

THE POPE'S MAN IN BROOKLYN: HOW BISHOP DAILY LEADS 1.6 MILLION NYC CATHOLICS

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atlas shrugged

Brooklyn's legendary strongman is not letting his death slow him down.

On a hot summer day at Coney Island in 1913, Angelo Siciliano found a name for his new American self, destined to become world famous. "Hey, Angelo, you have muscles just like that Atlas guy on the hotel," someone said, referring to a gold-painted statue that decorated the front of the nearby Atlas Hotel. It was a moment of inspiration. Charles Atlas was born!

Or so the story goes. Another version of this episode takes place at a Brooklyn gym. The entire Angelo Siciliano/Charles Atlas story is a mixture of fact, embellishment and apocrypha—a modern myth that has endured long after the original Charles Atlas died, on Christmas Eve, 1972.

Charles Atlas ads have begun reappearing in *Boy's Life*, *Popular Mechanics*, *The National Enquirer* and Marvel comics after an absence of nearly 10 years, and employees at Charles Atlas, Ltd. are once again busy filling orders for the Dynamic-Tension® course in health and strength.

Last May the company reached another milestone in its history when Jeffrey C. Hogue, 38, an Arkansas lawyer and sometime movie producer, bought Charles Atlas, Ltd., from Charles P. Roman, the man who cofounded the company with Atlas in 1928. Hogue moved to New York last year to take charge of the company, and still

keeps in touch on a daily basis with the 91-year-old former owner, who he considers one of the greatest advertising copywriters ever to have walked the face of the earth. It was Roman who wrote the classic Charles Atlas ads ("I was once a 97-pound weakling") and the archetypal sand-kicking cartoon epic "The Insult That Made a Man out of Mac," which ended with those immortal words "Gee, Mac, you are a real man after all!"

"I'll prove that YOU, too, can be a NEW MAN!" declares a caption from another popular ad, which shows a picture of a perfectly proportioned Atlas dressed only in a leopard-skin loincloth. "Hey SKINNY" taunts one ad—"MUSCLES? in 7 days" promises another.

For \$45 (plus \$5 shipping and handling), the Charles Atlas company sends Atlas' patented course to subscribers in 13 weekly installments. There's also a membership card and a diploma for people who complete the course. The material is being updated (mentions of things like "soda pop" are being replaced with more modern terminology), but the basic course hasn't really changed in nearly 70 years.

"Mr. Atlas came to America in 1903, just a little boy alone with his mother. Bless his heart, he didn't speak any English at all. He was a small kid—skinny and frail," recalls Hogue, with a touch of melodrama. Natives of Calabria, a region in the "heel" of southern Italy, Angelo and his mom moved in with an uncle who had a flat

on Front Street, in a tough, working-class neighborhood of Italians, Irish, Jews and Poles.

When he was 15, Angelo left school and took a factory job making leather purses. A photograph of him taken during this period shows a 97-pound weakling—pale, skinny and glum. One Halloween night, as he was returning from his 10-hour work shift, Angelo was attacked by a gang of neighborhood bullies who beat him with a stocking packed

with ashes. When he staggered home to Front Street, Angelo got another thrashing from his uncle for getting into a fight. Crying himself to sleep that night, he vowed that he would never take a beating again.

A year later, in the summer of 1909, Angelo was among a group of boys taken on a tour of the Brooklyn Museum by the director of an Italian settlement house, William Davenport. When the group scattered after the tour, the scrawny teenager flopped onto a bench in the Hall of Casts, a room filled with life-sized plaster replicas of Roman statuary. His eye was drawn to a giant statue of Hercules at the far end of the room, then to a number of other statues, all bristling with muscles and radiating power and dignity. Angelo was fascinated. He asked Davenport how these ancients became so muscular.

"Exercise, Angelo," Davenport told him. "Muscles come from exercise."

Angelo started reading *Physical Culture*, the popular magazine published by Bernarr

Macfadden, the New York-based fitness promoter and health advocate. He went to the local YMCA and worked out with medicine balls, side horses and wall weights, but something was missing. Angelo eventually found his answer while on one of his weekly visits to the Prospect Park Zoo.

"I was standing there in front of a lion's cage, and the old gentleman was lying down asleep, and all of a sudden he gets up and he gives a stretch," recalled Atlas years later. "Well, he stretched himself all over—you know how they do, first one leg and then another—and the muscles ran around like rabbits under a rug. I says to myself, 'Does this gentleman have any barbells, any exercisers? No sir. Then what's he doing?' And it came over me. I says to myself, 'He's been pitting one muscle against another.'"

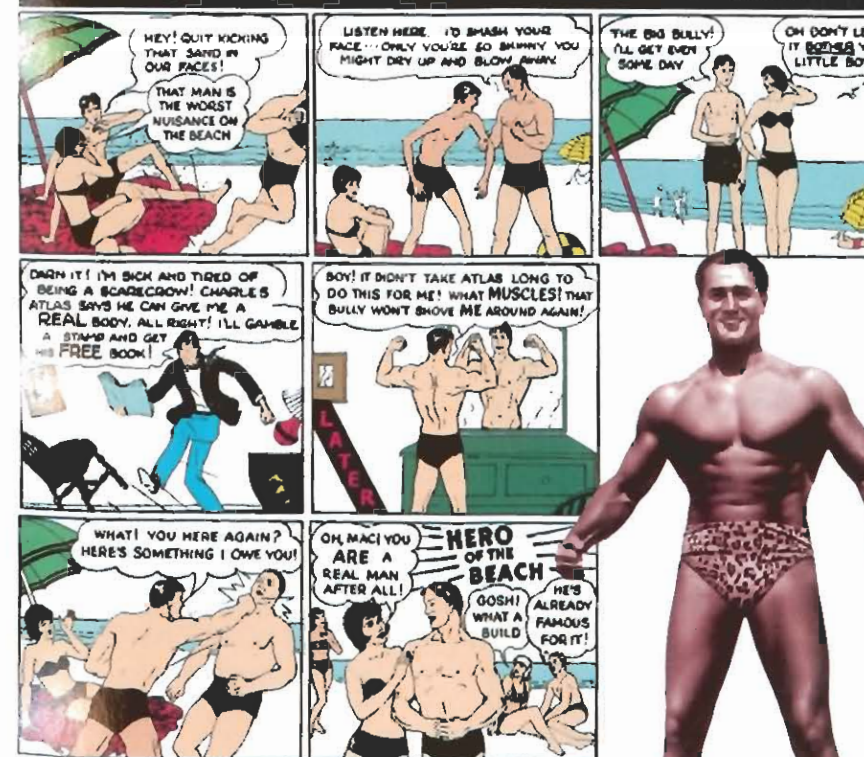
By 1917 Charles Atlas had a job as a professional Coney Island strongman, demonstrating exercise equipment and working with carnival acts. A friend in those days was fellow strongman Joe Bonomo, the son of Coney Island candy-

store owners, who was eight years younger than Atlas. In 1920, wearing a leopard-skin loincloth he borrowed from Atlas, Bonomo won a contest for "the Modern Apollo" and embarked on a career as a Hollywood stuntman. Bonomo later started a publishing outfit, Bonomo Culture Institute, which rivaled Charles Atlas in the '40s and '50s.

Atlas also won his share of muscle competitions, winning the titles of "World's Most Beautiful Man" and "America's Most Perfectly Developed Man" in the early '20s.

But while Bonomo wrestled with stuffed tigers in silent movies and wore a gorilla suit (for *Murders in the Rue Morgue*, with Bela Lugosi), Atlas earned \$100 a week as an artist's model for some of the most prominent sculptors of his time. According to some sources, his body, in whole or part, is the model for an estimated 75 statues around the country. Supposedly two of the most prominent examples are the statue of Alexander Hamilton at the U.S. Treasury Building in Washington, D.C., and the statue of

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VALET PARKING



George Washington in New York's Washington Square Park.

For all the monumental work he inspired, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man" lived modestly with his wife, Margaret, and two children, Diana and Charles, Jr., in a small house at 7901 12th Avenue in Bay Ridge. He later moved to a more upscale apartment on Shore Road with a view of the water. After his wife died, in early 1966, the devoutly Catholic muscle man gradually lost interest in his company and became more involved in religious matters, finally selling his half of the concern to Charles P. Roman in 1970, just two years before dying of a heart attack at a hospital near his summer home in Point Lookout, Long Island.

But his death did not hinder the spread of the Dynamic-Tension® exercise program, which has always featured the narrative voice of Mr. Atlas. The company Web site (www.charlesatlas.com) even has Atlas announcing, "I am currently developing a number of outstanding health products which will retain my official Charles Atlas'

seal of approval." Nowhere in any of the material is it mentioned that Atlas has been dead for 25 years, and the company policy regarding his passing seems to be a modified version of "Don't ask, don't tell."

"I've considered holding auditions for a new person but decided against it. I don't think there could ever be another Mr. Atlas," says Hogue of the immortal figure he now owns. "Mr. Atlas has been the good friend, the inspiration and the mentor for generations. He's an American icon."

Much of that vaunted status came as the result of decades of heavy advertising. By 1972 the company had sold more than 6 million individual fitness courses and received "tens of thousands" of testimonials to the program's success.

"In the beginning we had lots of different ads," remembers Roman, who still makes time for 20 minutes of Dynamic-Tension exercises each morning in his Manhattan apartment. "As time went on we just stuck with the ones that worked."

Historically, Charles Atlas has done its best business during periods of high unemployment, when people had ample time to practice the isotonic arts of Dynamic-Tension. The lessons require no investment in exercise equipment and include sensible dietary and lifestyle suggestions. There is also a lot of direct encouragement from Mr. Atlas himself.

Hogue and his new team hope to broaden the Atlas empire, eventually making a video version of the Dynamic-Tension training regime. They are also keeping a close watch on their copyright. Last September, Hogue filed a \$60 million lawsuit in Manhattan Federal Court against the state of Texas, charging that a commercial promoting Texas tourism used dialogue from the Charles Atlas sand-in-face cartoon without permission or attribution. The two sides have since settled amicably.

Then there are those pesky people from the Smithsonian Institution who have visited company headquarters twice already, hoping for a donation of some of the Charles Atlas archival material. "But I don't want to give them something that will just be available to a few scholars," says Hogue of the Smithsonian. "I think they ought to put some of this stuff on permanent display."

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