

# My First Half-Century in the Iron Game

# 10

Somebody once said ... “The only thing that we learn from history is that we do not learn from history.” Somebody else said ... “Those who fail to learn from history will be forced to repeat it.” W.C. Fields said ... “Life is not, as they say, just one damned thing after another, instead, it is the same damned things over and over.”

There was a time, believe it or not, when people in school were forced to study history; and they had to learn it, and if not then they failed and were forced to repeat the class. A detailed study of history provided the opportunity for meaningful education, and teachers clearly understood that fact. And understanding that has been lost somewhere along the way during the last fifty years; so that, today, people graduate from school with “honors” while having no slightest knowledge of history; or worse, with a totally distorted impression of history.

A clear awareness, and an understanding, of its true history is an absolute requirement for a real understanding of any field you can name; little if anything of value ever leaped suddenly into existence with no history of earlier work in that field, earlier studies, earlier developments, earlier theories and opinions. Instead, almost all real improvements, or “breakthroughs,” were made possible by earlier work in the same field; to reach the top later workers were forced to stand upon the shoulders of earlier workers in the same field.

Nor does it matter in the least that most of these “earlier theories” were wrong; in order to determine just what is “right” you must also determine what is “wrong,” and why it is wrong. Somebody once said ... “We learn, when we learn, only from experience; and then only from our mistakes; our successes merely serve to reinforce our superstitions.” Somebody else said ... “Success comes from good judgement; good judgement comes from experience; and experience comes from bad judgement.” Somebody else said ... “Just where and when has it ever been demonstrated that the majority were right about anything?”

Millions of people are now involved in exercise, for a variety of reasons, and yet very few of these people have any real knowledge of the history of exercise, do not know what has been suggested, do not know what has been tried, do not know what failed or what worked, do not know what is right or what is wrong. Without such knowledge of history most people will be influenced by the latest fads, the most recent superstitions and myths; and will be influenced by many myths that have been carried over from the past.

Unfortunately, many people want to be told exactly what to do, want to be lead by the hand, guided step by step; which is seldom possible and almost never practical. To the degree that people ever learn anything of value in this field, such learning will come from their own experience; because people are different, have different requirements, more or less potential than average, more or less need for exercise or tolerance of exercise than average. So things that work for others may not work for you.

Knowing what to do is not enough; frequently of even greater importance is an awareness of things to avoid. And it helps if you clearly understand why some things should be avoided. Without such knowledge you will be forced to repeat many of the mistakes of the past; to say nothing of the many mistakes of the present, of which there are a bunch.

During the last fifty years there have been several steps forward in the field of exercise, but for every step forward there have been several steps to the rear. Fifty years ago there was very little in the way of potential profit in this field, so most people gave their honest opinions; but today, exercise has become big business, the potential profits are enormous, so a very large part of what you read today was written with no slightest regard for the truth, was published only in an attempt to produce a profit.

Which is not intended to imply that fraud is a recent invention even in the field of exercise; quite the contrary, fraud in this field goes back at least seventy years. Going well back into the last century, a man named Bernarr McFadden, a very wealthy man by the standards of his time, had great interest in exercise; he did not really know much about it but he was interested, and he devoted large sums of money earned in other fields to attempts to generate interest in exercise.

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About 1921 he held what was probably the first physique contest in history; rented Madison Square Garden in New York and spent a lot of money promoting the contest. It was a flop; but he tried again about a year later, and produced another flop. So he quit conducting such contests.

None of the people who entered those two contests should ever have been considered; most were fat professional wrestlers, out of condition football players or carnival “strong men.” The only weightlifter that competed was an illiterate Italian whose real name now escapes my memory; but for about fifty years afterwards he was famous under the assumed name of Charles Atlas.

McFadden coined and registered (copyrighted) the term “The World’s Most Perfectly Developed Man,” and awarded this title to the winner of his contests. By any reasonable standards, Atlas’s physique was pitiful; but he was, as the British say ... “The best of a bad lot.”

Having produced back to back flops, McFadden never conducted another contest; and, the title being copyrighted, it was never again awarded to a later winner of such a contest. So, for the next fifty-odd years, Atlas claimed to be “The winner and still the holder of the title of The World’s Most Perfectly Developed Man.” Hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of such ads were published throughout the world for more than fifty years; ads offering to sell you the “secret” of Dynamic Tension, which was suppose to be responsible for Atlas’s physique.

There was little or no profit to be made from trying to sell people barbells, so instead they came up with this supposedly secret and revolutionary exercise program discovered by Atlas. And, of course, Atlas went to great lengths to deny that he was, or ever had been, a weightlifter; according to him, weightlifting was bad, dangerous, of no value, to be avoided; all you needed was his secret. Which secret, of course, he was willing to sell you.

Eventually, he was sued by a manufacturer of barbells; and on the witness stand in court, under oath, Atlas denied that he had ever used weights for any purpose.

But, when questioned by the judge, he finally admitted that he did use weights to “test his strength.”

“How often do you test your strength?” the judge asked him.

And Atlas replied, “Three or four times a week.”

So the judge then asked him “How long do you test your strength each time?”

And Atlas said, “Two or three hours each time.”

Yet he was not a weightlifter. Sure.

The winner of the Mr. America contest in 1946, Alan Stephen, tried to pull a similar scam, but it never got off the ground. Having won the contest he later denied being a weightlifter; a statement that was an obvious indication of what he was planning to do. But, for whatever reason, his plans to copy Atlas never led to anything.

In 1954, thirty-odd years after Atlas started running his ads for Dynamic Tension, I saw a copy of a mimeographed threatening letter that he sent some kid in Mobile, Alabama; the kid was somewhat behind in the payments to Atlas, and he got a letter that said ... “Mr. Atlas will be in your town within the near future, and he would not like to be forced to come by and personally collect your overdue payments.” The clear implication being that Atlas would come around and beat the hell out of the kid because he was behind in his payments. The poor kid was so scared that he planned to run away from home and go into hiding.

I could list a large number of early-day scams in this field, but the above example should serve my purposes; as it happened, Atlas was probably the only such scam that actually produced a meaningful profit, but there were many others.

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But up until about 1950 there was really not much in the way of any potential profit in the field of exercise; then things changed, but did not change in the direction of an improvement. The first real potential for profit in this field came with the introduction of food supplements, the skies opened and the money started to rain down; a trend that has continued to grow right up to the present time.

Starting sometime in the 1920s, Bob Hoffman took money earned in an unrelated business and devoted quite a bit of it to attempts to encourage weightlifting; for many years he was the sole support of national and Olympic weightlifting teams. Had it not been for his efforts it is highly likely that weight training would have died, ceased to exist.

Eventually he started selling barbells and related products, and started publishing Strength and Health magazine; but there was little of anything in the way of a profit from these activities. Long after he became famous for having the greatest physique in history, John Grimek was still earning \$50.00 a week. Which was a wage that would then provide for a reasonable standard of living, if you were not interested in things like eating and paying your rent. Now Arnold gets \$15,000,000.00 for making a single film.

My initial interest in this field had absolutely nothing to do with my commercial interests; for the first thirty-odd years it never occurred to me that there was any potential profit in the field of exercise, and in any case I had more than enough in the way of other commercial interests during those years, making films for television, operating international airlines, importing exotic animals and tropical fish and several other business ventures. So my interest in exercise was in no way influenced by commercial considerations; I designed and built literally dozens of exercise machines between 1948 and 1968, but it was never my intention to try and sell them; instead, they were intended for my own use.

Quite frankly, most of the people involved in exercise disgusted me, and I clearly understood that a very large percentage of them were either fools or frauds, or both. A situation that has changed primarily in the direction of being more widespread.

In the early 1960s I had moved my family and my business, film production for television, to central Africa; and, at the time, I had a net worth of about \$2,000,000.00. But things went down the tube in Africa, and when I was forced by circumstances (the need to support my family) to move back to this country in 1968 I arrived here with \$10,000.00 in cash and with debts exceeding \$500,000.00.

After I left Africa the government seized all of my equipment totally without reason: two complete film studios, three airplanes, nine ground vehicles, and a lot of other valuable assets. None of which assets were ever returned to me.

I had intended to continue my film production, but having had all of my equipment stolen in Africa this was impossible; having no money did not provide much in the way of a help either, and my creditors seemed to feel that I should pay them. We survived, but it was certainly not very easy.

So, being prevented from doing anything in the way of meaningful work by a lack of both money and film equipment, I devoted a large part of my time towards the development of the latest in a long series of exercise machines intended for my own use; still with no slightest interest in becoming involved in exercise as a business.

And, more out of boredom than anything else, I started writing articles about exercise and submitted them to various magazines in the field; most of these articles being along the lines of the famous telegram ... "Screw you, strong letter follows." In these articles I pointed out, in very blunt terms, many of the outrages then occurring in the field of exercise; took many commonly accepted theories and practices and clearly pointed out just how and why such things failed to work.

Following one of my articles, Bill Pearl called me and said ... "My God, Arthur, you can't print things like that; you have insulted everybody just short of the Pope and Jesus Christ."

To which I replied ... "Not to worry, Bill, I'll get around to both of them in a later article."

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Frankly, at the time, I expected a barrage of outraged slings and arrows; and there were a few people who objected, although surprisingly few; to my additional surprise I started getting hundreds, then thousands of letters from people who were not insulted by my articles, people who recognized the truth when finally exposed to it, people who were almost desperate for additional advice on the subject of exercise.

Then with no planning on my part, one thing lead to another and the result was the start of Nautilus Sports/Medical Industries, Inc., so with no hopes or plans in that direction I suddenly found myself in the exercise business.

At the time, 1970, the sale of exercise machines was not a large business; to the best of my later ability to determine the facts, total annual sales of exercise machines, worldwide, were less than ten million dollars. Most of which sales were shared between Universal and the Marcy Company.

Somewhat later, Harold Zinkin, the man who invented the first Universal machine, told me that their highest level of annual sales was seven million dollars; but later, after that company went down the tube and was bought by a friend of mine, the later owner told me that Universal's best year had in fact produced less than six million in sales.

Initially, our competitors ignored us; but later, when it began to appear that our sales were cutting into their potential sales, they started a series of savage attacks against us. According to them I was a member of the Cleveland Mafia, a heroin smuggler, a professional killer, and a long list of similar accusations.

And, of course, my statements regarding the need for variable resistance, direct resistance, full-range movement, and a long list of other requirements for proper exercise were outright hogwash, "unscientific," dangerous, etc.

At this time I would like to mention that one of our competitors (and only one of them), Walter Marcyan, the owner of the Marcy Company, never took part in these attacks upon us or our products. He is a gentleman; but he is also an exception, not the rule.

We were in no sense in competition with the York Barbell Company, and they did not attack us; but they did ignore us for many years.

Weider published a long series of articles that were nothing short of savage attacks upon both me and my products; which was not surprising, since, as proven by his own statements, he invented everything from sex to money to fire, the wheel, the airplane, and damned near anything else you can name, so he naturally objected when any credit was given to anybody else.

I have followed Joe's career from the start, and if he ever invented our discovered anything it has escaped my attention.

Some years after the start of Nautilus, when our annual sales had reached a level of ten million dollars, a national magazine stated that our annual sales were three-hundred million; then a year later another magazine said four-hundred million; and a year or so later a magazine said that we had an annual profit of three-hundred million dollars. No such claims were ever made by me, we refused to give anybody our sales figures; it was none of their damned business. We were, in fact, very successful, but not anything close to as successful as many people chose to believe.

During the sixteen years that I owned and directed Nautilus, our total sales did reach a level of several hundred million dollars, but not in any one year; and that is "sales," not "profit." There is, in fact, a hell of a lot less profit in business than most people believe; in general, during good economic times, in manufacturing the profit is about 1.4 percent of total sales, about fourteen cents profit for each ten dollars in sales. In retail business like a big grocery store the profit is less than one percent of sales, which is why so many such stores fail.

Which meant, during the early middle years of my time directing Nautilus, in order to make an annual profit of a million dollars I had to have sales of seventy million dollars; and, if I managed to do so, then I had to give seventy percent of that to the government in taxes; thus I would end up with a "net" in my pocket of less than one-half of one percent of sales.

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But according to the media, I was getting filthy rich was stuffing millions in my pocket every month; so everybody and their dog rushed into the exercise-machine business. They, too, wanted to get rich.

So, now, we have the better part of a hundred companies selling exercise machines; most of these being poor copies of machines that I designed over twenty years ago; products being marketed by people who know less than nothing about exercise but who are self-proclaimed “experts.”

During the years that I directed Nautilus, almost nothing went into my pockets; instead, almost all of my potential profit was spent on continuous research and development. The tax code being what it was during most of that period, meant that the government provided about seventy percent of my research costs. If I made a million dollars profit I could keep it all and then pay out all but three-hundred thousand dollars in taxes; or, instead, I could spend it all on research and pay nothing in taxes, which is what I normally did.

During my lifetime I have made far more money than most people ever will, but have spent almost nothing on myself; you only have one pair of feet, so who do you need two pairs of shoes?

As of this date, January 19, 1993, I have invested a total in excess of \$83,000,000.00 into the research that eventually produced our current line of testing and exercise machines; which is at least one-hundred times as much as has been invested in research by every other company in this field combined; research for both meaningful testing and proper exercise.

So I would suggest that you look carefully into the true history of this field before making up your mind about anything related to exercise.