WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

Joe Assirati: Reminiscences of Britain's Renaissance of Strength

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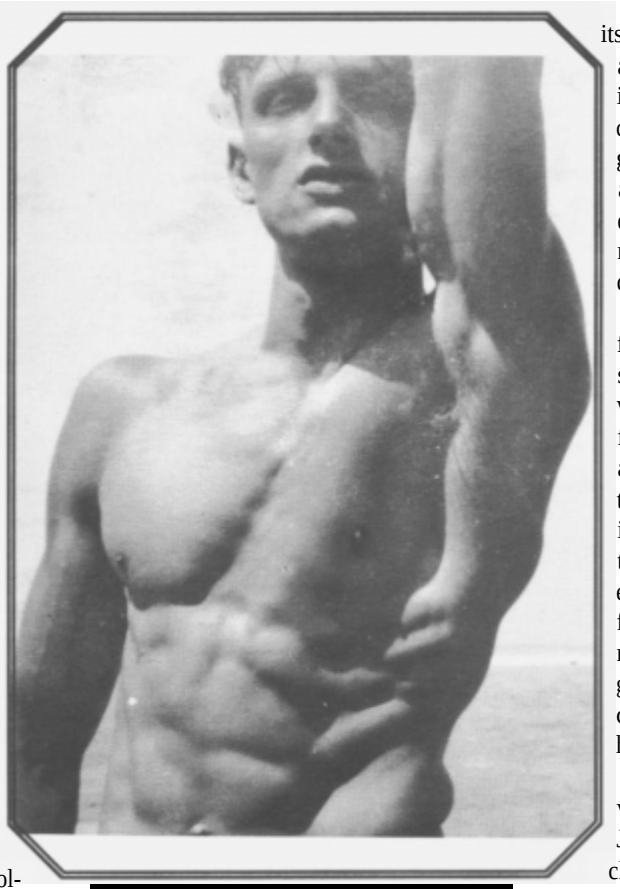

Joe Assirati in 1931.

Like all history, iron game history is stories. The history here comes to us from strongman storyteller, Joe Assirati, one of the few extant eye witnesses to the most colorful epoch in the annals of British strengthdom. The closer to the fact-ness of the past event, the better and more authoritative the history. But truly objective history doesn't exist. However stoutly pursued, there is, in history, always the alloy of the teller's perception, prejudice, and predisposition: in short, his personality. And without this aura of personality, there would be no joy in stories and their telling, and (to come full circle) without stories and their telling, there would be precious little history. In short, the best of iron game history is stories.

Like yours, my pleasure in history took root in stories, in my case those of my grandfather, who as a breaker-boy in Pennsylvania's hard coal region trudged-off, a boy of six, for his first day in the man's world of the breaker, which was destined to be (as whaling was for Herman Melville) his "Harvard college and his Yale." My love for boxing and even more, later on, for strength took root in his "traveling man tales" when, on a "sabbatical from the pits," he "took up with that hoyden, travel," returning to the patch, one day, with marvelous stories of Choynski and Corbett, "Ruby Robert" Fitzsimmons and Sailor Tom Sharkey. And it was such stories, along with the charm of his tale telling, that cast the die which was to stamp in iron the imprint of all that his grandson would become. Change the details: Is it not true for you, too, when you seek the roots of your interest in the "way things were" in our sport, its history? The story—and the charm of its telling.

Not just "official histories," but all levels of our game's "hot stove league" are fueled by the story, the yam. Today, of course, the simple joy that we took in such yarns as children is not enough, so we rationalize our delight in them by calling them oral history, and historians from the local University dash around with their recorders to capture them for posterity.

As readers interested in the history of strength, we too can rationalize all this as oral history, but in our hearts, we know that the charm of a strongman story lies in the tale spinner's love for the game and its heroes. It's instructive, of course, to attend to the tale-as-tale and to find in it yet another piece with which to complete, and give meaning to, the iron game puzzle that each of us carries around, unfinished, in his mind. But even more, it's sweet to feel, in the storyteller's telling, his love for our wonderful game and its history.

When Terry and Jan Todd returned from a recent trip to England, they spoke glowingly about meeting and working out with Joe Assirati (of the famous Assirati clan, cousin of Bert), a marvelous specimen of weight-trained manhood, 87-years-old, an inveterate storyteller. Encouraged by the Todds, I wrote to Joe and discovered, in the process, a charming man, full of the wisdom that accrues to deep reading, thoughtfully conceived progressive weight training, an acute social consciousness, and a commitment to his faith.

Unlike his massive cousin, Bert, who weighed 240 pounds at 5'6", Joe—who weighed only 92 pounds, clothed, with a 26-inch chest, at 16—was threatened with the loss of his job if he didn't "put on some weight." Inspired by his father's stories of Sandow and Hackenschmidt, he began to study the writings of Alan Calvert in ***Strength*** and various other systems of exercise: W.A. Pullum and Thomas Inch on weightlifting, Danks on strand-pulling, Mueller on free exercise, and Sandow's courses in light dumbell training. In six months, he had gained nine pounds (and kept his job). In five years, he weighed 161 pounds, clothed, an increase of 69 pounds. ("As with Siegmund Klein, my bodyweight has remained the same. At 59, I broke a civil service weightlifting record, weighing 153 3/4 pounds. At 70, I was still 154, stripped and now, at 87, I am 150.")

Having suffered with bowel and digestive problems throughout his teen years, Joe credits Calvert's teaching (that "weight training is powerfully effective in strengthening one's digestive organs") with the final cure of this acute disorder. "Judicious weight training," he continues, "also strengthens the heart and lungs. So much has been written about the necessity to run because (the claim is) weight training does not strengthen the heart. Paul Von Boeckmann disagreed with this view in a ***Strength*** article, around 1925. Many well-known

lifting authorities agreed with Von Boeckman; such as Charles A. Smith; my brother-in-law, Bill Coggins (Britain's 'Most Perfect Man' in 1930 and '32); and Ronald Walker (considered by many to be England's finest weightlifter)."

Admitting the complexity of the issue, Joe concedes that he has done a "lot of running." He continues, "I think the type of exercise Von Boeckmann was referring to was similar to that given by George Hackenschmidt in his book, ***The Way to Live.*** Von Boeckman advocated doing curls, presses, knee bends, etc., exercising at a steady pace and walking to and fro, briskly, between exercises. During such a workout, the heartbeat is increased enough to strengthen it and to improve circulation of the blood. As mentioned earlier, Charles Smith, Bill Coggins, and Ron Walker had an inherent dislike of running, but the two former men loved swimming. Charles represented Great Britain as a youth and Bill, at one period, was an all-year, open-air swimmer. Ron Walker lived with W. A. Pullum for awhile, being trained for some special events. Bill Pullum was a great believer in 'roadwork' and made it part of Ron's training. I was told, however, that Ron, when unaccompanied, would call on a friend, rest with him for awhile, and then run back to Church St., Camberwell [Pullum's Gym]."

At the age of 87, with two children, seven grandchildren, and eight great grandchildren, Joe still weight trains on Monday and Friday: "My training is limited mainly to the deadlift (owing to arthritis in both wrists), along with loading and unloading for my pupils. In the early morning, around seven, I do my outdoor exercises." Recently Joe was one of four generations of Assiratis who ran in the ***Sunday Times*** "Fun Run" in Hyde Park. As to his ideas about food, Joe commends his wife, Edith's, cooking and a varied diet. His own consists mainly of English and Italian dishes, along with Chinese dishes, which he praises as healthful. Since he turned 75, he has avoided eating after 6:00 P.M., except in social situations which demand otherwise.

"As to the role that exercise has played in my life, I have learned to discipline myself and to follow healthful living habits. Most men who continue to train with weights are cheerful, helpful, optimistic, and lasting friends. They enjoy their lives, and because of this, they are not envious of other people."

Like many in the older brigade of lifters, Joe leans to traditional training: "Weight training is the cheapest of hobbies. Along with a cambered bar that I bought from W.A. Pullum seventy years ago, I still have discs that were in use before 1914, given to me by George Merriman, one of my life's heroes, a man who lived to 91 and remained true to his name, a 'merry man.' A physical culture club that he started before the 1914-18 War is still active in the main center of London. Modern weight training, however, has become expensive because of all the Nautilus-type machines, but these are not necessary. I have no need for them, but I do realize that Arthur Jones revolutionized muscle building, and when used correctly, his machines can be of great use in many ways.

"I joined Pullum's famous Camberwell Weightlifting Club in 1927 and am a lifetime member of the British Amateur Weightlifting Association (B.A.W.L.A.), having been a member for sixty-five years. In 1927, Herman Goerner was training there. In those days, the quick lifts were the basis of a workout: one- and two-hand swings, one- and two-hand snatches and jerks, one- and two-hand deadlifts, and bent presses: there were 42 official lifts under B.A.W.L.A. rules. To show how things have changed, I was invited recently to visit a physical culture club that I started in 1935, at Mount Pleasant Office, London. It now has 600 members. The club secretary has told me that 'It's all changed now,' and it certainly has. Thousands of pounds had been spent on huge machines, but gone were the wrestling and tumbling mats, the parallel bars, and punching bags. Gone were the quick lifts. Gone, also, were the smiling faces I used to see there. My old weightlifting equipment was still there-the Olympic bars and the lifting platform—but it was hardly used anymore. I asked myself what had happened to physical culture as I knew it."

Just as interesting as these insights, above, into Joe's views of the "good life and lifestyle," are his historical insights into, and his stories about, British strengthdom in the decades just after the turn of the century, the renaissance in that nation's history of physical culture. Lest I should intrude another set of lips between the tale-spinner's and the printed page, here, I have permitted Joe to tell his own story in his own words, not mine, centering to a degree (for this issue) upon his hero, Alan P. Mead. In the process, Joe touches upon other strength luminaries, as well as upon some brief insights into what it was like to grow up as a Socialist Church-of-Englander in London's "Quartiere Italiano," as a member of a family whose very name was synonymous with strength and the finest in the strongman lifestyle. This whole column is taken from a series of letters that Joe wrote to me in response to questions that I had posed to him about his life in the Game.

"My father was a Socialist. The extreme poverty in London, contrasted with the examples of extreme wealth, caused nearly all thoughtful working men to become Socialists. Born in 1883, my father came to share the values of Socialism with me and taught me at an early age about the 'Brotherhood of Man,' lessons that I have never forgotten. He was a boxing instructor and, like my cousin Bert, a powerful, deep-chested man, who was not afraid of anybody. Prior to the 1914-1918 War, my Dad was a member of the 'Judeans Club in the East End of London when Ted "Kid" Lewis was training there. Through a close friend of Jack Johnson, named Moriarity, my Dad became a friend of Johnson, and in the 30's, Dad managed professional boxers. It's clear that I was brought up with a great interest in boxers.

"Except of course for my father, my greatest inspiration was Alan P. Mead. In 1924, I witnessed a display of muscle control by him which remains vivid to this very day. The symmetry, proportion, and elasticity of his skin, and the tone of his muscles—his ability to control them—outshone anything I had seen before or have seen since. His upper arms measured 16 1/2", and all the other muscles were in perfect proportion. By 1924, I had put on 70 pounds of good muscle and was thin-skinned and very supple; I was also almost hypnotized by Alan's muscle control. Soon after this, at a Christmas concert at work, I gave my first muscle control show and continued to repeat these in concerts, private exhibitions, and physical culture shows. After the muscle control portion of these shows, I presented talks on my 'way of life.' Still at 87, I do many of these movements in my daily morning workouts.

"The last time I met Alan was 1946, while I was still a member of the Army Physical Training Corps. To those who knew Alan's deep devotion to his country and its royalty, it was no surprise that his daughters were named Mary and Elizabeth, just another example of that devotion, as was his military service in the 1914-18 War, in which he lost a leg from the knee down. He came from a distinguished family of judges, etc., in the 'Temple,' London, for hundreds of years. As David Webster discusses in ***Barbells and Beefcake,*** the Mead family was rather rich, and Alan, himself, became the head of a well-known firm of solicitors and a most successful attorney-at-law.

"Whenever I think of Alan, I remember many examples of his warm generosity. For instance, I met my future brother-in-law, William T. 'Bill' Coggins, who as I said earlier was Britain's 'Most Perfect Man' in '30 and'32, at the Mount Pleasant Post Office in London where we both worked. Bill mentioned that Alan had presented the Clarance Physical Culture Club in Islington (London) with an Olympic barbell set that he had purchased from W. A. Pullum. In fact, Alan was so impressed by Bill's physique that he paid for a series of photos (and directed the photo sessions) with Bill posed as "Apollo," the "Discobolus" of Myron, Rodin's "Thinker," and others." Bill later married Joe's sister, Anne: another alliance through marriage of the Assirati family with the nobility in British muscle and strength, not to mention the 'almost family' connection between the Assirati family and Charles Smith, who at 20 came to live with Joe's family. Unlike some modern physical culturists, Bill was a good all-round athlete, which was common in those days. He was a member of the famous Ashdown Wrestling Club (in Islington) and also the Highgate Diving Club, both of which produced many British champions.

"My cousin, Bert, the European wrestling champion, also lived in Islington and often trained at the 'Clarance:' lifting weights, wrestling, practicing acrobatics, pulling strands, etc. You may have read that Ben did ten full deep knee bends with 500 pounds at the age of seventeen, accomplished in the presence of Bill Coggins and Jack Lewis, the famous strand-puller mentioned by David Webster in ***Strength Lore and Strands.***

"Speaking of Alan's generosity, I remember another example, this one involving his response to one of Bert's early demonstrations of power, when he was less than fifteen (fourteen years and nine months, to be exact). Bert and my father visited Pullum's gym in Camberwell on the occasion of a strength exhibition by Alexander Zass, 'The Amazing Samson,' whose main forte was bending iron bars. (I had to work that night and was not in attendance.) After displaying his amazing physique, Zass invited anyone in the audience to punch him in the abdomen, requesting that the punch be directed to the upper-part of his abdominal wall. Harold Wood, a good fighter who weighed at that time about 16 stones, took up Zass' challenge. (Wood is mentioned by Leo Gaudreau in ***Anvils, Horseshoes, and Cannons*** and also by David Webster in ***Barbells and Beefcake.***) Harold hit Zass with a mighty blow. Unfortunately, he did not hit him 'fair and square.' His fist caught part of Zass' ribs, causing him to stagger sideways. My father said that he thought Harold 'had taken a liberty.' I had been under the impression, until I read Webster's book later on, that Zass had invited another punch, a legitimate one this time, and that Harold had thrown one, but Webster claims that Wood had broken two of Zass' ribs, which was quite possibly true.

"Before Zass ever started to bend bars, in his exhibitions, he would hand around an iron bar so that any doubters could 'test' it. My 14-year-old cousin, Bert, happened to be the last 'tester,' having been immediately preceded by my father. When Bert returned the bar, it was noticeably bent. This, of course, created quite a stir, and many questions where directed at the young boy, who when requested, stripped off his shirt and showed his very muscular physique, especially his pectorals and triceps.[1] (It must be remembered that large pectorals were rare in those days because most lifting was done in a standing position.) In any case, Alan Mead was so impressed by the strength of this youngster that he told Bill Pullum to give Bert a 225 lb. set of weights and also that he would pay Pullum to instruct him. Bert accepted the weights, but because he lived in Islington, which was a center of physical culture clubs and good instructors, he never went to Pullum for instruction. Also, since our families saw one another almost every week, I helped to teach Bert various systems of training, including the 42 official lifts. As a sequel to this story, when my father described the evening's events to me, he whispered, 'Don't say anything to anyone, but I bent the bar before handing it to Bert.' You can believe this, when I tell you—many years afterwards, when Bert had traveled the world and seen all its strongest men—he confided to me, 'Pop [meaning my father] had the most highly developed forearms I ever saw."'[2]

Yet another side of the complex Mead is dramatized by an event that occurred at the Drill Hall in Southwest London back in 1928. "On that occasion, Thomas Inch (who was 47) beat Eugen Sandow's 282-pound. two-hands anyhow with dumbells and the boxer Harold Wood, whom I mentioned earlier, beat Arthur Saxon's 386 lb.two-hands pullover and push on back with bridge. The lifting was officiated by BAWLA referees and judges, and took place on a platform that had been rigged on a boxing ring. Tom Inch bent-pressed a dumbell weighing 220 to arm's length overhead, and then whilst supporting the dumbell, bent over, reached down, and took another dumb-

ell to his shoulder, straightened up, and pressed the lighter dumbell overhead. This must have weighed over 62 lbs.; I cannot recall exactly how much. Throughout the lift, he had a smile on his face, which may have seemed like professional showmanship, but that was just the kind of person he really was. He always had a genial smile for everyone.

"Both Inch and Wood had lived for many years in the 'Southwest area' and the Hall was packed with their supporters. The excitement increased when Harold Wood appeared. He was carrying a quart bottle of beer, which he placed by his side after he seated himself on a stool in a corner of the ring. Wood, at that point in his forties, was weighing over 224 lbs. In light of the fact that he had won the British 12-stone championship (168 lbs.) prior to the 1914-18 War, you know he was carrying a lot of excess flesh. Between warm-up lifts, he took swigs from his bottle, until it was time for his attempt at beating the famous Arthur Saxon. The bell was loaded to 387 3/4 lbs., and Harold rolled the barbell across his face and chest onto his abdomen. He then did a shoulder bridge and gave a mighty heave. The bell briefly sank several inches into his flesh (fat), but then shot-up so fast that there seemed to be hardly any 'press out.' This was greeted with tremendous applause because, as Bill Pullum had said, 'Harold was loved by the weightlifting fraternity.' In the midst of all this applause, I happened to look over at Alan Mead. He was expressionless and 'applauded" by gently patting the back of his one hand (palm downward on his knee) with his other hand: 'applauding,' if that was the word, with the least motion and emotion possible. I said to myself, 'Alan does not approve of what he has just witnessed.' I may have been wrong, of course; perhaps it was just his judicial training, which prevented him from showing his emotion.[3]

"Another interesting phase of Alan's life revolved around his first wife, a very good looking and intelligent woman, who, like many intellectuals, was of the left-wing persuasion, quite the contrary as I've said to the right-wing Alan. I recall on one occasion, as a group of unemployed laborers marched past the gym, Alan said, jokingly, 'We could drop a few of those solid dumbells on them.' I froze inside at the comment. Remember, at this time Fascism and Nazism were raising their heads, and there was much political tension in the air. On at least one occasion, however, Alan's left-wing wife influenced him in the strength side of his life. At that time, Alan requested my help at a sport meeting that he had planned; I was to take charge of the spirometer, with a prize to be given the man with the largest vital capacity of the lungs. The surprise to me was that the funds were being raised for a left-wing movement—not a Communist organization—but one supported very strongly by many Christians, particularly the Methodists, and to a great extent by the founders of the Labor Party in Great Britain during the early 1930s. Imagine my surprise that Alan, of all people, was running such an affair. I came to realize, of course, that the event and his involvement in it had to be the product of his wife's influence upon even as strong a conservative as Alan. The centerpiece of Alan's event that day, however, was a tug-of-war. We weightlifters got a team together on the spur of the moment, including Charles Smith, my training partner. We looked quite a muscular bunch when we lined up. Alas, there was a team in the competition which had not been thrown together at the last moment, as we had been. It had trained together consistently and had a coach who had studied and timed our pattern of straining at the rope, so that when it came time for our contest, they knew the rhythm of our pull-and-release and beat us twice.

"Along with the tug-of-war that day, Charlie Smith had a wrestling match with a fellow Bermomosey (South London) man, named Barham. A good wrestler, Charlie was expected to win, but was, instead, beaten in two falls. How so? It developed, as I learned later, that Barham was a member of the famed Ashdown Wrestling Club, whose coach was George Mackenzie, Great Britain's representative in four Olympic Games. From having wrestled with Charlie, on the occasion of the latter's visit to the Ashdown Club, Mackenzie knew all of Smith's favorite throws, as well as his ways of 'coming at' his opponent. So from his coach's experience with Charlie, Barham went into the match knowing what to expect and how to counter Charlie's throws. It was not until Charles was in the U.S.A., years later, that I told him how he had come to lose.

"Like C. A. Ramsey, Alan was a very private man, and I feel somewhat guilty in telling you some of these things, especially about the strong influence upon him of his first wife."

Like all great men, Alan P. Mead has been especially honored, here, by the fineness of this fine mean who was his stoutest admirer.

Like all history, iron game history is stories. More charming iron game stories than Joe's don't exist, nor more charming a storyteller than Joe Assirati, scion of strengthdom's noble Assirati clan.

Notes:

[1]Joe Assirati in a letter to the author: "Things are not always what they seem. When Bert stripped amazing everyone with his pectoral development, it was assumed that his chest was the result of his lifting, gymnastics, and wrestling, all of which, of course, did contribute to it. Another contributor, however, was the fact that I had showed Bert the great Maxick's ***Muscle Control*** and had read parts of the book to him, especially how Maxick advocated concentrating on one's muscles during exercise and other life activities. At that time, Bert was working for a family named Ronga (the family of Guido Ronga, the wrestling champion), and had to do a lot of metal filing at a bench. Encouraged by Maxick's development, Bert practiced his theory of concentration on the muscle group involved in one's activities (in this case, metal filing), and it was this single-minded concentration which contributed to his excellent chest. Huge pectorals were comparatively rare, compared with today. Note for example, Sandow."

[2]The British Empire and European Wrestling Champion and a man of Herculean proportions and strength, Bert Assirati was one of the great strongman-wrestlers of all time. He reportedly deadlifted 800 pounds back in 1938, and did a one-legged squat with 200 pounds. He did a pullover at arms' length with 200 pounds, and three one-arm chins while weighing 240 pounds. He also was able to hold a one-hand stand and do a crucifix on the rings at a bodyweight of 266. At the same weight, to quote David P. Willoughby, he could do a series of back somersaults "with the lightness and grace of a ballerina." In addition, he was a good long-distance cyclist and a champion stand-puller. See: David P. Willoughy, ***The Super Athletes*** (South Brunswick A.S. Barnes and Company, 1970), 131, 134-5, 254, 256, 266, 274, 381, 382, 546. See also Charles A. Smith, 'Tribute to a Strength Athlete." ***Iron Game History*** l(March 1991): 14.

[3]"Harold died in 1954 at the age of 65. He had retired and left London to live in a cottage in the country, continuing part-time work as a rat catcher. One snowy evening he visited the village pub lic house to enjoy some local company and the beer for which he still retained a 'liking.' By closing time, the snow was deep, so Harold decide on a 'short cut' across some fields, upon which, unfortunately for him, a farmer had recently laid some barbed wire, which entangled itself in his trousers. Failing to free himself quickly, he fell asleep, only to be found next day, frozen to death."