on his wife's spending.⁸² The governess also admitted to her employer that physical culture had made first-class athletes, but the girls would not make good wives and mothers. There seemed to be no bonds between the sisters, "no affection, no fund, apparently of happy childhood memories."⁸³

Despite the growing discord in the Macfadden home, the muscular millionaire continued to capitalize and promote his family. In a 1927 article, "Choose Your Mate with Your Children in Mind," the Macfadden family portrait was used to illustrate the success of well-matched marriages.⁸⁴ Ironically, at this time Mary had resolved to send her children to boarding school to protect them from the "tyrannical exercises" of their father.⁸⁵ Mary may also have sent the children away to shield them from the increasingly violent scenes that occurred between the couple. Macfadden told the courts that in 1926

or 1927, Mary had taken a revolver from a secret door and threatened to shoot him. Mary refuted this allegation, claiming that she had been on the verge of committing suicide, but that "she was a crack shot and she could have shot him if she'd wanted to."⁸⁶ Another such incident took place shortly after their return from Italy. Macfadden allegedly threatened Mary with a chair during a heated argument. She retaliated by throwing a razorblade case at him, cutting his lip, and breaking two teeth.⁸⁷

It was around this time that Macfadden published an article celebrating the nude sculpture of his 12-year-old daughter Byrnece dedicated to "American Motherhood." He claimed the cast should serve as an ideal to all young women and offered it for sale to schools, libraries, and other public institutions. In an accompanying page, Macfadden featured a photograph of Mary from her contest-winning days, claiming that "her stalwart health and grace of body are as much in evidence now as then"⁸⁸—despite claiming in court that her failure to keep her body "beautiful, trim and healthy" had been humiliating for him.⁸⁹

Mary perfectly captured the dissonance between the physical culture family's public and private personas when she wrote, "while my daughters were emaciated again from three more weeks of fasting as a 'cure' for another childhood disease, their pictures were being printed in most of the country's newspapers as healthy, laughing specimens of the physical culture life."⁹⁰

In 1928, as the cracks continued to grow in the physical culture family façade, Macfadden attempted to leverage his "family man" image one last time in a bid to bolster his political ambitions. Mary recalls the family being loaded into a private car attached to the rear of a train on a tour of America intended to "advertise our physical culture family."⁹¹ He intended to show the country that he was not a fringe fanatic who published salacious newspapers and magazines, but a wholesome and respectable candidate for the presidency of the United States. Behind the scenes, however, Macfadden's behavior was erratic and often violent. Mary recalls standing beside her husband at the podium as he vowed to make the nation fitter and healthier, before returning to their railway carriage and sinking into despondency at the realization that he had not received a presidential nomination. On one such occasion, Mary claims, he "gave our five-year old Berwyn a kick which sent him sliding to the other end of the car."⁹²

END OF MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE IN COURTS

Despite years of marital disharmony, Macfadden had been able to keep the salacious details of his private life from the public. When the Macfaddens took their battles to court, it became impossible to separate the idealized image of the family from the dysfunctional reality.

In 1930, Mary had been ordered to lose 35 pounds to accompany her husband on a European tour which saw him meeting both Mussolini and the Pope. On the crossing to Italy, Mary recalled Macfadden telling her he wanted to have two more sons to fully prove his sex determination theory and “put the finishing touches on the physical culture family.”⁹³ Mary’s refusal sparked a series of rows and bitter recriminations which culminated on 5 October with Macfadden telling his wife that she and



This Associated Press wire photo appeared in 1943. The attached caption: “Mrs. Mary Macfadden, wife of Bernarr MacFadden, 74-year-old publisher, was charged with extreme cruelty and an ungovernable temper in a suit for divorce filed by her husband here today. They were married in London 31 years ago after she won a prize as the ideal feminine physical culturist.”

the children were “no longer necessary to his success” and even demanding a blood test to prove that they were his.⁹⁴ The pair separated in Paris and Macfadden travelled to Rome without her. From his hotel room, he penned her a letter that begged her to reduce her weight for the sake of “the future happiness of . . . the entire family.”⁹⁵

Mary returned to the Englewood estate ahead of her husband and the couple continued to live uneasily together after his return, sleeping in separate bedrooms. The pair formally separated in April 1932, but the contentious divorce battle was not finalized until 1946, and even a decade after the divorce was granted, Mary attempted to have it overturned.⁹⁶ Mary battled Macfadden for years over the \$15,000 annual settlement he continually evaded paying her, claiming penury amidst “financial reverses.”⁹⁷ In 1931, Macfadden endowed \$5,000,000—a hefty

portion of his estate—to the Macfadden Foundation, an organization dedicated to spreading physical culture principles for “World Benefit.”⁹⁸ This act of largesse was also an act of economic subterfuge. Mary’s claim that Macfadden was attempting to “deprive me and my family of our rights” by making it appear that he was without means.⁹⁹ When Macfadden’s second wife, Marguerite Macfadden, sued her husband for divorce the judge issued an order restraining Macfadden from “disposing of any of his property pending disposition of this case.”¹⁰⁰

The court battles between Bernarr and Mary brought a flurry of salacious headlines from Macfadden’s competitors. The press gleefully reported Mary’s accusations that the Father of Physical Culture had used his children as “guinea pigs” for his “crackpot ideas.”¹⁰¹ They also reported on Macfadden’s counterclaim that until “five years before, their six children were models that attracted nation-wide attention,” but Mary had discouraged them from exercising and permitted them to “smoke and drink in swanky speakeasies.”¹⁰² Headlines of alleged affairs also rolled off the presses. Murmurs of Macfadden’s indiscretions with young secretaries had echoed around the publishing offices for decades, but were kept from the public until he was sued for \$100,000 in

an “alienation of affection” lawsuit filed by the husband of one of his Battle Creek sanatorium employees.¹⁰³ When Mary accused her husband of cheating on her in court, Macfadden countered by citing her infidelities, and the press reported every detail of the physical culture family’s fall from grace.¹⁰⁴

If infidelity and domestic violence were not enough to tarnish the physical culture family’s reputation, the children’s outright rejection of their father’s health principles certainly was. Byrnece Macfadden was the most outspoken in her disavowal of her father, yet she never used her media spotlight to speak out against him. In a series of interviews with Jerome Clifford Waugh, a doctoral candidate who wrote his PhD dissertation on Macfadden in the 1970s, she was vociferous in her condemnation of the muscular millionaire’s parenting. She described her father as a “tyrant” and claimed that she and her sisters were exhausted by their “severe” exercise regime and “hated” physical culture.¹⁰⁵ Desperate to escape her unhappy household, she married at 17 years old in 1931.¹⁰⁶ Upon hearing of her engagement, Macfadden wrote to his daughter, warning her that he was worried as to the outcome of her marriage if she embarked upon it in her “present condition.” He had been wounded to learn that she had taken up smoking and urged her to undertake “at least three months vigorous training, six months would be better... walk five miles daily, gradually increase to ten. An hour at least every day should be spent in strengthening your entire body.”¹⁰⁷ Despite his disappointment that his own children had grown up to be “average, not outstanding,” he still believed he could improve and, perhaps, capitalize on the next generation.¹⁰⁸

Beulah Macfadden far preferred late nights and strong drinks to the austere rigors of physical culture. She began drinking heavily in high school and after graduation spent the summer under the supervision of the wife of Macfadden’s East Coast Representative. The intervention did not work. To her father’s humiliation, she snuck out to party with movie stars at seedy clubs and speakeasies, until her behavior became so out of control, she was sent away. Rumors of her alcohol dependency swirled around the Macfadden offices, but the family was able to keep her wild behavior and late-night antics from the press. If it had gotten out, they would have dealt irreparable harm to the physical culture family ideal. Though Beulah worked as an artist, she never overcame her alcoholism. She spent the last few years of her life living at her

father’s Dansville Physical Culture Hotel, where she died on 2 December 1961 at age 46.¹⁰⁹

Braunda Macfadden represented another failure of Macfadden’s physical culture parenting methods. She had impressed her father with her robust and sturdy frame as a child, but as she grew into adulthood, she began to struggle with her weight, just like her mother. The children’s governess warned her employer that the child posed a “walking challenge to all your Physical Culture ideals” and while at boarding school she was placed on a strict diet prescribed by the Macfadden Physical Culture Institute of Nutrition.¹¹⁰ As she grew older, she further disobeyed her father’s dictates by smoking and drinking heavily. She died of a heart attack at just 48 years old.¹¹¹

Beverly Macfadden was described by her governess at age 13 as a “hoodlum” with a penchant for spending large amounts of money on things “suitable only for a chorus girl . . . with a rich sugar daddy on the string.”¹¹² In 1937, she dropped out of school and secretly eloped with a druggist—a fact gleefully reported by the media.¹¹³ In 1958, a newspaper reported that despite growing up with enormous wealth, she was now a “working girl” employed as a proof-reader, who maintained her 135-pound weight by smoking, not exercising. Beverly gave a rare statement, claiming she found her life “nice. And more restful.”¹¹⁴

The Macfadden boys, though held up as proof of their father’s sex determination experiments, were always understudies to their sisters’ main acts. Macfadden had invested an enormous amount of time, money, and energy into promoting his daughters, but by the time the boys arrived the shine had come off the physical culture family and Macfadden was far more interested in airplanes and ill-advised political campaigns than his children.

Berwyn Macfadden attended Columbia University before serving in the army for three years. He married Arlynne Skuba in July 1947 and his brother Brewster served as an usher, suggesting a closeness between the brothers.¹¹⁵ He was rumored to have a drinking problem and in 1958 ended up in court for giving his 86-year-old father a nasty black eye after accusing him of causing him to lose his job as a dance-master.¹¹⁶ He later tried his hand at acting, appearing as an uncredited “barefoot hillbilly” in Elia Kazan’s *A Face in the Crowd*.¹¹⁷ His career never seemed to take off. Perhaps if he’d been given the same performance training and spotlight as his sisters, he could have been a success.



In 1953, during an unsuccessful campaign to become Mayor of New York City, the Macfadden family again appeared in the press. The caption read “Political candidates love to pose with their families during a campaign—and here’s the granddaddy of them all, 84-year-old Bernarr Macfadden, publisher and health crusader, who’s running for Mayor of New York on the “Honesty Party” ticket. He is the father of nine and the grandfather of 10. Standing, left to right: Danny Wieggers; Joe Wieggers; James MacDonald; Braunda St. Phillip; Beulah MacDonald; Roland Hebert; Diana Muckerman; L. Arthur St. Phillip; and Brewster Macfadden. Sitting, left to right: Wendy and Joan Wieggers; Helen Wieggers; Peter St. Phillip; Bernarr Macfadden; Jeffrey Hebert; Sandra St. Phillip; Byrnee Muckerman; Berwyn Macfadden; Michael Hebert, and Philip Hebert.

Brewster was the youngest of the physical culture family. Born in 1925, into a rapidly disintegrating family, he spent little time with his father who was more interested in chasing his political ambitions and building his media empire. Ironically, Brewster was the only child invited to his father’s wedding to fourth wife Johnnie Lee Macfadden. Braunda’s husband, Arthur St. Phillip, suggested that, at 23, Brewster was invited to make Macfadden appear younger when the media reported on the nuptials.¹¹⁸ Brewster was a talented swimmer and competed on the varsity team at Yale as part of a team of Olympic hopefuls, until the outbreak of World War II when he abandoned athletics to join the navy.¹¹⁹ Brewster worked as secretary for the Bernarr Macfadden Foundation after his father’s death in 1955, but ultimately shunned his father’s legacy and settled in North Carolina where he worked as a sales representative for Eagle Electric for over forty years.¹²⁰

Most of the Macfadden children rejected not only their father’s physical culture legacy, but his love of the spotlight. Though the girls

had performed before large audiences during their childhoods and were widely applauded as wonderful dancers and performers, the Macfaddenettes chose to remain anonymous in adulthood. Choosing silence over spectacle was perhaps the most outright repudiation of everything their father stood for.

Macfadden’s illegitimate daughter, Helen, had perhaps the most right to feel alienated from her physical culture family. She had lived her life on the side-lines of Macfadden’s promotional circus, being sent to live with various relatives or attend boarding schools while Macfadden established himself in the United Kingdom. Though she was presented as a part of the physical culture family, her place in it was always unclear. Despite this, Helen was the only child to follow in her father’s footsteps and remain close to him until his death. In her late teens, she began working at the Macfadden offices as a stenographer.¹²¹ At 18 she starred on Broadway in *Bernarr Macfadden’s Physical Culture Girls* where she performed physical culture exercises alongside a group of young girls.¹²² She went on

to perform in many other acts, such as *The Perfect Girl*, and even had a brief stint in the Ziegfeld Follies until she retired from the spotlight in 1937 to marry Joseph P. Weigers, the Macfadden circulation and publicity agent, in an intimate ceremony that took place at her father's Fifth Avenue apartment.¹²³ In the 1930s, she began a monthly column in *Physical Culture* giving exercise advice to business girls, and went on to publish her own health book in 1939 titled *Help Yourself to Beauty* that received favorable reviews.¹²⁴

Mary Macfadden spoke out against her ex-husband in her 1953 memoir, *Dumbbells and Carrot Strips: The Story of Bernarr Macfadden*, co-authored with former Macfadden writer, Emile Gauvreau. She used the subsequent publicity to tell her story in national newspapers and magazines, both in America and the United Kingdom. Mary courted the press, launching a British book tour, and penning letters to her hometown's *Halifax Enquirer*.

She appeared in a spread for the *Yorkshire Observer*, which claimed that even though she was a 60-year-old mother of eight, she was still receiving marriage proposals. The piece ran far more flattering photographs of Mary than the press had used during their reports on the physical culture divorce, which had tended to focus on her weight and Macfadden's jibes that she had let herself go.¹²⁵ In another British newspaper, Mary made sure to mention that she had a "neat figure" of 150 pounds at 60 years of age.¹²⁶

There was renewed interest in Mary's story after the death of Macfadden on 12 October 1955, and the English newspaper, *The People*, began serializing her memoir that same month.¹²⁷ Mary's interest in attracting press publicity was perhaps to enhance her claims in court that she had played an instrumental role in building Macfadden's media empire and was entitled to a large portion of his estate. After the late 1950s, Mary seems to have retired gracefully to the sprawling Englewood estate where she'd spent her married life. Neighbors described her as a "lovely woman" with a "certain pleasant roundness."¹²⁸ She was often spotted walking vigorously around her neighborhood and remained active until her death at the age of 77 in 1969.¹²⁹

AFTERMATH

Macfadden's physical culture family was leveraged in both his own publications and in the national media to rehabilitate and enhance

his reputation as a respectable family man and a leading expert on domestic health and fitness. Images of his healthy, happy, and beautiful children were widely circulated as symbols of the success of physical culture child-rearing. The family possessed little agency in the construction of their public image and were often reduced to mere props in the media circus of Macfadden's self-aggrandizing publicity campaigns or the biological testing grounds for his theories. Through private deconstructions of their public images, however, the Macfadden family were able to regain control of their own narratives to escape their patriarch's authorship. Mary became increasingly vocal about where she agreed and disagreed with her husband's health principles, while her children tacitly disavowed their father's physical culture legacy through their disappearance from the spotlight that had shone upon them from birth. Mary Macfadden's lawyer claimed in court that "the stigma of Macfadden's life before he knew her had been wiped out by seventeen years of married life, publicized every step of the way. His name had acquired an aura of respectability which admittedly had never attended his efforts before."¹³⁰

While the presentation of the physical culture family was certainly orchestrated into a savvy public relations campaign to enhance Macfadden's public image, it cannot be argued that his life with Mary was simply a cynical media ploy. Macfadden truly believed in the sanctity of the home after his own peripatetic childhood of rural poverty and neglect. It is clear, however, that Macfadden's ultimate loyalty was to his cause. In his magazine, however, his family was first and foremost included in its pages as physical culture propaganda.

NOTES

1. Mary Macfadden, "I Married a Health Fiend," *The People*, 25 October 1955: 3.
2. Todd's paper on Macfadden won the 1986 North American Society for Sport History Graduate Essay Prize and appeared as: Jan Todd, "Bernarr Macfadden, Reformer of Feminine Form," *Journal of Sport History* 14, no. 1(Spring 1987): 78-96.
3. See Robert Ernst, *Weakness is a Crime: The Life of Bernarr Macfadden* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1990); William R. Hunt, *Body Love: The Amazing Career of Bernarr Macfadden* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989); Shannon L. Walsh, *Eugenics and Physical Culture Performance in the Progressive Era: Watch Whiteness Workout* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020) particularly

- Chapter Four; Kathleen L. Endres, "The Feminism of Bernarr Macfadden: Physical Culture Magazine and the Empowerment of Women," *Media History Monographs* 13, no. 2 (2015): 1-14.
4. Mary Macfadden v. Bernarr Macfadden and Macfadden Foundation, (volume unknown) Supreme Court of NY Appellate Division Reports, 1 (1935): 200; found at <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=f9KTOgzLfoYC&pg=GBS.PA598&printsec=frontcover>.
 5. Todd, "Bernarr Macfadden: Reformer of Feminine Form," 72.
 6. Macfadden's first Physical Culture Exhibition ran from 28 December 1903 to 2 January 1904. It is normally referred to as a 1903 event.
 7. "Comstock Takes Hand in Physical Culture Show," *New York Times*, 6 October 1905, p. 9.
 8. "Union Suit Pictures Bad," *The Sun*, 29 March 1906, p. 6.
 9. "Macfadden Had Gone to Europe," *The Central New Jersey News*, 24 October 1906, p. 1.
 10. "Physical Culture Effects Demonstrated in Fine Competition," *Birmingham Gazette and Express*, 26 April 1906, p. 6.
 11. "Bernarr M' 'Fad' Den's City of Few Clothes," *The Topeka Daily Capital*, 21 June 1906, p. 4.
 12. "Physical Culture City" website at: www.bernarrmacfadden.com/pccity.html.
 13. "Airy Garb Shocks Villagers," *The Uniontown News*, 24 August 1906, p. 1.
 14. "Comstock Now After Macfadden," *The Central New Jersey Home News*, 14 February 1907, p. 2.
 15. Macfadden was pardoned by President Taft in 1909 and never served his custodial sentence. He was never reimbursed for his payment of the \$2000 fine, which blackened his view of Taft.
 16. Bernarr Macfadden, "Editor's Viewpoint," *Physical Culture* (August 1912): 122.
 17. "Noted Athlete in Police Net," *Washington Herald*, 14 June 1912, p. 5.
 18. Bernarr Macfadden, "Bernarr Macfadden on the Physical Culture Movement, Past and Present," *Physical Culture* (April 1915): 357.
 19. "Value of Health Culture," *The Inter-Ocean*, 26 April 1908, p. 5; and "The Welsh-Summers Match," *Evening Express*, 15 October 1909, p. 4. See also: "Freddie Welsh" at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freddie_Welsh.
 20. Bernarr Macfadden, "Physical Culture Wave Circling the Civilized World," *Physical Culture* (July 1903): 93.
 21. See Mary Macfadden and Emile Gauvreau, *Dumbbells and Carrot Strips: The Story of Bernarr Macfadden* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1953), 47; and "Our £100 Prize Beauty Contest," *Woman's Health and Beauty* 15, no. 1 (January 1913): 2.
 22. Bernarr Macfadden file, FBI, no. 62-33905, sec. 1, quoted in Ernst, *Weakness is a Crime*, 54.
 23. Fulton Oursler, "Bernarr Macfadden: His Life and His Work," *Physical Culture* (March 1929): 54.
 24. See *Macfadden v. Macfadden*, 10; and "England and Wales Births 1837-2006," database, FindMyPast.co.uk. www.findmypast.co.uk/transcript?id=BMD/B/1892/3/AZ/000638/166. Accessed 23 November 2021.
 25. Macfadden and Gauvreau, *Dumbbells and Carrot Strips*, 3.
 26. Ibid.
 27. See Grace Perkins, *Chats with the Macfadden Family* (New York: Lewis Copeland, 1929), 7; "Swimming: Two Interesting Local Galas," *Halifax Evening Courier*, 6 October 1906; "Winner of £100: Miss Mary Williamson's Notable Distinction," *Halifax Evening Courier*, 17 February 1913.
 28. "Our £100 Prize Beauty Contest," 2.
 29. Macfadden and Gauvreau, *Dumbbells and Carrot Strips*, 20.
 30. Ibid., 19; "Fred Welsh's Sister Married," *The Merthyr Express*, 19 March 1910, p. 6.
 31. *Macfadden v. Macfadden*, 11.
 32. Ibid.
 33. Ibid., 3.
 34. *Macfadden v. Macfadden*, 200.
 35. Ibid., 644.
 36. Macfadden, "I Married a Health Fiend," *The People*, 30 October 1955: 2.
 37. Macfadden and Gauvreau, *Dumbbells and Carrot Strips*, 135.
 38. Perkins, *Chats*, 12.
 39. Macfadden and Gauvreau, *Dumbbells and Carrot Strips*, 139.
 40. Ernst, *Weakness is a Crime*, 46.
 41. Macfadden and Gauvreau, *Dumbbells and Carrot Strips*, 121.
 42. *Macfadden v. Macfadden*, 766.
 43. See Macfadden and Gauvreau, *Dumbbells and Carrot Strips*, 279; "Determining the Sex of Your Child," *Physical Culture* (March 1922): 39; and Macfadden entry on "SS Lusitania Passenger Manifest," 24 October 1914, page 25, lines 31-34.
 44. Macfadden, "Your Old Editor is Back at the Helm," *Physical Culture* (October 1916): 5.
 45. Macfadden, "Bernarr Macfadden's Viewpoint," *Physical Culture* (September 1918): 11.
 46. Macfadden, "My Life Purpose," *Physical Culture* (September 1917): 73.
 47. Macfadden, "Don't Lay Baby on Its Back," *Physical Culture* (October 1918): 48.
 48. Macfadden and Gauvreau, *Dumbbells and Carrot Strips*, 354, 138.
 49. *Macfadden v. Macfadden*, 232.
 50. Macfadden, "Bernarr Macfadden on the Physical Culture Movement," 356-360.
 51. *Macfadden v. Macfadden*, 221.
 52. Ibid., 224.
 53. Macfadden and Gauvreau, *Dumbbells and Carrot Strips*, 215-216.
 54. Macfadden, "Determining the Sex," 38.
 55. See Macfadden and Gauvreau, *Dumbbells and Carrot Strips*, 214; and *Macfadden v. Macfadden*, 224.
 56. Helen Moller and Curtis Denham, *Dancing with Helen Moller* (New York: John Lane Co., 1918), 51.
 57. Interview with Byrnece Macfadden Muckerman, 21 April 1973, quoted in Jerome Clifford Waugh, "Bernarr Macfadden: The Muscular Prophet," (PhD dissertation, State University of New York at Buffalo, 1979): 218, footnote 16.
 58. Macfadden and Gauvreau, *Dumbbells and Carrot Strips*, 393.
 59. Ibid., 243.
 60. Ibid., 241.
 61. Perkins, *Chats*, 4; and *Macfadden v. Macfadden*, 99. Even a Kentucky newspaper referred to them as the physical culture family. See: "Bernarr Macfadden Attacks Unlawful Literary Censorship," *Kentucky Advocate*, 19 May 1923, p. 1.
 62. Macfadden and Gauvreau, *Dumbbells and Carrot Strips*, 393.
 63. Perkins, *Chats*, 84.
 64. Macfadden and Gauvreau, *Dumbbells and Carrot Strips*, 326.
 65. Ibid., 247.
 66. Ibid., 231.
 67. Macfadden, "Determining the Sex," 38.
 68. Ibid., 40.
 69. Macfadden and Gauvreau, *Dumbbells and Carrot Strips*, 333.

69. Macfadden, "The Story of Little Billy," *Physical Culture* (February 1923): 22.
70. Fulton Oursler, *Behold This Dreamer!* (Boston: Little Brown & Company, 1964), 173.
71. Byrne Macfadden, "I Don't Know What Medicine Tastes Like," *Physical Culture* (April 1924): 49-51.
72. Ernst, *Weakness is a Crime*, 70.
73. Vera Caspary, *The Secrets of Grownups* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1979), 87.
74. Macfadden and Gauvreau, *Dumbbells and Carrot Strips*, 364.
75. *Ibid.*, 340.
76. Brewster Macfadden draft card, National Archives, St. Louis, Missouri; WWII Draft Registration Cards for New Jersey, 10/16/1940-03/31/1947; Record Group: Records of the Selective Service System, 147; Box: 402.
77. Macfadden and Gauvreau, *Dumbbells and Carrot Strips*, 139.
78. See Waugh, "Bernarr Macfadden: The Muscular Prophet," 219-220, footnote 21.
79. Macfadden and Gauvreau, *Dumbbells and Carrot Strips*, 345.
80. Bernarr Macfadden vs. Mary Macfadden, No. 77430-A, Dade County Record Center, Box No. 86-821. Chancery Circuit Court, Dade County, Florida, 28, 78.
81. "The Perfect Union Didn't Last," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 4 March 1945, p. 53.
82. Marjorie Greenbie to Bernarr Macfadden, office memo, 12 March 1931, Special Collections Division of University of Oregon Library. Taft Collection, Stark Center.
83. Greenbie to Macfadden, Greenbie Papers, KLUE, quoted in Ernst, *Weakness is a Crime*, 158.
84. Dr. Elizabeth Taylor Ransom, "Choose Your Mate With Your Children In Mind," *Physical Culture* (April 1927): 33.
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86. Bernarr Macfadden vs. Mary Macfadden, Special Master's Report, 7, 1945. Taft Collection, Stark Center.
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89. "Rugged Living' Exponent Macfadden Dies at 87," *The Shreveport Times*, 13 October 1955, p. 18.
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91. *Ibid.*, 399; and "Bernarr Macfadden to Give Talk Here," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 21 October 1928, p. 2.
92. Macfadden and Gauvreau, *Dumbbells and Carrot Strips*, 399.
93. *Ibid.*, 404.
94. *Macfadden v. Macfadden*, 767. Macfadden repeated this accusation in a letter to Mary in March 1931.
95. *Ibid.*, 22.
96. "Macfadden Divorce Fought," *New York Times*, 10 June 1954, p. 34.
97. "Macfadden Divorce Suits: Counter-Actions by Publisher and Wife Filed at Trenton," *New York Times*, 21 September 1933, p. 10.
98. "Donates \$500,000,000 to Promote Health," *New York Times*, 25 September 1931, p. 16.
99. *Macfadden v. Macfadden*, 779.
100. "Wife Sues Macfadden," *New York Times*, 6 August 1911, p. 11.
101. "Ridicules M'Fadden Ideas," *New York Times*, 8 February 1945, p. 11.
102. "Macfadden Girl Secretly Wed," *The Record*, 2 December 1937, p. 1.
103. "\$100,000 Suit Pending Against Macfadden," *The Baltimore Sun*, 25 March 1934, p. 10.
104. "Macfadden Divorce Suits," *New York Times*, 21 November 1933, p. 10.
105. Interview with Byrnee Macfadden Muckerman, 220.
106. "Milestones," *Time*, 24 August 1931. <http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,753006,00.html>. Accessed 11 November 2021. Her age was incorrectly reported as 19.
107. Bernarr Macfadden to Byrnee Macfadden (undated correspondence, 1931) quoted in Waugh, 243.
108. *Bernarr Macfadden vs. Mary Macfadden*, No 77430-A, 41.
109. See Ernst, *Weakness is a Crime*, 155; and "Beulah Macfadden," *New York Times*, 3 December 1961, p. 88.
110. Greenbie to Macfadden, quoted in Ernst, 155. Greenbie to Macfadden, telegram [n.d.] and a copy of the diet, Greenbie Papers, Special Collections Division, Oregon University Library.
111. "St. Phillip-Macfadden," *New York Times*, 7 June 1936, p. 43.
112. Greenbie to Macfadden, office memo, 12 March 1931.
113. "Macfadden Girl Secretly Wed," 1.
114. "Exercise By the Numbers," *Reno Gazette-Journal*, 1 November 1958, p. 16.
115. "Miss Skuba Bride of B. Macfadden," *New York Times*, 20 July 1947, p. 42.
116. "Son Hangs a Shiner on Papa Macfadden," *Daily News*, 7 October 1954, p. 93.
117. Danton Walker, "Broadway," *Daily News*, 28 May 1957, p. 131.
118. Arthur St. Phillip to Clifford Waugh, 21 March 1973, quoted in Waugh, 221, footnote 24.
119. "Olympic Stars Compete," *New York Times*, 28 June 1948, p. 24.
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121. "Miss Macfadden and Physical Culture Girls Score Big Hit at Rivoli," *The Central New Jersey Home News*, 4 November 1924, p. 5.
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123. "Helen Macfadden Has Home Wedding," *New York Times*, 18 September 1937, p. 16. Helen was previously married in 1926, aged 19, to her father's editor Alexander Markey, but there is no record of how this marriage ended.
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126. "Life With Macfadden," *Evening Standard*, 5 October 1953, p. 4.
127. Macfadden, "I Married a Health Fiend," 25 October 1955, 3.
128. Interview with George Davies, 6 October 1982, in the Taft Collection, Stark Center.
129. Interview with Campbell Norsgaard, 30 December 1981, in the Taft Collection, Stark Center.
130. *Macfadden v. Macfadden*, 21.

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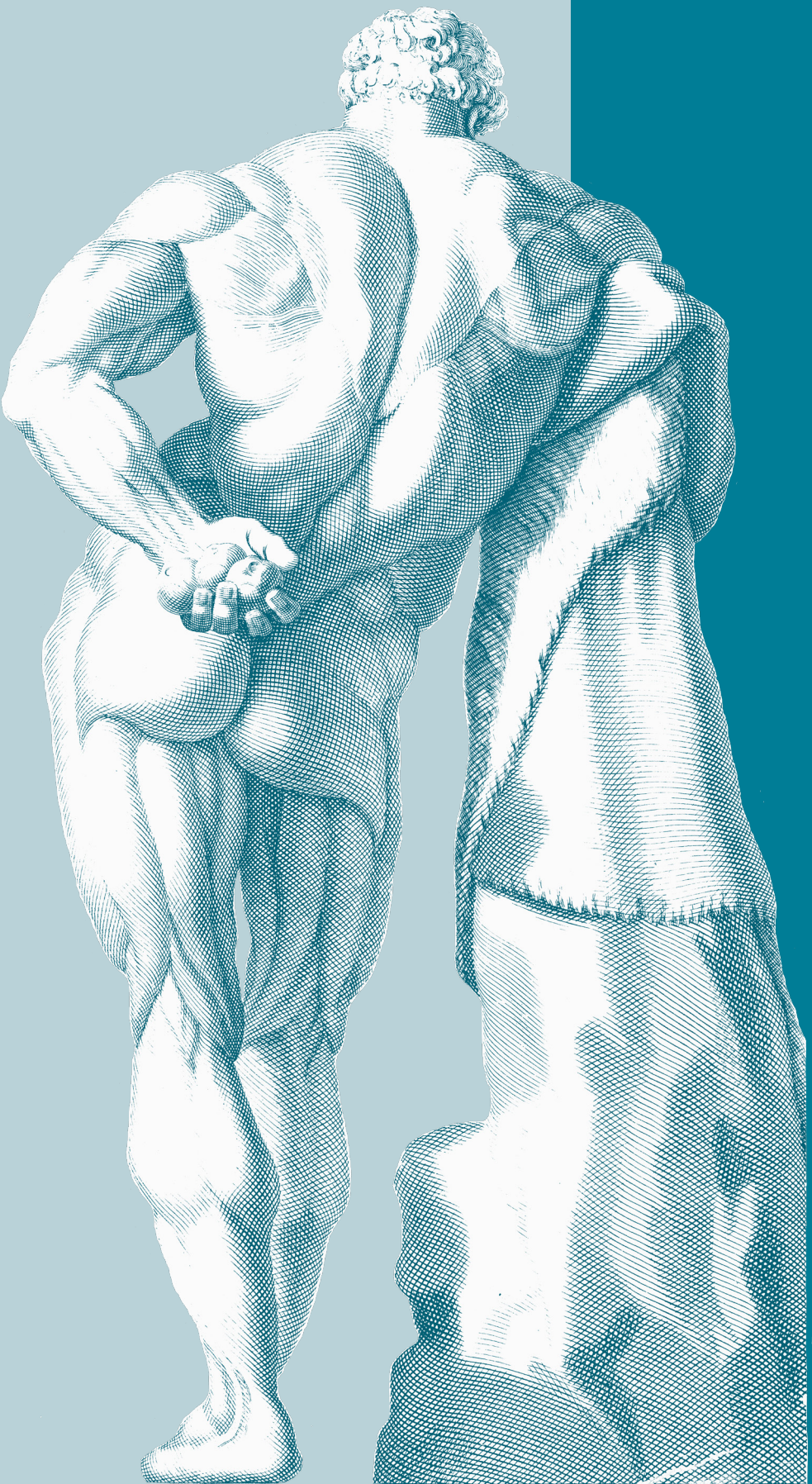
PATRON SUPPORTER: \$ _____

THIS MUST BE A SEPARATE CHECK.

IT CANNOT BE COMBINED WITH SUBSCRIPTION PAYMENT.
PAYABLE TO: UT-AUSTIN ("IGH DONATION" ON MEMO LINE)

IRON GAME HISTORY

H. J. LUTCHER STARK CENTER
NEZ 5.700, D3600
403 DELOSS DODDS WAY
AUSTIN, TEXAS 78712



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