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“Hey Skinny, Your Ribs Are Showing”:
The Fitness Industry of Charles Atlas and Masculinity in Early Twentieth-Century United States

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Early twentieth-century United States witnessed the fast development of fitness industry. The most well-known and successful example might be the “Dynamic Tension” program, a mail order workout course created by Charles Atlas and his marketing partner Charles Roman. The program of Atlas enjoyed great success that continues to this day and has owned over 30 million customers.¹ During the heyday of his program from 1929 to 1948, Atlas claimed that it could provide qualities that American men believed they needed at that time, including a sense of control, increased sexual vigour, and attractiveness and a strong personality. It will be argued that these qualities represented the cornerstones of masculinity in the male psyche at a time when the country experienced a perceived crisis of masculinity.²

The conception of masculinity in the United States had been changing during the past two centuries. In the first half of 19th century, men of rotund proportions were considered the embodiment of health and fitness. Muscularity then was associated with

² For the purposes of this essay, “psyche” has been taken to mean the male spirit or mind, and masculinity “as the possession of qualities traditionally associated with men.” See, respectively, Oxford Dictionary, http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/psyche and http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/masculinity (accessed September 19, 2013).
the working class, toiling in fields or factories. This perception began changing from the 1860s onwards with the adoption of physical culture, generally defined as “the sum total of a society’s activities and attitudes connected with physical development and education”. There was a societal acceptance of exercising as a means of improving the body. This change was primarily due to increased interest in sport among the upper classes and also to the rise of “Christian Muscularity” among the lower classes, whereby a good Christian was seen as a strong Christian. Men such as Eugen Sandow and Bernarr McFadden became living embodiments of physical culture in the early twentieth century. Both Sandow and McFadden proved very successful in spreading the concept of physical culture before the arrival of Atlas.

Immigration and industrialization during the late 19th century also helped transform American understanding of muscularity. The rise of immigration and industrialization led some social commentators to believe that white American men were becoming too feminine. Additionally important, the large influx of European immigrants resulted in increasing economic competition and a destabilized sense of masculinity in the U.S. during the nineteenth century. Under the perceived crises of masculinity, men sought a muscular body type in the early twentieth century as a means of separating themselves from women and immigrants.

The economic crises in the early 20th century also contributed to the deepening of a perceived crisis of masculinity among American men, that in turn contributed to the

development of fitness industry, such as Atlas’s business. Scholars have noted that during the Great Depression, men blamed themselves for the economic crash.\(^8\) Indeed, Atlas’s business partner, Roman, noted in 1942 that their business tended to do well during times of crisis, as men believed they were unemployed due to a lack of physical power.\(^9\) The loss of employment led to emasculation in some men during the Great Depression. Engaging in physical self-improvement gave unemployed men back a sense of control. Men turned to fitness as compensation for social changes that left them feeling stripped of their former power.\(^10\) Added to this, World War II in the 1930s and 1940s made men more conscious of their bodies, as military fitness became a talking point in the media.\(^11\) Physical fitness was not just a matter of pride; it arguably became a means of survival and self-preservation. Taken as a whole, these long-term and short-term societal trends go some way in explaining the society and male psyche, into which Atlas and Roman tapped.

Of relevance to the business success was the public persona presented by Atlas and his business partner Roman. Randy Roach perhaps sums up the fitness industry best when he described much of it as “muscle, smoke and mirrors.”\(^12\) Atlas himself was an almost mythical embodiment of many of the prevailing societal changes discussed above. He was an Italian immigrant who, according to legend, went from being a “97 pound weakling” as a boy, to winning Bernarr McFadden’s “Most Perfectly Developed Man” competition in 1921 and 1922. After Atlas’s victory in 1922, it is said that

\(^12\) Roach, *Muscle, Smoke, & Mirrors*, xii.
McFadden ceased holding the competition since Atlas would win every time.\textsuperscript{13} Atlas himself preached and practiced a healthy, clean life, reminiscent of “Christian Muscularity” of the previous century.\textsuperscript{14} Some contemporaries, including Atlas himself, compared Atlas’s physique with that of the Greek Gods.\textsuperscript{15} Atlas set up an exercise mail order business in 1922, however it did not take off until Charles Roman joined the business in 1929. Roman was an account executive at a New York Advertising Agency before he met Atlas. Months afterwards, Roman became Atlas’s partner in their new company. Roman preferred, it seems, to allow Atlas to be the face of the campaign, while he focused on the marketing aspect.\textsuperscript{16} Upon Roman’s death, the \textit{New York Times} obituary declared Roman to have been “the Brains Behind the Brawn.”\textsuperscript{17}

With Atlas as the face, and Roman as the brains, their business flourished. The company made over $300,000 in 1941 alone.\textsuperscript{18} To understand the business’s success in the economic climate in the 1930s, it is necessary to examine the product and how it was marketed. The product itself was a mail order workout program, delivered in twelve lessons that promised a radical change in physique and appearance, if followed dutifully.\textsuperscript{19} The programme demanded dedicated commitment from the user to be effective. What was novel, and to the course’s advantage, was that no equipment was necessary. The programme was based on what Roman termed “Dynamic Tension,”


\textsuperscript{14} Gaines, and Butler, \textit{Yours in Perfect Manhood}, 92, quoted Atlas as saying, “We are created in God’s image and God doesn’t want to be a weakling.”


\textsuperscript{16} Greene, \textit{A Child of Three Fathers}, 46.


\textsuperscript{19} Atlas, \textit{Everlasting Health and Strength}, 42.
meaning muscles would be built by pitting one muscle against the other.20 Roman, the main figure behind the advertising, used bold statements such as: “Let me prove I can make you a new man,” “Don’t be a half man,” or “I manufacture weaklings into men.”

The most famous of the Atlas advertisements was a comic strip, supposedly depicting an episode from Atlas’s life, in which a young man (Mac) is bullied on a beach in front of a girl, goes home in shame, starts the Atlas course, and finally defeats the same bully and gets the girl. It was accompanied by the caption, “the insult that made a man out of Mac.”21 It was a powerful indication of what a man should be; strong-willed, attractive and with a muscular body. Pettegrew has called this advertisement, “one of the most formative commercial texts on normative American masculinity ever seen.”22 Toon and Golden goes further and calls it, “the greatest mail order ad of all time.”23

The delivery of the advertisements was as important and effective as the messages themselves. Famously, “the insult that made a man out of Mac” advertising was produced in dozens of comic book strips as it targeted adolescents. The advertisement is regarded as one of the most successful comic advertising campaigns in U.S. history. The message of what strength and muscles could achieve was delivered at an important time of identity formation for many teenagers.24 Zolotow, writing in 1942, noted, “for twenty years, the iron muscled body of Atlas has fascinated adolescents.”25 Roman himself noted that in the early years of the business, the average age of the men subscribing to the course was between 15 and 25.26 While marketing was primarily

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20 Gaines and Butler, Yours in Perfect Manhood, 67.
22 Pettegrew, Brutes in suits, 310.
26 Pace, “Charles Roman, the Brains Behind the Brawn, Dies at 92.”
geared towards younger generations, Atlas was quick to point out that his workout could be done by all ages.\textsuperscript{27} It is generally agreed, however, that the course was marketed towards young white heterosexual men, as the advertisements only featured young white males and promoted the heterosexual lifestyle.\textsuperscript{28} Atlas himself contributed to the promotion of his product by participating in numerous public exhibitions, further enhancing his image in the public eye as a man of herculean strength and beauty.\textsuperscript{29} Along with these public exhibitions, Atlas’s advertisements circulated in a number of magazines with a huge geographical spread. In 1942 alone, Atlas’s business advertised in some one hundred and twenty five pulp-paper magazines.\textsuperscript{30}

The success of the Atlas workout program helps illustrate public perceptions about masculinity and the crisis of masculinity in America at that time. It is interesting that the success of Atlas’s product came after America’s successful engagement in World War I, and a period of relative prosperity, followed by the trauma of the Great Depression. Perhaps it was not surprising that the youth of America were attracted to a programme that seemed to promise increased physical strength and self-discipline. Public perceptions about masculinity, as espoused by Atlas and Roman, were partly concerned with control, and indeed their programme marketed the idea that men had to take control of their lives. This is made clear in several of the advertising techniques used in promoting the Atlas product. As mentioned earlier, Roman asserted that their business tended to do well during times of crisis, as men believed they were unemployed due to a lack of physical power. Atlas in 1936 wrote, “This is essentially the age of survival of the fittest,” and Atlas advertised that his workout course held “the

\textsuperscript{27} Atlas, \textit{Everlasting Health and Strength}, 39.
\textsuperscript{28} Greene, \textit{A Child of Three Fathers}, 48.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 49.
\textsuperscript{30} Zolotow, “You, Too, Can Be a New Man,” 21.
key to your future.” Accordingly, the message being promulgated was that physical power equated with taking control of one’s destiny.

Control in the Atlas advertisements extended beyond physical power. It included control over one’s body and habits. Lesson one of the Atlas Dynamic Tension Course elucidated this: “The first great step necessary is the reformation of habits.” Atlas called this “personal power,” and certainly it represented a new means of control over one’s self. Early Atlas advertisements challenged men to “take charge of your life.” Indeed in 1936, Atlas wrote that if a man had any secret habits that he wanted to get rid of, he needed his course. The Dynamic Tension workout also demanded that “students”, Atlas’s term for his customers, “mastered methods for acquiring great internal strength.” Coupled with this, Atlas’s company sent out testimonial forms to students asking them to note any changes in their will power since beginning the course. Use of such forms presents a powerful reminder of the effectiveness of the marketing campaign. Not only did it purport to provide the tools to masculinity, regular check ups with customers were done to ensure the programme was being utilised.

How did the customers respond to this idea? Letters to Charles Atlas from some of his students provide an interesting window of study into the male psyche. One student’s wife, “B.A.,” wrote to thank Atlas, as due to his workout course, her husband had stopped drinking alcohol completely. Another student wrote to Atlas claiming, “today I feel no man can rule or oppress me,” exhibiting the importance of control over

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31 Atlas, Everlasting Health and Strength, 19; Gaines, and Butler, Yours in Perfect Manhood, 110.
33 Atlas, Dynamic Tension Lesson One, 1.
34 Gaines and Butler, Yours in Perfect Manhood, 69.
35 Atlas, Everlasting Health and Strength, 27.
36 Atlas, Dynamic Tension Lesson One, 5.
38 Gaines and Butler, Yours in Perfect Manhood, 146.
one’s destiny. A recent study found that control is a major incentive for men to exercise. Certainly this seems to have been the case for some of Atlas’s students during this time. “M.H.” from Texas informed Atlas, “my body will show anyone how I am today.” Wiegers argues that physical culture at this time was tied to a strong work ethic, and that “out of shape” bodies represented laziness and weakness for some. Thus, the ideas of control seem to have resonated greatly with some of Atlas’s students as a defining characteristic of masculinity. Control indicated a strong work ethic and discipline during a period of economic and masculine instability.

Control was not the only issue that characterised masculinity for men such as Atlas and Roman. Sexual health and attractiveness were also presented as cornerstones of masculinity. Chapman, writing on Eugene Sandow, a predecessor of Atlas, wrote that one aspect of physical culture Sandow promoted was that it helped those men with a “lack of vigour,” a euphemism for sexual impotency. Atlas, writing in 1936, was more subtle in his advertising, highlighting the dangers that could befall a marriage in which the husband is too tired, “and constantly interested only in ‘sitting down to rest’ at night.” It is often forgotten that Atlas published a series of books on sex at the end of the 1920s aimed at informing men on the finer points on love. Such a message was combined with the idea that Atlas’s workout made men more attractive to the opposite sex. This was most strongly suggested in “the insult that made a man of Mac advertisements,” in which the newly muscled white male gets the girl after defeating the

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41 Gaines and Butler, Yours in Perfect Manhood, 147.
43 Chapman, Sandow the Magnificent, 76.
44 Atlas, Everlasting Health and Strength, 28.
Men were encouraged to “show your girl what you're really made of.” The perceptions of masculinity were in part driven by the idea that musculature was attractive to women.

Once again, letters sent to Charles Atlas from clients are informative. Very revealing is the letter from “R.B.” to Atlas, informing him, “I got my girlfriend through you.” “J.C.S.” wrote of how it “never ceases to amuse me to see the expression on their [his friends] faces when they grab my arm in a friendly gesture and feel the muscle there.” “J.D.” kept his message to Atlas short, informing him, “I think that I look much better inside and outside.”

It is interesting to note that this idea of muscles increasing attractiveness was prevalent in the time of Sandow and is enjoying resurgence today. In the late twentieth century, a study by Pope found that most respondents believed they would be more attractive to women if they had an additional fourteen kilograms of muscle. The correspondence to Atlas shows that this idea was prevalent among many of his students as well. Attractiveness and success with the opposite sex, it would seem, made up part of the male perception of masculinity at this time.

Another aspect of masculinity perceived by the public is strong personality. Dynamic Tension promised, “Others will see, by your bearing, that you have personality, reserve power and magnetism.” Atlas’s short pamphlet written in 1936 is telling. Atlas wanted his students to become “the perfect man, mentally and

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47 Gaines and Butler, *Yours in Perfect Manhood*, 69.
48 Ibid., 146.
49 Ibid., 149.
50 Ibid., 150.
physically.”53 Atlas lamented that as a “97 pound weakling,” he had no personality.54

Such writings were accompanied by advertisements for Atlas’s course, grandiosely
declaring, “You cannot be a leader and a weakling. The weak, timid man is afraid. He
lacks the courage, the daring and the strength. He has no poise, no self-
confidence…everyone detects the weakling.”55 Frederick MacMonnies, writing a
testimonial about Atlas in the 1920s, seemed to echo Atlas’s advertising, noting that he
had “observed that Health and Strength accompany honesty and integrity.”56 According
to Atlas advertisements in 1936, weaklings could not lead and had unstable employment
statuses: “Be the husky who’s hired, while the weaklings are fired.”57 Such a message
came soon after the Great Depression and during World War II, demonstrating that a
cornerstone of masculinity were men of strong conviction and personality.

Wiegers argues that for many, exercising allows a person to make powerful
statements about who they are.58 Relating Wiegers’s argument to a study in 2003, it
certainly appeared relevant sixty years earlier for Atlas, who believed that a strong body
goes hand in hand with a strong personality. His students seemed to agree. “T.A.” wrote
that her husband had “changed in looks and personality” since he began Atlas’s
course.59 Very revealing is the letter from “M.M” that thanked Atlas: “I shall always
think of you as the man who has brought me from darkness into sunshine and gave me
the status, which has enabled me to become a real man among men.”60 It appears in the
words of one student of Atlas, that men were “very proud of their body, thanks to”

54 Ibid., 14.
55 Ibid., 19.
(1922).
58 Wiegers, “Male Bodybuilding,” 147.
59 Gaines and Butler, Yours in Perfect Manhood, 146.
60 Ibid., 155.
Atlas. This pride in physical appearance seems, at least from some of Atlas’s students, to have had a beneficial effect on their personality. Returning to the quote from another former student, “Today I feel no man can rule or oppress me”, it can be suggested that for many, a strong body correlated with a strong personality reinvigorated their masculinity.61 Another Atlas student wrote that he was now a “he-man” thanks to the workout.62 It seems that many who subscribed to the Atlas workout course accepted the perception that a strong personality was a pillar of masculinity.

Succeeding at a profound juncture in U.S. history, when there existed a perceived crisis of masculinity in the male psyche, Atlas’s product purported delivering a sense of control, increased sexual vigour and attractiveness, and a strong personality. Such qualities, it was argued, were seen as the cornerstones of masculinity that addressed what some perceived as a crisis of masculinity within the male psyche. The success of Charles Atlas’s business provides a window into certain qualities identified as important to the male perception of masculinity during this time period. Many students of Atlas would surely agree with Reich that the Atlas workout programme was one of the most “formalised plans of mainstreamed American masculine identity formation.”63 The success of Atlas’s programme illustrates the extent to which many young men were prepared to accept the message about what masculinity meant.

About the author

Conor Heffernan is a senior of History and Political Science at Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland. Conor has a keen interest in health and fitness and American culture in

62 Atlas, Debt Collection Notice and Testimonial.
63 Reich, “The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man,” 446.
the 20th century. He hopes to further his studies into the history of physical culture in the future.