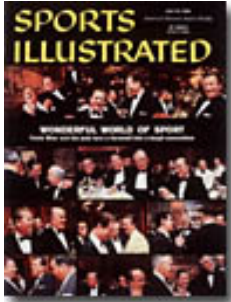
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July 27, 1959

Far Out Beyond Fitness

With fitness getting fashionable, the ageless fad of muscle culture has received a new shot in the arm. Here an old fan, now a famous writer, notes some weird changes in a familiar scene

Stephen Birmingham

I guess I was about 13 when I decided to be the strongest man in the world. It was over a girl named Betty Lou who, at the time, was both taller and stronger than I. I had run across an advertisement in a comic book (we still called them "funny books" in those days) that promised to solve my problem. It showed a skinny guy on a beach with his girl. They were getting along fine until a couple of husky bloods came galumphing along, tossing a big beach ball, and one of them—either accidentally or on purpose—kicked some sand in the skinny fellow's face. When the skinny one started, ineffectually, to protest, he was taunted, shoved and pushed on his backside in the sand. And, because the victor always gets the spoils in funny books and elsewhere, his girl went waltzing off arm in arm with the bully.

My case, of course, was a little different. I had tried to put my arm around Betty Lou one morning when we were parked, side by side, in the bike rack. And Betty Lou, a magnificent specimen, had kicked my kick stand out from underneath me and sent me sprawling on the asphalt. I didn't want revenge. I wanted muscle and authority enough to be able to stand up to her and assert my rights. So I did what the skinny type in the funny-book ad did. I somehow scraped together enough money (I think it was \$25 in those days) for the bodybuilding course which, if it didn't make me the strongest man in the world in 13 weeks' time, would put me, I decided, well on my way.

I was reminded of this the other day when I discovered that a particularly persistent and annoying series of television commercials, advertising the gymnasiums of a **Mr. Vic Tanny**, had begun to have the effect of "selling" me. "Fifty cents a lesson, only 50¢ a lesson!" kept buzzing through my head, along with a vision of myself restored to a state of bouncy fitness, more wiry than an innerspring. The frequent intrusions on my television screen of **Tanny's** corps of cavorting, leotard-clad men and women had driven me almost to the point of distraction but also to the point, in salesmen's language, of purchase. I felt myself submitting, as if by posthypnotic suggestion, to the pitch.

If anything stepped in to save me it was only the thought that by giving in I would simply be joining a national fad. **Tanny** and his fellows have been exploiting and promoting a kind of health hysteria that has got, it appears, a half nelson on **America's** mentality. For instance, a check-out girl in our local supermarket, recently manfully hoisting a heavy carton of groceries to her shoulder, disdainfully rejected my offers to help and said, "Don't worry about me. I'm in great shape physically and spiritually and I owe everything to **Vic Tanny** and **Billy**

Graham." And she smiled the smile of the blessed.

I have looked into the Vic Tanny story a bit, and he is certainly what would be called an enterprising fellow. With nothing more than The American Dream behind him, Tanny—the son of a poor tailor—has managed to parlay a minor talent into a business that is reported to bring in something close to \$15 million a year. His gyms, which have been sprouting like wild flowers (in pink and charcoal gray, his favorite colors) in cities across the country for the last nine years, now number more than 70. There are 10 in the New York area alone. So far, more than a quarter of a million people have subscribed to his courses, but, as we all know, there are many more people than that in the United States. The market has only begun to be tapped.

Tanny's pupils work out in air-conditioned, deodorized elegance, hoisting chromium-plated bar bells, with soft music playing in the background (Tanny gyms, for sheer glossiness, are running neck and neck with Slenderella salons). And for the person who succumbs to the lure of "fifty cents a lesson" there are a number of possibilities—all somewhat more costly. (For sheer ingeniousness and aggressiveness, Tanny's merchandising methods far outshine those of Arthur Murray.) Prices run from \$60 a year on the West Coast (they're higher in the East because of the fancier facilities) to \$339 for a Lifetime Membership. But there are so many "price deals" available that firm prices should probably not be quoted. There are, for example, Family Memberships, and in this area Tanny is fortunate in having, right in his own family, an example of his course's effectiveness with older people and specifically with women. Angela Tanny, his white-haired but still shapely 66-year-old mother, lifts weights joyfully and regularly. And Tanny, who is 46, swart, swaggering, with a California tan and wide shoulders, often works out with her.

One of the most surprising developments in bodybuilding is that during the last five years it has become a family affair. What was once a pastime for prepubescent youths is now a hobby for men and women of all ages. "There seems to be a feeling around here," says a gym instructor, "that the family that weighs in together stays together." And it was this phenomenon as much as anything else that determined me to re-explore the whole huffing, puffing, physical-culture world to see what had happened since I first dreamed of being stronger than Betty Lou.

I decided to go back to the very beginning. In the old days, of course, there was only one bodybuilder, and I was somewhat relieved to find that among purists of bodybuilding he is still No. 1 and Vic Tanny strictly a parvenu. If the bodybuilding population were to arrange itself in a human pyramid, the one man to be given top spot would be Charles Atlas, even though there would be a number of disgruntled shoulders in the lower tiers. Atlas is the unquestioned leader of his field by virtue of his success, his fame and the number of his admirers. "There's only one Charles Atlas," one of these said to me. " Tanny is no Atlas. Lionel Strongfort was no Atlas. Joe Bonomo was no Atlas. Hargitay is no Atlas. Only Atlas is Atlas! He's to muscles what Tiffany's is to diamonds."

Atlas was obviously the man to talk to, and I telephoned him for an appointment. When I met the great man in the still-resplendent flesh I reported the above remarks to him. I discovered that he is not in the least fazed by such extravagant praise. He has heard it often. And at 66—Vic Tanny's mother's age, to be sure—he feels that after 30 years spent producing stronger, healthier, cleaner-living and cleaner-thinking young men at the approximate rate of 50,000 a year, he is hugely entitled to it.

I also mentioned to Mr. Atlas that I had once been one of his pupils. But I confessed that I had not been a good one. Thirteen weeks, to a 13-year-old, seems an eternity, and, though I applied myself to the lessons for the first week or so, I gradually lost interest. Betty Lou may have moved away, or maybe I decided to become a saxophone player in Glenn Miller's orchestra, or something. When I told him this, Mr. Atlas expressed surprise. "You should've kept it up," he said. "You'd be a lot better off today if you did. You'd have a physique

you could show off and they'd say, 'Oh,' and 'Ah,' and 'Wow,' and you wouldn't, like now, have a middle that has a very slight tendency to very slightly paunch." (The Atlas style of speech is just as gravel-voiced, if slightly easier to follow, as [Casey Stengel's](#).)

[Mr. Atlas](#) went on to say that since I hadn't completed it I should have taken advantage of one of the unusual aspects of his course. "If you was not a hundred percent satisfied we would of refunded your dough," he said. "And that's not all. Atlas refunds money, if not satisfied, with six percent interest on! What do you think of that?" [Mr. Atlas](#) also pointed out that at 13 I was at the ideal age to start bodybuilding. It is around this age that a majority of Atlas pupils start and, unlike myself, most of them—as far as [Mr. Atlas](#) knows—finish the course fully satisfied. At least the refund with interest is rarely requested. It is never too late, [Mr. Atlas](#) feels, to start thinking about physical culture but, to a large extent, it goes with youth. [Mr. Atlas](#) feels his greatest debt is to the adolescents and teen-agers of rural America—rural because, for some reason, more Atlas pupils live in villages, hamlets and on farms than in big cities. Physical culture, as [Mr. Atlas](#) sees it, is not just muscle building. It is a whole philosophy in which strength and health and happiness are permanently equated. "It makes sense," Atlas says. "You come right down to it, what's a man got beside what's right here inside his skin? You don't keep that part of you healthy, what have you got left? Right?"

Inside [Charles Atlas](#)' skin things seem to be in very good shape indeed. The Atlas eyes are dark brown and piercing. The Atlas humor is good; he insists that he hasn't a worry in the world. The Atlas complexion is smooth and ruddy. His only sign of decrepitude is that he appears to be very slightly hard of hearing. His hair, though liberally streaked with steel gray, is still surprisingly dark and luxuriant. The Atlas manner is cheerful, vigorous and explosive. If Atlas in a business suit often fails to impress, it is only because his height is not imposing. He is 5 feet 10 inches. A girl who works in the same building as the [Charles Atlas](#) offices in [New York](#) managed to pass [Mr. Atlas](#) in the elevator for years without guessing who he was. "He was always just a nice little man who smiled and said hello every day," she says. "Then my girl friend told me that's [Charles Atlas](#). Imagine! Me, saying hello to [Charles Atlas](#) every day and not knowing it!" Encased in gray worsted flannel, the Atlas torso seems merely stocky. The Atlas neck, in a collar and tie, seems short. And, in a shirt, the Atlas chest—which is 47 inches normal, or twelve inches more than the average male's—merely makes the Atlas chin seem unusually deep in the Atlas shoulders. All this, however, supposedly corrects itself when [Mr. Atlas](#) emerges—as he insists he frequently still does—in leopard trunks as [America's](#) Most Perfectly Developed Man.

This title was awarded him in 1921, along with a check for \$1,000, when he won a contest sponsored by the late Bernarr Macfadden's magazine, *Physical Culture*. It gave Atlas one of his greatest assets. Without it, it seems doubtful that his name could have become what it is today—synonymous with bodybuilding. And without the name [Charles Atlas](#), [Mr. Atlas](#) feels, bodybuilding would not be what it is today. What was once the exclusive bailiwick of sideshow strong men is now—thanks (Atlas thinks) in large part to Atlas—a popular national sport. Atlas estimates that today—with much of the credit due to Atlas—eight out of 10 young American men engage in one form of it or another. And it is also now international. In England—a country not noted for producing Adonises—it has become wildly popular. (The young Duke of Kent is reportedly a satisfied Atlas pupil.) It is also popular in [France](#), [Belgium](#) and [Germany](#), though not, for some reason, particularly so in the rest of [Europe](#). It is very popular in [Scandinavia](#) and [Iceland](#), and perhaps even more so in [Mexico](#), Central and [South America](#). In [Greece](#), traditional home of godlike young men, they couldn't seem to care less.

The official Atlas measurements have been recorded and filed for posterity in the [New York Public Library](#). In addition to the staggering figure for Atlas' chest, a few of the others are: biceps, flexed, 17 inches; waist, a trim 32 inches; forearm, 14• inches. His thigh measures 23• inches and his calf 16• inches. He weighs 180 pounds. These statistics were gathered at the time of the contest, in 1921, and when I

suggested that some of them might have changed over the past 38 years, **Mr. Atlas** bridled and said, "They're 100% the same today, exactly. Or," he added, "just about." To prove it, he urged me to punch him in the stomach—hard. I did so, and, true enough, it was like punching the trunk of a giant sequoia.

One thing has happened to the Atlas frame, though, and that is that its owner seems less eager to display it nowadays. Once upon a time an interview with Atlas invariably began with him stripping off his shirt, and continued with Atlas sitting behind his desk in the seminude. That ritual is now, for some reason or other, dispensed with, though I was proudly shown "the arm." (The arm, I assure you, is every bit as magnificent as it is advertised to be; it rolls and surges, as he flexes it, with a vast muscular groundswell.) Today the only persons treated to a glimpse of the total Atlas physique are members of The **New York Athletic Club**, where Atlas religiously works out three afternoons a week, running anywhere from three to five miles an afternoon at a brisk eight or nine minutes to the mile or swimming the same distance in the pool; or neighbors in Point Lookout, **Long Island**, where Atlas has a summer place. Atlas is a familiar figure on the beach, either swimming, exercising or scouting for driftwood which, as a hobby, he fashions into odd and interesting pieces of outdoor furniture. One former Point Lookout neighbor, James Egan, the **New York** advertising man, says that in his considered opinion there were certain unguarded moments when the Atlas middle showed a slight tendency to very slightly paunch. Atlas himself merely snorts at such a suggestion.

That Atlas ever managed to achieve his world-famous physique in the first place seems now to have been largely a matter of chance. Born in southern **Italy**, the son of a farmer, Atlas was christened Angelo Siciliano. Neither his mother nor his father was notably well developed or even husky. When Angelo was 11 years old his family brought him to **America**. "I was a 97-pound weakling," begins an official piece of **Charles Atlas** promotion material under a photograph of the youthful Goliath looking stoop-shouldered and slack-jawed. "I was a scrawny, skinny scarecrow," the brochure continues. "I was so ashamed of my puny body that I dreaded stripping for gym. I was a complete washout at sports. Girls used to snicker at me behind my back. I was miserable. I wanted to do something about my physique—but I didn't even know how to begin."

This account, breathless though it is, is evidently an accurate description of young Angelo's physical state at the time. In those days, living in **Brooklyn**, the youthful Angelo used to spend his Saturdays listlessly hanging around one of the Italian settlement houses in the borough. That was how, more or less accidentally, he found himself tagging along after a group of boys and girls who were going on a tour of the Brooklyn Museum. "I'm sort of following 'em," he says, "not even noticing when we got there, and then, all at once, I begin to notice all the statues. Some of them was real statues. Some was only whatchamacallit, plastic casts. But anyways, I'm noticing the physiques on some of these fellows who was not attired, you see. And I'm looking over some of these specimens. And I ask myself: What's this? How can this be, such a development? Is this an imagination of the artist, or what?" By the time he left the museum, he says, he had made up his mind to turn himself into the flesh-and-bone equivalent of Phidias' Olympian Zeus. He went home that night and started to exercise.

Five years later, by the time he was 20, he had a "pretty good physique," and, as a result of various feats of strength, had begun to earn the nickname Atlas. He liked the name. (He later had his name legally changed, adding, arbitrarily, Charles because he liked that name, too.) He liked the way he felt. "I began to really feel great," he says. Still he had no clear idea of what his future career might be. He was earning, at that time, around \$12 a week doing odd jobs, and, one day, while "showing off around **Coney Island**," he was stopped and asked if he'd care to do some modeling. Siciliano-Atlas said he'd be happy to and was taken to the studio of **Mrs. Harry Payne Whitney**,

who had been looking for a well-muscled model for a soldiers' monument she was working on. "She looked at the muscles and said 'Wow!' " says Atlas. "Bingo, I was making a buck an hour modeling for Mrs. Whitney." He went from one sculptor to another and, as a result, is today immortalized in a number of municipal monuments all over the country. That's Atlas as George Washington in the Calder group at the base of Washington Arch in New York City. That's also Atlas as Alexander Hamilton in front of the Treasury Building in Washington. He is Leif Ericsson somewhere, he can't quite remember where, and he is Two Soldiers, both of them, in Mrs. Whitney's Cleveland group. He is in the Battle of the Marne monument in France, and he also appears on a medal awarded by the Bell System, though not, as is often believed, as the wing-footed Mercury who serves as that telephone company's symbol, "the spirit of communication."

Things *still* might not have got under way for Atlas had it not been for three isolated bits of musing that he did along about this time. The three musings turned themselves into three ideas. The first one went something like this: It's better exercise for a man to lift a 10-pound weight 10 times than a 100-pound weight once; therefore, it should be even *better* exercise for him to lift a one-pound weight a hundred times. Very well, if this is so then would it be far, far better exercise to lift no weight an infinite number of times? The second Atlas musing was this one: How does a baby get its strength? "I watched little babies," he says. "I watched the little fellows pushing their hands together, pulling their hands apart, pushing their feet down, snapping them back again. I thought, that's how a baby gets his strength! He's pitting one set of muscles against the other!" The third Atlas notion, which is similar to the second, occurred when he was walking through the zoo looking at the caged wildlife. "I watched that old tiger stretching and flexing his muscles in the cage with a big lazy yawn on him, and I thought: What keeps him-in shape so good? And then I thought, he keeps in shape like a baby gets strong. When he's stretching he's not lazing—he's exercising. He's putting his muscles into play, pitting one set against the other!" From these three thoughts came Atlas' famous bodybuilding theory which was later christened, and copyrighted, "Dynamic Tension."

The simplest of the Atlas exercises provides the easiest explanation of what Dynamic Tension is. With the heel of your left palm in front of your chest, press as hard as you can against the heel of your right palm, resisting meanwhile with the right—keep pushing as though you expected to be able to push your right hand out the window. Now reverse the procedure—pushing your right palm against your left. This exercise is virtually an Atlas trademark. When you see people doing this as they walk along the street—and, once you're aware of it, you do see them—you know they are Charles Atlas students. The Tiffany of muscles himself, apparently, has done so much palm pushing that it appears as a nervous mannerism when he talks.

With the \$1,000 won in the Physical Culture contest, \$5,000 more borrowed from his mother and a theory based on tigers, tots and weightless lifting, the young Charles Atlas set out to strengthen and healthen the human landscape. His first step was to open a gymnasium and to expound upon his theories there. It soon became clear, however, that Dynamic Tension could be much more widely and efficiently taught through some other medium, such as the U.S. mails. At this point, around 1929, Atlas had a final piece of good fortune. He made the acquaintance of a gentleman named Charles Roman. Roman, at the time, was working for an advertising agency and had been specializing in mail-order and coupon advertising. That the two should become associated seemed a natural. "When Charlie asked me to be his partner, I was, needless to say, delighted," says Mr. Roman, a small, dapper, smooth-voiced and dark-haired man. "After all, Charles was no businessman." And he adds generously, "But then I'm no physical specimen, either."

From the beginning, the Roman-Atlas partnership was a perfect wedding of brains and brawn. Roman helped Atlas polish up his mail-order course. (Roman modestly admits that the term Dynamic Tension is his invention. "It was dynamic, it was tense, so I thought, why

not Dynamic Tension?") He developed the Atlas advertising program which is in effect today. Roman set up the corporate structure of Charles Atlas, Ltd., opened the **Charles Atlas** offices in **London** and later in **Buenos Aires**. And Roman organized, for the company's figurehead, some remarkably effective personal publicity.

There began to be a series of well-publicized feats of strength which, though most of them took place 30-odd years ago, have proved astonishingly durable for the purposes of **Charles Atlas** advertising. They continue to be touted as though they had happened last week. Atlas did, to be sure, do some pretty impressive things. He once singlehandedly towed a 72-ton observation car of the Broadway Limited for 112 feet along the tracks of the Pennsylvania Railroad's Sunnyside yards in **New York**. "Then, just in case they thought I was maybe pulling the thing down a hill," Atlas says, "I turned around and pulled the thing 115 feet back the other way." At another point the world's most perfectly developed man pulled six strung-together automobiles for a full mile. Another time, in **Bermuda**, he publicly bent a raw steel bar five feet long and an inch square, held in his teeth, into a perfect V. There were a number of occasions when motorists around **New York**, stopped with flat tires, were astonished to see a dark-haired young man bounding toward them with an offer to be a human jack.

Privately, on the other hand, **Mr. Atlas** has always been one of the gentlest of men. He has never in his life been in a fight. Once, on the subway, he was rudely and aggressively jostled by a roughneck. **Mr. Atlas** merely inched away from the other man and said politely, "Beg your pardon."

As a matter of fact, Atlas has always emphasized gentlemanliness as well as manliness. A newcomer to the **Charles Atlas** course is usually surprised to see how little Lesson 1 is devoted to affairs of the muscles and how much is given over to what might be called rules of good behavior, and moralizing. "Throw off any tendencies to unwholesome influences," Lesson 1 says. "You must have POWER OF WILL. You must have COURAGE and fear nothing. You must have absolute CONFIDENCE—and you must have PERSISTENCE." Lesson 1 goes on to discuss the value of "deep breathing of pure outside air," and correct posture. "Nothing indicates a REAL MAN more than the way he holds himself. If your chest is sunken and your stomach sticking out, you cannot stand out as a man with personality."

As a student progresses further in the course he runs into some of Atlas' dietary theories. Some are fairly unsurprising. A pet peeve, for instance, is white bread which has had, he insists, many of its nourishing elements "bleached out." Lesson 3 says, "Be sure to eat WHOLE WHEAT BREAD." Atlas is also a bug about drinking water, "DRINK MORE WATER," commands Lesson 3. He also favors milk drinking, but, in the case of both milk and water, he recommends that they be not drunk but eaten slowly, and thoroughly *chewed*. Atlas himself is a strong fruit and vegetable man. His normal breakfast consists of a glass of hot water with lemon juice (for an eye opener), followed by a glass of orange juice and two bananas. He will either skip lunch altogether or he will have a glass of vegetable cocktail and a few sprigs of celery, or two apples. Dinner, the largest Atlas meal, might typically consist of a before-dinner vegetable cocktail, followed by three broiled lamb chops, a small salad and a baked apple.

All meals, however Spartan or frugivorous, should be eaten, Atlas feels, slowly. "Americans eat too fast," he says. Atlas likes to dine leisurely with music and, in his **Brooklyn** apartment overlooking the Narrows, symphonic and operatic phonograph records play for many occasions. An Atlas innovation, one which he recommends to his students, is a "music bath," a long, leisurely bath taken to a soft musical accompaniment.

Atlas, needless to say, neither smokes nor drinks. He drinks neither alcohol nor coffee nor tea. He will tolerate moderate tea, coffee or alcohol drinking in others but can hardly bear to associate with smokers. When students, as they occasionally do, visit him in his **New**

York office, they find a large ashtray on his desk. "It's for their last cigarette," Atlas says menacingly. Atlas had a cigarette himself, once. It made him violently ill. He also, on the occasion of his 50th birthday, had a glass of wine—"just to see if I'd like it." He didn't. Some of Atlas' theories on food are more startling than others. I had never heard, for example, that lettuce contains a high amount of opium and is, therefore, good to munch on just before retiring. It speeds you to slumberland, says Atlas.

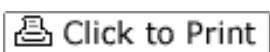
Another thing the Charles Atlas student learns is that there is relatively little "hard sell" to the course. In response to each coupon inquiry Atlas sends out a letter that begins, "Congratulations!" and a booklet outlining the course. If the prospect fails to reply to this, a follow-up letter is sent about a week later, but beyond that there are no further inducements. Once having signed for the 13 Charles Atlas lessons—they now cost \$30 cash or \$35 on the time-payment plan—the student receives a six-to 10-page lesson every week. When the lessons are finished, each student receives a diploma and, after that, continues to receive, from time to time, dispatches from the Atlas offices which contain "advice on matters of strength and health." These mailings continue, as Atlas puts it, "for LIFE," but they contain no solicitations or exhortations or attempts to sell anything. "You finish me and you're finished," says Atlas proudly. "Except I tell you to keep up the exercising. Keep up! Keep up!-Don't let that stomach get saggy! But I got nothing more to sell—no gadgets, no dumbbells, no vitamins, no nonsense."

If the student is 16 years old or older ("Younger fellows don't need such knowledge") he receives, free with the course, a 10-volume *Encyclopedia of Hygienics*. This work, which is "about every phase of personal hygiene and manhood—over 1,500 pages of clear information," was written by "the well-known authority," Dr. David H. Keller. Other than this, no apparatus or extra goods go with the course, and this fact clearly is one of the course's great appeals. Atlas admits he could make more money if he were to sell, as many of his competitors do, various items of bodybuilding equipment—bar bells, hand grips, chest pulls, wall pulls, skip ropes, foot stirrups, head straps, energy wafers, virility pills, jewelry, statuettes, rowing machines, sunbathing attire and, incredible though it may seem, a great many other things. But since his methods, he feels, are nature's methods, he staunchly refuses to permit any paraphernalia other than Hope, Courage, Confidence, Faith and Persistence.

Atlas has long been involved in an extracurricular, but well-publicized, feud with a certain Mr. Robert Hoffman, publisher of a magazine called *Strength & Health* and a purveyor, among other things, of bar bells. Atlas grows excited at the mention of Hoffman's name. "What's that guy think he's talking to, a bunch of morons?" he cried. "I mean, what does he think? You know what he says? He says you can eat, smoke, drink and still stay healthy if you use a couple of bar bells! That's for morons! Morons!"

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