

Charles Atlas and Boyhood Dreams

Several years ago I was visiting my friend, Nick, in Point Lookout, New York. After lunch, we took a walk on the beach behind his home. As we passed one very nice brick home, Nick pointed at the home and said, "That's where Charles Atlas use to live." Of course I knew who Charles Atlas was, being one of his customers and all. Charles Atlas (We never called him Charles or Mr. Atlas...just Charles Atlas) was one of the first and most famous body builders.

He had advertisements in every comic book and every boy's magazine. All of the cartoon ads were the same. Frame one: A slender young man and his girlfriend are sitting on the beach, talking. Frame two: A bully marches past the young couple, kicking sand in their face. Frame three: The young boy objects and the bully shoves him aside. In the next set of pictures the young man is working out with Charles Atlas exercises and as the bully comes by and kicks more sand, the now well-muscled young man takes charge, and "Pow!" decks the bully!

Another victory for goodness, right and the American way of life! Nick told me that neighbors who had lived in the neighborhood while Charles Atlas and his wife were still running their thriving "body building by mail" business remembered how the Atlas' operation worked. Each morning, Charles Atlas and his wife would carry boxes of mail to the car and head off to the post office to mail "the way to build a better body" instructions to hundreds of young boys thorough out America. Shortly after they departed, they

would return with another box of letters from hundreds of new customers. The neighbors told Nick that this seemed to be their way of life. They never saw Charles Atlas working out on the beach or beating up bullies, just carrying boxes of mail to and from the post office, with what I imagine was frequent side trips to the bank!

Well, here I was, walking on the beach, in the exact location, where some bully probably kicked sand in little Charles Atlas' face many years ago (shortly before I read his advertisements in the 1940's). That embarrassing event probably inspired Charles Atlas to build his body so that he could ward off bullies (and make a comfortable living residing on the beach)!

I couldn't help thinking about my Charles Atlas experience. I was about ten or eleven when I read my first Charles Atlas advertisement. As a farm boy, with my nearest neighbor living a mile or so away, I had never been bullied or had sand kicked in my face (Probably due to the fact that my family had never taken a beach vacation!), but I could imagine something like that happening and felt I should be prepared.

I saved up my money, probably a quarter or two, and sent for the materials that would enable me to win over girls, something that clarinet lessons and my pony, Jet, had yet to do! I was surprised when I got the envelope from Charles Atlas that it only contained instructions and cartoon pictures of how to do these exercises. Most were dynamic tension exercises (pressing your arms against the doorway, pressing

your fists together, doing push ups and sit ups and lifting heavy objects). I did the exercises faithfully for a week or so, and when I didn't notice much difference in my body, stopped these workouts. My father was a strong hard working farmer and he laughed at these exercises, believing that hard work was what made a man strong and told me that I would be better off shoveling more corn and pitching more hay if I really wanted to develop big muscles. In our farm society, he was right of course, and the necessity of unending farm work led me down that muscle-building path.

I have thought of Charles Atlas many times over the years. I think it is so important for young boys to have dreams of the impossible as well as the possible. I see my grandchildren playing video games, watching television and talking on their cell phones and wonder if we have really moved to a better place.

Waiting for the Charles Atlas envelope to arrive (four to six weeks they said, not Fed Ex tomorrow) taught me patience; being disappointed with the material I received gave me an early lesson about consumerism (My parents did not feel bad for me and buy me a Universal Gym); the realization that muscles can't be built over night reminded me that hard work is the root of most success; and, my father's admonition about hard work probably reinforced the values that my parents were hoping to instill in me at that young age.

Luckily for me, I have never been in fights that required muscles bigger than I have. Most of my fights in life have

been psychological or attitudinal, not physical. Maintaining the drive to reach the goals I set, never giving up even when things looked grim, being patient with others and myself, becoming strong psychologically, not to beat others but to understand them, not being afraid to try new things even when I might not be good at them, not disliking others because I made dumb choices, and not blaming my mistakes on others. Charles Atlas' program would have worked if I had committed myself to following each of the steps he outlined, but I wasn't ready to do that at that age.

I had a pony to ride and a clarinet to master. Thank you Charles Atlas for being part of my educational program in life. My adage is "Sticks and stones and sand in the face might break my bones, or even be embarrassing, but open mindedness, a love of learning and respecting others is the best way to become strong in life."

December 2007