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*BC Medical Journal*



## Aging doctor and six-pack abs

After 50 years of bodily neglect, can our intrepid author turn his burgeoning belly into a work of art?

James E. Miles, MD

I all started when I turned 50. I seemed to be aware for the first time that my life was finite, and that "putting things off" could mean I would never do them. I had known, of course, long before my 50th birthday, that I was not immortal, but the sense of appreciating this came to me in my middle years. Gradually, things I wanted to do with my remaining time began to emerge, at first creeping tentatively into my consciousness. Reflected upon, these things began to assume a more substantial presence. In this way I came to realize that I wanted to do certain things and I then proceeded to try to do them.

For example, I wanted to be a department head and I achieved this, spending 10 very happy years as the head of the Department of Psychiatry at Shaughnessy Hospital in Vancouver, and then 5 mostly tormented years as the head of the UBC Department of Psychiatry. I also wanted to breed thoroughbred racehorses and, with a friend, had the unique experience of having our first foal, Miss Calabash, become the champion BC-bred 2-year-old filly of 1984. Buoyed by this

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initial triumph, we expanded, flirted with bankruptcy when our stable was almost as large as an Arab prince's, and finally departed the racing scene—

our kelly green and white silks now hanging quietly in my closet.

Recently another of these ideas began to take form—namely, that after a lifetime of assiduously avoiding any physical activity several events conspired to give me the motivation to develop "ab" muscles. I am embarrassed to tell the history of my relationship to physical activity, and how superbly I rationalized it all. It started when I was a child and my younger brother arrived.

He was blond, cute, muscular, tough, and seemingly unafraid. For example, he took to swimming like a seal and could open his eyes underwater. I, by contrast, loathed swimming and

particularly hated getting water in my eyes. This would induce panic until I could see clearly again. I therefore approached the water with my skinny

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body shivering and my eyes scrunched shut. I never did learn to swim, although I often wished I could (until I saw *Jaws*). Swimming held another peril for me as it required that I expose my rather skeletal body to the world. I found this painful in the extreme.

My brother also played baseball well, while I approached the game with the ever-present fear that a moment's inattention would result in the ball striking me somewhere on my vulnerable anatomy. He also became a very good hockey player—I couldn't skate and my attempts to do so were marked by an appalling level of apprehension about falling.

*Continued on page 416*

Continued from page 418

Those were the days of the Charles Atlas advertisements in comic books. Charles Atlas was a famous body builder and one of his ads is seared into my brain. It shows a muscular man kicking sand in the face of a thin young man who is picnicking on the beach with his beautiful companion. She has a haughty look of disdain as she watches the sand landing on her boyfriend while he cowers in fear. I remember the advertisement so well partly because the hapless victim had a significantly better build than I did. When I went off to university, I carried with me a letter, artfully obtained from my family physician, recommending that I not do the mandatory physical education program. My passion to avoid this program, along with

any other physical activity, was partly due to my fear that I would not do well, and partly due to my estrangement from the whole young male world of jockstraps, injuries, liniment, and communal showers. Had I a well-sculptured, muscular body, I would have been front and centre. I had an additional disability in my long nose, a genetic gift from my father and grandfather. My peers would joke with me saying, "You're the only guy we know who can smoke a cigar in the rain." Although I laughed, my laughter was hollow and my body image gradually grew more distorted. Now, of course, I love my nose.

The years went by and I maintained my idiotic attitudes about physical activity. I smoked heavily, drank heavily, and churned out ugly witti-

cisms to support my stupidity. At that time I loved such comments as W.C. Fields's, "Drink water that fish pee in?" and Dean Martin's, "I feel sorry for people who don't drink—when they wake up in the morning that's the best they are going to feel all day."

For many years I felt it was hopeless—I was stuck with my body and there was no chance of altering it. Gradually in this midlife period things began to happen. In 1991 I stopped drinking and in 1994 I stopped smoking. For me and those around me these two events had the qualities of a genuine miracle. After an adult lifetime of wretched thinness—at 6'1" my weight hovered around 130 lbs.—I started to gain weight, my rather cadaver-like appearance began to change, and I stabilized at about 165 lbs. I even started to work out at a local gym and found, to my absolute amazement, that it made me feel better. However, I did not look forward to my visits to the gym. I found the exercise program boring and although it was tolerable as long as I could read, there is not much you can do in a gym with a book in one hand.

My abdomen was a sort of fish-belly white, crisscrossed by scars from a series of surgical interventions (perforated ulcer, gastrectomy, radical prostatectomy). With a burgeoning pot, it was not exactly an objet d'art.

My twice weekly attendance at fitness gradually sputtered out in December 2002 even though I knew I needed help. In March 2003 I decided to return to the gym, but this time I hired a trainer. Jason, a nice young Canadian of Italian background, took me on, I am sure, as a sort of project. To my absolute amazement my pot gradually vanished; I couldn't keep my trousers up and they had to be taken in. I could see and feel the increased tone and size of my muscles and my motivation rose by leaps and bounds.

Another thought began to take shape: Why couldn't I have six-pack

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abs? I had already experienced definite changes in my musculature from exercise and, wonder of wonders, I looked forward to going to my workouts. Where was the thin young man on the beach? I listened to conversations and actually went on the Internet to learn about abs and I realized that my abdominal muscles, so long neglected, were nothing unique and that I might be able to actually get six-pack abs, a term used among the cognoscenti for an impressively muscled abdomen. I don't mean to imply that I plan on abandoning my general exercise routine but rather that I will add to it the critical elements of ab workouts, namely: (1) intense muscular overload, (2) progressive intensity from workout to workout, and (3) spacing of the workouts to avoid over- or under-training. This means I will be

using "weighted crunches," "weighted incline sit-ups," and "weighted sit-ups." Jason and I will be working together on this diligently and I hope that within a few months I will be ready to appear on the beach, moving panther-like across the sand, and occasionally flexing my six-pack.

Finally, and at long last, the skinny guy comes into his own. After years of suffering by comparison with my peers, I note that many of them are now overweight, suit jackets straining against their bulk. And here am I, a slim clotheshorse with potential abs, which I will only show in carefully selected locations. However, if it all works out as I hope, I may make a picture available of my six-pack abs to those interested in this phenomenon. These will be mailed in plain brown envelopes. **BCMJ**

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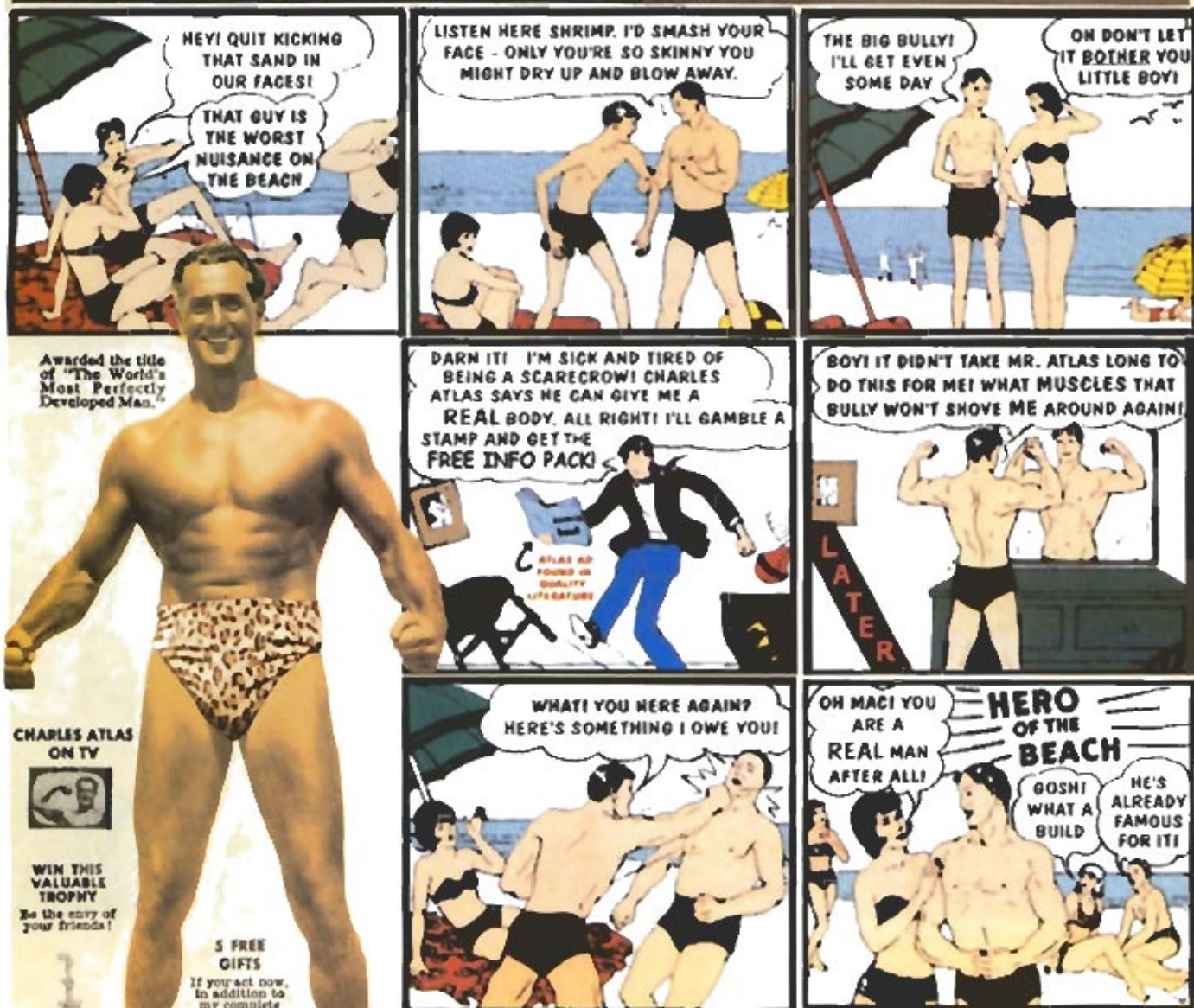
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