



IRON GAME HISTORY



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A Surprise Gift at the 2005 Arnold Strongman Classic

Last March, on the night before the annual Arnold Strongman Classic, Jan and I had assembled the ten Strongmen, the alternates, the coaches, the officials, the judges, and the television personnel for a meeting with Jim Lorimer, who has directed the Arnold Classic for the past thirty years. We bring everyone together each year so that Jim can explain the many activities that take place over the three-day Sports Festival. This is no easy task as the Classic is so vast and multi-faceted that it is almost beyond description. Even so, Jim does his best to convey what activities will be available over the weekend and to officially welcome the competitors. During the meeting, we also cover matters such as meals, transportation, and medical support, and then Jim usually tells everyone to go downstairs to board the buses which will take everyone to the venues for a look at the implements they will face in the competition over the next two days.

This time, however, just before Jim got to the part about buses, he called David Webster to the front for an "announcement." David has been our chief of officials every year we have had a strength competition at the Classic, so he was well-known to everyone in the room. David said very little, except to invite Bill Kazmaier to come to the front for a presentation. At this point neither



Resistance training illustration from Mercurialis' 1573 edition of *De Arte Gymnastics*.

Jan nor I knew what was afoot, but as Bill—who, along with David himself, has helped me design the Strongman events—began to thank us for the work we'd done in creating the Arnold Strongman Classic we began to suspect that we were going to be given some sort of plaque or certificate on behalf of Jim and Arnold and perhaps David and Bill, too. But then Bill went on to say that although Jan and I had a very large collection about physical culture we didn't have every book in the world. At that point I began to realize that we might be given something for our collection.

Bill then handed me a small bag, which contained a tin box. And as I opened the box, with Jan at my side and the room as quiet as a church, I saw to my immense surprise that it was the 1573 edition of *De Arte Gymnastica*, Hieronymus Mercurialis' sixteenth-century treatise that was the foundation of much of the physical culture writings which followed. When I realized what it was, I knew that the man behind the remarkable gift had to be our great good friend, David Webster. As we kept looking at this almost unimaginable treasure and shaking our heads in disbelief, David admitted what he had done and the room filled with applause. Jan and I were so overcome by this totally unexpected gift that, for once, I was speechless.

As we embraced David and each

other we learned that the book had come from his own extraordinary collection, and that he had simply decided to pass it on to us. He explained that he had had it for many years and that he hoped we would enjoy it as he had done. We left immediately afterward to board the buses, but all Jan and I could think of the rest of the evening was Mercurialis' wonderfully illustrated book. We spoke often of the book with David over the weekend that followed, and we spoke in even greater detail during the week after the contest, when David came down to Texas with us to spend a few days recovering, looking at our collection, and taking long walks at our ranch.

We went to the university, of course, and met

with several people of interest to David, and we told them all about his gift. One of these people apparently called the university's public relations division, and soon a writer called for an appointment for an interview with David. This was done, and what follows on Page Three are excerpts from the article that was widely published throughout Texas in local newspapers. A version of it was also published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, a publication which is seen by most university people in the U.S. This exposure led to several other, related articles in local and national publications, and the outward spread of David's selfless generosity continues to this day. For one thing, the articles helped to establish that the study of physical culture is a growing academic

field. The publicity also led to several important contacts with people who had materials that they believed should be part of the collection.

Over the years we've been given many wonderful collections and many splendid individual gifts, but we've been personally touched this deeply only once before—when Al Leroux, who was dying of Lou Gehrig's Disease, came to the annual meeting of the Oldtime Barbell and Strongman Association in New York City from Rhode Island in an ambulance three days before he died so he could attend the dinner one more time and personally whisper to us that he wanted his beloved collection to join our own. The unique thing about David's gift is that David, himself, is a very active collector and *De Arte Gymnastica* was one of the crown jewels of his own collection.

In the spirit of David's gift we intend to have this rare volume translated into English so that it can be fully accessible via the internet to scholars and fans of the Iron Game. Those of us who have already lived most of our lives realize that we're part of a centuries-old, unbroken strand of enthusiasts who have received physical strength and psychological satisfaction from the practice and contemplation of progressive resistance exercise. To me, it's comforting to know that four and a half centuries ago—when Mercurialis was thinking about and then writing his masterwork—he was probably comforted by the fact that twenty centuries before his own day there were men and women who thought about physical culture, practiced physical culture, and wrote about it. The mulling of such matters makes some people feel insignificant. I'd argue that being able to play a small role in the large history of the Game should make us all feel very significant indeed.