

Hey, Skinny! Charles Atlas Lives!

The Man Is Dead, but the Name Has Kept Its Muscle

By MARIA NEWMAN

HARRINGTON PARK, N.J., May 30 — The letters still pour in every week, as heartfelt as they were 70 years ago.

"Dear Mr. Atlas," reads one from Sydney, Australia. "I know you probably hear this every day, but I need your help. I am a 16-year-old small weak geek. I am the little kid who everyone laughs at and makes fun of."

Charles Atlas, who transformed himself from a weakling into a muscular millionaire by dreaming up a mail-order fitness course and advertising it in comic books, has been dead for 28 years. But the letters addressed to him do not go unanswered. Charles Atlas Ltd., the company he founded in 1929, is alive and well and — if not quite as robust as it once was — still helping to turn the scrawny into the brawny.

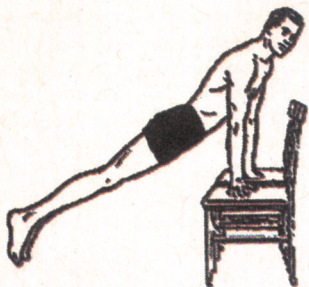
In an age of elaborate, niche-marketed fitness programs and diet plans, the operation remains remarkably simple. It requires no special equipment or classes — only the "Dynamic-Tension" Bodybuilding and Fitness Course, 12 lessons in a three-ring binder (\$45 plus shipping and handling) that promise "new muscles in days!" through tips on nutrition, wholesome living and a regimen of exercises that pit one muscle against another. The company still advertises in comic books, using its original, now-classic cartoon of a bully kicking sand in the face of a hapless man as his date looks on in disappointment. And the bulk of its clientele is still teenage boys eager to bulk up.

Some accommodations have been made to the times. The company now relies mostly on its Web site (www.charlesatlas.com) and e-mail to communicate with its customers, whom it refers to as "students." It is trying to appeal more to women, and it offers a line of vitamin and dietary supplements. But it has also discovered the powerful appeal of nostalgia, using all the old grainy black-and-white images of its strapping founder



James Estrin/The New York Times

Jeffrey C. Hogue, with a cutout of Charles Atlas, bought the Atlas company in 1997. The company still sells the muscle-building workout plan that includes exercises like the one at left, a chest workout that requires two chairs.



starting position



ending position

Charles Atlas's Name Still Has Plenty of Muscle

Continued From Page B1

to reach those who remember and even those who do not.

"Retro is the key word today in advertising," said Jeffrey C. Hogue, who bought the company in 1997 from Charles P. Roman, Mr. Atlas's partner. "We never left retro. But how do we take an image we all know and love, and make it appeal to women or younger people? That's what we're working on."

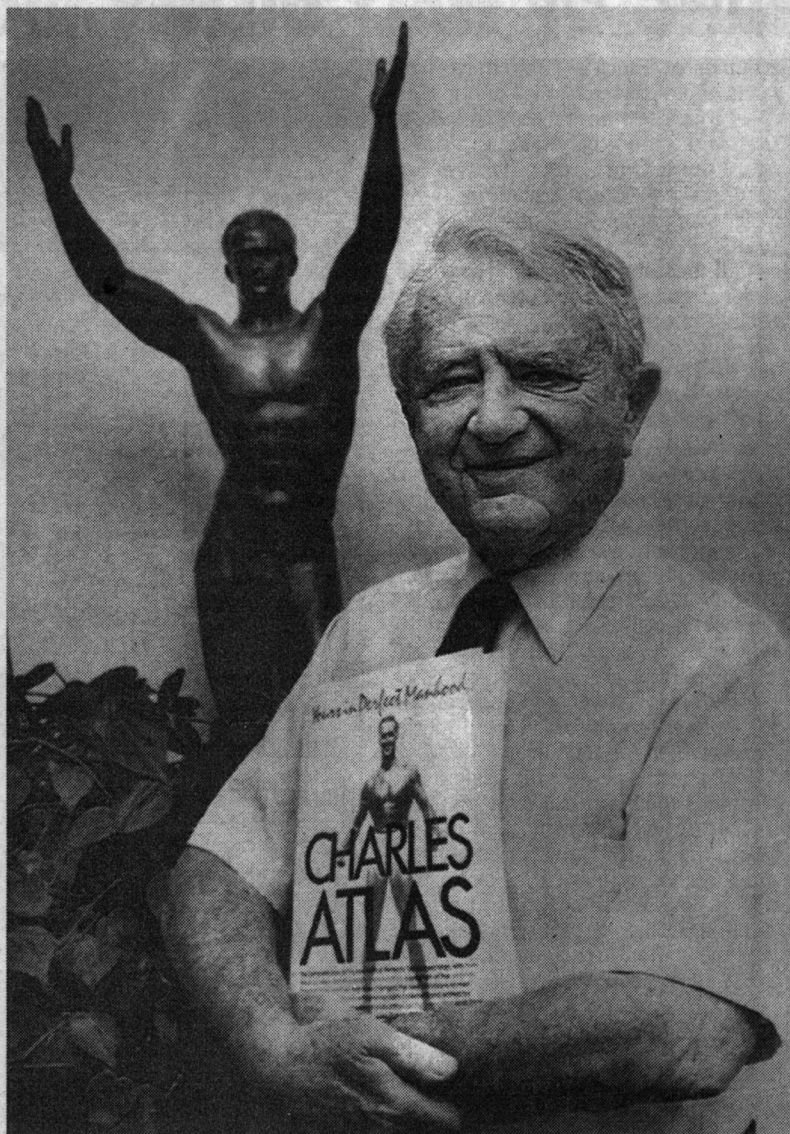
These days, the letters to Charles Atlas are answered by Mr. Hogue, a 41-year-old intellectual property lawyer who says he has followed the Dynamic-Tension plan since he was a boy, although he favors three-piece suits to the leopard-skin trunks that were Mr. Atlas's signature. He is helped by Cynthia Soroka, 33, the company's vice president, a bookish, size 4 executive who says that she, too, has benefited from the workouts.

In a modest two-story frame building behind a model train shop and bird shop in this Bergen County suburb, they and five full-time assistants share a small office crammed with the memorabilia of Mr. Atlas, an Italian immigrant who turned an insecurity into a profitable strength-building course long before the fitness mania overtook the nation. There are life-size cutouts of Mr. Atlas in his leopard trunks, photos of him flexing his glistening muscles alongside all manner of celebrities he helped, and file cabinets filled with letters written to him by men and some women who turned to him for help in overcoming the humiliation of physical weakness.

"I bought what to me was part of my boyhood," said Mr. Hogue, in the soft drawl of his native Arkansas. "I had been an Atlas student myself, and I love all this."

Few companies today can boast the longevity of Charles Atlas Ltd., whose fitness plan has remained largely unchanged since Mr. Atlas and Mr. Roman wrote it. It provides guidance on everything from self-confidence ("Go steadily on from one success to another") to proper sleep habits. Lesson One urges layabouts: "Don't dilly-dally! GET UP! If you linger and hesitate you are weakening your will power, with the tendency to start the day all wrong, slouching through it with no conscious aim."

Mr. Atlas, whose real name was Angelo Siciliano, arrived at Ellis Island from Italy in 1903 when he was 10 years old. He was often picked on as a boy because of his slight build, and later traced his transformation to two New York spots he visited: the Brooklyn Museum, where he saw a statue of Hercules; and the Prospect Park Zoo, where he was captivated by the sight of a lion stretching its muscles. The lion had visible strength without the use of barbells and machines, and young Angelo



Associated Press

Charles P. Roman, in 1982, with a statue of Charles Atlas, his longtime business partner. Mr. Roman died in 1999. Mr. Atlas died in 1972.

concluded that "he's been pitting one muscle against another."

So Mr. Siciliano began developing a muscle-strengthening routine that emphasized isometric and isotonic exercises that did not require weights or other equipment. For him, the regimen resulted in a 47-inch chest and a 32-inch waist.

He went on to become a bodybuilder and a model for sculptors. He changed his name to Charles Atlas, and in 1922 was named the World's Most Perfectly Developed Man at a bodybuilding competition at Madison Square Garden. His prize was a screen test for a Tarzan movie, or \$1,000. He took the cash, and started selling his exercise program through the mail.

But when he met Mr. Roman in 1928, his company was foundering. Mr. Roman, an adman, came up with the idea for the comic book ads, and the name "Dynamic-Tension." He became president of the new Charles Atlas Ltd., but mostly acted as public relations agent for the photogenic Mr. Atlas, and the new company

made them both wealthy.

In 1969, less than three years before his death, Mr. Atlas sold Mr. Roman his share of the business. Mr. Roman kept the company going from his Chelsea office and a warehouse in Perth Amboy, N.J., until 1997, when he sold the enterprise to Mr. Hogue.

Mr. Hogue had mailed away for the course when he was 15 and attending a military school in Tennessee, finding himself unable to tote heavy rifles for artillery drills. He went on to become a lawyer and a film producer, as well as a collector of movie posters and other memorabilia. He wrote to the aging Mr. Roman on a whim, asking if he would be interested in selling the company.

Over lunch, Mr. Roman named a price, and Mr. Hogue agreed to it on the spot. The two went on to become friends until Mr. Roman died in 1999.

"I guess he agreed to sell it to me because he knew it wasn't about money," Mr. Hogue said. "He didn't want someone to exploit the name he had built upon over the years. I felt such an affinity to him."

Mr. Hogue will not disclose how much he paid for the business or how much revenue it brings in. But it is clear that the company is not the cash machine it used to be.

The business has had some ups and downs in the last few years, Ms. Soroka said, but it manages to survive because its product endures. Internet sales have been a boost, she said, as has a segment about Mr. Atlas on A&E's "Biography" program. (The program, produced in 1999, will be rebroadcast in July.) In 1997, the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History created an exhibit of Charles Atlas artifacts provided by Mr. Hogue and his company.

"It's been a long, hard, rough road," Ms. Soroka said. "We're starting to see things turn around."

The company is developing an audiotape course for the blind, and working out the details for a CD-ROM version and one that can be downloaded from the Internet.

But the biggest change could come in its marketing. Although Mr. Hogue still advertises primarily in comic books, where ad space is relatively cheap, he has hired a firm to come up with new magazine ads to appeal to women and younger people, as well as older people who took the course as teenagers.

He says he is also exploring more opportunities to license the Atlas name. Companies like I.B.M. and Microsoft have paid Mr. Hogue for its use in their own advertising, as has the Texas tourism bureau. He says he has also been talking with companies that would manufacture other items bearing the Atlas name, like a belt that would keep track of weight loss, and an air freshener.

But the heart of the business remains the 12-lesson course, and Ms. Soroka and Mr. Hogue say they are inspired by the stacks of mail and e-mail messages they get, requesting the course or asking for specifics on the plan. One recent trip to the Madison Square Station in Manhattan — where the company has used Post Office Box D for decades — yielded 70 letters or orders. Some of the letters could have been written half a century ago, like one from someone named Nick, who reported that he had started the Atlas course a month ago and had gained 10 pounds.

"My whole body seems to be getting bigger and stronger," he said. "Girls have started noticing me more and taking a double take. Also the people who once picked on me have backed off. Not all but some."

Mr. Hogue and Ms. Soroka respond to all the mail addressed to Mr. Atlas in the first person, almost as if he were still alive. But Mr. Hogue says there is no attempt to mislead customers about the founder's demise.

"We don't hide it on the Web site," he said. "But people need and want to believe in Mr. Atlas. He really is still with us."