Finding Aid

Ottley Coulter Photograph Collection, 1892-1970

Abstract

Ottley R. Coulter was a circus performer, a vaudevillian, a professional bodybuilder, and one of the sport’s first historians, having collected thousands of photographs, clippings, and other sports ephemera. The collection contains sports photography chronicling bodybuilding and weightlifting from the early 20th century through the 1970s. Photographs of circus strongmen and women exhibiting their physiques and feats of strength are a highlight of this collection. Also represented are photographs and sports card ephemera that document the early days of other sports like baseball, football, cycling, wrestling, boxing, track and field, and soccer. In addition to photographs depicting the early days of physical culture, there are numerous photos of Ottley and family members during his youth through middle age, including a rare glass negative and tintype.

Access

Access to the Ottley Coulter Photograph Collection is restricted to visitors of the H.J. Lutcher Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports. The Stark Center welcomes access inquires and encourages research appointments. For more information, phone (512) 471-4890, email info@starkcenter.org, or visit http://www.starkcenter.org.
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Collection processed by Nikki Koehlert, Will Clements, and Kelly Garrett under the supervision of Brent Sipes.

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**Preferred Citation**

Ottley Coulter Photograph Collection, H.J. Lutcher Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports, The University of Texas at Austin.

**Subject Index**

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- Bodybuilding
- Circus Performers
- Dance
- Stunt Performers

*Sports*
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- Boxing
- Cycling
- Football
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- Rugby
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- Wrestling

*Key Names*
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- Cadine, E.
- Carr, Owen
- Coulter, Ottley R.
- Goerner, Herman
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- Lewis, Ed (Strangler)
Biographical Note

Ottley Russell Coulter, the only son of David Coulter and Effie Elizabeth Ohl, was born in Parkman, Ohio, on June 6, 1890. Raised in a family of exceptionally tall and physically fit men and women, Coulter first became interested in physical culture and weightlifting while attending Hiram College. After dropping out of school in his second year to focus on weight and stunt work training, Coulter joined the ranks of professional circus strongmen in 1911. Ottley began his circus career partnered with Mexican ring artist Jose Prada before going on to perform solo in touring circus shows, including the Frank Robbins Circus, across the country. His most impressive feats while touring included the Jefferson lift, the Rectangular Fix lift, and various hand balancing acts.

By 1917, Ottley had married Ethel Alexander, and the couple settled down in Lemont Furnace, Pennsylvania, a town just outside of Pittsburgh, where they had three children - Athelda, David, and John Robert. Around this time Coulter began working as a police officer for the Lemont Furnace Police Department. Drawing upon his experience with physical fitness, Ottley taught fellow officers hand-to-hand combat techniques as an alternative to using firearms. He worked several decades for the department before
retiring. As a hobby, Ottley also bought, traded, and sold magazines and books related to physical culture, most specifically weightlifting, as well as those on other topics such as gardening and furniture building. He felt that resources pertaining to physical culture should be preserved for posterity.

In the early 1920s, Ottley was one of the founding fathers of the American Continental Weightlifting Association (ACWLA). As the first association of its kind in the United States, the ACWLA advanced the field of strength training from a circus and vaudeville performance niche to an American sport. As an officiated sport, athletes registered and compared results with other weightlifters across the world. In 1952, Coulter published a book, *How to Perform Strongman Stunts*, about some of his classic feats of strength. In later years, he remained active in the weightlifting and powerlifting worlds by regularly attending contests, such as those hosted by Bob Hoffman’s York Barbell Association in York, Pennsylvania. Ottley Coulter died in December 1976 at the age of 86.

**Biography compiled from:**


Ottley Coulter Correspondence, H.J. Lutcher Stark Center for Physical Culture & Sports, The University of Texas at Austin.

Ottley Coulter Photograph Collection
The H.J. Lutcher Stark Center for Physical Culture & Sports
The University of Texas at Austin

Scope and Content

Ottley Coulter Photograph Collection: 29 Boxes: clippings, correspondence, negatives, photographs, and calling cards, 1892-1970

The materials in this collection date from roughly the 1890s to the early 1970s. Ottley Coulter acquired all the items in this collection over his lifetime in an effort to document physical culture. Ottley wrote to other athletes and collectors of physical culture ephemera in order to procure materials for his personal archive. This collection of (approx.) 2600 items primarily consists of photographic materials, including photographic prints, photo postcards, cabinet cards, negatives, clippings, sports cards, and some personal correspondence. There is also a tintype and glass negative, depicting Ottley and his family, located in the series labeled “Coulter Family Photos & Personal Materials, circa 1892-1962.” A number of these photographs are candid and formal portraits of Ottley Coulter throughout his professional career. Notable names from the world of bodybuilding featured in this collection are Charles Atlas, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Johnny Weissmuller as well as other men and women of the sport. Early strongmen and women that performed in travelling circus shows, where Ottley got his start, are also featured. Of particular interest are photographs of early strongmen and women performing various stunts and feats of strength. Photographs, baseball cards, and clippings from the worlds of boxing (including female boxers), hockey, wrestling, and dance are also represented. Many of the photographic prints and clippings are from Alan Calvert’s Strength magazine (1914-1935), which was the first print publication in America devoted to weight training. Ottley was featured in Strength in addition to contributing articles to the magazine. Some photographs also include handwritten captions, names, dates, or locations regarding the various athletes and their feats of strength. Many of the photographs appear to be reprints and were used in
publications after their original printing. Due to the inability to ascertain accurate dates of the photographs, many of the items remain undated. This collection is arranged into 15 series. The current arrangement mainly separates the collection into groups by sports activities, with folders arranged alphabetically by the photograph's subject. In addition, Coulter family photos are located in Series V.

**Collection Arrangement**

**Series I: Baseball, circa 1901-1927**

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**Series II: Bodybuilders/Strongmen/Lifters, 1892-1970**

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- Box 25, Folder 348: Unidentified Bodybuilders
- Box 22.1: Unidentified Bodybuilders (negatives)
- Box 25, Folder 349: Unidentified British “Oldtimers”
Box 22.1: Unidentified Female Model (negatives)
Box 25, Folder 350: Unidentified Male Physiques
Box 25, Folder 351: Unidentified Mexico
Box 25, Folder 352: Unidentified Muscle Beach
Box 22.1: Unidentified Strongman (negatives)
Box 25, Folder 353: Unidentified Supermen Photos
Box 26, Folder 354: Unidentified Strong Women
Box 22.1: Unidentified Weightlifter (negatives)
Box 26, Folder 355: Unidentified Women
Box 26, Folder 356: Unidentified Women’s Keep Fit Exercises

Series III. Boxing, circa 1920-1947
Box 26, Folder 1: Boxing

Series IV. Calling Cards Pre 1930
Box 26, Folder 1: Calling Cards Pre-1930

Series V. Coulter Family Photos & Personal Materials, circa 1892-1962
Box 26, Folder 1: Coulter Family Photos & Personal Materials

Series VI. Circus, circa 1910-1944 (1 Folder)
Box 26, Folder 1: Circus

Series VII. Cycling, circa 1947
Box 26, Folder 1: Cycling
Series VIII. Dance, circa 1920-1930
   Box 26, Folder 1: Dance

Series IX. Football, circa 1900-1956
   Box 27, Folder 1: Football

Series X. Group Exercise, undated
   Box 29, Folder 9: Group Exercises

Series XI. Hockey, circa 1934
   Box 27, Folder 1: Hockey

Series XII. Publications, circa 1912-1948
   Box 27, Folder 1: Photo Advertising
   Box 27, Folder 1.5: Photo Advertising
   Box 27, Folder 2: Postcards, Art Photos
   Box 27, Folder 3: Strength Magazine 1
   Box 27, Folder 4: Strength Magazine 2
   Box 28, Folder 5: Strength Magazine 3
   Box 28, Folder 6: Strength Magazine 4
   Box 28, Folder 7: Strength Magazine 5
   Box 29, Folder 8: Strength Magazine (Newman)

Series XIII. Rugby, circa 1947
   Box 29, Folder 1: Rugby
Series XIV. Soccer, circa 1947
    Box 29, Folder 1: Soccer

Series XV. Track and Field, circa 1947
    Box 29, Folder 1: Track and Field

Series XVI. Wrestling, circa 1900-1970
    Box 29, Folder 1: Wrestling 1
    Box 29, Folder 2: Wrestling 2
    Box 29, Folder 3: Wrestling 3