

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)

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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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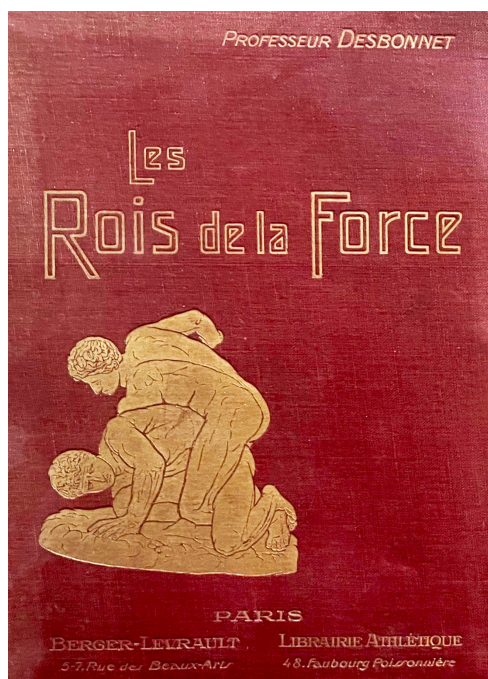
ing in Desbonnet's coverage of nineteenth century athletes that much attention is focused on Hippolyte Triat who charted the course for his own claim to fame. Undoubtedly, Triat's most notable achievement was the luxurious gymnasium he established in Paris which allegedly featured over 100,000 francs 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.

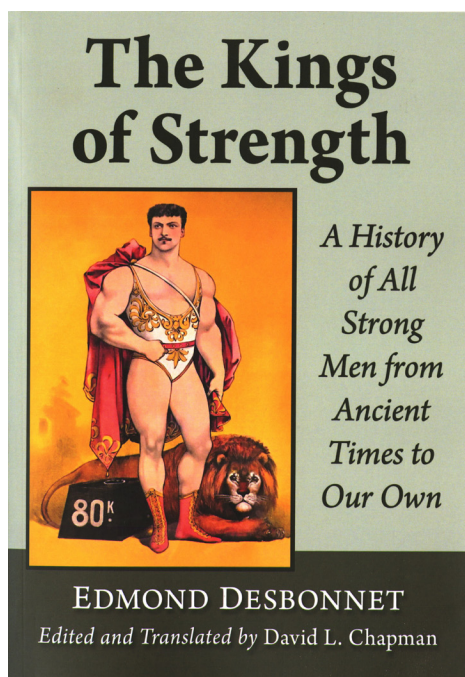
Lest his nostalgic perspective be viewed as anti-modernist, Desbonnet also made much of the achievements of strongwomen, most notably Katie (Brumbach) Sandwina whose presenting-arms-stunt with her diminutive husband Max (Heymann) gained much popular acclaim. What most *Kings of Strength* readers likely 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

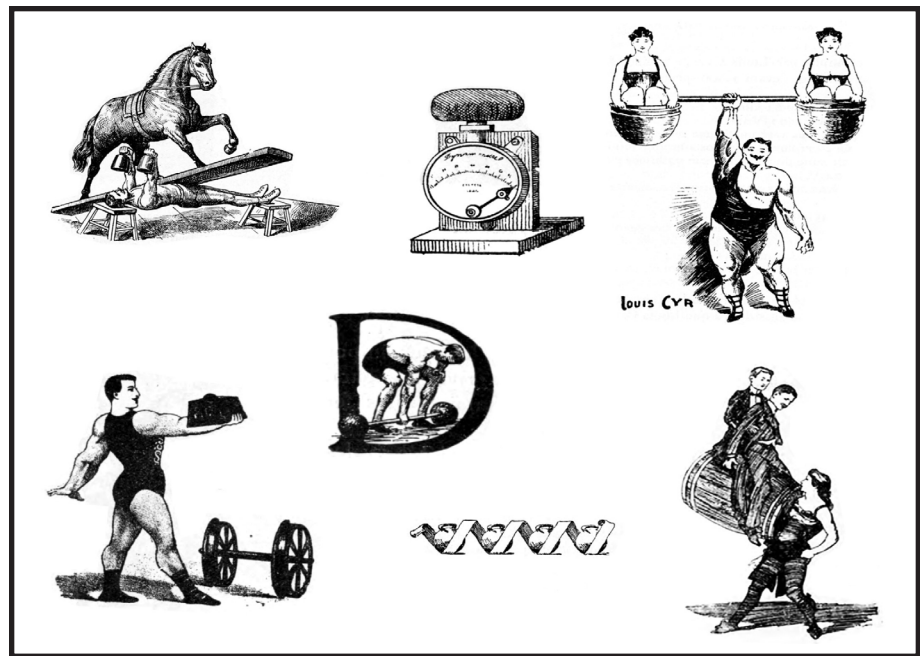


David Chapman worked “off and on” for more than 30 years translating *The Kings of Strength*. Just released by McFarland Publishing, the new edition is a strength historians delight. Filled with original photographs collected by Chapman, the stunning 470-page volume deserves to be on the shelf of every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

was” (p. 276).<sup>1</sup> 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 Debonnet’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.