

George Heraklides: Model Titan

12/30/06

By Steve Frangos

Special to The National Herald

Beginning in the middle 1880's, Greek strongmen began to perform at circuses, music halls and arenas all across the United States of America. Massive strongmen such as Heracles Koutalianos, Theodoros George Costakis, Nicholas Protopapas, Antonio Pierri and numerous others toured the nation performing feats of strength which, up to that time, had only existed in the imagination. These Greek athletes were known not simply in the major urban centers but literally all across the country. Towns, hamlets, and rural centers such as Atlanta, Georgia; Galveston, Texas; Atchison, Kansas; Fort Wayne, Indiana; Bismarck, North Dakota and elsewhere not only regularly saw these men perform, but also eagerly anticipated their next scheduled visit.

Academic writings on the establishment of the Greek American community do not recognize the symbolic significance of these exceedingly prominent men. The cultural impact of these quintessentially Greek performers offers an important counterpart to the downtrodden immigrant workers so often characterized in standard historical accounts.

Just as the direct involvement of Greek immigrants in the American labor movement is, for the most part, ignored in historical accounts, so too is this class of traveling performers.

Demography alone does not determine history. Nor does money command every social situation. Pre-

dictably, university trained writers have focused more attention on the arrival of the Greek merchant class to North America in the 1850's and 1860's than to any of these entertainers.

But the symbolic impact of these intrepid Hellenic strongmen must no longer be ignored.

Greeks came to America as no other ethnic group in history. Americans at all levels of society, and in every part of the country, already knew of the Classical Greeks before the first Greek immigrant ever set foot onshore. These showmen, with their broad mustaches, animal skin costumes and massive physiques were living proof of what Americans had only read in books of history and poetry.

In the early 1880's, those fabulous tales of the far traveling Greeks were now coupled with the personal experience of seeing living men suddenly on nearly every street corner of the country. That these men were often twice the size of the 'average' American did nothing but increase their prominence to those who flocked to their performances.

It is surprising for many Greek Americans to learn that these early Greek showmen were already recognized performers by the time the second wave of Greek strongmen began to appear in the early 1900's. Performers such as Apostolos, Arthur and Theodore Combis, who formed the fabled Grecian Trio of vaudeville fame, were the younger generation of strongmen who followed this prior generation of eminent showmen. Individuals still praised by the elder generation of Greek Americans, like William Demetral, Jim Londos and even Demetrios Tofalos were all noted, even internationally acclaimed,

Continued on page 8

George "Little Hercules" Heraklides' Ca

Continued from page 1

athletes. Yet these famed colossi were but following a professional venue which other Greek athletes had already blazed on the entertainment trail.

By the late 1880's, the Greek strongman was a recognized stereotype in American culture and entertainment. Still, not all these men reached their goals of fame and fortune. The meteoric rise and ignominious fall of George Heraklides can help set the wider field of Greek athletic success in professional sports into perspective.

By the time we first hear of George Heraklides, in the late 1890's, he was just beginning to appear in vaudeville houses in a strongman act while keeping his day job as a street peddler in New York City. Even at this early point in his stage career, Heraklides was known for lifting a horse on his back.

THE TERRIBLE TURK

Heraklides' first major wrestling match was especially noteworthy as his opponent was none other than Yusuf Ishmaelo, "The Terrible Turk" Ishmaelo (1857-98) was literally the very first of the "Terrible Turk"

wrestlers to tour America. A legendary giant at 6 feet and 2 inches and more than 250 pounds, Ishmaelo is still revered both in the history of wrestling and Turkey, and is considered one of the strongest professional wrestlers ever.

The Terrible Turk met Heraklides after just having fought and bested Ernest Roeber, the American champion. Because of a disqualification, Ishmaelo was not allowed to claim the championship title.

The Ishmaelo-Heraklides match took place at Madison Square Garden on June 11, 1898.

As Graham Noble, the wrestling historian has noted, "The buildup included reports that Heraklides had worn out three of his trainers, and that when the two men met, 'there will be wrestling the likes of which was never imagined.'"

In this pre-match hoopla, the New York World also reported that the Ishmaelo-Heraklides contest "will be animated by a race feud, as well as personal antagonism, and if the fervent prayers of all the Greek flower peddlers in New York avail, the Cross will wave above the Crescent when their countryman has finished with the follower of the Prophet."

The reality was far different from the publicity: 'The Little Hercules' (as Heraklides was known) was, within what seemed moments, picked up and dropped to the floor with a crash.

As the New York World reported, "The poor little cuss wriggled. The Turk put a lock on him that was a combination of a Nelson and a stranglehold. He turned Heraklides over on his back and downed him. But he didn't let go of his strangle hold. (Referee) Jimmy Carroll, fearing that the Turk would pull his victim's head off, pulled him away by main force. Time of fall - 47 seconds. The Greek lay flat on his back, dead to the world. His seconds, Caspar Leon and John L. Alexanderoff, picked him up and carried him away face downward. Soon he began to wriggle, then revived, flopped down on the boards, and made as if he wanted to kill a few thousand Turks at one blow. But he saw Youssuf in his corner and got over his hostility."

Noble goes onto describe the debacle in some detail: "After a 15-minute interval, the second bout started. The Greek kept backing off and going off the mat, but eventually, Youssuf grabbed him by the neck,

se a Good Lesson for Greek Strongmen

pulled him to the mat, and rolled on him and crushed him flat on his back." This second fall took 3 minutes and 5 seconds. Youssuf seemed fairly satisfied with his performance, and when Heraklides got up, he slapped him on the back ("contemptuously," according to the report) and shook his hand (Journal of Manly Arts May 2001).

Immediately after his contest with Heraklides, and in his last match in North America, Ishmaelo met and brutally defeated a young Evan "Strangler" Lewis. The Turkish wrestler then decided to return home with a reported \$10,000 of winnings from his tour. The Turk died along with some 571 other passengers when his ship the La Bourgoigne sank.

And whatever else can be said concerning George Heraklides, he did not let his meeting with "The Terrible Turk" end his hopes for a strongman/wrestling career.

THE MODEL TITAN

In the late 1900's, we find Heraklides west of the Mississippi still dividing his time between vaudeville and wrestling. The following flamboyant Galveston Daily News come-one-come-all public challenge was

typical of all the Greek strongman/wrestler performers:

"George Heraklides, who is appearing at a local vaudeville house in a strong act, and who styles himself, 'The Model Titan,' strolled into The News office last night and issued a sweeping challenge to middleweight wrestlers of Texas for a mat contest in Galveston. Heraklides said he had no special choice, but really did want to meet William Mihovil, the crack Galveston wrestler. Heraklides looks like a hard proposition for the mat. He is rather small in stature, but he is all there with the muscle and sinew. He says that any middleweight desiring to take up his challenge can reach him at the vaudeville house on Tremont Street, between Market and Post Office streets (March 13, 1909)."

But Heraklides was never fated to be a successful vaudeville performer or championship wrestler.

Later, in Reno, Nevada we hear something of the end of George Heraklides: "Judge Pollock of Sparks added to his reputation as a foe to the worthless when he imposed a sentence of 150 days in jail upon George Heraklides... for wife beating. George is... a swarthy-faced individ-

ual who wears greasy long black mop of hair and likewise a pair of long shiny, black leather boots. He struts about town like a broken-down actor, and claims to be one. His last act (was) of beating his wife cruelly. Constable Frank Malay arrested him on Friday and narrowly escaped with his interior works, for George, it is said, pulled a long, sharp deer knife from his boot, and presented it point out at the arm of the law or rather another portion of Malay's anatomy. Frank, however, disarmed the man, who afterwards presented the weapon to him hilt outwards for keeps (Nevada State Journal January 24, 1911)."

Many early Greek immigrants attempted to gain greatness as strongmen performers, few reached the lofty heights that Heracles Koutalios, Theodoros George Costakis, Nicholas Protopapas, or later Jim Londos, the Golden Greek, realized. This sad tale of George Heraklides is instructive. It took more than muscles to be a successful working strongman in North America.

Readers who wish to contact Mr. Frangos are encouraged to e-mail him at greekwrite@yahoo.com.