

C) The Greeks took calisthenics seriously not only as a form of military discipline and strength, but also as an artistic expression of movement and an aesthetically ideal physique. Indeed, the term calisthenics itself is derived from the Greek words for beauty and strength.

We know from historical records and images from pottery, mosaics and sculptures of the period that the ancient Olympians took calisthenics training seriously. They were greatly admired – and still are, today – for their combination of athleticism and physical beauty. You may have heard a friend whimsically sigh and mention that someone ‘has the body of a Greek god’. This expression has travelled through centuries and continents, and the source of this envy and admiration is the calisthenics method.

D) Calisthenics experienced its second golden age in the 1800s. This century saw the birth of gymnastics, an organised sport that uses a range of bars, rings, vaulting horses and balancing beams to display physical prowess.

This period is also when the phenomena of strongmen developed. These were people of astounding physical strength and development who forged nomadic careers by demonstrating outlandish feats of strength to stunned populations. Most of these men trained using hand balancing and horizontal bars, as modern weight machines had not yet been invented.

E) In the 1950s, Angelo Siciliano – who went by the stage name Charles Atlas – was crowned ‘The World’s Most Perfectly Developed Man’. Atlas’s own approach stemmed from traditional calisthenics, and through a series of mail order comic books he taught these methods to hundreds of thousands of children and young adults through the 1950s and 1970s.

But Atlas was the last of a dying breed. The tides were turning, fitness methods were drifting away from calisthenics, and no widely-regarded proponent of the method would ever succeed him.

G) In this ‘bigger is better’ climate, calisthenics was relegated to groups perceived to be vulnerable, such as women, people recuperating from injuries and school students. Although some of the strongest and most physically developed human beings ever to have lived acquired their abilities through the use of sophisticated calisthenics, a great deal of this knowledge was discarded and the method was reduced to nothing more than an easily accessible and readily available activity. Those who mastered the rudimentary skills of calisthenics could expect to graduate to weight training rather than advanced calisthenics.

Questions

29) the origin of the word ‘calisthenics’ _____

30) the last popular supporter of calisthenics _____

31) the first use of calisthenics as a training method _____

32) a multidisciplinary approach to all-round health and strength _____

33) reasons for the survival of calisthenics throughout the ages _____

34) medical substance to increase muscle mass and strength _____

35) a reference to travelling showmen who displayed their strength for audiences _____

F) In the 1960s and 1970s calisthenics and the goal of functional strength combined with physical beauty was replaced by an emphasis on huge muscles at any cost. This became the sport of body building. Although body building’s pioneers were drawn from the calisthenics tradition, the sole goal soon became an increase in muscle size.

Body building icons, people such as Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sergio Oliva were called mass monsters because of their imposing physiques. Physical development of this nature was only attainable through the use of anabolic steroids, synthetic hormones which boosted muscle development while harming overall health. These body builders also relied on free weights and machines, which allowed them to target and bloat the size of individual muscles rather than develop a naturally proportioned body. Calisthenics, with its emphasis on physical beauty and a balance in proportions, had little to offer the mass monsters.

H) In recent years, however, fitness trends have been shifting back toward the use of calisthenics. Bodybuilding approaches that promote excessive muscle development frequently lead to joint pain, injuries, unbalanced physiques and weak cardiovascular health.

As a result, many of the newest and most popular gyms and programmes emphasise calisthenics-based methods instead. Modern practices often combine elements from a number of related traditions such as yoga, Pilates, kettle-ball training, gymnastics and traditional Greco-Roman calisthenics. Many people are keen to recover the original Greek vision of physical beauty and strength and harmony of the mind-body connection.