

Remembering "To The Ladies"

Vera Christensen

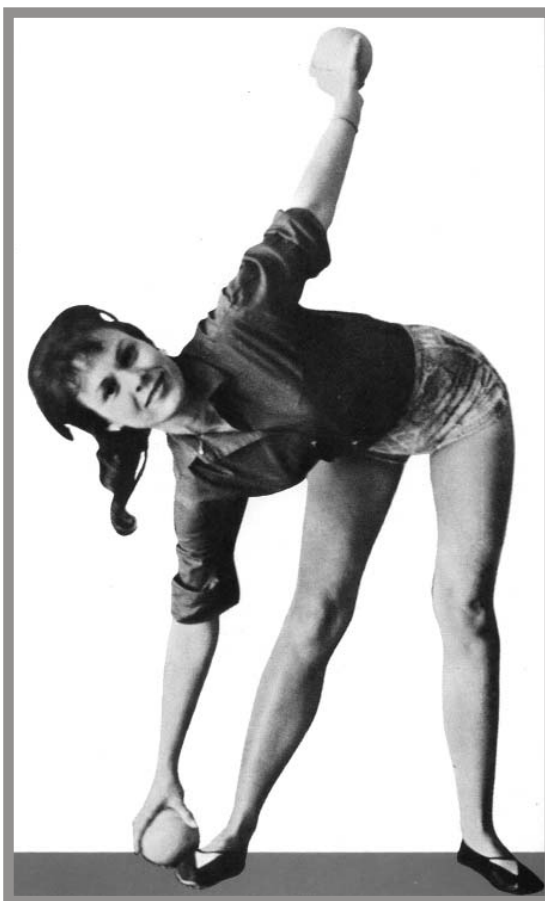
When I was asked recently how I managed to write for *Strength & Health* magazine for so many years, I had to reach back fifty years, to the Spring of 1956. Harry Paschall, who had been editor of *S&H*, had retired and was living in Pompano Beach, Florida. One day he happened into our gym in Ft. Lauderdale, which is only a few miles south as we had the only gym in Broward County at the time. Our friendship developed quickly. Harry apparently liked Al, my husband, and me, and he appreciated our knowledge of the business. So he just asked right out if I would like to author a "Ladies" section of *S&H* each month. Of course I was flattered and said yes. Harry then had to call Ray Van Cleef, who was the editor at that time. (A further note about Ray Van Cleef and Harry Paschall. After Harry was instrumental in my long writing career, he went back to York, PA, and became the editor again of *S&H* after Ray moved his family to California. I had met Ray and his family at their home in York, in the early 1950's, before I started to write. Harry named our very first weightlifting team in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. That was, of course, Bosco Weightlifting Club.) And then Ray talked to Bob Hoffman to okay it all. As I said, it all happened quite

quickly. I really had to get into it fast as the first article was to be published in the June 1956 issue. I also needed a photographer. Wouldn't you know, Al had been dabbling in the dark room and had a good Roloflex camera which could provide the type of photos needed for reprint. So, Al did all the photography up until 1976 when we were divorced.

As anyone who read *S&H* could tell, we were a traveling family, operating gyms all over. By living in so many interesting places, it provided us with lots of material and varied types of ladies, all of whom were thrilled to be in a published magazine. During all those years I don't think anyone was used as a model more than once, except for yours truly.

While living in St. Vincent in the Caribbean we had a very pretty native girl who exercised and was photographed for the article. She was a clerk in a native grocery store. While living on Barbados, the interest in weight training was quite large. And what a beautiful island on which to photograph the models. Then, while living on Grand Cayman Island, one of our models was the principal of the elementary school my children attended. She was a marine biologist as well.

We also spent a great year in



Vera Christensen's articles on fitness training for women appeared in *Strength & Health* from 1956 to the magazine's demise in 1986. Like Jack LaLanne, Vera tried to get all women involved with exercise and often showed women how to exercise at home, using objects from around the house, like these softballs, as well as dumbbells and barbells.

Lake Placid, New York. Lots of skiing and ice skating on the personal side of our lives. I conducted a weight training and exercise class at the high school there for the state of New York. I became the personal trainer for a female ski jumper who was a particularly interesting person. She was trying very hard to get on the ski jump team, which, of course, was all male. She never made it, but what made me feel even worse was that my own twelve-year-old son made the team and he was a first timer on snow skis. He was a natural, and loved the whole daredevil part of it. Of course, it scared me to pieces to watch him jump. We also had several other interesting people as models while living in that beautiful, beautiful part of New York. I even got to be a passenger down the four-man bobsled run, and it was one of the greatest thrills I have ever had; I will never forget it.

While just visiting, not living, on the Isle of Pines, which is south of Cuba, we got a lot of pretty shots for one of the articles. Actually, it was the last time we visited Cuba and the Isle of Pines, as Castro was not being friendly and we were actually strip-searched, even our small children. What a shame, as we had been weekend-ing both places for several years in that absolute-ly beautiful country. The gym in San Diego gave us lots of ladies to use in the articles.

Another interesting girl was a professional horse rider. She had a bad knee injury, so after her surgery I trained her so she could get back in her saddle and onto the race track. So many, many different types of women were used in my articles, and I think that was one reason why the series ran so long. Lots of variation.

Now to the ladies in Las Vegas. One in particular. I became the personal trainer for Mrs. Horn, the mother of Roy Horn of the famous Siegfried and Roy act. I trained her in their home, or should I say their compound, as it takes up several blocks. Unfortunately, Mrs. Horn would not let me publish an article about her training. I did, however, get to romp with a couple of male lions, only three months old. Anything older would have been too dangerous.

Unfortunately, another article I did was never published. It was about Jayne Mansfield. It seems that Bob Hoffman wouldn't use her photos because her husband, Mickey Hargitay, was affiliated with Joe Weider's



Pretty Vera Christensen served as a powerful role model for the cause of women's training and figure improvement. Her graceful, feminine physique was firmly muscled, athletic, and yet alluring. Hers was a body average women aspired to match, and her column in *Strength & Health*—"To The Ladies"—was one of the longest-running features in the history of the magazine.

International Federation of Bodybuilders (IFBB).

Another group of articles that had lots of appeal involved a weight loss contest I created. Ladies sent in their "before" photos and a short bio. These were published and after three months of dieting and new photos with information on how they lost their weight, we then published the results. First, second, and third place prizes were awarded. It went over well; I don't know why I didn't do it again.

During the last several years the magazine was published, I was asked to write two articles a month. No one really knew this, as I wrote under an assumed name. Well actually, it wasn't that assuming. It was my middle and maiden names put together (Hope Coleman).

So as to how I remained with *Strength & Health* for so many years, until it went out of circulation near the passing of Bob Hoffman, I guess it was because the series was so varied in topics and areas, and because many lovely ladies spent so much time training their bodies and then gave their time to be photographed. And, ultimately, I just was not fired!