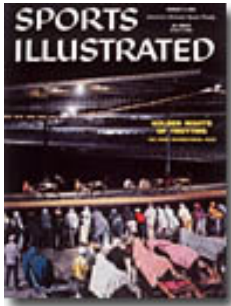


 Click to Print

[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) |

[Close](#)



August 03, 1959

For Love Of Muscle

On the lunatic fringe of fitness the bulging bicep is idolized. Here its cult is discussed, and Charles Atlas' opinion of it

Stephen Birmingham

In the huffing, puffing world of muscle culture, which has recently, thanks to the President's physical fitness program, taken a new lease on life, one man still stands out above all the others: **Charles Atlas**. Despite the streamlined competition of **Vic Tanny**, whose chromium-plated machines and hard-sell commercials have spread across the country, Atlas is still the king of them all, or, as one admirer put it, he is "to muscles what Tiffany's is to diamonds." Moreover, at 66 he is still in his prime, a silver-haired testimonial to the efficacy of the bodybuilding system he calls Dynamic Tension.

There are those, of course, who have called Atlas crazy. For some reason it is a trait of the bodybuilding world to impugn loudly, in the case of any disagreement, the other fellow's sanity. And those who attack Atlas maintain that stretching like a tiger or a baby or palm pressing cannot possibly produce the muscular development that pressing a few hundred pounds of weight can. And there are also those who find the whole physical-culture world very slightly tinged with lunacy, since—on the student level—it is a world that is populated so heavily with postadolescents, teen-agers and others not noted for their stability.

The Tiffany of muscles, however, is calm in the face of such criticism. He approaches his work with dedication, spirit and the belief that his calling may be the highest calling of all. "I desire," says one of his lessons, "to build a PERFECT RACE, a country of PERFECT HUMAN MASTERPIECES. I aim to make you powerful, graceful, magnetic." He continues with this advice: "At all times switch the mind from unpleasant to pleasant things. The mental influence plays a larger part in the promotion of health than most people realize. 'As a man thinketh, so he is.' "

Contented and successful though he is, however, there are some developments in the culture to which he practically gave his name which Atlas views with concern. His own motives are certainly unimpeachable, and **Tanny's** can perhaps be criticized only for the taste of some of his endlessly repeated TV commercials; but the motives of some others are, to say the least, unclear.

In general, all bodybuilders are motivated by one of three desires. A man decides to improve his physique either because he wants to *feel* better or because he wants to be stronger or—the third reason—for sheer vanity. **Charles Atlas**, of course, concentrates entirely on

men who want muscle for the first two reasons. In the third, or Body Beautiful, branch of muscledom, things are somewhat different.

It is hard to know how much admiration of one's own elbow is, as it were, helpful, and how much is, shall we say, overly time-consuming or morbid. From a dispassionate interest in pectoral muscles and calf measurements, it is only the briefest possible hop to a kind of abject body worship. If you are of the Body Beautiful school of thought, *too much* muscle is displeasing. Droop of ear lobe, blemish of skin, cast of eye—all such can be considered serious disfigurements. There is no limit to how far this sort of thing can be carried, but an excellent illustration of what it can develop into was to be found, until recently, at a place called Muscle Beach in **California**.

Outwardly, Muscle Beach in early years seemed to have much to recommend it. On the sunny shore above the blue Pacific, with a WPA-built platform with gym equipment, it was, to many, a heartening sight to behold, with **America's** young men and women improving themselves athletically by stretching, flexing, doing double presses and performing some astonishing gymnastic and acrobatic feats. On weekends whole families disported themselves there. Many a **Hollywood** hopeful who, for one reason or another, felt that his or her appearance in the seminude might be more memorable than when clothed came, eager for attention, to Muscle Beach.

But then there came to be a breed of youngsters known, for lack of a better term, as "beach bums." These—many still in their early teens—seemed more interested in lying about in languorous poses than in exerting themselves with weight lifting and surf boarding. Muscle Beach, already a tourist attraction, became notorious. People traveled far—extremely far, it seemed—to visit it. Bars in the neighborhood did a thriving—too thriving, in many cases—business. Many Muscle Beachers seemed to have no jobs or other visible means of support, and yet, to Santa Monicans, it had long been apparent that those who wished to had no difficulty finding patrons in their audiences. In fact, as far as the respectable population of **Santa Monica** was concerned, Muscle Beach turned into a horror.

Three years ago a crazed pervert named Stephen Nash attacked and stabbed to death an 8-year-old boy under a **Santa Monica** pier, a stone's throw from the musclemen's lair. And, though Nash himself was no weight lifter, he was considered quite typical of the group who composed Muscle Beach's camp followers. After this, members of the **Santa Monica** police vice squad began to be regulars among the onlookers at Muscle Beach. They rediscovered, and arrested, some of their oldest and most familiar—if not necessarily favorite—customers. Among new offenders they discovered that the most popular reason for being in that section of the state was that they had "always wanted to see Muscle Beach." Something, as far as **Santa Monica** was concerned, had to be done. But it was not to be easy.

Though the Muscle Beach area was tax-supported and the province of the city's Recreation and Parks Commission, the Muscle Beachers themselves were, as the saying goes, organized. There was a 400-member Muscle Beach Club, to which members paid \$5-a-year dues. It took an explosive multiple arrest for crimes, felonies and misdemeanors ranging from suspicion of rape to child molestation to lewd vagrancy—in which the suspects were five of Muscle Beach's most popular heroes—to bring forth the public outcry that spelled Muscle Beach's doom.

Muscle Beach was officially closed in December 1958. Despite the protests of bar owners, hot-dog-stand proprietors and "tourists," it is unlikely that it will ever open again in anything like its previous state. The Muscle Beachers have dispersed. This does not mean, of course, that the members of the Body Beautiful cult who used the beach as their national headquarters have done anything but go elsewhere. In a way, the closing of Muscle Beach has made it harder for police to apprehend the undesirables in their midst. "They were all so nice and concentrated there," a vice squader admits. In point of fact, the cult still nourishes and attracts its members, through other means.

There is, for example, the curious and ambiguous case of the many "little magazines" whose contents are devoted to photographs of the

male physique, lightly clad. Certain of these publications, which are pocket size and sell for up to 50¢ apiece, are so-called "one-shots." A magazine, in other words, may appear only once devoted to male body culture; when a magazine next appears it will be devoted to another subject, in another guise entirely, with another title. Others, however, manage to publish regular monthly or quarterly issues. In nearly every case their contents are supplied by photographic studios which specialize in the male physique, and all the magazines, they keep saying, operate under principles that are almost embarrassingly respectable. When accused, as some of them have been, of catering only to homosexuals, they act shocked; editorially they protest that they are eminently "cultural," devoted to "esthetic appreciation of the male figure," no naughtier than *The Atlantic Monthly*. Anywhere from a dozen to 15 magazine titles in this category currently bespatter the newsstands to a degree that certain news dealers have found distinctly unesthetic. The Union News Company in **New York**, for one, refuses to distribute these magazines at any of the stands it operates on the ground that the magazines are unwholesome as to content, that the motives of their publishers are at least exhibitionistic and that the reasons for their purchase by the public are prurient.

Wholesome or not, the following facts seem clear: a number of the gentlemen who appear as "models" in these magazines are former Muscle Beachers; the circulation of all the magazines (each one sells between 10 and 20,000 copies) is considered by the newsdealers to overlap—one audience, in other words, is supporting them all; a number of the publications carry West Coast addresses, though not all. Beyond this, it is anyone's guess—and there have been several—what the editors are trying to accomplish.

All this is very far indeed from the code of ethics practiced by **Charles Atlas** and in the chromium-plated gyms of **Vic Tanny**. To the Tiffany of muscles, however, the whole Body Beautiful cult is more than a public problem. It is a personal thorn in his side. The very existence of such a group, however far removed, has cast an undeserved and unfortunate light on all that Atlas does and teaches. It shocks Atlas to think that his own theories may have had anything to do with those of the body esthetes or that their rise may have affected his. Nonetheless, the fact is that the two seemed to have developed as parallel phenomena.

Charles Atlas began his rise to fame in the Depressed '30s, and it was this same period that first noticed a Body Beautiful boom, and Muscle Beach. (It was in 1935, also, that **Vic Tanny** set up his first gym, in **Rochester, N.Y.**) The fact is—horrible though it is for Mr. Atlas to contemplate—that Mr. Atlas may have inadvertently helped to create, with his emphasis on strength and muscle, a few Frankensteins. By calling attention so effectively to the condition of the male physique, he may have helped build the Body Beautiful boom, and the boom in its turn may have helped build Atlas.

Because he cannot effectively combat them, Atlas tries his best to ignore the members of his profession's lunatic fringe. It is clear that the whole business is not only distasteful to him but largely incomprehensible. When it was pointed out to him recently that bodybuilding, which in his hands had been advertised as a way to get yourself a girl, had become, in the hands of others, a way to get something quite the opposite, Mr. Atlas reddened beyond his usual healthful ruddiness and said, "Some of those people—why, why, they're not normal!" And Charles Roman, his business partner, told me crisply, "We wish to have absolutely no connection drawn between Charles Atlas, Limited and the publishers of the male physical-culture magazines. We do not wish to be associated with them in any way whatsoever." And he adds, "Charlie Atlas has done too much good for his country to worry about people like that."

And it is certainly true that today, with a comfortable income from his business (how much he earns he does not wish to say, but the Atlas share of the partnership is thought to be between \$30,000 and \$50,000 a year), with a pleasant way of life spanning Point Lookout in the summer, the **New York Athletic Club, Florida**, in winter, and between times the **Brooklyn** apartment that is filled with paintings and

antiques (collected by Mrs. Atlas), along with plenty of good music to eat and bathe by, **Charles Atlas** feels abundantly rewarded. His greatest satisfaction comes, however, from a feeling that he has contributed significantly to the well-being and happiness of American youth. Though he numbers among his alumni such celebrities as **Bob Hope**, the late Fred Allen, **Max Baer** and Harry von Zell, his loyalty remains to small-town boys across the country—a boy whom he sees, symbolically, as "a boy on a farm in **Kansas**," a vision perhaps tempered by his memory of himself on a farm in southern **Italy**. He is also proud of the members of the armed services whom, he feels, he has helped train. He has made a number of tours for the **Marine Corps**, the Air Force and the **Coast Guard** on which he has lectured to personnel; he receives hundreds of letters—and answers each—from satisfied Atlas students in every branch of the services. Such time as he spends at his desk is chiefly devoted to handling his massive mail. He is a slow worker with words and will spend hours trying to give a routine letter to a fan the right "feel." His letters are apt to begin "Hello Dear Friend" and close "Yours for Perfect Manhood, **Charles Atlas**" or "Yours for HEALTH AND STRENGTH" or "Yours for a HEALTHY and STRONG BODY." His correspondence goes all over the world.

Atlas has other reassurances that the work he does is good. The **American Medical Association**, for example, has surveyed his course and found it to their liking. And when the **Federal Trade Commission** examined his records and not only found that his course was as advertised but also that over a three-month period the average Atlas pupil gained three-and-a-half inches of muscle over-all, Mr. Atlas was not in the least surprised. In addition to himself, Mr. Atlas has living proof of the efficacy of his methods all around him. Mrs. Atlas has taken the course, as have his daughter, Diana, and his son, Charles Jr., and all three are stronger than most people. Charles Jr. won the nickname of Hercules while attending **New York University**. Mr. Atlas' granddaughter, Valerie, is stronger than most of the 9-year-olds in her neighborhood. If his dream of building a race of human masterpieces has not quite come true, no one can blame him for not trying.

Seated at his desk in his **Manhattan** office the other day, in front of an open window that admitted the cool, clean wind ("Oxygen is LIFE!") from East Twenty-Third Street, **Charles Atlas** expanded his still outsize chest and said, "Life is worth a million bucks! You lose your health, what else have you got?" He fixed me with a penetrating gaze, and I knew it was people like myself who provided him with his infrequent disappointments—men who had started once in the sweet long ago to take his course but who had not kept it up. And now, as he could have told us, we showed a slight tendency to very slightly paunch.

Find this article at:

<http://vault.sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1070853/index.htm>

 [Click to Print](#)

[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) |

[Close](#)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

Copyright © 2007 CNN/Sports Illustrated.