



PHYSICAL CULTURES OF THE BODY VI CONFERENCE

OFFICIAL PROGRAM // JANUARY 8 - 9, 2026

An international conference on the symbolic and cultural importance of the healthy and active body with reference to issues of race, gender, injury, strength, performance, eugenics, and much more.

THE H. J. LUTCHER
STARK CENTER
FOR PHYSICAL CULTURE & SPORTS
The University of Texas at Austin

PHYSICAL CULTURES OF THE BODY VI

Conference Schedule, Day One

8 January, 2026 — Online

9:30AM

Basudhita Basu – Defending Her Own “Body”: Historicizing Women’s Entry in the Physical Culture Movement of Colonial Bengal

Asim Kumar Halder – Training the Body, Healing the Self: The Martial and Medicinal Epistemology of *Kalaripayattu*, India’s Own Martial Art

10:30AM

Natascha Louw – Unveiling the Shadows: South African Rugby Performance and Institutional Herstories, 2004-2024

Tatiana Konrad – Outdoor Sports, Disability Rights, and the Environment in *The Peanut Butter Falcon* (2019)

11:30AM

Louis Neymon – From the *Force Culturiste* to the *Force Athlétique*: France’s *Culture Physique* and the Early Days of French Powerlifting

Mark Doyle – Barbells, Bulking and Bourdieu: The Social Transmission of Transformation in Powerlifting

12:30PM

Emma Pihl Skoog – “Dad on Parental Leave!”: Weightlifter Lennart ‘Hoa-Hoa’ Dahlgren and the Construction of a New Dad in the Swedish Social Insurance Agency’s Campaign of the 1970s

Alec Hurley – Strongmen of the Valleys: Uncovering the Influence of Eugen Sandow in the Welsh Valleys During the Early 20th Century

John Fair – A Philadelphia Story: The William J. Herrmann Physical Training Institute

2PM

Airnel Abarra – “Empowerment of Hegemonic Subservience?”: Visualizing Female Bodybuilding in the Developing World

Hallie Franks – American Venuses: Ancient Sculpture and Women’s Physical Culture

3PM

Eduardo Galak - “To Remain United in Spite of All Vicissitudes”: Images of the Consequences of the Firpo–Dempsey Fight (1923) and Its Political Uses

David Chapman – American Champions: A Lost Legacy of Olympic Paintings

PHYSICAL CULTURES OF THE BODY VI

Conference Schedule, Day Two

9 January, 2026 — In-Person & Online

9:30AM

Keisuke “Jima” Nakajima – On the Artificiality of Athletic Bodies: *Technosomata* in Physical Culture

Simon J. Bronner – The Domestication of Physical Culture: The Growth and Function of the “Home Gym”

10:30AM

Jonathan White – Lifting in Country: Launceston Elliot, Tom Pevier, Thomas Inch, and the Disorganization of British Weightlifting, 1891-1910

Dimitris Rigalos – “Strong as Tofalos!”: The Greek Strongman, Dimitrios Tofalos and the Politics of Strength

11:30AM

Mitch Snow – The “Dance of the Pole”: Ritual, Strength Training and Public Entertainment in Preconquest Mexico

Emalee Nelson Stone – Keiki in Motion: Camp Erdman, the YMCA, and the Pursuit of Health from the 1920s to Today

12:30-1:30PM

Lunch Break

1:30PM

Martin Shuster – Critical Theory and/of Lifting

Jan Todd - A Forgotten Scottish Strongman: Jacobite John Murchison and His Lifting Stone

2:30PM

Cory Johnson – The Ideal Body Under Duress: The Uffizi Pankratiasts

Charles Stocking – Between Average and Ideal: Classical Sculpture and the Body Mass Index



Basudhita Basu is an Assistant Professor at The Amity University, Jharkhand. She completed her doctoral degree in 2022 from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Her thesis titled “Sports and Culture: Colonial Bengal through the Prism of Sports” expanded the scope of the rich body of works on British colonial policy in India through an innovative case study of the physical education curriculum in schools of Bengal. She is the recipient of Iswarchandra Vidyasagar Bicentenary Fellowship in 2020, Early Research Grant from The British Society of Sports History, Travel Grant from British Society of the History of Science, and Foreign Travel Grant from Indian Council for Historical Research. Apart from presenting papers in various national and international seminars/conferences, she has avidly published in various national and international journals.

Defending Her Own “Body”: Historicizing Women’s Entry in the Physical Culture Movement of Colonial Bengal

By the latter half of the 1920s, the vernacular print media in Bengal reported distressing incidents of female abductions and contended that these crimes were a perennial problem in Bengal. In a conventional Bengali society, a woman’s body was considered a site of honor for their families. The notion of chastity was upheld in the early twentieth century in Bengal, where the female body was considered to be untouched and reserved only for her husband. In such a society, sexual violence was brought upon the women not only to satisfy one’s sexual urges but to dishonor the entire family. Hence, to limit such incidents, one of the measures adopted by a section of Bengali *Bhadrolaks* (the educated Bengali men) was to encourage their female counterparts to augment their physical strength by engaging in the burgeoning physical culture movement in Bengal, which was dominated by the men.

The present paper delves into studying the female atrocities and sexual violence in twentieth-century Bengal and how it acted as one of the “push factors” for women to indulge in physical training through exercise, such as *Lathi* (stick) Wielding and sword fighting which ultimately absorbed them into the broader physical culture movement which was in vogue in colonial Bengal.¹ This makes the paper unique and interdisciplinary, cutting across the borders of the history of physical culture movement and sports in colonial Bengal and women’s studies. Previously, such topics have remained outside of the academic deliberations in India.

Women’s studies in Bengal, on the one hand, have focused on women’s emancipation through female education, participation of women in the nationalist movement of India, women’s entry into several professional domains, leaving behind the history of sexual violence and how the women themselves rose against such deplorable situation. On the other hand, the discourses on the sports history of colonial India have mostly focused on three significant aspects: Firstly, the development of a certain sport, primarily cricket and football. Secondly, how did these games act as a tool to encounter the British administrators? Thirdly, how can one gauge the nuances of nationalism, communalism and regionalism from the sporting fields of colonial Bengal? Although such studies, conducted by astute sports historians, assist us in comprehending several facets of colonial Bengali culture, they have overlooked the gendered aspect of sports in Bengali society and what motivated Bengali women to participate in the ongoing physical culture movement in the aforementioned state, the gap which the present work fulfils. Furthermore, it assesses the role of the female academic institutions of Bengal that aided in the process of introducing physical exercises, *lathi* wielding, and drills among the women of Bengal. Though the motivation to engage in the physical culture movement among the ladies of Bengal stemmed from two main factors, i.e, to produce healthy male offspring and defend themselves from sexual assault, This study will take up the second argument, hence shedding light on the vulnerabilities experienced by women in twentieth-century Bengal.

1. The upper-class Bengali men were ridiculed by the British administration for their alleged physical weakness. They were ridiculed as effeminate. The Bengalis on the other hand accepted their physical weakness and as a result strove to augment their muscular strength. This further led to the physical culture movement in Colonial Bengal.



Asim Kumar Halder completed his PhD in Sports Humanities and Sociology in 2025 at Shanghai University of Sport, Shanghai, China, where he was awarded the President's Fellowship (2020-2025). His doctoral dissertation, "From Tradition to Modernity: The Development and Transformation of Indian Women's Sports from the Perspective of the Media," examined the historical and cultural shifts in women's sport in India through media representation. His broader research explores Indian women's sport, Indian traditional and folk sport, Asian martial arts, and the cultural history of physical practices in South Asia. He has published several articles in international journals across diverse disciplines with scholars from multiple countries in sport studies.



Professor Zheng Guohua is a Professor and Dean at Shanghai University of Sport, Shanghai, China. His research explores sport, media, and cultural studies with emphasis on the anthropology of physical practices. He has led four National Social Science Foundation projects and more than twenty provincial and ministerial projects. He has published over 120 papers in core journals and authored or translated 19 monographs. His work has been widely presented internationally, advancing cross-cultural perspectives in sport studies. His scholarship has earned multiple national and provincial awards, underscoring its academic and social influence, with achievements recognized by Ministry of Education prizes and provincial first-class awards.

Training the Body, Healing the Self: The Martial and Medicinal Epistemology of *Kalaripayattu*, India's Own Martial Art

Kalaripayattu, India's own martial art, emerged historically as a system of bodily training designed for fitness, strength, and preparation for war. Rooted in regional combat repertoires, it cultivated discipline, resilience, and embodied skill. Alongside its martial functions, Kalaripayattu developed therapeutic practices, most notably Kalari Chikitsa (Kalari Therapy), that framed training not only as preparation for conflict but also as a means of healing, recovery, and sustaining the body. This dual orientation toward combat and care situates Kalaripayattu as a distinctive cultural practice where the body is simultaneously trained and healed.

The study is guided by three central lines of theoretical inquiry. First, through the lens of *embodiment*, it examines how martial repertoires cultivate lived bodily knowledge, inscribing discipline, rhythm, and sensorimotor memory into the practitioner's body. Second, in terms of *physical training and social order*, it explores how Kalari spaces, ritualized pedagogy, and repertoire sequencing regulate hierarchy, reinforce collective identity, and function as mechanisms of social discipline across historical contexts. Finally, regarding *therapeutic knowledge*, it considers how healing practices are integrated into martial training, revealing continuities between martial and medical traditions, highlighting the body as a site of both combat readiness and restorative care.

Findings show that embodiment is expressed through coherent technical families of sequences, weapons, and marmakkai practice. Physical training functions as social regulation, reproducing hierarchies while adapting through historical ruptures such as conflict and colonial suppression. Therapeutic knowledge remains deeply embedded in Kalari Chikitsa, sustaining continuity between martial and medical traditions. Taken together, Kalaripayattu emerges as a complex system where embodied practice, social order, and therapeutic values converge, underscoring its enduring relevance in both local and global contexts.



Ms. MMW Louw is a sport officer at the University of Venda. She holds a master's degree in Sport Science from Stellenbosch University, an honors degree in Biokinetics and a post graduate diploma in Occupational Health from the University of Pretoria. Since 2020, she has delivered numerous presentations, national and international. She has an intellectual interest in sport and sport history, with a specific focus on rugby and women as academic disciplines. Her master's thesis unpacked the life herstories of three historically significant Springbok rugby players. She is currently pursuing a PhD on South African Rugby Herstories.



Professor F.J. Cleophas is an associate professor in Sport History at Stellenbosch University, South Africa. Prof. Cleophas obtained his PhD with the dissertation entitled "Physical Education and Physical Culture in the Coloured Community of the Western Cape, 1837-1966." He has published widely on non-racial sport and sport history in marginalized communities in the Western Cape, with an emphasis on physical culture. He has published over 60 articles in peer-reviewed journals and has 11 book chapters to date. His recent publications include the books: *Exploring Decolonizing Themes in South African Sport History: Issues and Challenges* (2018); *Critical Reflections on Physical Culture at the Edges of Empire* (2021); and *Physical Education and Physical Culture in South Africa, 1837-1966* (2024). His forthcoming publication is *Cricket and Cape Town Society* (2026).

Women's Herstory Matter

Historical intervention is necessary to address the broader, unmapped landscape of South African women's rugby herstory, as indicated by this study. South African rugby narratives reflect the country's historical, social and political undercurrents. These narratives that evolved over time are complex stories, often forgotten or untold. Consequently, rugby narratives developed a defined, masculine character. These narratives featured masculine attributes since the formation of the South African Rugby Board and the South African Coloured Rugby Football Board in 1891 and 1897, respectively. Today, South African rugby embodies a prominent male institution, with narratives deeply connected to the nation's colonial and apartheid past. Past narratives portrayed rugby as a white Afrikaner game, sidelining minorities and women. Herstory is not just a re-labelling of history but an epistemological resistance against institutional silence that reclaims voice, authority, and memory. It presents a counter-archive of women's strength, endurance, and togetherness in a class struggle for legitimacy in a sport that represents South Africa's patriarchal and national identity. The aim of this study is therefore to foreground performance and institutional narratives of women that molded and formed South African rugby in the 21st century. This research tackles the void that exists about South African women's rugby herstory. Since the stories we tell matter.



Tatiana Konrad is the PI of “Air and Environmental Health in the (Post-)COVID-19 World,” a postdoc in the Department of English and American Studies, University of Vienna, Austria, and the editor of the “Environment, Health, and Well-being” book series at the Michigan State University Press and the “Environment, Senses and Emotions” book series at the University of Exeter Press.

Outdoor Sports, Disability Rights, and the Environment in *The Peanut Butter Falcon* (2019)

This paper examines the representation of disability in Tyler Nilson and Michael Schwartz’s comedy-drama film *The Peanut Butter Falcon* (2019). It analyzes how the film communicates ableism through the story of Zak (Zack Gottsagen)—a young man with Down syndrome who escapes a care facility and takes a journey through the outdoors in order to pursue his dream to meet his sports idol, Salt Water Redneck (Thomas Haden Church), and become a professional wrestler. Reading the film through the lens of Southern Gothic that, among other elements, is defined through its distinct landscape, including rivers, swamps, and marshy waterways that have both narrative and symbolic value in Southern texts, the paper focuses Zak’s journey as a way to freedom—from patronization, control, and various limitations created because of ableist views of disability. The paper pays special attention to the way the film juxtaposes the natural environment and the built environment (or the lack thereof) to examine how people with disabilities are excluded from sports. On the way to Ayden, North Carolina, to the wrestling school that Zak has heard of so much, Tyler becomes Zak’s coach—they use tree trunks, fruits, and water as sports equipment. Via the scenes that take place outdoors, the film comments on the exclusion of people with disabilities from sports—having no access to necessary equipment, Zak has no chance to become a good wrestler. The film oscillates between the ideas of ableism and inclusion, the state’s view of people with disabilities and these people’s actual needs and wishes. Thoroughly examining these contrasting representations, the paper investigates how *The Peanut Butter Falcon* uses the outdoor environment—the Southern landscape—to raise the problem of ableism and advocate for disability rights, inclusion, and diversity.



Louis Neymon is a PhD student in social sciences of sport at the Paris-Saclay University. His thesis aims to study the history and development of French strength sports, particularly these last few years. He is particularly interested in the evolution of masculinities and of the sociodemographic profiles of strength athletes.

From the *Force Culturiste* to the *Force Athlétique*: France's *Culture Physique* and the Early Days of French Powerlifting

France has a rich history of strength sports athletes, ranging from the early *hercules forains* like Louis Uni to the contemporary powerlifting champions like Prescilia Bavoil or Panagiotis Tarinidis. However, the history of French strength sports after the second world war is not well known. How did French powerlifting develop, under which influences, in the 1980s? To answer this question, I will use evidence from *Santé et sport* ranging from 1963 to 1980, which became the main journal promoting powerlifting but was originally a body-building journal, and from *haltérophile moderne* from 1958 to 1980, which was the official organ of the French weightlifting federation. I used 1980 as the last date, as it is (for now) considered as the first year where a powerlifting competition was organized in France. My methodology consists in reading those resources at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF), and look first for institutional insights, to understand how the sport was structured at this time, second, to references to strength competitions that are not solely weightlifting. I intend to find notable insights on the history of French powerlifting and on its early structuration as a sport, which seems to have been done by *culturistes*, but always under the domination of weightlifting, as the hegemonic strength sport and sport federation. This exploratory work could help better understand how the contemporary relations between bodybuilding, powerlifting and weightlifting are still informed by different institutional views, which all come from the history of each of these sports.



Mark Doyle is a sociology lecturer who has trained as a powerlifter since 2022. A member of the Irish Powerlifting Federation, he's preparing for his second competition. He's currently developing projects on strength training as a health intervention and is also in the process founding a community-focused, LGBTQ-friendly powerlifting club in Dublin.

Barbells, Bulking and Bourdieu: The Social Transmission of Transformation in Powerlifting

Powerlifting is a strength-based sport comprising the bench press, squat, and deadlift. Beyond its physical demands, powerlifting represents a structured, cultural practice centered on the body and often, its transformation. The discussion in this paper is based on semi-structured interviews with powerlifting coaches and reflexive ethnographic training diaries based on my own journey from novice to competitor. Also drawing on Bourdieu's (2010) concepts of habitus and capital, and Shilling's (2003, 2008) theorization of the body as a project, I explore how powerlifters are initiated into a distinct habitus, or ways of being, through training and mentorship. Central to the paper is how lifters transition from novices to more experienced powerlifters, emphasizing the role of coaching in transmitting embodied knowledge and shaping lifters' bodily capital (Wacquant, 2022; Underman, 2022) as they engage in a process of 'becoming' a powerlifter. Coaches are discussed as key agents in this field, guiding clients through lifting techniques, strength progression, and body modification strategies, including bulking and cutting cycles. The social transmission of bodily knowledge, both in-person and through social media platforms, plays a crucial role in shaping training philosophies, reinforcing discipline and dedication, which manifest physically, through macronutrient and calorie consumption/restriction, weights lifted and the repetition of technique. Furthermore, social media extends the reach of coaching practices, creating new avenues for recognition, validation, and accountability. Overall, it is argued that powerlifting exemplifies a shared embodied transformation between coach and lifter—a fluid, ongoing, and reflexive process through which they engage the corporeal and carnal dimensions of practice.



Emma Pihl Skoog holds a PhD in History at Stockholm University (2017). In her thesis, she discussed issues related to embodiment, class and gender in strength sports and boxing. She is also an archivist and is, at the time of writing, a lecturer in Archival Science at the Department of Historical and Contemporary Studies, Södertörn University.

“Dad on Parental Leave!” – Weightlifter Lennart ‘Hoa-Hoa’ Dahlgren and the Construction of a New Dad in the Swedish Social Insurance Agency’s Campaign of the 1970s

The Swedish parental insurance system, introduced in 1974, was the first gender-neutral policy in the world to grant both mothers and fathers the right to paid parental leave. Despite its egalitarian ambitions, the reform initially had little impact on men's participation: during the first year, only 0.5 percent of all leave days were taken by fathers. In an effort to change this, the Swedish Social Insurance Agency launched a major public information campaign in the late 1970s, featuring weightlifter Lennart ‘Hoa-Hoa’ Dahlgren as its central figure. The campaign's most iconic image—showing the muscular Dahlgren in a blue-and-yellow T-shirt, the colors of the Swedish flag, cradling a baby under the slogan *Barnledig pappa!* (“Dad on parental leave!”)—has since become a lasting symbol of fatherhood and gender equality in Sweden.

This paper examines how the image of a strong, masculine athlete was mobilized to promote a new social ideal: the caring father. Through a cultural-historical and gender analytical perspective, the campaign is discussed as an example of how the Swedish welfare state sought to redefine masculinity in the service of equality. Rather than challenging traditional masculinity, fatherhood was integrated into an existing ideal of physical strength and national pride. The campaign thus reveals how 1970s equality politics relied on popular culture and bodily symbolism to make new gender roles appear both desirable and legitimate.

In this context, the paper contributes to a broader understanding of how masculine physical capital in sports functioned simultaneously as a vehicle for social transformation and as a mechanism for maintaining existing gendered and ideological hierarchies. It positions the athletic body as a key site of negotiation—where power, care, and citizenship were reimagined within the ideological framework of the Nordic welfare state.



Alec Hurley is a lecturer in sport management at Cardiff Metropolitan University in Wales. His research addresses historical intersections of identity, place, and space in sport. Alec has previously published and presented on underrepresented strongman figures with his research on physical culturist and author Arthur F. Gay.

Strongmen of the Valleys: Uncovering the Influence of Eugen Sandow in the Welsh Valleys During the Early 20th Century

In the coal-rich valleys of South Wales the physical culturist movement found an unexpected and receptive audience. Phillip (Phil) Jehu's name does not appear on any formal physical culture records or clubs. Born and raised in the Rhydycar neighborhood of Merthyr Tydfil records of his time as a part-time performer remain scarce. However, throughout the interwar period, he and his close friends – all miners in the local coal-works – embraced the physical culturist lifestyle. Despite the strenuous physical nature of his primary occupation, Jehu and his cohort ripped off the music hall shows and physical demonstrations made popular by Eugen Sandow. With performances limited to post-shift shows at the local working men's club and related institutes across Merthyr Tydfil tales of his exploits are being rapidly lost in history.

This presentation, therefore, seeks to place Jehu's legacy as a local legend, who drew influence from Sandow's captivating London performances. In doing so, this project relies on an assortment of historical approaches: archives, ephemera, and spoken histories. Written records of his performances are drawn from local newspaper archives, including the *Merthyr Express*. Ephemera, from his era as a part-time strongman, come from the personal collection of his grandson, Lyn Jehu. Among the collection are a set of Sandow barbells with accompanying documentation and photos of Phil Jehu in traditional strongman poses where he shows off his powerful form in his mid-50s. The archives will be bolstered through family oral histories to more fully capture the life of an extraordinary and unknown strongman.



John Fair is an Adjunct Professor in the Department of Kinesiology and Health Education at the University of Texas at Austin. A native of Waynesboro, Pennsylvania, he was educated at Juniata College (B.A., 1965), Wake Forest University (M.A., 1966) and Duke University (Ph.D., 1970). He has also held professorships in Pennsylvania, Virginia, Maine, Alabama, and Georgia. His areas of specialization include British and Irish History, Southern History, and the History of Physical Culture and Sports.

A Philadelphia Story: The William J. Herrmann Physical Training Institute

Amidst the long-forgotten lore of Philadelphia athletic enterprises of the early twentieth century was a gymnasium that prioritized opportunities for a wide swath of citizens rather than wealthy businessmen or championship performers. William John Herrmann, born July 30, 1870, was scion of a family devoted to physical culture that stretched back four generations into nineteenth century Germany. Rather than choosing a traditional career after graduating from the Franklin Institute in mechanical drawing, William. embraced the less secure option of his physical culture pastime. For nearly seven decades Herrmann made many significant contributions to the welfare of his community, first through his athletic achievements in fencing, wrestling, and boxing, and then his Training Institute which attracted some of the leading physical culturists of the day, including Eugen Sandow, Henry "Milo" Steinborn, Lillian Leitzel, P. H. Paulinetti, and his son, William who inherited the Institute. No less notable were many leading boxers who trained at Herrmann's, such as Jack O'Brien, Bob Fitzsimmons, Stanley Ketchell, Tommy Loughran, and Jack Johnson. Undefeated fencer Arlene Bittner was another protégé. Herrmann also taught students for many years at Princeton, Penn, and Temple universities and for two decades was head physical education instructor at Lawrenceville Academy. But his foremost claim to fame is less obvious. Herrmann was a pioneer in promoting physical culture for sectors of the population, especially young females, heretofore unserved and often unaware of the importance of health and fitness. His contributions can best be measured during days of yore when Philadelphia was an epicenter for the burgeoning field of physical culture.



Airnel T. Abarra is a PhD Candidate at the Doctorate School of Sport Sciences at the Hungarian University of Sport Science, Budapest, Hungary. His research topic is about women bodybuilders and physique athletes and identities. Currently, he is the Academic and Sports Development Manager of INSPIRE Sports Academy, National University Laguna in Calamba City, Philippines. He became interested in life and works related to women bodybuilders and physique athletes because of its unique subculture and quest for the ideal physique and strength.

“Empowerment or Hegemonic Subservience?”: Visualizing Female Bodybuilding in the Developing World

The socio-economic and socio-cultural situation of a particular athlete affects their concept of empowerment and fulfillment, especially in the sporting world. This also entails how the philosophies and understanding of self and identity of the athlete are shaped through their environments. Bodybuilding, which is a non-mainstream sport in developing countries like the Philippines, shows this dynamic, especially in training, coaching, and engagement in fitness and physique sports by women. Even though there are several diverse studies on female bodybuilders, these mainly come from developed countries, and there are no extensive case studies with a focus on other parts of the world, where cultures are characterized by more traditional gender roles. Through this study, we would like to investigate how female bodybuilders in developing countries shape their identity, ideals, and goals for their ideal body and health, among gender relations that are different from “Western” contexts. Using participatory research methods with emphasis on visualizing the female bodybuilders through “Photovoice Method,” it will be discussed how the female bodybuilders’ identities are shaped and if their situations really empower them, given that most of the gatekeepers in the sport are males. This includes how acceptable their bodies are within their subculture. Using case studies of female professional bodybuilders in the Philippines, the author will provide diverse narratives of female bodybuilders and look at these through the lens of identity, and cultural relativism. Through this, it can provide a better perspective on how athletes process their situations which can be empowering or conforming rooted in different hegemonic factors.



Hallie Franks is Professor of Ancient Studies at the Gallatin School at New York University. She is the author of *Hunters, Heroes, Kings* (American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 2012), *The World Underfoot* (Oxford University Press, 2018), and *Ancient Sculpture and 20th-Century American Womanhood: Venus Envy* (Bloomsbury, 2025).

American Venuses: Ancient Sculpture and Women's Physical Culture

As the hold of corsets loosened toward the end of the 19th century, physical culture provided a different method of shaping women's bodies. While ancient Herculeses and Apollos provided the model for the physical culture man, Venus was the inspiration for a new healthy, vital "American woman," who was active, fit, robust, and newly primed for the physical toll of motherhood and modern life. Marketed primarily to young, white, middle-class women, physical culture manuals, magazines, and advertising presented ancient sculptures of Venus—most notably the Venus de Milo and the Venus de Medici—as the visual model of this new woman. What did it mean for a woman to embody (or *try* to embody) not just the visual perfection of an ancient statue, but also its health? What were the practices of diet and movement that were supposed to have produced its ideal, and how were women expected to translate this model into flesh? What were the stakes to which this vision of a nation of American Venuses was bound? This paper considers the ways in which various early American physical culture contexts and media used ancient sculptures of Venus to visualize a kind of body that was both "natural" and universal, while simultaneously requiring increased discipline, investment, and self-surveillance.



Eduardo Galak is a Physical Education teacher with a PhD in Social Sciences. He is currently an independent researcher at CONICET and a Professor at the Universidad Nacional de La Plata (Argentina). His research focuses on the history of physical culture, visual pedagogies, and the political uses of sport.

“To Remain United in Spite of All Vicissitudes”: Images of the Consequences of the Firpo–Dempsey Fight (1923) and Its Political Uses

Can one be a sporting hero when one’s most notable achievement is, in fact, a celebrated defeat? The 1923 boxing match between Jack Dempsey and Luis Ángel Firpo, called the “Fight of the Century,” is often remembered for the 17 seconds when Dempsey was knocked out of the ring by the Argentine. The fight has been referenced in literature, paintings, and popular culture, including films and cartoons. Firpo, the *Wild Bull of the Pampas*, was the first Latin American athlete to contend for a world title (Corpas, 2023) and has been described as an emblematic figure of Argentine identity, representing the virility and Latinity of his time (Scharagrodsky, 2021).

This defeat created an image of a national hero that was politically exploited by Juan Domingo Perón’s government from 1946 to 1955. This paper analyzes images from 1923 and contrasts them with newsreels from 1954, when boxing celebrated Perón as “the first sportsman.” During this period, newsreels became propaganda tools (Kriger, 2009; Galak, 2017) used to shape sporting images (O’Mahony, 2012). A hermeneutic analysis is conducted on images from the Argentine “official” newsreel, *Sucesos Argentinos*, alongside two U.S. newsreels (Universal Newsreel) reporting on the meeting between Dempsey, Firpo, and Perón.

While Firpo is part of an international history of boxing that associates Latin Americans with issues of race and masculinity (LaFavor, 2020), this sporting event can be understood as a fundamental step in the development of the image of Latin male athletes: virile, strong, and *wild*.



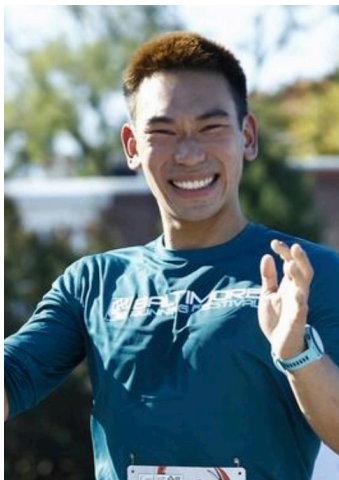
David Chapman is an independent historian who has written books and articles on such diverse subjects as sport history, gender studies, cinema, jazz, and popular culture. Chapman has over twenty books to his credit, and he has written extensively for both popular and academic journals. One of his first books was *Sandow the Magnificent* (1994), a biography of a famous vaudeville strongman and bodybuilder. His latest book is *The Kings of Wrestling* (2024), a translation of a French work from 1910 that includes pictures and biographies of famous wrestlers from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He is currently working on a biography of athlete, dancer, and artist Hubert J. Stowitts.

American Champions: A Lost Legacy of Olympic Paintings

In 1936 an exhibition of large tempera paintings of major athletes was mounted in Berlin in conjunction with the Olympic Games by California artist Hubert J. Stowitts (1892-1953). He called his series “American Champions,” and it consisted of 55 life-sized, full color representations of such sports heroes as football and track star Woody Strode, high diver Frank Kurtz, and young tennis star Bobby Riggs. The men had all posed for the artist in his studio, and astonishingly, he depicted the subjects totally nude.

When the American Olympic Committee balked at sponsoring these works, Stowitts decided to pay for his own fare to Berlin as well as to ship his artworks so that they could be exhibited at the games. When he got there, the paintings were mounted and the show was displayed for about a week, before Nazi officials shut down the exhibit. They had no problem with the nudity, but since there were African Americans and Jews among the athletes in the show, this went against the racial laws of the German Reich.

The story of Stowitts and his American Champions has never been told, and I will use primary sources (letters, newspapers, interviews) to trace its history. I will show how Stowitts’s paintings have implications for sport history, fine art, and muscular body display. I will also relate the unfortunate story of how the collection of American Champions was ultimately broken up, lost, and/or stolen so that only reproductions are currently available.



Keisuke “Jima” Nakajima is a fourth year PhD student in Classics at Johns Hopkins University. His research centers around ancient technology and reception of the Greco-Roman world in modern fitness culture. He is also an indoor cycling instructor at the university Rec Center, hoping to pursue his career in the fitness/wellness industry after graduation.

On the Artificiality of Athletic Bodies: *Technosomata* in Physical Culture

This paper examines how athletic bodies, both in the ancient and modern world, are conceptualized as cyborgs, hybrids of natural and artificial. I incorporate the notion of *technosoma*, the techno-body, in my analysis of ancient texts on physical training, focusing on Philostratus' *Gymnasticus* in particular, as well as of modern physical culture movement. Building upon Donna Haraway's cyborg theory (Haraway, 1991), the expression *technosoma* challenges the traditional opposition between “natural” bodies and “artificial” technologies and instead conveys a conception of “the body in which natural and technical instances are inextricably interwoven” (Chesi, 2023).

Highlighting the artificiality of physically trained bodies aids us in explaining the complex relationship between living flesh and artificial bodies during the physical culture movement, as exercise enthusiasts began to promote ancient Greco-Roman sculptures as models to emulate. Viewing physical training as body-enhancing technology also contributes to our understanding of moral panics and criticisms which accompanied promotion of exercise as “technopanics” (Orben, 2020).

This study enriches the field of Classical reception by discussing a traditionally overlooked subject of popular culture. Despite its undeniable significance, the exercise and fitness culture has been a blindspot until recently for many Classicists writing about the afterlife of Greco-Roman aesthetics, as Wyke pointed out (1999). There are only several publications after Wyke that specifically deal with Classical reception in physical culture (Todd, 2005; Stocking, 2014; Miller, 2018; Franks, 2025), and this paper enriches their discussion of how the ancient world shaped our definition of beauty and health in the Western world.



Simon J. Bronner is Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Social Sciences at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. The author or editor of over 40 books, his latest is *Folklore and Ethnology of the Modern World* (Routledge, 2026) that includes research on the politics and psychology of strongman performance. He serves on the editorial board of *Iron Game History*.

The Domestication of Physical Culture: The Growth and Function of the “Home Gym”

British social historian Eric Chaline concluded his book *The Temple of Perfection: A History of the Gym* that defined the athletic venue as a public social space with a brief observation on the rapid rise of the “home gym” in the twenty-first century. While Chaline notes the roots of the workout area, often a designated room, in the home to the nineteenth-century fitness correspondence courses, this digital-age development with architectural and commercial implications appears to challenge his thesis of “modern” gyms fulfilling social functions of civil religion. Later commentators linked the rise of the home gym and its representation of individuation, and alienation, to the global pandemic of 2020-2021, but the practice has been sustained beyond when it was a pragmatic response. In this presentation, I survey through oral, documentary, material, and commercial evidence what constitutes a “home gym” today and whether, in light of the history of equipment and space, it redefines the concept of the gym—and physical culture of the body. I interpret the individual workout space’s shifting use—arguably toward the development of strength and muscularity rather than speed and thinness—as a psychological-cultural function of “domestication,” applied in anthropology to humans exerting control of another species, but also representing in cultural studies individuation and privatization particularly as these processes manifest contextual issues of the role of the body as a malleable and solitary material object in late or “liquid” modernity.



Jonathan White is a first year PhD student at the University of Texas at Austin. He received his undergrad from Pepperdine University and his master's from King's College London before coming to Texas. His primary interests lie in British sports history and the Olympic revival in Britain.

Lifting *in* Country: Launceston Elliot, Tom Pevier, Thomas Inch and the Disorganization of British Weightlifting, 1891-1910

This paper sets out to examine the careers and impact of three weightlifters/strongmen who competed as amateurs and professionals in England before the creation of a national governing body for weightlifting. Launceston Elliot, Tom Pevier, and Thomas Inch all established themselves as some of the best early lifters in Britain as the need for greater organization became more apparent. Elliot and Pevier played roles in establishing the first British Amateur Weight Lifter's Association (BAWLA) in 1901 but the organization's dissolution and eventual recreation in 1910 owed much to the success of Thomas Inch using lifts more commonly associated with weightlifting despite being a professional strongman. Without a governing body, British weightlifters competed in an odd collection of events and lifts, usually based on what city or gym a lifter called home. Loyalty to the different smaller organizations that did exist often meant lifters would not compete against each other due to membership with one group or another. The lack of a controlling body may have even lead Elliot and Inch to pursue professional careers as the disorder of British lifting left few options for those seeking greater competition. Sources used for this paper come primarily from newspapers, magazines, scrapbooks created by British lifters and trainers from the era, and surviving memorabilia. This paper seeks to fill the gaps in our understanding of how different lifts developed, the standardization of judging and referee training, and how the ambiguity and significant cross-over between weightlifting and strongman performances lead to a fractured and chaotic community.



Dimitris Rigalos, M.Sc. M.A. (GRE), is a PhD student in Physical Culture and Sport Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. His research interests include the philosophy of education and sport, ethics, the history of sport, and the Olympic Movement.

“Strong as Tofalos!”: The Greek strongman, Dimitrios Tofalos and the Politics of Strength

This paper presents a short biography of Dimitrios Tofalos (1884-1966) who was a prominent Olympic victor in weightlifting, a strongman, and a professional wrestler. Particularly, it explores his role in the cultural politics of strength in early twentieth-century Greece and the Greek diaspora in the United States. Tofalos’s contested victory at the 1906 Intercalated Olympic Games in Athens, against Austrian champion Joseph Steinbach, was interpreted in Greek public discourse as a symbolic triumph of national strength. This event, and the intense public reaction surrounding it, was a moment of symbolic consolidation in the evolving narrative of Greek modernity. Tofalos’s later move to the United States and his transition into vaudeville and professional wrestling drew heavily on his Olympic victory, strongman persona, and commanding physical presence. These elements allowed him to succeed in commercial entertainment circuits, either by competing or mentoring, while maintaining symbolic value within and for the Greek diasporic community. This research draws upon a diverse body of primary sources, including Greek and international press archives, personal memoirs, vaudeville and wrestling advertisements, and sports magazines, as well as materials from the Ottley Coulter Scrapbook Collection.



K. Mitchell Snow is an independent scholar. He is the author of *Movimiento, ritmo y musica: una biografía de Gloria Contreras* (2008) and *A Revolution in Movement: Dancers, Painters, and the Image of Modern Mexico* (2020). He has written for publications such as *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, *Dance Chronicle*, *Dance Research Journal*, *Early Popular Visual Culture*, *Iron Game History* and *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film*.

The “Dance of the Pole”: Ritual, Strength Training and Public Entertainment in Preconquest Mexico

Writing from Mexico City in 1586 Spanish Jesuit José de Acosta briefly noted some of the feats of strength he had seen indigenous dancers perform there. He described individuals who competed to bear great burdens, jugglers who tossed logs about using their feet, and others who withstood blows that could break an iron bar. As a missionary, Acosta and his companions had worked assiduously to rid indigenous Americans of their dances, almost all of which had once formed part of complex public ritual cycles with deep religious roots. Still, Acosta understood that dance was also the people’s preferred form of purposeful exercise, and was thus potentially useful to the civic good. The Spanish allowed a few of what they classified as “recreational” dances to survive. One of these was the log juggling that the Dominican chronicler Diego Duran called the “dance of the pole.” The dance of the pole offers insights into cultural practices that clearly involved prolonged and intensive physical training and that emerged in a completely different cultural sphere from that of the classical Mediterranean. To elucidate these distinctions, I shall use reports from post-contact Spanish authors, a mid-nineteenth century traveler from the United States, and contemporary Mexican historians, linguists and ethnologists who have documented its performance and meaning across time. Responses to this dance suggest that some Prehispanic practices may provide insights into the processes underlying the subsequent tensions between strength and sport as entertainment and strength as hygiene in Mexico.



Emalee Nelson Stone is an Assistant Professor of Instruction in the Department of Kinesiology and Health Education at The University of Texas at Austin. Her research and teaching specializations lie at the intersections of sport, history, society, and culture. Specifically, she studies American women's experiences in sport.

Keiki in Motion: The YMCA, Camp Erdman, and the Pursuit of Adolescent Health from the 1920s to Today.

Emerging at a time when industrialization and urbanization were reshaping childhood experiences, the summer camp movement sought to counteract sedentary city life by cultivating strong, healthy bodies, and moral character through outdoor recreation. The Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) played a central role in this national effort, blending Christian values with physical education and social reform to promote holistic youth development. This presentation will examine the origins and evolution of Camp Erdman, which serves as the camp branch of the YMCA of Honolulu.

Founded in 1926 on O'ahu's North Shore, Camp Erdman reflected these mainland ideals while adapting them to the distinct cultural and environmental landscape of Hawai'i. Drawing on archival sources and organizational records, this presentation will trace how the YMCA of Honolulu localized the national emphasis on health, fitness, and recreation to serve the islands' youth population. Camp Erdman became both a reflection of and a response to broader American trends which promoted physical vitality, social cohesion, and cultural exchange. By connecting this historical narrative to the present, this presentation aims to highlight how the legacy of the early camp movement continues to resonate amidst today's adolescent health crisis. As youth face declining physical activity and rising mental health challenges, Camp Erdman and similar programs remain vital spaces for embodied learning, outdoor engagement, and community building, ultimately continuing a century-long mission to foster healthier, more resilient generations.



Martin Shuster is Professor of Philosophy and Isaac Swift Distinguished Professor of Jewish Studies at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, where he is also affiliated with the Center for Holocaust, Genocide, and Human Rights and with the program in Capitalism Studies. He is the founding director of the Philosophy and Critical Theory Lab (PaCT Lab). He has published essays, articles, and books across a range of topics in ethics, aesthetics, political philosophy, critical theory, and philosophy of religion. His most recent book is *Critical Theory: The Basics* (Routledge, 2024). He is currently working on a book about weightlifting for Duke University Press's "Practices" series.

Critical Theory and/of Lifting

This presentation revisits the ways in which certain early streams of critical theory conceptualized the body and physical culture, especially at the turn of the twentieth century in Germany leading up to and through the two world wars. Some of the figures that interest me most include the members of the Frankfurt School (especially Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse) and Wilhelm Reich, but also later theorists like Bero Rigauer and Rudolf zur Lippe. The idea is to revisit their critical approaches to physical culture—most notably their suspicions of how it is allegedly related to regressive political trends—all so as to think more deeply about one of the most prominent contemporary sites for physical culture: weightlifting. I argue that while many of their insights are perhaps even more pressing today (with the rise of new technologies and new regimes for mass standardization), their broad and thoroughgoing suspicion of seemingly any kind of physical culture and body development is, in fact, counterproductive and at odds with their deepest core aspirations. I pursue this argument through a focus on weightlifting, though I do not intend thereby to suggest that it is the only site for such a possible corrective to these traditions of critical theory.



Jan Todd, the Roy J. McLean Centennial Fellow in Sports History, is a professor in the Department of Kinesiology and Health Education at The University of Texas at Austin. Todd founded and directs the PhD program in Physical Culture and Sport Studies and oversees both the graduate and undergraduate Sport Management programs at UT-Austin. She is the Director of the H.J. Lutcher Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports.

A Forgotten Scottish Strongman: Jacobite John Murchison and His Lifting Stone

At Eilean Donan castle located in the western highlands of Scotland, a massive rock rests in the main courtyard bearing a weathered brass plate. “The Murchison Stone,” the plate explains, “. . . was lifted onto a wall in Glen Utulan by John Murchison of Auchtertyre, (one of the Four Johns of Scotland) who was killed in the Battle of Sheriffmuir, 1715.” There were many things about the stone that intrigued me, including its massive size, but the most surprising thing about my discovery was why I had never heard of it. Furthermore, several days later, when I attended “The Gathering” run by Stevie Shanks at the Potarch Bridge near Aboyne, where people try to lift the famous Dinnie Stones, I was again surprised to discover that no one there (including the stone-lifting historians in residence) seemed to know anything about the stone—or the man who supposedly lifted it. This paper is, therefore, an attempt to historicize the stone and its reputed lifter and to explore the story surrounding his lift. For, like all tales of strength (and especially this one which is more than 300 years old) there are questions that must be asked, and myths to unravel about what really happened and what it means.



Cory Johnson has an MLS from North Texas University, a BA in Classics from Texas Tech University, and is a faculty member at Texas Tech University. With over 20 years of international combat sports experience as an athlete and coach, his research interests and projects consist of ancient Greek sports, philosophy, and culture.

The Ideal Body Under Duress: The Uffizi Pankratiasts

This paper offers a detailed explanation of the positioning and musculature of the two combatants in the famous sculpture of the “Two Pankratiasts” housed in the Uffizi Gallery of Florence.

The statue makes most sense if it is viewed as a depiction of two combatants in the Greek pankration, which—unlike wrestling—permitted strikes, and offered more options for both ground fighting and joint manipulation in the form of submission locks. This popular position in Greek art would have been familiar to those watching or participating in the pankration, including the sculptor himself.

While attention is often drawn to the raised fist seeking to land a punch on the lower athlete, the image is more about control, leverage, and the availability of submissions that present themselves due to the dominant position of the athlete on top. The musculature of both athletes is identical, so size and strength are not the primary issue; rather, the technical advantage this position afforded the man on top.

While static, this sculpture presents a narrative of what could have happened before, during and after this controlling position. This is accomplished through the structure of the human body when it is manipulated through leverage and the torsion of its limbs. This statue shows the ideal highly-developed Greek body under duress through the hyperextension of its joints and limbs. This is especially clear when viewing the statue from all angles as was intended and will be illustrated in this presentation.



Charles Stocking specializes in the history and philosophy of the body, sport, and physical culture from Ancient Greece to the present. He is the author of several books on the relationship between ancient and modern sport including *Homer's Iliad and the Problem of Force* (Oxford 2023) and *Ancient Greek Athletics: Primary Sources in Translation* (Oxford 2021). Charles has also been certified through the National Strength and Conditioning Association and served as a strength and conditioning coach for UCLA Athletics from 2004-2008, where he coached seven different varsity teams as well as individual Olympic athletes. His current research focuses on the role that Classical Antiquity played in shaping modern scientific discourses on race, gender, and health.

Between Average and Ideal: Classical Sculpture and the Body Mass Index

This paper examines the history and implicit philosophic influences involved with the origin of the Body Mass Index as a metric of health. Significant scientific research has demonstrated that the Body Mass Index fails to properly identify health co-morbidities. This paper adds to those existing critiques through discussion of the problematic socio-historical origin of the Body Mass Index, first proposed by the 19th century statistician Adolphe Quetelet. Through examination of Quetelet's writing, we will see that the original BMI metric was born out of an effort to equate actual human bodies with the idealized proportions of Classical sculpture.

