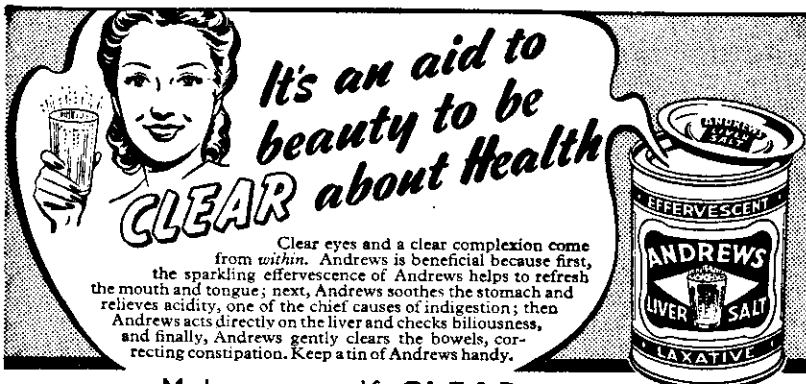


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TACTICS ON THE MAT

(Written for "The Listener" by
L. R. HOBBS)

I DON'T know quite why, but Consumer Research and all the other of these scientific research bureaux seem to have totally ignored a fascinating field of study — how wrestlers spend their Sunday afternoons.

I had one to put in myself the other day in one of these strange New Zealand cities—strange to me, I mean—and I found myself and The Wrestler the sole occupants of the hotel lounge.

He was a big man, with a big emerald ring and the biggest checks I have ever seen to his sports coat. Everything about him was big, except his voice, which was thin and reedy, like a morepork talking philosophy. But he was obviously intelligent.

"It's the effect of the war, you know," he said, in an accent that my own war years taught me came from the Bronx, with perhaps the influence of an aunt from Texas to balance it. "This war taught me a lot, buddy. It's helped me a lot in the job. I'm a wrestler, ya know."

I said I knew.

"How do you mean it taught you a lot?" I asked. "Did it make you more ruthless, more bloodthirsty?"

"Naw, ya don't get it, buddy," he went on. "It's made me think, and apply the principles of war to wrestling."

Armchair Strategists

Then he went on to explain. There were a lot of things called the principles of war, that were the same thing in wrestling, he said, and the intelligent man who studied them could not go wrong. This was not appreciated by his public. Army experts suffered from the same lack of appreciation, he said, from armchair strategists, and that was how he described the big public who sat and listened to the broadcasts of his bouts.

"They think this wrestling's just a matter of brute strength, with a few fancy holds and a bit of rough stuff they can see from the back seats," he said. "But, brother, they're all wet."

It was like this, brother, he went on. You worked on strategy, to a plan of campaign, carefully mapped out. You never made the mistake of under-estimating your opponent, you kept your reserves handy, your morale high, and your opponents always in your sights.

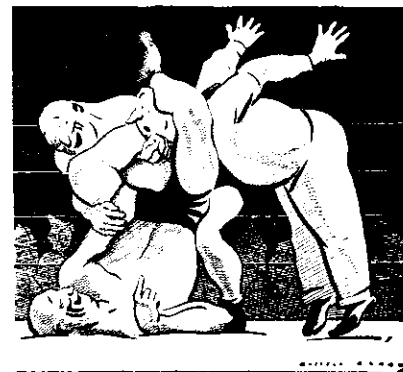
"And the box office. Where do you keep that?" I asked.

He withered me with a look.

He seemed proud of that look. "Did that wither ya, brother, or didn't it? That's the look I use in round 4 when the referee gives a penalty fall against me."

Then he went on.

"Even when things were going against you, you brought strategy into it too. You didn't just go back towards the ropes, as the announcer said. You retreated according to plan. And then you thought of diversions. Montgomery and



Eisenhower were both fond of going big on diversions, he said. His were good ones. They included suddenly ripping the shirt off the referee, blowing a nonchalant kiss to the press table (always easy to impress) or in extreme cases throwing the water bucket at his opponent. But the principle was the same as war.

"L'audace, toujours l'audace," he said.

Then on attack, the principle of sudden surprise was always best. His favorite trick was to pretend that he was getting ready to introduce the Boston Crab, and then suddenly use an elbow jolt at the referee, feint sideways and throw his opponent over the ropes. It worked, he claimed, because everyone was surprised.

There ought, he said, to be a careful study made of this modern approach to wrestling. There was a Staff College for the Army, and he was all in favour of one for wrestlers.

"Ya can't fight tanks with bayonets," they used to say. It was the same in wrestling. You had to have heavy artillery to stand up to things like flying tackles from 11 feet away. You used a barrage before a big attack, and you used propaganda.

"What sort of propaganda?" I said.

"It impresses the enemy," he said. "You make faces at him. Like this —"

I hurriedly stopped him because just at that moment a good-looking blonde had come to the door of the lounge, but had turned away with a cry of dismay.

"Never mind, brother," he said. "I'm talking serious."

There was it seemed in that afternoon's conversation not one rule of war that did not also apply in wrestling. He was just a beginner at wrestling, but he was sure trying.

I couldn't go to the wrestling the next night, but I heard over the radio the result of The Wrestler's bout. He was beaten ignominiously in the fourth round, after being thrown three times running into the lap of a stout licensed victualler in Row 3, Seat 5, ringside (price 7s. 6d.).

"How come, brother?" I asked him at breakfast the next morning, as he toyed with a small steak the size of a bedroom rug. "What happened to the rules of war?"

"They still stand, buddy," he said. "But ya gotta have education first, see. This guy I wrassled, he was dumb. He told me he thought the Geneva Convention was a brand of square gin."

"But it'll improve, buddy," he said. "Education must win in the end. Think of General Lee and General Stonewall Jackson. Next time out I'll win in the third round."

And strange to say, he did.