

# Superstars, Superheroes and the Male Body Image: The Visual Implications of Football Uniforms

Charlotte A. Jirousek

## *Introduction*

Ann Hollander has argued most successfully that there is a relationship between the cut of clothes and concepts of the ideal body, and that the body ideal changes as fashions change (84-87). Although football uniforms are not daily dress, they have been the costume of heroes idolized by young boys and grown men alike as the embodiment of American manhood in the middle of the twentieth century. It can be argued that the evolution of the high tech protective armor worn under the uniform created an exaggerated image of male musculature, particularly in the years from World War II through the 1980s. This silhouette has exerted a relentless pressure on the ideal form of the unadorned male body. This pressure can also be discerned in recent fashion trends. To be sure, not all men are sports fans. Martin and Koda make a persuasive case for a set of options from which men can choose to define their personal style (7-9). The preeminent choice they offer is between the look of the "Jock" and the "Nerd." They present the recent rehabilitation of the fashion image of the Nerd as a backlash against the ultra-macho Jock notion of manhood. Even with this alternative, the relentless images of muscular bodies presented by the media must be difficult for any man to ignore completely.

Football has been described as the ultimate expression of manly skill and aggressiveness, a metaphor for male roles and social relationships. In the introduction to a history of the National Football League, football is described as a "symbolic war":

Professional football is basically a physical assault by one team upon another in a desperate fight for land. Most people see themselves as the sum of their possessions-I am what I own. The most basic possession, land, is the issue in football and the most basic weapon, the body, is the means of acquiring it. It is a game of physical dominance-, the weak are punished unmercifully and the unskilled are run off the field. So much of a man's personality is at stake that the game becomes a fanatical crusade." (*The First Fifty Years*)

There are several possible reasons why football rose in importance by the midpoint of this century. Social scientists have made a case for territoriality as a basic human trait. As our population has grown, becoming more urban and crowded, the appeal of this turf-oriented sport increased. This has also been a period of unparalleled technical development, social upheaval, alienation and anger. Football reflects an increasingly high tech, fast-moving culture, generating metaphors of violence, high tech strategy, corporate style teamwork, and high tech-augmented physical power. These images resonate with the temper of society in a way that the slow-paced, graceful virtuosity of that other great American pastime, baseball, can no longer do as effectively. As football gained in popularity, it was discovered that television and football were remarkably well suited to each other. The continuous action and visual impact of football came across dramatically on television. The enormous success of televised football has firmly planted the football hero in the pantheon of male icons.

## *The Evolution of the Football Uniform*

Football began as a college sport, and although in recent years professional football has gained preeminence, college football has retained a passionate following. Since its beginnings, football has been followed fervently at the University of Alabama, and with great success. This was particularly true during the tenure of coach Paul "Bear" Bryant from 1958 to

1982. The opening of the Paul W. Bryant Museum in 1988 celebrated this history. The museum houses an extensive archive of visual and written material on football. In addition, there is a collection of football uniforms, equipment, and related materials that document the history of football from its beginnings in the 19th century to the present. As seen in these collections, the Alabama experience of football encapsulates the national experience. This material can be used to illustrate some interesting parallels between the evolution of the football uniform and the evolution of ideals for male body image.

The first intercollegiate football game in the United States took place in 1869 between Princeton and Rutgers. Within the next two years, Yale, Columbia, and Harvard established teams, and the "Ivy League" was born. Alabama came to the sport as a relative latecomer in 1892, and the Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Conference was formed in 1894 (Edson 23).

Early football players had no protective gear to exaggerate the body silhouette. The body image of the Victorian and Edwardian football hero was that of the natural athletic body. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the ideal for the fit male body was slender, with smooth muscular definition, corresponding to Classical sculpture (Mrozek 21-22). On the first Alabama team, the average weight of the players was 148 pounds (Bolton 62). The uniform of Alabama's early teams consisted of ordinary knickers and a wool sweater. At this early period in its development, the game of football was virtually without rules, a violent free-for-all that was little more than a planned brawl. Gradually, because of the serious injuries that occurred, protective features were added to football wear, although many players resisted these innovations. Initially these precautions were rather minimal. In 1894, Alabama players were photographed wearing thicker (probably canvas) pants. A sleeveless canvas vest and a jersey were also worn under or instead of the sweater. These specialized garments may have saved wear and tear on the player's personal wardrobe, but they provided little protection for his body. In 1896, some padding was added to the elbows, and by the turn of the century jerseys had replaced sweaters (Shores). Not until 1900 did the first helmet (a rather inadequate leather article) appear at Alabama. However, helmets would remain optional until the late 1920s (See Figure 1). Also introduced at the University of Alabama in 1900 was a type of canvas pants with attached vest. This garment included quilted patches filled with cotton, which also might be stiffened with lead inserts. In addition, patches were sewn to the pants and/or vest, into which rows of small reeds were inserted.

By 1901, separate leather shoulder pads began to come into use. A photograph of the 1901 University of Michigan team includes a player with his sweater off and pads visible over his jersey. In 1903, the first shoulder pads appeared at Alabama. During the next 25 years, the size of shoulder pads would gradually increase, as would the bulk and padding of the canvas knee pants. However, protective shoulder padding continued to be relatively unobtrusive before World War 1. Such gear was a personal choice, often added only to protect an injury that would otherwise prevent the player from playing. Routine use of excessive protective gear was generally considered unmanly, and the wide-shouldered look of pads was de-emphasized as a result. After World War 1, as a generation of American young men set off to college, America was in a youthful, freewheeling mood. The college boy and his sport of football surged in popularity. In 1919, professional football made its appearance with the founding of the National Football League. The NFL introduced football to non-college audiences in towns throughout the midwest, and eventually, the whole country. The 1920s has been described as "the decade in which sport assumed its modern position as a cornerstone of American culture" (McChesney 55). This was also the first era in which radio and especially film could bring sports and its stars to the broader public (Treat).

By the 1920s, the shoulder padding was sufficient to be noticeable, but still seemed not to exaggerate the shoulder musculature in the way later uniforms would do. The bulky pants in use by this time often made the legs and hips appear wider than the upper body. This was also a characteristic of men's suits in the late

twenties. The suit jacket became somewhat wider in the shoulders, but although the waist was indicated, the jacket was essentially straight and loosely fitted, giving width to the whole body. Pants were also cut wide. In the extreme form, the youthful fad for a style of wide- legged pants known as "Oxford bags" decidedly counterbalanced any appearance of width in the shoulders.

By the 1930s, some players, particularly linemen, began to wear shoulder pads that did add substantial width to the shoulders as compared to the lower body. At the same time, the uniform pants became more closely fitted, following the narrower contour of leg and hips, but augmented by the protective thigh padding. The more noticeable pads began to take on the look of exaggerated muscle development in the shoulders and thighs.



Figure 1. University of Alabama football team, 1901. Most of the members of this team would be considered too small to qualify for a football team today. Note the player holding the ball (center, front row). Even the broadening effect of the horizontally striped jerseys cannot disguise the narrow shoulders and chests. The player on the extreme left (front row) appears to have some modest padding under his sweater. Photo courtesy of the Paul W. Bryant Museum, University of Alabama.

Men's suits also began to take the form of an inverted triangle; wide at the shoulders, tapering to a clearly demarcated waist, and descending to narrower hips and pants.

Over the years the game became somewhat more regulated and less overtly dangerous. From the 1940s to the 1970s the protective padding developed into a form of virtual armor that increasingly exaggerated the athletic male form, and therefore exaggerated the superhero image of the football player (See Figure 2). Thus, football became a less directly brutal spectacle, with the illusion of protection for its players, who at the same time evoked an image of superhuman size and strength. As the violence became more sublimated, the image of strength became more fantastic.

There is some evidence that the power of the football image is beginning to wane, however. Particularly among younger people, basketball has been on the rise as the sport of choice', and basketball stars have gained prominence in television sports and advertising imagery (Weismann 810). This may signal a paradigm shift in the image offered by the sports hero. The basketball hero still offers a larger than life body image, but the uniform exposes the real body, significantly different in proportions from the artificially exaggerated football silhouette. Yet football continues to be the leading American sport in terms of attendance and earnings, and clearly continues to be a pervasive media presence'.

### *The Media and the Development of the Superhero Body Image*

Football was first seen on television as a demonstration at the RCA pavilion during the New York World's Fair of 1939. Even in that first fuzzy broadcast football was seen as the perfect television sport:

Science has scored a touchdown at the kickoff of football by television. So sharp are the pictures.. that the viewer sits in his parlor wondering why he should leave the comforts of home to watch a gridiron battle in a sea of mud on a chilly autumnal afternoon.... When the players gallop directly in front of the camera, the viewer feels that he is plunging right through the line or sliding out of bounds with the ball runner.... There is plenty of action on the gridiron and that is why football is classed as a "natural" for the camera. (Patton 15)

Commercial television had to wait until after World War 11 to become a reality. Football games were broadcast from time to time throughout the 1950s. However, it was not until after the spectacular sudden death National Championship game televised in 1958 that the networks took up football in earnest. In 1962, the first contract with the NFL was signed by CBS.

As televised football grew in popularity, the images of football increased in importance. Television created many individual stars, whose image and lifestyle had substantial influence. As a result, this period saw an increasing use of football and other sports stars for advertising, which further augmented their image power. Johnny Unitas, Frank Gifford, and Alex Karras were among the first beneficiaries of this attention (Patton 38-42). Joe Namath, whose career began at the University of Alabama, became one of the great celebrities of the sixties when he led the New York Jets to their first Superbowl victory. He was as well known for his playboy lifestyle and pantyhose ads as he was for his prowess on the field (Jenkins 42).

Although changes in male body image and fashions are certainly caused by a number of factors, the parallels between the functional evolution of the football player's protective gear and the aesthetic evolution of the male silhouette are striking. The steady rise in the popularity of football was concurrent with the increasing augmentation of the player's body. The protective gear under his uniform ultimately created an irresistible image of male power which has in turn affected standards of male strength and beauty. The power of this image has contributed to a national obsession with physical fitness and sport in general, in the pursuit of the ideal body

(Ames 91-94). This trend has been particularly discernible in the last thirty years, the era in which football became the preeminent sport, its image and mythology promoted by the ubiquitous force of television. It is interesting to compare the evolution of the football uniform with other media images of male strength and attractiveness in comparable periods. In the late 1930s and 1940s, comic books were a popular form of literature for children, particularly for boys. Superman first appeared in 1938, followed quickly by Batman in 1939 (Superman at Fifty; Vaz 31-32). These superheroes were idolized for their incredible bravery, moral superiority, and (for the time) fantastic physical strength and proportions. Since Superman and Batman were supposed to be more powerful than ordinary men, they were drawn with physiques that exceeded the currently accepted standards of strength and fitness. In every conic book there was also an ad for Charles Atlas's body building program, holding out the promise that even a "97-pound weakling" could hope to look like Superman.



Figure 2. University of Alabama All SEC Linebacker Woodrow Lowe, 1972-75. The fully evolved football uniform features protective gear that creates a superbly silhouette suggesting massive shoulder, chest, and thigh musculature. *Photo courtesy of the Paul W. Bryant Museum, University of Alabama.*

Of course, the image of Charles Atlas in the ads looked suspiciously like that of the superhero shown in the adventure stories. Clearly this advertiser thought that the muscular appearance of the comic heroes was fascinating to the young reader.

For the most part, real muscle men of the day could not match this super image. The accepted ideals of strength and fitness for men idealized the classical Greek prototype, with smooth sleek lines and limited muscle definition (Ames 91). In actual fact, few if any men then encountered in real life could be compared to Superman's original physique, with the possible exception of a few obscure body builders-and a uniformed football player. Apart from the cape, the uniform of Superman or Batman actually looked rather like the football uniform of the day, but with super shoulders instead of pads.

As football uniforms and padding grew more exaggerated in the years that followed World War 11, these fictional superheroes seemed to grow more powerful in appearance as well. In their comic book versions, the physiques of Superman and Batman have decidedly improved with age. Between the late thirties and the post sixties era, the bulk and articulation of muscles increased markedly.

Even more dramatic is the contrast between Adam West's 1960s portrayal of Batman and Michael Keaton's 1989 movie version. Adam West was filming his campy television series at the beginning of the televised football era, before the subsequent fitness craze set in (Eisner 14). West's body looks quite unremarkable to our eyes today. On the other hand, Keaton's body had to be augmented with supermuscular armor to accomplish a satisfactory superhero effect. Clearly the standards for super bodies had been revised in the interim.

The most dramatic changes in the ideal body silhouette occurred after the introduction of regularly televised football in the 1960s. By the end of 1961, there were numerous assertions by the elder statesmen of both football and baseball that football had replaced baseball as the national pastime (Marshall 10; "National Game" 15). Although this was an opinion subject to debate, there was no question that football was now center stage. Television enormously increased the impact of the football body image. It can be no coincidence that the rise of televised football also corresponded to an explosion of interest in physical fitness in general and the amateur sport of body building in particular. As football became more popular, football players were getting bigger, both in fact as well as in silhouette ("Hefty Pros" 43). Certainly factors such as improved nutrition had contributed to larger, stronger athletes, particularly in the first half of the century. Yet improved nutrition alone cannot account for the growing fascination with well developed muscles.

Although body building had a long history as a minor sport, it had not previously captured mainstream attention. As the new physical fitness craze began in the late 1950s, California led the way with the success of Vic Tanny's sanitized gyms that offered fitness regimes and weight training for the amateur, male or female (Bunzel 45). Throughout the 1960s, interest in body building grew. By the early 1970s, *Sports Illustrated*, for the first time, began to cover major body building events, such as the Mr. Olympia competition, on a regular basis (Kram 128-48; McDermott 92). This interest in body building began to produce real life superheroes whose bodies looked as though football pads had been installed underneath their skin. These images of exaggerated muscles, looked upon as freakish in earlier periods, were now admired. The standard for jock manliness-of-form had escalated right out of normal reality.

It might be a temptation to dismiss the extreme results of body building as an aberration, followed by a rather obsessive subculture, and not relevant to mainstream tastes. Yet even if one does not choose to participate in the pursuit of this physical ideal, the pressure of this superheroic image can modify tastes and attitudes. Definitions of physical attractiveness are to a large extent cultural. Therefore, self concept, and our response to the appearance of others, is colored by such norms. There is no denying that standards of male attractiveness, as represented by public taste in popular entertainment stars, have shifted toward the more muscular. It should be

pointed out that these images are sometimes intended to appeal to a female public rather than a male one, and, therefore, may not always inspire male emulation. At least in some cases, the media hero's silhouette may be more of a reflection of changing standards of male attractiveness than a source of these standards. However, this does not change the fact that both female and male audiences gradually accepted a more exaggerated aesthetic for the ideal male body.

The earliest male heart-throbs were, if anything, on the skinny side, and exaggerated muscularity was absent even among the square-shouldered and square-jawed. In fact, the nude upper body was rarely seen except in rather exotic settings until the 1930s and after. Douglas Fairbanks was a rather small and slender hero of 1920s swashbuckler epics (See Figure 3). He could be best described as wiry rather than muscular, although he was generally held to be a model of fitness and athleticism for his time (Mrozek 26). Like football stars, movie stars seemed to become more broad shouldered as time passed. In the thirties, Olympic swimming stars such as Johnny Weismuller and Buster Crabbe played superheroes Tarzan and Flash Gordon, while Clark Gable and Cary Grant were playing more conventional romantic leads. These stars offered an increasingly broad shouldered and solid silhouette, but not one with pronounced muscles. This was also the first period in which football uniforms presented a noticeably broad shouldered silhouette. In the forties and **fifties**, Kirk Douglas and Burt Lancaster played many romantic and adventure roles. They offered somewhat more muscular shoulders, but not a look that could qualify as superheroic by today's standards. Charlton Heston seemed to be the actor of choice for superheroic roles in the 1960s, and in this first decade of televised football, he provided an image which was both large of frame and decidedly muscular. However, as televised football grew, and the subsequent sports and fitness boom developed, the standard for the heroic body became Sylvester Stallone or Arnold Schwarzenegger (See Figure 4). By the time Schwarzenegger appeared in *Conan the Barbarian* in 1982, movie stars had become truly larger than life (Kroll 100). The overdeveloped muscles of these stars would have seemed unnatural--even repugnant, to many-a few years earlier. Is it not possible that this silhouette had become acceptable, and in fact, necessary as a bodily image of superpower after years of continuous televised exposure to the supermen of the gridiron?

Certainly athletics has enormously influenced the marketing of clothing for both men and women in this century. Athletic wear such as turtle neck sweaters, T shirts, sweat shirts and jogging suits have all entered the wardrobes of even the most determined couch potato. Athletic images have also become stock-in-trade for marketing clothing and anything else that can be vaguely associated with sexual attractiveness. It can be said that the mark of fashion in the 1980s has been the shoulder pad, which did with clothing what Arnold Schwarzenegger has done with the body. Although shoulder pads are certainly not a new idea, there has been no period in which they were more exaggerated.

Also, as in the movies, the individuals chosen to wear the clothing and underwear in magazine ads have decidedly more athletic-looking bodies than was the case in earlier decades. In fact, a perusal of male fashion layouts could create the impression that if a man wants a career in modeling today, he will need to include weight training in his plans.

In recent years, however, the more extreme body builder images have begun to decline somewhat in fashion spreads. Though it is still manifestly clear that male models weight train to maintain their athletic looks, the more exaggerated muscle men are being replaced by men with more balanced proportions. This may be a result of the sports trends which are leading away from the predominance of the football hero toward the more proportional athleticism of the basketball star, as described above. Yet, we still have super male models such as Fabio, and the muscle man has by no means disappeared from the media, any more than football has disappeared as a national sport (Linden 73). However, Fabio's image as a romance novel cover boy and fashion model is clearly aimed at women more than men. His image cannot be seen primarily as an icon of male

aspirations. In any case, the media continues to offer professionally developed athletic bodies as the standard of attractiveness.

### *Implications*

For men, athletics and fitness have been the source of standards of body image and appearance more than fashion images (Ames 91-92). The pursuit of beauty is therefore translated into the pursuit of a healthy athletic body. Indeed, until relatively recently, articles offering men advice on their appearance were invariably offered under the guise of health and fitness. The rare discussion of male concerns with appearance seemed to be confined to women's fashion magazines'. Even in these articles, male concerns are presented primarily as health issues. However, health is not the only concern. In a study by Larry Tucker conducted at Auburn University, self concepts of male students were examined (McCarthy 12). Tucker compared students in a health class with members of a weight training course. Although both groups displayed similar profiles on a pretest, there was a significant difference between the groups at the end of the course. The weight training students experienced an improvement in self confidence and general satisfaction levels with their bodies which corresponded to the visible changes in their physique. In another study by Adam Drenowski and Doris Yee, it was determined that although men and women are equally likely to be unhappy with their weight, women want to lose weight, while men want to gain (626-634). Therefore, women diet, and men exercise.





Figure 3. Douglas Fairbanks in *The Thief of Baghdad*. Fairbanks was the swashbuckling hero of many romantic adventures in the silent movie era of the 1920s. This rare bare-chested shot reveals a rather slender figure by today's standards for heroes. Yet Fairbanks was considered a leading proponent of fitness in his day, whose body was cited as an example of the ultimate in male physical development. *Photo courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive.*

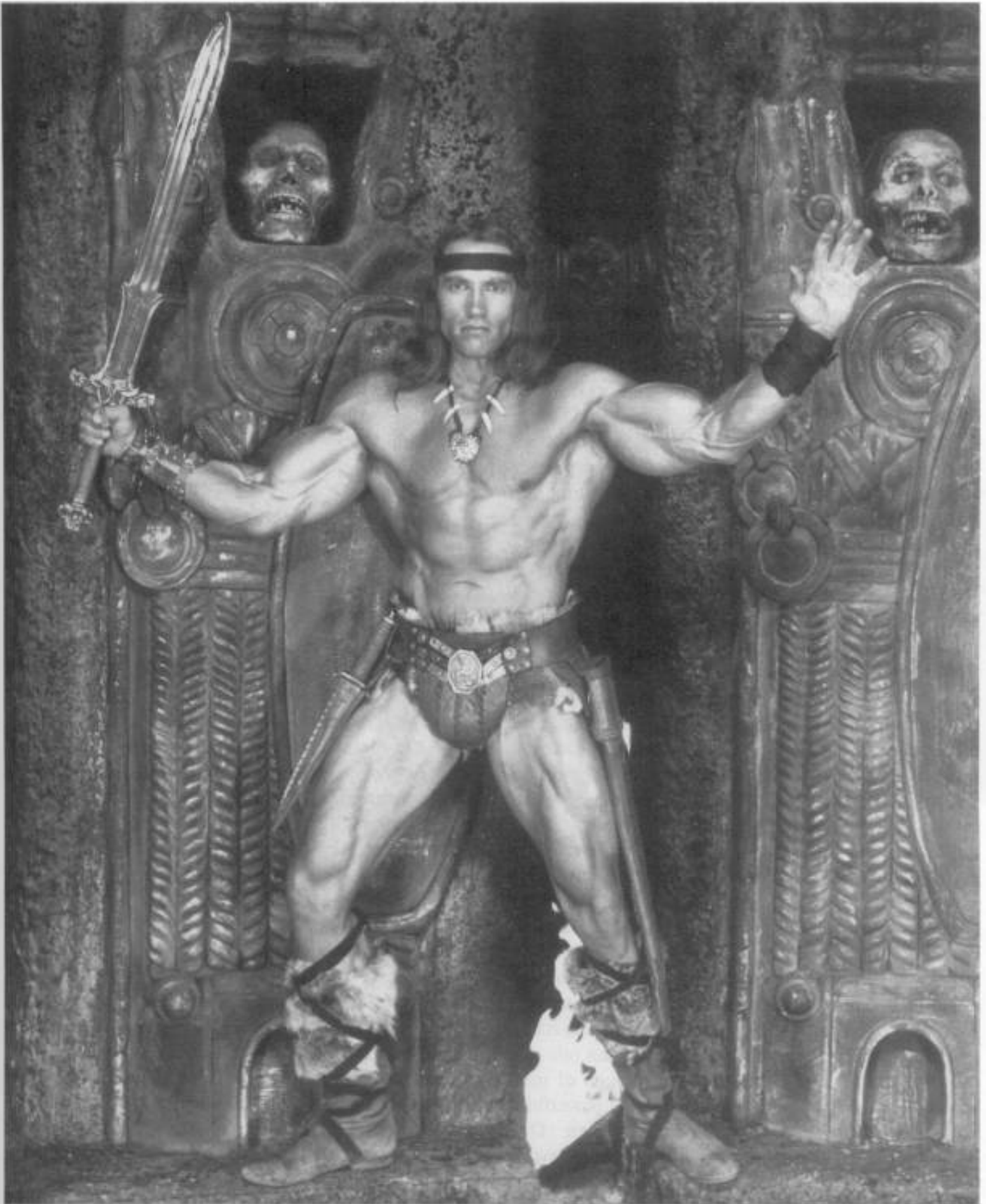


Figure 4. Arnold Schwarzenegger as Conan in *Conan the Destroyer*, by Universal City Studios, Inc., 1984. The physical standards for adventure heroes have changed dramatically since the early days of film. This degree of physical development

Figure 4. Arnold Schwarzenegger as Conan in *Conan the Destroyer*, by Universal City Studios, Inc., 1984. The physical standards for adventure heroes have changed dramatically since the early days of film. This degree of physical development would not have been perceived as an acceptable image even a generation ago. The exaggerated musculature creates a silhouette that looks as if the football player's pads have been inserted under the skin. *Photo courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive.*

Much has been said about the unrealistic standards of beauty that have been foisted upon women by movies and fashion marketing. Since the 1960s, fashion magazines have portrayed a feminine ideal body which is wholly unattainable for most. The medical community has decried the resulting epidemic of bulimia and anorexia as desperate young women tried to achieve the impossible.

It seems that the athletic heroes sold through the media as a standard for manhood have placed an unrealistic pressure on young men not unlike that presented by the fashion model to young women. Images of sports surround a boy from earliest childhood. Many adolescents and young men have been motivated to actively pursue the kind of superbly silhouette embodied in the uniformed football player. The result has been a boom in weight training. Certainly the desire to compete and succeed in a variety of athletic endeavors is an important stimulus for this trend; yet it is undeniable that muscle building is done for the sake of image and attractiveness. For some, the desire to achieve supermuscles has become so great that they turn to artificial aids. In the 1980s, use of anabolic steroids to achieve this goal became an epidemic among high school-aged as well as older athletes (Fackelmann 391).

Fitness is a laudable goal, and to the extent that health is improved, disciplines mastered, and excellence achieved, society is well served. However, the exaggerations of body form encouraged by media images are perhaps not so healthy. It would seem that the super body as envisioned in the image of the uniformed football hero has provided an unrealistic standard of male strength and beauty. In turn, this image became the measure for other male icons of physical beauty, such as movie stars and fashion models.

In an era of overwhelming change, constant crisis, and deep disillusionment with old values, the metaphor of football in particular and sports in general has fulfilled the immensely important role of a cultural myth. It is clear that the images of men reflected in the game and its players speak powerfully to many people, both men and women. Our institutions may help to select and shape these myths, but once they are in place, they shape us all.

## Notes

'J. Fierman, "Advertisers Show Signs of Football Fatigue," *Fortune* 110 (15 Oct. 1984), 14-1. Fierman reports

that for the first time ratings for ABC's Monday night football have dropped 12%, and other football broadcasts show similar declines. Meanwhile, basketball revenues and viewership were rising (B. Welling, "Basketball: Business is Booming," *Business Week* (28 Oct. 1985), 72-5; and M. Landier, "It's Not Just the Fans on the Edge of Their Seats: Advertisers on CBS are Reaping a Bonanza from NCAA Basketball Fever," *Business Week* [13 Apr. 1992], 40).

'J. Lieber, "Fat and Unhealthy," *Sports Illustrated* 76 (27 Apr. 1992), 32-4 pp. Lieber reports that although football revenues appeared to have peaked in 1990-93, and basketball earnings have been rising steadily for a decade, projections for 1994 still show that football revenues will still be almost triple those of basketball for the same period.

"Men In Vogue: Charlton Heston Stays in Shape and Tells How," *Vogue* 151 (1 Jan. 1968), 67; "Men and Their Looks," *Vogue* 146 (15 Nov. 1965), 181; and "Male Body Beautiful," *Harper's Bazaar* 105 (June 1972), 106.

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**Charlotte A. Jirousek** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Textiles and Apparel at Cornell University, Ithaca, NY.