



Graham Noble

The life and death of the terrible turk

The golden years of professional wrestling, around the beginning of the twentieth century: the era of Hackenschmidt, his sensational arrival in London, and his eclipse by Frank Gotch a few years later; of Pons, Zbyszko, Padoubny; of the great Indian wrestlers: Ghulam, Imam Bux, Gama; and the Turks: Cour-Derelli, Ahmed Madrali, Youssuf Ishmaelo: Names which can still stir the true chronicler's blood.

Youssuf Ishmaelo, the Terrible Turk

Youssuf Ishmaelo, the Terrible Turk: the original, in fact, of all the "Terrible Turks" who invaded western wrestling arenas over the past century. An athlete considered by Alan Calvert, the pioneer of American weight training, to have been one of the three strongest men of recent history, and of whom Edmond Desbonnet wrote, "For many years he has left in the world of wrestling and wrestlers the memory of someone irreplaceable."

According to Desbonnet in his book *Les Rois de la Lutte* (The Kings of Wrestling), (Paris, 1910), the Turkish invasion began in 1894 after a wrestler named Doublier was defeated by a rival, Sabès. In a search to find someone who could defeat Sabès, Doublier visited Turkey and brought back three wrestlers: Kara Osman, Nurullah, and the 6'2", 250-pound Youssuf Ishmaelo.

Youssuf's first match in France was against Sabès, and at the start of the bout the Frenchman strode forward to take up his "irresistible" front belt hold. But Youssuf absorbed the initial shock, and with one hand took hold of Sabès' neck with terrific force, brought him to the mat, and turned him over for a fall. Youssuf the winner in four seconds.

And thus began Youssuf Ishmaelo's reign as lord of the French wrestling arenas, which lasted from 1894 to 1897, at which time he began his tour of the United States of America. His fierce pride and brutal strength made him unbeatable. When two of his victims, Antonio Pierri and Tom Cannon, threatened to find someone to beat him, Youssuf said he would cut his throat if he was ever beaten.

Youssuf's bout against another Turk, Ibrahim Mahmout, was remembered as one of the most brutal bouts ever seen on the mat. "When men wrestle in Turkey, women weep," recalled one witness:

Well I remember the bout between Youssuf and Ibrahim Mahmout. I cannot imagine any more grit possible than these men displayed in continuing the contest as they did. I saw the contest between Mahmout and Youssuf at the Circe d'Hiver in

Paris. Youssuf was the heavier and of more massive build. He was the incarnation of irresistible strength and had unlimited confidence. His harsh face with its look of awful cruelty would have unnerved most men but Mahmoud stood boldly up to him. He was as tall as Youssuf but not as heavy. His broad shoulders, finely developed body, and undaunted look of ferocity gave him the appearance of a tiger about to spring. As soon as the signal was given they attacked each other with indescribable ferocity. With deep knowledge of painful holds they began to torture each other without a groan. Their panting bodies were streaked by the terrific strokes. Youssuf's surprise at the unexpected resistance enraged him. No man before had ever been able to withstand him more than five minutes, yet his most pain giving holds seemed to have no effect on Mahmoud, except to increase his sweating. Mahmoud was resisting with untiring energy. Youssuf was so enraged that he tore his opponent's nostrils, broke his ribs and twisted his arms. Mahmoud was covered in blood, had undergone treatment that would have disabled an elephant, yet he fought gamely on. Finally the judge and spectators could endure the sight no longer. Tom Cannon the referee attempted to separate the two Turks but found it useless. Cannon then began to beat Youssuf with a stick but still he held on, although he gave such a look in his direction that Cannon knew to draw back. Some spectators and a police inspector with six men had to take a hand before Youssuf could be pulled away from Mahmoud. Three police held Youssuf on each side and when he turned in his frenzied anger he swung the six policemen around like the spokes of a capstan. They were both taken to the station and an interpreter asked Mahmoud if he was not going to lodge a complaint against Youssuf. He answered with great dignity, 'Certainly not. We were only wrestling.'

Ibrahim Mahmoud had actually come in as a substitute for Kara Ahmed (later to win the world Greco–Roman championship in 1901), who had taken ill shortly before the bout. Desbonnet heard a rumor that Kara Ahmed had withdrawn after he had been told that Youssuf, because of some grudge, was planning to kill him in the course of the match.

When he toured America in 1898, Youssuf, with his flowing robes and colossal appetite, was a sensation. He made \$10,000 from the tour, a huge sum in those days. An unsophisticated and suspicious man, he demanded his payment in gold, and he kept it in a heavy belt, which he never took from his waist.

When Youssuf was appearing at the London Theatre in New York, his manager, William A. Brady, offered \$100 to anyone who could stay 15 minutes with him. One wrestler who took up the challenge was the well-known George Bothner. Bothner was only a lightweight, about 125 pounds, but he was a skilled athlete with a lot of experience in wrestling heavier men, and he didn't believe there was a man alive who could pin him on his back in 15 minutes. He also had a suspicion that Youssuf was an imposter, "Like so many other so-called terrors."

He changed his mind when he visited the theatre one night and saw Youssuf give a local heavyweight "a terrible trouncing," but still thought his speed and

skill could help him win. The match came off a couple of days later.

When Youssuf saw Bothner was only a lightweight, he became "real angry"; he thought that someone was trying to make fun of him, and he didn't waste any time in dealing with the challenge.

"I don't know of any modern wrestler who was as strong as Youssuf," Bothner later told Nat Fleischer for the book *From Milo to Londos* (New York, 1936):

He was a modern Hercules and he knew how to apply his punishing strength, as he was as quick as a jungle cat and master of all holds.

Youssuf came at me like a bull. He rushed me right off the mat into a bunch of chorus girls in the wing. The first thing I knew I found myself helpless. The Turk picked me up as if I was a kitten. Never before have I felt such terrible strength. Before I could give a wiggle or squirm he dashed me down on the boards with terrific force, knocking all the strength and wits out of me.

They told me that after I had landed, Youssuf rolled me over with his foot, looked out over the audience, gave a contemptuous snort and walked off the stage. When I came to, I was a sadder, but wiser young man. Somehow or other I got into my clothes, hobbled out into the street and started to walk up Third Avenue towards my home. Youssuf had given my neck such a wrench that he almost tore it from my shoulders. It was several days before I could look in the direction I was headed.

In New York Youssuf met the American champion Ernest Roeber. Their match took place at the old Madison Square Garden before a sell-out crowd, and although it was brief, it was quite a sensation.

Immediately the bout began, Youssuf launched a series of brutal attacks to Roeber's neck. The American was felled but quickly stood up only to be met by such a violent assault that he began to retreat. This only incited Youssuf to one of his furious rages, and when he caught Roeber, he gave him a terrific push. They were wrestling on a raised platform about 5 feet high and Roeber was sent flying into the midst of the audience.

Youssuf was disqualified, a correct decision according to Edmond Desbonnet since "A wrestling match is not a fight, but a sport. Such a system of demolishing opponents by flinging them to the ground cannot be tolerated. This would be the end of wrestling and the triumph of brutes and ignoramuses."

Finally, in Chicago, Youssuf quickly defeated the famous Evan "Strangler" Lewis. After that, he boarded the liner *La Bourgogne* for the voyage back to France. Off Nova Scotia it hit another ship and sank, taking down 500 people including the Terrible Turk. The survivors remember Youssuf acting "like a wild beast." With a dagger in his hand, he forced his way through the frightened crowds waiting to board the lifeboats. By the time he reached the rails, a fully loaded boat was already being lowered. Ignoring the shouts of the crew, he jumped into it. His huge weight, together with the violence of his leap, overturned the boat and all its occupants were thrown into the sea.

Youssuf, although a good swimmer, was dragged down the weight of his 10,000 Dollar gold belt.

Thus died Youssuf, the original (and the greatest) of the Terrible Turks.

I first read about Youssuf while a boy, and the image of this huge man scattering women and children in a frenzied attempt to save his own skin was something that stuck in my mind. I found it hard to imagine that a famous champion would act like that, and in my young mind the name of Youssuf the Terrible Turk became associated with all that was reckless, brutal, and cowardly. I couldn't help being interested in him.

But as I grew older, I began to have reservations about his whole legend. I didn't doubt that he drowned in the Bourgogne tragedy. The ship was sunk off Nova Scotia after colliding with a British vessel, the Cromartyshire, and 560 passengers and crew were lost. Youssuf may well have panicked, but those stories of his wild behaviour and his gold belt sounded like sensationalism or some angle dreamed up by a wrestling promoter. I had to admit, though, that if someone did dream it all up, he had a real flair for publicity. The idea of the greedy Youssuf being drowned because he wouldn't release his precious belt does have a kind of poetic justice, and it invariably crops up whenever his name is mentioned.

Also, Youssuf looked nothing like an athlete. It's hard to reconcile the photographs of this man, who appears to be a big, out-of-shape slob, with the accounts of his terrific feats. Hackenschmidt, Zbyszko, Padoubny, Gotch, they could be anybody's idea of a wrestling champion. But Youssuf, though big, shows no real muscular development and carries a lot of fat. Rather than being "One of the three strongest men of all time" he looks like, say, a gluttonous French dock worker.

Actually, according to Graeme Kent's *Pictorial History of Wrestling* (Middlesex, 1968), he really was a gluttonous French dock worker from Marseilles, as a matter of fact. Kent paints such a different picture of Youssuf that it is almost as if he is writing about a completely different "Terrible Turk," someone who "rarely enjoyed fighting and on at least one occasion had to be forced into the ring at gunpoint to fulfill a contract," who "ate like a pig and rarely washed," and whose tour of America was "disastrous."

In Kent's account, Youssuf's disqualification against Roeber, in a farcical bout lasting a total of 75 seconds, was greeted with boos by the audience and angry protests by the Turk's corner. Perhaps this was all just wrestling ballyhoo because a return bout took place a month later before a full house: From the beginning Youssuf threw wrestling skills to the winds and proceeded to hurl Roeber from post to post. Roeber did his best to make a proper contest of it but the Turk would seize him and throw him into one of the ring posts. After a few minutes of this treatment all four posts were broken and the bout had degenerated into farce. The police entered the ring and ordered the match to be brought to a halt before someone was killed.

This whole version of events raises the question: who was the real Youssuf? Was he really the Sultan's favourite wrestler, who could crush his opponents in minutes? Or the overweight French dock labourer who ate like a pig and wasn't a real wrestler at all? Obviously, something is wrong here; the two images are irreconcilable.

Youssuf made his reputation in France, but there is no reliable history of French professional wrestling, and material on the Youssuf era is difficult to come by. I haven't been able to check the old papers and magazines *Velo*, *La Vie en Grand Air*, *Petit Journal* but it seems that Youssuf the Turk did indeed defeat the top French professionals of the time. A short article in the *New York World* of April 30, 1898, stated that Youssuf had 115 victories to his credit and no defeats. The article gave a list of champions that he had defeated in Turkey and France, and noted that he had defeated "seven of the best men in Russia, four in Austria, twelve in Bulgaria and eleven in Romania." That information came from Youssuf's management and so too much credence shouldn't be given to it, but actually, the number of bouts (115) sounds quite reasonable for a professional career spanning, at a guess, ten years or so. As for that ill-fated American tour: Accompanied by Joseph Doublier ("his backer") and Antonio Pierri ("his manager"), Youssuf arrived in New York on February 18, 1898. Almost immediately after landing Doublier issued a challenge to all American wrestlers, and especially Ernest Roeber and Evan "Strangler" Lewis, the two leading professionals of the time. Initially Youssuf was given good write-ups. *The World*, for instance, explained that he was 32 years old, and "the Alexander, the Napoleon of the wrestling world. He has never been thrown. All Turkish wrestlers have met him and have gone down, often with broken legs or sprained backs." A couple of days later the paper reported that Youssuf "has orders from the imperial head of the mahometan church himself, to go forth and throw every man who questions his title to supremacy. Abdul Hamid II has heard of Evan Lewis and Ernst Roeber. He has been told that they are the cleverest and strongest wrestlers in the world, and Ismaillolo is sent across land and sea to prove that they are not."

The World reporter commented that Youssuf was physically impressive but added that he was surprised at his paunch: "the size of his stomach is apt to make one sceptical." He was told that this would be reduced by training and was assured that "in the roped arena Youssuf is as agile as a cat."

Well, the newspaper wrangling went on for a couple of months before Youssuf had his first real match in the States. It was against Roeber, the American champion, in the old Madison Square Garden. The *National Police Gazette* report of the contest stated that Roeber was reluctant to come to grips and "persisted in running around the outer edge of the platform until the Turk, in his eagerness to force Roeber to an issue, rushed him to the side of the unprotected ring and deliberately shoved him off the platform down among the spectators."

Roeber was carried to his dressing room, unconscious. And even though the match was for the best of three falls, referee Hugh Leonard disqualified the Turk immediately. "When this decision was announced," said the *Police Gazette*, "a perfect pandemonium reigned. While the excitement was at its height William A. Brady rushed to the Terrible Turk and begged him to keep quiet. The noise was deafening, but Youssuf walked to one corner of the stage and by pantomime he tried to indicate that it wasn't his fault. He tried to show that Roeber fell off, but the crowd howled back in refutation of his claims. Everyone saw the attack on Roeber and agreed that Youssuf's terrible temper had done what perhaps Roeber could not have done. It made him lose the match."

The uproar went on for five minutes with cries of "Fake!" and "He fell on purpose!" Youssuf, whose fighting blood was up, demanded that he go back on and wrestle all comers, but was forbidden to do so by the police. Bob

Fitzsimmons, the boxing champion and one of Roeber's seconds, shouted, "Roeber is stronger than that stiff of a Turk! He wouldn't have done a thing to him in a clinch!" The Turk's manager, William A. Brady, stated that in his view, "Roeber had no business getting off the mat," somehow forgetting that he only "left the mat" because Youssuf threw him off it.

In a letter to *The World* of March 28, Youssuf was quoted as saying that he had been on the mat to "wrestle, not to run foot races."

Roeber would not measure strength or skill. He kept sprinting around in circles outside the mat. When I reached for him he was near the edge of the platform and sprang back. I touched him, truly, but it was his own movement rather than contact with my hands that sent him over. I do not need to foul any man to win. I have never been defeated, nor do I believe the man lives who can vanquish me.

Youssuf (or, more accurately, his managers) went on to say that he wanted to wrestle Roeber again, and that match took place on April 30, 1898, at the Metropolitan Opera House on 39th Street, where "from pit to dome the immense amphitheatre was crowded with an excited howling mob."

"In that well known temple of art," the report read, "where the world's great singers have interpreted the genius of the most celebrated musicians before audiences comprising the refinement and fashion of New York, there was enacted one of the most disgraceful spectacles the metropolis has ever witnessed. The magnificent surroundings and the association of the structure only served to deepen that impression."

To prevent a repetition of the "Madison Square Garden fiasco," the ring on the Opera House stage had been roped off. But when the match began, Roeber didn't seem any more eager to come to grips than he had been in the first match. Youssuf, frustrated at his inability to do anything with Roeber, lost his temper and began throwing the American across the ring and against the ring posts "with more violence than was absolutely necessary." Roeber claimed that Youssuf had struck him with the heel of his hand and then punched the Turk in the nose.

This was the sign for a general melee in the middle of the ring between the two wrestlers' seconds and supporters. A dozen uniformed police jumped in to try and subdue the "shouting, swearing, punching, kicking and hair-pulling" throng. Once again the match ended in uproar.

"The fisticuffs on stage were by no means the only diversion of the evening," the report continued. There was some difficulty in the orchestra chairs in seeing the men who wrestled in the preliminary matches when they were wrestling on the floor, and a number of spectators got up to see better. Cries of 'Sit down!' had no effect on those who insisted they meant to see what they paid for.' Those behind then got up and the audience generally were yelling 'Sit down' and catcalling at each other every few minutes. Finally one man got up and threw a punch at the spectator behind him. Instantly half a dozen men were on their feet pummeling each other, while one sporting gentleman, unable to resist the temptation, leaned over and gave one of the crowd a cracking blow on the head with his cane.

The air was full of canes, fists, and flying hats in a moment; while someone yelled 'Police' and half a dozen big bluecoats ploughed down the aisle to the

scene of the scrap.

While this rather lively scene was occurring, the audience were on their feet, yelling like Comanche Indians, standing on their seats, and even climbing on each others backs without so much as a by your leave, to view the scene better, while gentlemen with impossible waistcoats, rainbow cravats, and lungs of brass were leaning from the boxes and roaring encouragement to get go at him' for now was his chance.

From other quarters came roars to 'Smash him!' and the like and crop haired individuals occupying seats which are the centre of attention on opera nights jumped up and down and implored Mr. Roeber to 'Kill the Turk!'

It was another shambles, but it showed again that Youssuf could draw a crowd. And probably because of that he attracted challengers from the other leading North American wrestlers: Dan McLeod, Tom Jenkins, Strangler Lewis. Some of these came to nothing, although Youssuf did meet Lewis in his last contest in America. He also had contests against a couple of others, John F. McCormick and George Heraklides, although these seem to have been fairly minor names in the pro-wrestling world.

Although McCormick had worked with Ernest Roeber and even toured with the Robert Downing company meeting all comers, he was described as "a third rate wrestler" and Youssuf undertook to throw (pin) him three times in an hour. In fact he did it within seven minutes, the three falls taking 4 minutes 7 seconds, 1 minute 25 seconds, and 39 seconds. Youssuf was just too strong for the much smaller McCormick, and as he kept his temper under control, this was probably his most orthodox wrestling performance. The World reported on his strength, but thought he lacked skill and on occasions failed to take full advantage of his holds.

Youssuf's next match was with George Heraklides, a Greek strongman who lifted a horse as part of his strength act and made his living pushing a banana cart. Previously unknown as a wrestler, Heraklides literally jumped into the public eye following the second Youssuf-Roeber match. As the Greek's manager Joe Humphreys explained in *The Ring* thirty years later:

I got the Greek to stand up close to the rail from where he could look down on the proceedings. Then I suddenly sneaked in that tickle and the damage was done. With a yell, he leaped clear over the rail and landed in the center of the ring. Before he had a chance to get his breath, he received several blows square between the ribs from the cops. To them, this Greek was just another foreigner who had entered the ring and their decision was to tame him as quickly as possible. After several more blows landed on Heriklides, Charley White and I decided it was high time for us to make our appearance and save our pet from a lambasting.

We jumped into the ring, explained matters to the cops in our loudest voice so that all the scribes could get an earful and everybody enjoyed a hearty laugh except the Greek. The next day our wrestler smashed his way into print in big headlines and it wasn't long before Charley White and I got many lucrative matches for Heriklides.

Anyway, a match between Youssuf and Heraklides was arranged, and the pair met at Madison Square Garden on June 11. The build-up included reports that Heraklides had worn out three of his trainers, and that when the two men met, "There will be wrestling the like of which was never imagined." In fact, however, when they did meet, "The Little Hercules," as Heraklides was known, was picked up and dropped to the floor within moments. Said *The World*:

The poor little cuss wriggled The Turk put a lock on him that was a combination of a Nelson and a strangle hold. 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.

After a fifteen-minute interval, the second bout started. The Greek kept backing off and going off the mat, but eventually Youssuf grabbed him by the neck, 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. Even Joe Humphreys admitted, "Heriklides received his chance, but he failed to live up to expectations," a condition he repeated in Atlantic City in August 1898, when "the strong Jap Takekawa" rendered the Greek unconscious with a strangle that left him "black in the face and in spasms."

In Chicago on June 20, 1898, before a reported crowd of 10,000, Youssuf met Evan "Strangler" Lewis, the one-time American champion. The match was for a purse of \$3,500 and the "championship of the world" (again), with the best of three falls to decide the winner. The only move barred was the stranglehold.

Youssuf immediately assumed the offensive and after three minutes was able to get a decisive hold on Lewis. Unfortunately, it was a stranglehold and the match was stopped and the first fall was awarded to Lewis on a foul. At this point some kind of argument ensued and it was agreed that Lewis could take the winner's end of the purse as long as referee Tom Hogan was replaced by C.C. Duplessis. Hogan refused to leave and had to be escorted from the ring. "During all this time," the report reads, "there was the wildest excitement."

Anyway, the match was restarted again from scratch, the best of three falls again to decide the winner. Within four minutes Youssuf succeeded in applying a stranglehold. Reluctantly he quit the hold after being cautioned by the referee, and the fall was again awarded to the American. The second and third falls were won by Youssuf after six minutes and seven minutes of wrestling respectively, and here I cannot understand the match report since it says that the falls were gained in each case by a "stranglehold" the very hold that Youssuf had been disqualified for. In any event, Youssuf won, and afterwards Lewis was quoted as saying, "I was licked. The Turk is the better man."

That was Youssuf's last match in America, or anywhere. Soon after he boarded the SS Bourgogne, and set off back to France.

The *New York Daily Tribune* of Thursday, July 7, 1898, was headlined, "Frightful Disaster at Sea." The paper reported that the steamship La Bourgogne, which had sailed from New York the previous Saturday, had collided with the British ship Cromartyshire on the morning of July 4, and sunk within three-quarters of an hour. Almost 600 lives had been lost in the cold waters of the North Atlantic. The Tribune listed some of the more prominent fatalities and included in the list was an entry for "Ismael Yousouf," which read in part:

Ismael Yousouf, known as the "Terrible Turk" to the wrestlers all over the world, was a steerage passenger on board La Bourgogne. He was born in Shumia, Turkey [now part of Bulgaria], thirty-five years ago. He was six feet two inches in height and weighted 240 pounds. On his arrival here, in January last, he was advertised all over the country as a wrestler, but in some matches he seemed to be more of a prize fighter than a wrestler. When in training his favorite diet was black coffee and wheat cakes. His career as a wrestler was not a wholly successful one on this side of the Atlantic. Although he defeated all of the men against whom he was matched, he received extremely small compensation for his work. The account of the sinking told how, when "all on board realized the awful nature of the collision, there was a mad rush from cabins and steerage for the deck above." The order to lower the lifeboats was given, but amid the frenzied excitement which in an instant seized upon the sailors of the doomed ship, it was unheard or was disregarded. All discipline disappeared and the sailors fought like demons to gain possession of the boats and life rafts. Women were forced back from the boats and trampled by those who made self preservation their only object.

On board were a large number of Italians and other foreigners. These fiends stopped at nothing. In a boat was a party of forty women, but so great was the panic that not one hand was raised to assist in its launching. The occupants so nearly saved were drowned like rats. So desperate was the situation that an Italian passenger drew his knife and made directly at one who, like himself, was endeavoring to reach the boats. Immediately his action was imitated in every direction, knives were flourished and used with effect. Women and children were driven back to inevitable death at the point of weapons, the owners expert in their use. According to stories of survivors, women were stabbed like so many sheep. And so, out of 785 people on board, 571 were lost, and of 70 women passengers, only one was saved. So much for the days of "Women and children first."

There was no mention of Youssuf himself pushing people out of his way, or using a knife. Really, we don't seem to know how he reacted, but nearly all the elements of the Youssuf legend are already there. All that was needed was the story of his gold belt, and that came a couple days later not from one of the Bourgogne survivors, but from someone in the make-believe world of pro-wrestling.

T.W. Bert represented William Brady, who had been heavily involved in managing Youssuf's American career. Bert, in fact, was described as having been in "charge of Youssuf's American financial dealings." In *The World* of July 16, 1898, Bert described his surprise at Youssuf's drowning, since he knew the Turk to be a strong swimmer. But then, he wrote, he remembered the \$8,000 of gold that Youssuf wore in a money belt around his waist he refused

to accept paper money and insisted on being paid in gold, so the stories went and realised that this must have dragged down the Turk. Bert stated that, knowing Youssuf as he did, Youssuf would have been too greedy to let go of the belt.

Bert had no proof of this, but he presented it as fact. He calculated that \$8,000 of gold would have weighed 40 pounds. Then when Prof. Gus Sundstrom, "champion all-round swimmer of the United States," for the sake of experiment, tried to swim with 40 pounds of scrap iron tied around his body. When it was found that he couldn't keep his head above water for more than thirty seconds, that was taken as verification of Bert's story.

The Americans seemed to have little sympathy for the Terrible Turk. In press reports, William Brady had referred to Youssuf's "childish love of finery" and his "sluggish oriental brain," and in summing up the Turk's time in America, T.W. Bert wrote:

I don't believe that Youssuf has left many American friends behind him, for he disgusted everyone with his beastly manners and his extraordinary penuriousness. I watched him very closely while he was here, and I never saw him pay one cent for food or drink for another person. He did not forget himself in these two respects, however, for if there was anything in the world he liked besides money, it was eating and drinking. He must have eaten ten times every day, and one of his meals would have been enough to feed me for a whole week.

Sundstrom, the champion swimmer, added, "With all due respect to Youssuf, any man fool enough to carry such weight of money deserved to be drowned."

The story that Youssuf would only accept payment in gold came from William Brady, who had taken over the Turk's management a month or so after his arrival in the States. In the patronising way he used to talk about Youssuf, Brady told *The World*, "He does not understand paper currency, and will have nothing to do with it." Brady told how he had to "send to the bank on salary day and get the Turk's stipend in gold. Youssuf sat for an hour when he was first paid, clinking the yellow shiners and counting them over and over again like the old miser in the [operetta] *Chimes of Normandy*." But maybe that was all just a story, and Youssuf never had forty pounds of gold wrapped around his waist when he drowned. Maybe he had very little money at all. The short obituary in the *Daily Tribune*, which was free of the usual pro-wrestling lies and exaggeration, commented that during his time in America, Youssuf "received extremely small compensation for his work. The *World* article in which Youssuf's love of gold was described also stated that he originally came to America for an agreed \$20 a week, which for the supposed strongest wrestler in the world doesn't sound like much at all.

The article went on to say that Youssuf was now earning many times more, but I suppose they only had William Brady's word for that. Almost as soon as Youssuf's death was announced, Brady's henchman T.W. Bert was telling newspapers how well he had been treated, and how Youssuf himself had told Brady and Bert how much he had enjoyed his American trip. You feel that Bert was trying a little too hard, and that there is another story beneath all this. The Terrible Turk drew big crowds and must have made a lot of money for some people; but perhaps Youssuf himself got little out of it, and left for home with

almost nothing to show for his six months in America. That would explain why "The Alexander, the Napoleon of the wrestling world" was travelling steerage the cheapest passage you could get.

After the second Youssuf–Roeber bout, *The World* published a spoof letter supposedly from "The Terrible Turk, to his master the Sultan." This was doubtless based on similar Manhattan satires written by Washington Irving decades earlier (*The Salmagundi Papers*). Anyway, in this humorous piece, the wrestler calls himself "thy faithful servant, Ismail Yousof, whom the dogs of infidels well call the Terrible Turk," and goes on to tell the Sultan:

Yea, this is a dull land for sports like us; for every one of those who do wrestle do spend all their time uttering loud and windy, and abusing one another after the manner of old women or of rowers in the Golden Horn when their barges have clashed. These Americans are windy people, indeed, and when their breath is spent that they can cry aloud no more, they send weird little men called press agents to certain daily bulletins, called newspapers, and great is the volume of abuse they print touching one another.

Well, that was just a satire, but it was still a good description of the workings of the professional wrestling world, which, it seems, has always been built on the bedrock of exaggeration, falsehood, and baloney. And for some reason that kind of reporting and mythmaking settled on Youssuf from his early days in the west. Edmond Desbonnet, for example, told the romantic story that Youssuf had been a notorious bandit leader back in turkey. He had been captured and brought before the Sultan, where he won his freedom by defeating the strongest wrestlers in the palace. At the time of the second Youssuf–Roeber match, another Frenchman, "Emile Lamberjack, the noted French cyclist," told *The World*:

He [Youssuf] is the most wonderful wrestler in the world. I have seen a great many clever men, and have had the privilege of witnessing matches between them and this fellow. None of them made any showing against him. I can assure you that none of the reports of his great feats in Europe is exaggerated in the least. Why, that Turk can take Roeber in his two hands and crush him to death. He can murder him like he would a fly. Roeber is a child compared to him. I tell you, Youssuf is marvellous.

That was the way that Youssuf's supporters always talked, for some reason. But the reports of his American matches don't give much support to this view of the Terrible Turk. In both Roeber matches, in fact, very little actual wrestling took place. Youssuf did get down to some grappling in the match with Strangler Lewis, but the range of his technique seemed to be extremely limited and some of the gloss on this victory is taken off by the fact that the American was four inches shorter and outweighed by fifty pounds.

Probably his most normal wrestling match was against the "third rate" John F. McCormick in Philadelphia on April 4, 1898. The report of this match commented that Youssuf's "brute strength was marvelous" (against an opponent reportedly seventy pounds lighter), but also observed that he did not appear to have a great knowledge of "the science of wrestling," and that when he did manage to put holds on McCormick, he wasn't able to take full

advantage of them. When Youssuf wrestled "Heraklides the horrible," he did win the first fall inside a minute, and that sounds impressive. But in fact that match was described as "a screaming farce, funnier than when Roeber flew off the platform backward, and funnier than the Donnybrook fair scrimmage when Roeber and the Turk met a second time in the Metropolitan Opera House."

Youssuf had beaten all his American opponents, but when you look below the simple win-loss record, it begins to look a lot less impressive. And yet the impression was somehow built up that this man was a Titan of the mat. A supposed account of the Strangler Lewis bout related that "Lewis tried to hold on to the ropes but the big six-meal-a-day man from the land of the sultan looked for a good spot, picked Lewis up, and slammed him down like a pile driver." This does not really agree with the report in the *Police Gazette*, and in fact this rather exaggerated account was written thirty years after the event, probably by someone who hadn't even seen it. It is an image that came to be associated with Youssuf a modern Hercules picking his opponents up by sheer force and dashing them to the mat. But it doesn't sound like genuine wrestling.

Going back to the first part of this article, the "eyewitness account" of the Youssuf-Ibrahim Mahmoud bout in Paris appeared in an article by strongman Ottley Coulter in the March 1927 edition of the magazine *Strength*. Coulter was supposedly quoting "a member of a well known club an elderly man who had spent most of his time in travel and had seen varied experiences in all parts of this little old world," but I doubt that this elderly man ever existed. He seems to have been a contrivance, a literary device to enable Coulter to bring together stories of well-known wrestling bouts in the common theme of "It's a rough old sport." The story of Youssuf versus Ibrahim, in fact, closely follows Edmond Desbonnet's account in *Les Rois de la Lutte*, and the phrase, "When men wrestle, women weep," seems to be taken directly from that book. Not only was Ottley Coulter a great collector of strongman literature who would have had a copy of *Les Rois de la Lutte*, but he engaged in regular correspondence with Desbonnet.

The account of Youssuf's time in France is also taken from Desbonnet's book, which is now quite rare. Desbonnet was a pioneer of French physical culture and was acquainted with the leading strongmen of the day, but we don't know if he actually saw all the contests that he wrote about. Besides, he wasn't always an accurate historian and sometimes tended to romance. Leo Gaudreau gives examples in his classic history of strongmen, *Anvils, Horseshoes and Cannon* (published by Perry Rader's *Iron Man* magazine about 1980). And by 1898 there was already a strong show business element in professional wrestling. William Brady, for instance was a producer of first melodramas and then moving pictures.

Matches were not always on the up-and-up, either. In an article in *The World* of April 6, 1898, a passing reference was made to Youssuf's victory over Paul Pons back in France, and an "anonymous businessman" quoted Pons as saying that he had been paid to lose the match and accepted that as part of the game. Over ninety years ago *Health and Strength* sounded a note of caution on the results of "Greco-Roman wrestling on the continent, where it is rather forcibly suggested that the tournaments are, as a rule, all cut and dried, with the leading positions all comfortably arranged before hand." As for America, the papers and magazines of the time often refer to professional wrestling contests being fixed, and ironically, Youssuf was initially seen as someone who would wrestle for real and expose "the many fakes that a few years ago killed the game."

From his photographs, Youssuf looks out of shape and with no real muscular development of the arms, shoulders, or chest. But then, wrestling isn't bodybuilding and some heavyweights can be deceptively strong. If they are quick, too, then they can often use their extra weight to overwhelming effect, especially against lighter opponents. And, although Youssuf was not particularly big by modern pro-wrestling standards, back in the 1890s he often outweighed his opponents by forty, fifty pounds or more.

Actually, according to Edmond Desbonnet again, Youssuf was very physically strong. Desbonnet recalled one afternoon when Doublie brought his three Turks to his physical culture school in Lille. After eating a huge quantity of food, Youssuf gave a little demonstration of his strength. He grasped a broom handle, hands close together towards the centre, and with a quick twist broke it in two.

Then twelve pieces of lump sugar were taken from the bowl on the table and piled on top of the other. The middle finger of his right hand was rested on the edge of the palm of his left hand over the pile of sugar cubes. Using the finger like a spring recoil, it was released and struck the pile and pulverised every cube.

Desbonnet lifted a 200-pound barbell overhead and persuaded Youssuf to do the same. The Terrible Turk apparently had never used a barbell before and took hold of it the wrong way, with palms uppermost. Nevertheless, he picked up the bar and pushed it overhead with his hands in this unorthodox position, and no one else in the gym could duplicate that. Desbonnet then asked to come to grips with Youssuf and was immediately aware of his terrific power.

Desbonnet was impressed by Youssuf's "innate strength and untamed spirit," but if anything, was more impressed by his capacity for eating the numerous pies that were brought before him. One thing that everyone does seem to agree on is Youssuf's "terrifying" appetite. When he first arrived in America, he was considered fat, although the reporters were told that he would work it off. In fact there does not seem to be much record of him doing any training, but he might have kept in some kind of wrestling condition by appearing in the music halls and theatres (as George Bothner related). In the run-up to the Youssuf-Heraklides contest, *The World* reported that the Greek "is now working hard at a quiet Long Island resort, while Youssuf goes along in his indolent, indifferent manner, eating enormously and drinking in proportion, content with the exercise he gets in his exhibitions and matches."

The real Youssuf, whoever he was and however strong he really may have been, has been buried beneath a hundred years of historical neglect, sloppy research, and manufactured legend. For all his slobbish appearance, he may have been quick and strong, with some kind of natural ability. He may have been a Turkish strongman who found himself out of his depth in a country and a type of wrestling he couldn't understand. Or he may have been a mediocre wrestler, but a great crowd puller who could make money for the promoters, one of the first great products of wrestling ballyhoo, in fact. As to whether he was actually a Frenchman, well, I did speak to Graeme Kent about this and he was helpful, but he couldn't remember the original source for that story. He explained that *The Pictorial History of Wrestling* had been written over thirty years ago and that he no longer had his notes for the book.

Many Turks came into pro-wrestling around the turn of the century, and of course they were all "the Sultan's champion." It was said that some of these

Turks were ethnically Bulgarian, Armenian, or Greek, and one of them (Mustapha Orelli of Constantinople) was certainly Phil Lane of Oxford, England. So it wasn't hard to accept that Youssuf Ishmaelo really might have been a Frenchman from the Marseilles docks.

I more or less had to leave it at that, but then a few months back Willie Baxter, one of our leading wrestling historians, told me that Youssuf Ishmaelo really was Turkish (or at least Ottoman). He told me that Youssuf was still remembered in Turkey, where he was known as Koça Youssuf ("Big Youssuf"), and that there was even a comic strip about his life. Willie sent me Turkish material that gave Youssuf's birth date as 1857. Apparently Youssuf had become recognised as Turkey's strongest wrestler in the late 1880s after beating the famous Kel Alico, a man who is said to have held that title for over twenty years previously.

In 1894, the Frenchman Doublier went to Turkey and brought back his three wrestlers, Youssuf Ishmaelo, Hassan Nurullah, and Kara Osman. That would have been a straight business proposition for Doublier, but it was presented as a story of revenge, with Doublier trying to find a wrestler who would defeat his "hated rival" Fernand Sabès. That old routine was still being fed to a gullible public ten years later when Antonio Pierri brought Ahmed Madrali to London to challenge George Hackenschmidt. Pierri, the one-time "Terrible Greek," previously had been beaten by Hackenschmidt and Madrali. According to the famous weightlifter W.A. Pullum, who should have known better, Madrali was "the Sultan of Turkey's chief wrestler, whose services Pierri bent on revenge that he found he could not exact himself had journeyed to Constantinople to secure." Like Youssuf, Madrali was touted as a modern Hercules, but after his second defeat by Hackenschmidt in 1906, he was described by reporters as "a third rater."

Antonio Pierri, of course, had arrived in America as Youssuf's manager, and in fact he had wrestled the Turk himself back in Paris in 1895. Over the years Pierri promoted one "Terrible Turk" after another, and as late as 1909 he was still at it with Youssuf Mahmout, who toured the United States during the build-up to a match with "world champion" Frank Gotch. (This was a different Youssuf Mahmout from the one Gotch was wrestling when he was injured in 1916; the latter was actually Bob Managoff, Sr.) One of Mahmout's opponents, Charles Cutler, was reported as saying that, "This Turk is not human, so great is his strength." But, unsurprisingly, when the match with Gotch was made, Mahmout lost in two straight falls.

The famous bout between Youssuf Ishmaelo and Ibrahim Mahmout, the bout after which Ibrahim Mahmout said, "When men wrestle, women weep," who knows if it was straight? It might have been, but some of the later detail, such as Youssuf whirling six policemen round at arm's length, is ridiculous. And if Tom Cannon did jump in and start hitting Youssuf with a stick, well, he was part of the wrestling scene, too, and that could have been part of an act to get the crowd worked up. Such crowd-pleasing behaviour was not unusual in turn-of-the-century professional wrestling. The report of the wrestling match between John Lemm and Jimmy Esson that appeared in *Health and Strength* on May 8, 1909 reads:

Right from the commencement Esson seemed to have been inviting disqualification. He began striking Lemm in the preliminary manoeuvring for neck holds and entirely disregarded the referee's warnings and appeals, following them

up with a deliberate blow of greater force and showering abuse both on the referee and his opponent. It seems strange that he was not immediately disqualified.

Esson next tried to throw his opponent into the orchestra and then jabbed him viciously under the chin. Following this the two men appear to have put in a little real wrestling, but only for a few minutes, for Esson soon returned to his mixed style, repeatedly driving his elbow into Lemm's face. The referee states that his protests were not only ignored but that their only visible result was an outburst of "Gotching" by Esson, who thrust his fingers into Lemm's eye and abused both the referee and himself, and indeed everybody in general. The affair was allowed to continue for a few more minutes until Lemm seems to have retaliated in some not very clear fashion, but anyway sufficient to earn a reprimand from the referee. Esson however was not satisfied with this for he immediately broke away from Lemm's hold, dropped wrestling altogether and attacked his opponent with his fists. The referee at this point seems to have remembered that he was controlling a wrestling match and not a rough and tumble fight, and he disqualified Esson who, hurling threats at everybody, went for Lemm whilst his seconds rushed into the fray and pummelled Lemm's seconds. With a general battle in full swing the curtain was dropped on the disgraceful pandemonium.

Lemm and Esson weren't hams. They were successive winners (1908 and 1909) of the Alhambra tournament, a short-lived attempt to get back to straight wrestling. So they were near the top of the tree in the professional game. But they had to make a living and they knew what the public wanted was "a show." When you understand this, you realise that it wasn't really strange that the referee didn't immediately disqualify Esson for his behaviour: in fact, "the referee" was an integral part of the show.

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