

# A TOKEN REMEMBRANCE OF AN IRON GAME PIONEER: AN INTRODUCTION

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

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.<sup>1</sup> 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."<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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."**

**Correspondence to: Dr. John Fair, NEZ 5.700, Dept. of Kinesiology & Health Education, Stark Center, University of Texas at Austin, 78712. Email: john.fair@austin.utexas.edu.**

the most thorough treatment of Coulter's early career as a circus performer.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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*.<sup>9</sup>

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."<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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."<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup>

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

1. Bill Pearl, George Coates, Tuesday Coates, and Richard Thornley, "Ottley Russell Coulter," in *Legends of the Iron Game I*, ed. Trudi Knoedler (Phoenix, OR: Bill Pearl Enterprises, 2010), 175.
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).
10. For additional biographical information on Attila, Sandow, and Nordquest, see: Pearl, Coates, Coates, and Thornley, "Professor Louis Attila," 41-46; David Webster, "A Sport is Born," in *The Iron Game, An Illustrated History of Weight-Lifting* (Irvine, Scotland: John Geddes, 1976), 10-11; "Adolph Nordquest," *Strength* 3 (May 1917): 14-15.
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.