

THE FIRST FEMALE CELEBRITY FITNESS AUTHOR: VAUDEVILLE'S BELLE GORDON—CHAMPION LADY BAG PUNCHER OF THE WORLD

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In 2013 Bieke Gillis, then a graduate student at The University of British Columbia, won the North American Society for Sport History Graduate Essay Contest for an essay on a *fin de siècle* vaudeville performer known as Charmion.¹ Although Charmion was often described as a strongwoman, and cabinet cards sold at her performances included some showing her flexed biceps and muscular back, she wasn't a strongwoman in the classic sense of Sandwina, Athleta, Minerva, Vulcana, or other circus and vaudeville performers who lifted things, broke chains, or bent iron. As Bieke explains in her article that begins on page 25, Charmion, although called a strongwoman, was actually an acrobat, who became more famous for the strip-tease or "disrobing" part of her trapeze act, than she was for the athletic stunts she performed after removing her dress and petticoats.²

The story of Charmion's career as a performer and Bieke's analysis of what her performances meant within the context of the social mores and expectations for women in the *fin de siècle* era, are emblematic of the stage careers of many other female vaudeville and circus entertainers. While listening to Bieke's paper in 2013, I immediately thought of Belle Gordon, another female vaudevillian who capitalized on the connections between physical culture and theater as Charmion had.³ Gordon, was neither an iron-lifting strongwoman nor an acrobat. She was an attractive, athletic, young woman who transgressed the traditional boundaries of acceptable female behavior by training to become a boxer and then developed a bag punching act that won her the distinction of being known as "the champion female bag puncher

of the world." Belle's skill at bag punching—the repetitive hitting of multiple punching bags, often timed to music—amazed Victorian audiences while her diminutive size, pretty face, and toned yet curvaceous physique helped her become an icon of beauty in that era. Unlike her contemporary Charmion, however, Gordon also published a book, titled *Physical Culture for Women*, that was part of Richard K. Fox's series of athletic guidebooks. It is, I believe, the first exercise book written by a celebrated woman athlete.⁴ The book was part of Gordon's campaign to capitalize on the widespread interest in physical culture that emerged at the turn of the twentieth century. It was also part of her plan to reinvent herself as a physical culture expert by exhibiting the shapely body she honed by exercise as evidence of her expertise.

This paper is the first attempt to examine the career of Belle Gordon, whose performing life was played out on the stages of saloons, burlesque halls, theaters, and major vaudeville houses. Gordon defined herself first and foremost as a performer and she found in bag punching a way to create art through the enactment of sport. Like many vaudeville entertainers, the details of Belle's life outside the theater remain well hidden despite the fact that she received an enormous amount of publicity during her active years as a performer.⁵ After examining several hundred newspaper advertisements and articles from her years as a performer, I still don't know if Belle Gordon is her real name, where she was born, or when and where she died. When asked about her early life and how she got started, Gordon sometimes told reporters that she was inspired to take up bag punching after seeing boxing champion Robert Fitzsimmons give an exhibition in Kentucky.⁶ Since Fitzsimmons's life is well documented and

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he gave only one recorded exhibition in Kentucky, Belle *could* have seen him in Louisville, Kentucky, on 16 December 1894 when he went three rounds with Tom McCarthy and then gave an exhibition of bag punching.⁷ Belle claimed in a 1903 interview with the *San Francisco Chronicle* that seeing Ruby Robert, as Fitzsimmons was often called, made her “stage struck,” creating in her a desire to go on stage and be a boxer and bag puncher herself. She was, she told the reporter, about 14 years old at this time. Sadly, the San Francisco reporter didn’t probe further and simply summed her up as “. . . just a little back woods girl from down in old Kentucky.”⁸ In 1907, Belle claimed that the day after Fitzsimmons’s exhibition she and a childhood friend went to see the boy’s father, a man who had some experience training boxers.⁹ The father (who is never named) agreed to help her learn to box, and they set up a crude punching bag in the barn behind his house where she began training. She weighed about 90 pounds when she began.¹⁰

Punching bags were not common at this time because of the lack of sporting goods dealers, so many boxers trained on home-made equipment, hitting a heavy bag filled with sawdust or dirt, while others used rugby balls suspended in nets that more closely mimicked modern punching bags.¹¹ Exactly what Belle used in the beginning is not known, but she reportedly saved money and was able to purchase a real bag before too long.¹² The idea of Belle buying a speed or punching bag with money she saved, raises questions about what role her family played in her life at this time and when she began appearing professionally. It is worth noting that her family is never mentioned in any of the articles examined for this paper. As for when she began, she told a reporter in 1896 that “For two years now, I have been all over the country playing dates,” giving credence to the 1894 date.¹³ An 1898 article in the *Cincinnati Post* supports this, although it disputes the Kentucky origin story. In it she is described as “a Cincinnati girl . . . who some years ago gave an exhibition at the dime museum.”¹⁴ In that same article, Belle reports “I taught myself bag punching . . . I was giving exhibitions six months before I saw a man punch the bag. My model is Fitzsimmons.”¹⁵

If Belle was appearing in 1894 and 1895, she was probably not playing in the kind of theaters that advertised in newspapers. Only two brief mentions were found in a search of newspapers from 1895.¹⁶ In January of that year, she

Belle Gordon, Who Holds a Medal for This Art, Has Issued a Challenge for a Contest at the People’s.



Belle Gordon was known for being willing to take on all comers who wanted to beat her at the sport of bag punching. This image and the accompanying article explaining her willingness to defend her title as the Champion Women’s Bag Puncher of the World appeared on 15 March 1898 in the *Cincinnati Post*.

and Billy Curtis, who is described as being from Indianapolis, boxed three rounds in an exhibition in his home city.¹⁷ In August, a brief mention on who is playing at the Buckingham Theater in Louisville reports: “Billy Curtis and Belle Gordon closed the show with a boxing match.”¹⁸ There is no mention of her bag punching in either article.

The National Police Gazette claimed in a 1901 article that Gordon was the first woman to “master the art of bag punching and has invented the majority of the blows she uses, and which have been adopted by men and women alike.”¹⁹ Again, however, other news accounts contain conflicting narratives. In the 1907 interview in which she claims it was seeing Fitzsimmons that inspired her, she also suggests that John Donaldson, a gym owner and well-known member of the New York boxing fraternity, helped teach her the finer points of bag punching. Donaldson set up a special place in his gym for her, Belle explained, and after a short time with him as her coach she became “very proficient” at bag punching.²⁰ Donaldson also got

bookings for her and helped her re-think her act with Billy Curtis, a former professional boxer. It was after working with Donaldson that Curtis and Gordon added a solo bag punching segment for her to the end of their act. Heavy-weight champion James J. Corbett remembered seeing them perform and that Belle was the real star, telling a reporter, "Belle Gordon did a punching bag act, and her husband did the falling when they put on the gloves."²¹

As historian Jerry Gems has documented, the 1890s was a unique decade in the history of boxing. Men's prize fighting, with Richard K. Fox and the *Police Gazette* to champion it, began to be viewed as less violent and more socially respectable as the sport was "civilized" by the adoption of the Marquess of Queensbury Rules.²² Adding to the popularity of boxing was the growth of taverns such as Harry Hill's Exchange in the Bowery District of New York, one of many saloons across America that became performance spaces for sparring matches, pedestrian races, and all sorts of indoor sports popular with male gamblers. These less glamorous, more "down-market" performing venues hired both male and female athlete-performers and welcomed both male and female spectators.²³ Interest in boxers as sport celebrities increased geometrically in the last decades of the nineteenth century as newspapers like the *Police Gazette*, and the *Spirit of the Times* reported on the lives and relationships of the champions as much as they did the matches. Further, the early sport papers were suddenly filled with illustrations—first engravings, and then photographs—that revealed the bared chests and athletic grandeur of the boxers' bodies.²⁴

Eugen Sandow's influence in making the muscular body a new ideal, can plainly be seen in the many physique images that begin appearing in the 1890s showing the hypertrophied arms and muscular backs of male athletes. Women who gave "athletic performances" like Belle Gordon and Charmion, also posed for photos revealing their nude backs and flexed arms, just as strongwomen Vulcana, Sandwina, and others did.²⁵ The transgressive nature of seeing attractive women performing such masculine rituals as boxing and weightlifting appealed to male and female audience members on several levels. Although historian Susan Glenn does not discuss women boxers in her well-regarded *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism*, her claim that vaudeville and legitimate theater provided women with an important public space

in which to both view and participate in new forms of womanhood, rings true.²⁶ Similarly, Erik Jensen observed, after studying German women boxers in the early twentieth century, that "By celebrating or engaging in violence themselves, these female boxing enthusiasts staked a claim on masculine behavior for women too."²⁷ Witnessing performers like Belle Gordon, who demonstrated that they were not just the equal but actually superior to male performers, connected with the emerging cultural forces of the early twentieth century such as the rise of the "New Woman."²⁸ If Glenn is correct, witnessing women excel at typically male activities helped further the emergence of feminism in the early twentieth century and strengthened the growing sentiment that there was no reason for women not to be treated as the equal of men in all aspects of life.²⁹

The other aspect of the audience's appreciation of such athletic performers, however, was the erotic pleasure of viewing a fit, attractive, woman on stage in short skirts, low-cut blouses, and with bare arms. Historian Kasia Boddy's *Boxing: A Cultural History* argues that in the 1890s "Women's arm muscles had suddenly become a new erogenous zone." Citing literary sources in which the flexed arms of women athletes are described in evocative language, she explores at some length in her book, the works of journalist/novelists Jack London and Frank Norris who were among the early writers enchanted with the muscular arms of acrobats, strongwomen, and female boxers. Boddy suggests that the athletic women performers who filled circus tents and the gas-lit theaters of vaudeville, were representatives of the "New Woman" type that emerged at the turn of the century. They cultivated athleticism "as an alternative to Victorian restrictions on their bodies and behavior," while their fans viewed them as a "disjunction" of new and old types of womanhood.³⁰ What they viewed, and perhaps fantasized about, was what *McTeague* author Frank Norris found erotically interesting, "the frame of a pugilist in the person of a girl not yet out of her teens."³¹ Norris wrote these words to describe Alcide Capitaine, a vaudeville acrobat often referred to as "The Female Sandow." His words, however, are also a perfect description of diminutive, teenaged Belle Gordon whose rise to national attention in the waning years of the nineteenth century was closely linked to her physical appearance.³² Belle's arms were also discussed by journalists. In 1907, one wrote of her appearance in Salt Lake City



Billy Curtis began appearing with Belle Gordon in 1895 when she was just 15. Curtis had been a professional boxer of limited fame before pairing with her and in the beginning they simply did a sparring match on stage. Gordon was known for being a small woman, weighing only 90 pounds, in fact, when she began to train, and so Curtis must also have been a small man based on their height in this photo from 1896. During the years they performed as Curtis and Gordon their act began with a “comic” boxing match in which Belle defeated Curtis, and then Belle did a solo bag punching set following the boxing match. They were married by 1899, but precisely how long that marriage lasted, and why they separated is not known.

saying, “Belle Gordon, the athletic girl, is there with a collection of biceps that would make the most heroic bachelor ponder over the matrimonial chance.”³³ Belle’s fame was also enhanced, of course, by the unexpected delight viewers found in watching a woman often described as “dainty” demonstrate that she was a master of the punching bag and perhaps, the best bag puncher in the world of either sex.³⁴

While the beginning of her career remains murky, by 1896 Curtis and Gordon were appearing in various vaudeville venues in northeastern America, and their act was now considered a “comic” turn by including a man vs. woman sparring match—always won by Belle. The sparring match was then followed by Belle’s increasingly impressive bag punching solo that soon dominated all newspaper accounts.³⁵ Because she was attractive and the bag punching was novel and impressive, Belle quickly eclipsed Curtis in terms of press coverage. Curtis is featured in only one photo in the *Police Gazette* by himself (in 1899) while Belle was featured numerous times.³⁶ In the short article accompanying his photo, Curtis is described as “a boxer of quite some ability and an entertainer

of rare merit.”³⁷ How successful Curtis was as a professional boxer is not clear as there is only one mention of an actual boxing match in the *Gazette*, and it is from 1893.³⁸

Belle first appeared in the *Police Gazette* in 1896 when they ran a large photo of her dressed in a striped dress, accompanying a lengthy article that described her as “one of the most attractive specialists now before the patrons of vaudeville in this country.” The “champion female bag puncher of America,” as they called her, was then about 16 years old. Belle’s credentials, the article explained, came from her incredible skill. She does not “miss the bag once out of a thousand times,” the *Gazette* reported, “and her act is the hit of the show she is currently engaged with. She is very ladylike, very small, and very pretty and knows well how to take care of herself.” She was also, according to the *Gazette*, a better bag puncher than James J. Corbett or her idol Bob Fitzsimmons, and “just about as clever” as Tommy Ryan.³⁹

The true focus of the *Gazette*’s article though was Belle’s struggle to be truly recognized as the best female bag puncher in the world. The article revealed that she already had circulated an open challenge for either men or women to come on stage and try to out-point her in a bout with “the flying sphere.”⁴⁰ However, no one took her up on that offer and she was frustrated by new imitators of her act who did not take her seriously. Jack Burke, who did a similar act with his wife had called her “a bag of wind,” she reported, and that did not sit well with Belle.

She decided to force a showdown in the same way that prize fighters and professional strongmen did, by using the pages of *The Police Gazette* to openly challenge others for the world title. So, she went to the *Gazette* offices where she met Sam Austin, the *Police Gazette*’s sport editor and an important figure in the boxing community. Belle explained that she was there to put up money for an open challenge to any other woman bag puncher in the country. According to Belle, “He looked at me in an amused way and, bursting out laughing said: ‘Why you are only fooling. You are much too small and some of these women will eat you up.’” According to the article, Belle then pulled \$250 out of her pocket and laid it on his desk, telling him she was “not fooling, and here is my money to back what I say.”⁴¹

Austin, who controlled the sport pages of the *Gazette*, was clearly charmed by the youthful Belle and became a powerful advocate

for her in the years ahead. He posted her \$250 challenge in the *Police Gazette* as she asked and then used the newspaper's own money to raise the ante to any amount between \$250 and \$1000 in the months ahead. No one took that bait either.⁴² Finally, on 23 July 1897 the *Police Gazette* hosted a women's competition at the Broadway Athletic Club in New York to decide who should hold the title of "Champion Woman Bag Puncher of the World." Gordon beat seven other women in claiming the crown that evening with Sam Austin serving as referee. For the victory she was presented with a special gold medal designed and donated by Richard K. Fox, owner of the *Police Gazette*.⁴³ She wore the



In 1896, sixteen-year-old Belle Gordon met Sam Austin, the sporting editor of the *National Police Gazette*, who became her friend and a professional mentor. Austin helped her re-think her act, and he personally directed the creation of the elegant frame shown in this photo where she hung the various balls she used to perform. Here, she has three balls attached at the same time. Before 1900, Belle often performed in floor-length skirts in keeping with contemporary women's fashions. The medal she was presented by Richard K. Fox is clearly visible on her skirt, just below her waist.

medal at every performance in the years ahead. The medal gave her credibility in the same way that the boxing champion's belt indicated he was the best in the world.⁴⁴ She was reportedly only 16 years old when this contest was held.⁴⁵ After the victory, Fox and Austin gave her even more publicity in the *Gazette*, including two articles in the same issue in the week following the contest.⁴⁶ Austin also continued to feature her in single photographs and in longer articles in the *Police Gazette* and kept her in the public's eye over the next several years.⁴⁷ Belle and Billy also got help from Austin in making additional improvements to their stage act. An account of a performance they gave in 1897, in Washington, DC, described Belle as Austin's protégé writing that her act was:

... far and away the best thing ever seen in this city in this line. Not only is Miss Gordon by long odds the best female bag-puncher who has ever graced a stage, but she can give cards and spades to the pugilistic cracks who think they can hammer the pigskin. Miss Gordon has the art down to a fine point. Her fancy figures are executed with a precision and skill that could only have been obtained by years of hard practice. The stage setting for Miss Gordon's act was designed by Sam Austin, the sporting editor of the *Police Gazette*. It is something unique in this line, and when the lights are out in front and Miss Gordon steps into the framework surrounding the punching bag support and the glare of the calcium lights are thrown on her she presents a most charming site. Then, when she begins to get in her fine work on the pig skin she completely captures the audience.⁴⁸

The critical praise she received in Washington became common in the years ahead. In Brooklyn that same year, Belle and the other members of the Rentz Santley Burlesque Company played to a sold-out house and Belle was described as the "star of the olio, who punched the bag in such clever style that the crowd yelled at her 'Better than Fitz!'" a reference to heavy-



After separating from Billie Curtis, Belle had to redesign her act and think about how she wanted to portray herself to the public. She began to rebrand herself as an expert in physical culture and changed her wardrobe to both reveal more of her body and to heighten her feminine appearance. Her curled hair and frilly, short-skirted dress made her seem more of a figure of beauty and less a boxing tomboy as she did when she first appeared on stage.

weight champion Robert Fitzsimmons.⁴⁹ Gordon further enhanced her reputation by taking on male bag punchers in exhibition bouts. She beat boxer Joe Gans in a bag punching contest in Baltimore in 1896, and she “clearly out-classed” Jack Ward in a match in 1898.⁵⁰ She even took on two male boxers at once in Cincinnati with the contest worked so that if either

of them beat her they would both claim a prize.⁵¹ The *Commercial Tribune* reported that Gordon made “short work of two men at the People’s Theater last night in a contest of buffeting the ball . . . Miss Gordon just won the contest in a walk. . . [her] exhibition was a marvelous one and evoked wild applause from the delighted audience.”⁵² In January of 1902 she even challenged world champion Jim Jeffries to an exhibition bag punching match and reportedly out-pointed him.⁵³

Interestingly, there are no newspaper accounts found of Belle going head-to-head in a bag punching contest against another woman, although numerous articles refer to her defending the medal against all comers. Belle often contested the claims of women who tried to copy her act or use titles they had not earned.⁵⁴ In 1913 after nearly twenty years of performing, Richard K. Fox decided to create a special championship belt for Belle similar to the belts he presented to the champions in men’s boxing. Each year that she had retained her title, an engraved gold bar was added to the medal so that, by 1913 it was “about two feet long and with twenty bars on it.”⁵⁵ To create the belt, Fox took back the medal and used the engraved bars as decorations on the new champion’s belt. After presenting it to Gordon, the *Police Gazette* reported, “A great many young women with ambitions have had their envious eyes on the title, and they have tried to annex it on many occasions, but always, when the smoke of the conflict has been wafted away, they have found that Miss Gordon’s reputation was a real one and not a flimsy bubble bobbing along ready to be punctured by the first performer who happened along.”⁵⁶

Sam Austin connected her to another

late-nineteenth century celebrity, Steve Brodie, famous for jumping off the Brooklyn Bridge in 1886, and then using his resulting celebrity to open a saloon, and later to go on the stage.⁵⁷ Curtis and Gordon joined Brodie's burlesque troupe during the winter of 1897-1898, but their act was overshadowed by Brodie, whose lack of acting skills could not be forgiven by most critics despite his celebrity.⁵⁸ Despite this bad run, over the next years Curtis and Gordon worked continuously for various vaudeville circuits playing in Washington D.C.; Providence, Rhode Island; New York City; Indianapolis, Indiana; Chicago, Illinois; and many of the towns in between these urban centers.⁵⁹ They were also successful in Europe during these years. In the summer of 1897 they went to Britain where Belle "made such an emphatic hit in the London music halls," that they were invited to return in 1898.⁶⁰ For the next several years they continued working both sides of the Atlantic, doing an extended continental tour in 1899-1900 playing Berlin, Hamburg, Hanover, Vienna, and Paris.⁶¹ By 1899, Belle was so well known that reports of her appearances in Europe were also appearing in American papers. In May of 1899, the *Police Gazette* reported that Curtis and Gordon had been in Europe for about a year playing "all the principal cities," and that they were booked solid up to 1901. The fact that they were also booked in Paris during the Exposition [Ed Note: 1900 World's Fair and Olympic Games] the *Gazette* reported, "attests to the merit of their work." In this May 1899 article, they are referred to for the first time as husband and wife.⁶²

One indication of Belle Gordon's growing fame as the nineteenth century was drawing to a close, was the invitation she and Billy Curtis received to have their act recorded by Thomas Edison's cameras in

1898. Edison had been experimenting with film throughout the 1890s and had asked Eugen Sandow to do his posing routine for his cameras in 1894.⁶³ By then, Edison had developed a way for the public to view the short films he produced by looking through a peephole into a box in which the film was projected. Edison called this new invention a Kinetoscope and began manufacturing the machines for sale to owners of emerging Kinetoscope "parlors" who then charged the public to see the films. As film historian Dan Streible observed, films to be viewed by the public needed to have appeal.⁶⁴ Although the studio filmed all sorts of short subjects from the natural world and urban landscapes, Edison and his partner, William Dickson, also turned to vaudeville, the circus, boxing, and other sports to film celebrities they hoped the public would pay to see.

Annie Oakley was the first athletic woman to be filmed. She gave a shooting exhibition in 1894 that was captured for posterity while she was in New York for Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show.⁶⁵ Four years passed before another athletic woman was captured by Edison's cameras. The second woman was Belle Gordon, who recreated the comic boxing match she and Billy Curtis did on stage in which she knocks Curtis to the floor.⁶⁶ Charmion would not do her disrobing trapeze act for Edison's cameras until 1901, and that same year another Edison movie featuring women appeared, called "Gordon Sisters Boxing."⁶⁷

Although some individuals have suggested that one of the women in "Gordon Sisters Boxing," is Belle Gordon, neither the appearance of the more slender of the two women on screen, nor any news clippings from this era support this assertion. According to the Library of Congress, there were two versions of the Gordon Sisters



As she began connecting herself and bag punching to the emerging physical culture movement at the turn of the twentieth century, Gordon revealed even more of her body and posed for photos like this biceps shot that appeared in the *National Police Gazette*. Compared to Charmion's arm, Gordon's "fine biceps" as the *Gazette* described it, is more smooth than peaked. However, that was also Gordon's goal for exercise for women. She was not in favor of "too much" muscle on women's bodies.

who appeared on vaudeville: Bessie and Minnie Gordon worked together in 1901 and Bessie and Alice in 1903.⁶⁸ The use of the Gordon name could have been a legitimate family name, or it could have been an attempt to play off Belle's fame. It was not unusual for circus and vaudeville people to choose stage names that were similar to those of the biggest stars, as professional strongman Montgomery Irving famously did when he began appearing as Sandowe.⁶⁹

Gordon and Curtis's movie, titled "Comedy Set To," was captured on 50 feet of film and could be viewed in 40 seconds.⁷⁰ Sadly, no copy of the film still exists and so the Edison catalog description is the only source available to help envision what it may have looked like.⁷¹ The catalog described it as showing "Curtis and Gordon in one of their cleverest acts," and then explained that Gordon held the *Police Gazette* medal as "Champion Lady Bag Puncher of the World." They described the bout as "a combination of popular leads and blows used by all pugilists, and the grace and ease with which Miss Gordon does a cross-under or throws an upper-cut or an under-cut at Billy Curtis, is so quick and clever that one wishes the round was three times longer." The catalog claimed *Comedy Set To* was "refined, scientific and a genuine comedy."⁷²

While Edison's writers may have declared the film "refined," the final part of the catalog entry was clearly written for male theater owners choosing films to show in their Kinetoscope parlors. "Belle," the entry concluded, "is as frisky a little lady as ever donned a boxing outfit, and her abbreviated skirts, short sleeves, and low necked waist make a very jaunty costume. Plenty of action and sure to be a great favorite."⁷³ The prescience of the catalog's author is worth noting.

In the summer of 1900, after Belle returned to the United States from another tour in Europe, she was no longer connected to Billy Curtis. When and how they separated, and if they actually divorced is not known.⁷⁴ The press reports and advertisements connected to her appearances just begin listing her as a single act.⁷⁵ By this time, however, she was playing at the better vaudeville houses like Tony Pastor's theater in New York, and she even had a popular song dedicated to her called *That's My Girl* that included her photo on the front cover of the sheet music.⁷⁶ By 1903, she also had a product endorsement deal, and began appearing with champion wrestler Gus Ruhlin, in advertisements for a cure-all tonic called Blood Wine,

which had reportedly made her "strong and vigorous," and able to work harder than ever.⁷⁷

The break with Curtis allowed Belle to reinvent herself as a performer. Belle's costumes become more elaborate and feminized with shorter skirts, ruffles, and other feminine touches. Stiff petticoats held her skirts away from the body and made her corseted waist appear smaller and her silhouette more conventionally feminine. Without the sparring match to take up time at the beginning of her set on stage, Belle's bag punching becomes more complex as she moved from one bag to two and then three and later to five and she even ordered a new apparatus so she could try to keep nine bags going at the same time. She planned to debut the nine-bag finale in Buffalo and would be using most of her body to keep them in motion. Two of them were attached to the floor, three from platforms, and two each from the sides of the frame. The local paper claimed she would use hands, feet, knees, elbows, and even her head to keep them all in motion while music played. She even learned to do part of her routine while wearing a blindfold.⁷⁸ The *Buffalo Enquirer*, in 1902, reported that after she moved to a single act, she became "the sensation of the circuit over which her show travels."⁷⁹ In San Francisco, in 1904, the act was described as a "phenomenal athletic showing . . . she kept the spheres under perfect control."⁸⁰ The *Tribune* in Scranton, Pennsylvania, remarked on the originality of her act saying, "Miss Gordon occupies a position above the average female bag punchers and well deserves the applause accorded her."⁸¹ The strongest praise, however, came from her friends at the *Police Gazette*, who saw her show at Tony Pastor's theater in New York in 1902:

Belle Gordon, the 'Police Gazette' woman champion bag puncher produced at Tony Pastor's theater recently a bag punching act which proved her to be a master—or mistress, if you like—of the art. Her efforts to entertain were not limited to the mere mechanical art of keeping a punching bag in motion under the regulation platform, but she introduced novelties which seemed to defy the laws of gravitation, and which had hitherto seemed impossible of performance. In concluding she kept in motion one ball fas-



After the publication of her book, *Physical Culture for Women*, Gordon appeared on the front cover of the *National Police Gazette* twice. This photo, displaying her back and shoulder muscles, took up the entire front cover on 11 February 1905. It also ran as the front piece inside her book.

tened to the floor, and two which were suspended from the platform.

By her new achievements she has taken a firm grip on the championship, for it is hardly likely that any other woman will dare attempt what she has accomplished.⁸²

The following week, the *Police Gazette* ran a full-page photo of Gordon in her new costume writing in the caption that she was making a hit with her new and novel act.⁸³

One of the biggest changes Belle made after splitting from Curtis began after an article appeared in the *New York Evening World* titled "Bag Punching as a Beauty Maker." Frances Namon, featured in the article, was a far-less-skilled performer who did a bicycle and bag punching act with her husband. The article reported that bag punching had cured Namon's

dyspepsia and helped her lose weight and pronounced bag punching an exercise that could work "wonders with the human form."⁸⁴

Whether Belle saw the Namon article before she launched her own bag punching/physical culture campaign is not known. However, just six weeks after Namon's article appeared, Gordon sat for an interview with the *Times* in Philadelphia that was published as "Bag Punching the Latest Fad for Physical Training for Women." The *Times* described Gordon as "one of the most perfect specimens of womanhood in the world" and held her up as a model for what can be achieved through exercise.⁸⁵ The article explained that Gordon started to build up her body by taking daily exercise as a girl, "took aptly to it," and began to show improvement. Although she also liked outdoor sports, Gordon took up the punching bag, the article explained, and she "soon mastered the art completely and won renown for her cleverness." According to the *Times*, Belle was the first woman to master the art of bag punching and she invented the majority of the blows she used in her act, which were then copied by other men and women performers.⁸⁶ Miss Gordon, the article concluded, "indorses [sic] bag punching as an excellent exercise for building up the system and one which can be adopted as one of the chief exercises for women."⁸⁷

At the cusp of the nineteenth century, the rise of a transnational physical culture movement made the shape, muscularity, and health of both male and female bodies a matter of keen public interest. The movement gave birth to new magazines like *Sandow's Magazine* in England and Bernarr Macfadden's *Physical Culture* in the United States; it inspired the first proto-physique contests; it saw the rise of mail-order physical training courses; it fostered the growth of public gyms; and it even began to be incorporated in the stage performances of some of vaudeville's biggest stars. Sandow started the vaudeville-star-as-physical-culture-expert trend when he began delivering short lectures as part of his stage shows. Sandow sometimes even taught anatomy by flexing his muscles and then naming the contracted flesh in both English and Latin.⁸⁸ Famous strongman and pro-wrestler George Hackenschmidt, also famous for his physique, gave similar physical culture talks after demonstrating his wrestling skills on music hall and vaudeville stages. Like Sandow, Hackenschmidt also wrote books describing best physical culture practices, and his body, like Sandow's, was widely admired.⁸⁹

Sandow and Hackenschmidt (and the other performers who also jumped on the physical culture bandwagon) generally had no university degrees or special training as physical educators. The credential that made them experts in physical culture was the body they created through exercise. What mattered was what the body looked like and what it was able to do on stage. Although 43 percent of the theatrical profession consisted of “professional show women” by 1900, none of the early vaudeville and circus performers, chorus girls, singers, or actresses followed Sandow’s lead and successfully began incorporating physical culture lectures into their stage act until Belle Gordon decided to capitalize on the body she built through exercise.⁹⁰

References to Belle’s beauty and fine figure began to appear more frequently in the press after the article in the *Philadelphia Times*. In 1902, for example, when she is playing at the Lafayette Theater in Buffalo, Belle is described as combining science with grace in her bag punching act, and it is reported that she will be remembered as well for her “personal charms” and “superb physique.”⁹¹ She was described at times as a “perfect woman,” as if she is the feminine counterpart to Sandow, often billed as The Perfect Man.⁹² In 1904, the *Los Angeles Herald*, describes her as “a perfect specimen of physical development. She is not

large,” they write, but her arms, “though very muscular, are not ungracefully proportioned. She is graceful in her carriage, and the flush of perfect health shows in her rounded cheeks and bright eyes.”⁹³ Belle’s interest in physical culture also gave reporters something to discuss at greater length in their articles, and her choice to move her career in this direction was a perfect fit for the zeitgeist of the times.

The campaign was essentially launched in July of 1901, when nearly a full page of the *Police Gazette* was devoted to Belle and bag punching. A large photo in the center of the page shows Belle in a more revealing dress than she wore previously in the act of hitting the bag.

Below the central image are two physique photographs, the first a double biceps shot that displays her back and shoulder muscles, and the other shows her flexing one of her arms.⁹⁴ By 1903, Belle also began incorporating a lecture on physical culture in her stage act at times. In a show she did at Keith’s Theater in Philadelphia, the papers reported “She really made the pig skin talk, while her demonstration on physical culture was a novel feature of the act.”⁹⁵ In December of 1903, Gordon, now a headliner for Benjamin Keith’s more high-class vaudeville circuit, is listed as the author of a three-part series in the *San Francisco Chronicle* on bag punching as exercise. “Bag Punching for Health and Beauty,” “Bag Punching in a Ball Gown for Health,” and “Bag Punching Fashion’s Newest Fad” were all long articles that included practical advice for getting started and training with a punching bag.⁹⁶ Gordon later published a fourth article with the *Chronicle* in 1905 called “Limbering up for the Bathing Suit,” that is all too reminiscent of our modern anxieties over swimwear.⁹⁷

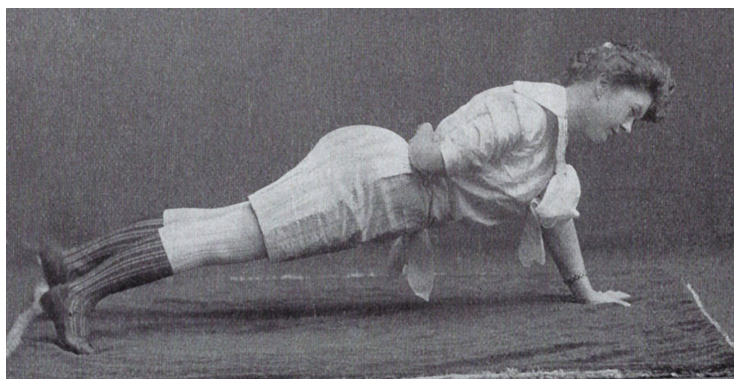
In July of 1904, the *Police Gazette* posted a small announcement that the Fox Athletic Series was bringing out its fifth volume—this one authored by Belle Gordon on *Physical Culture for Women*. Belle Gordon, “is considered physically perfect,” the announcement read, and she has not only written a book

on physical culture, but has posed for the 32 illustrations in it.” Every woman who desires to attain physical perfection, they declared, needed Gordon’s book.⁹⁸

Gordon’s soft-bound paperback contains no biographical information on Belle and her main contribution seems to have been the posing for the 32 instructional photographs. There is a very short introduction that introduces Gordon as the most beautifully formed woman in America, and then tells readers that “what this system has done for her it will do for anyone else if conscientiously and persistently practiced.”⁹⁹ The introduction also contains guidance for those aiming to lose or gain weight: “To



Belle Gordon’s book, *Physical Culture for Women*, was published in 1904 as part of the Richard K. Fox’s Athletic Library. She included chapters on Resistance Movements, Wand Movements, and Bag Punching Movements for beginners.



Although *Physical Culture for Women* was aimed at beginners, some of the exercises, like the one-arm pushup above, required more upper body strength than a beginner would normally possess.

take on flesh drink plenty of water—as much as a gallon a day. Eat starchy foods and spend eight or nine hours in bed.” To lose weight, “. . . eat sparingly, take long walks and spend but five or six hours in bed.”¹⁰⁰ After an admonition to get plenty of fresh air and follow the exercises in the book faithfully, the section titled “Resistance Exercises” opens. Each exercise is allocated two pages in the book, one for a photograph of Belle Gordon demonstrating the exercise and the other for the description. Twenty-two open-handed isometric and bodyweight exercises are included in the Resistance Exercises section, including a one-handed pushup that would have required considerable strength.¹⁰¹ The second section contains only six exercises with a wooden wand to build flexibility and then, in the third section she describes how to perform 11 simple bag exercises.¹⁰² The book contains only 73 pages.

The *Police Gazette*, also published by Richard K. Fox publications, promoted the book heavily over the next several years. One of the illustrations from the book, showing Belle dressed in shorts and a middy top while punching a bag, was used as a full-page image on the cover of the *Gazette* in March of 1904 when the book was launched. Belle was also the cover model for the *Gazette* in February of 1905, only this time, she is posing with a

flexed arm, in diaphanous drapery displaying her back and arm muscles.¹⁰³ Inside the *Gazette*, advertisements ran regularly telling readers the book can be purchased by sending six two-cent stamps. As new editions of other Fox training guides appeared, a larger ad was also created, showing Belle in only tights and a sequined singlet such as acrobats wear. “Artists have raved over Miss Gordon’s curves,” the ad begins, “and she is proud of them because she helped make them.” Belle’s goal in writing the book, they explain is to help other women look like her. “She shows the movements and

exercises necessary to produce physical perfection, and it’s all very interesting because she is not only a smart woman but a great poser.”¹⁰⁴

It is impossible to accurately measure how much impact the book, or Belle, for that matter, may have had in the sudden interest in bag punching as exercise for women that occurred in the first decade of the new century. However, many gyms added punching bags to their equipment offerings at this time, and many fitness magazines included articles of training for women. Gordon posed for one of the most important of those articles, titled “Bag Punching for Women,” and written by a medical doctor in 1907. The article in *Health* magazine helped allay concerns that this was inappropriate exercise for women, or that it could be dangerous.¹⁰⁵ “Bag punching is attended with no danger or injury of any kind, or sprained muscles,” wrote the doctor. It would instead create in women grace, poise, agility, well-molded and firm muscles, and overall good health.¹⁰⁶

As for Belle, she began dressing more provocatively after the book’s publication, revealing her body more fully while she performed her act. A 1906 report from Dallas suggests the success of this approach as the reviewer wrote, “The hygienic value of the exercise is shown in her symmetrically developed



Gordon’s excellent physical condition can be plainly seen in this 1904 photo taken for her book demonstrating the starting position for bag punching. She was then about 24 years old.

figure . . . she is most pleasing to look upon and there is no suggestion of the pugilist about her."¹⁰⁷ She also began using the term "The Athletic Girl" and later "The Physical Culture Girl," in her advertising along with, of course, her continued billing as the Champion Female Bag Puncher of the World.

For at least ten years after the release of *Physical Culture for Women*, Gordon continued to perform in vaudeville, but she gradually gravitated away from the big cities and played smaller towns, especially those in the western states of America. Reports of her shows in places like Wichita, Kansas; Bismarck, North Dakota; Anaconda, Montana; and Olympia, Washington, show she was still working as a headliner, but the theaters were not as grand.¹⁰⁸ In 1909, she teamed up with concert violinist Al Barber and they appeared together as Gordon and Barber for about three years. With Barber, she did her entire ten-minute performance while he played for her with the music's pace increasing during her time on stage. Again, nothing is known about their relationship or why they parted ways in 1913. Belle continued to work after the split for about two more years, billing herself as "The Athletic Girl" once again. The last mention I found of her appearing was in South Bend, Indiana, on 19 November 1915.¹⁰⁹

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Although Gordon's story is far from fully documented in this paper, I wanted to offer up this admittedly incomplete essay to connect her to Bieke Gil's work on Charmion as her life in vaudeville overlapped almost exactly with Belle Gordon's. Both women were major stars on vaudeville, both women were filmed by Thomas Edison, both displayed the muscularity they built through exercise, and both represented a new type of woman. Bieke has suggested that we must consider the meaning of the Edison films particularly carefully for they both embody and suggest multiple layers of meaning for



By 1906, Belle was wearing a costume not dissimilar to Charmion's or other acrobats who performed in tights on her legs and an elegantly trimmed gymnastics singlet. This picture appeared in the *Police Gazette* on 19 May 1906.

women. While Belle's "victory," in the film (and night after night on the vaudeville stage) could be read as a celebration of women's athleticism and physicality, and serve as a "powerful symbol of women's physical emancipation and autonomy," we must not forget that the women are simultaneously still subjects of the male gaze, which objectified their bodies as sexual commodities."¹¹⁰

Bieke's right, of course. Belle Gordon, like Charmion several years later, was clearly sexually objectified by her participation in the film and also in her performances on stage in vaudeville. Further, Bieke is right in asserting that the majority of contemporary scholars of women's studies almost uniformly regard such objectification—or being under "the male gaze"—as problematic for women, especially women in sport. As a topic, the male gaze has

been much discussed over the years by feminist scholars who view it primarily as a force that works against women. What scholars have spent less time thinking about is whether "the gaze" may also serve different functions in some circumstances. Sport historian Allen Guttman, in his work on sport and *Eros* has suggested that the male gaze is neither monolithically evil nor demeaning to all women. In his 2002 essay titled "Spartan Girls, French Postcards, and the Male Gaze: Another Go at Eros and Sport," Guttman argues that some women, fully aware of the gaze, will do as figure skater Katarina Witt did in her famous/infamous Carmen performance at the Olympics in 1988 and intentionally use the existence of the gaze to "embrace a fusion of the athletic, the aesthetic, and the erotic" in their performance of "sport."¹¹¹ In Witt's case that choice led her, while wearing a sexy skating outfit that appeared to be cut to the waist, to the gold medal in figure skating.

At the turn of the twentieth century, I believe that Charmion, some of the strong women I've written about in the past, and especially the subject of this paper, Belle Gordon—realized that it was in fact the existence

of the sexualized male gaze that provided them with the opportunity to be an athlete. Rather than restricting them, the fact that they developed physical skills that defied gender norms while maintaining an appearance of traditional beauty, desirability and, putting this in quotes “femininity,” meant that women who would otherwise have had no prospects of a physically-based career were able to move outside moribund separate sphere ideology; transcend Victorian norms; and become what I believe should be called the New Women of vaudeville and the circus. Admittedly, they were not of the same background as the basketball-playing, university-educated women we generally associate with New Women in the Progressive Era. My suspicion is that Belle spent her youth on a small, hard-scrabble farm, living on the edge of poverty. The fact that she was performing at age 14, and perhaps touring by 15, provided her with a very different set of life-choices than the young women attending Mount Holyoke and Wellesley.

I believe that Gordon, and many of the women who worked in vaudeville and the circus, realized that the existence of the sexualized male gaze provided an opportunity for her to become a performer. Rather than restricting her, Belle developed physical skills that defied gender norms while maintaining an appearance of traditional beauty, desirability and femininity. She chose to use her moving body as a form of art and to do so knowingly under the male gaze. And, by making that choice, she provided thousands of others with a window into a world where women could be viewed as physically competent and could even do some things better than highly skilled men. She told a reporter once that she’s been invited by a women’s academy to become their physical education instructor and that it would have given her a secure life. However, she explained, “I can make much more money in theater, and I will reach more people.”¹² She certainly did.

NOTES

1. Bieke Gils, University of British Columbia, “Flying, Flirting and Flexing: Charmion’s Trapeze Act, Sexuality and Physical Culture at the Turn of the Twentieth Century,” 2013 Annual Meeting of the North American Society for Sport History: <https://temp.nassh.org/awards/graduate-student-essay-award/>.
2. I have been unable to find any evidence that Charmion (Laverie Vallée) possessed greater strength than other female acrobats of

her era. When she performed, she normally hit a few posing shots to highlight her well-muscled arms and back (muscles commonly seen in many acrobats and trapeze artists), but there is no record of her ever lifting anything publicly. A *New York World* article claimed that Charmion, “. . . measured her strength [probably on a dynamometer] against three strongmen, including Sandow, and ‘showed that she had nearly half as much leg and back power’ as them. See “A Woman in New York with the Muscles of a Sandow,” *New York World*, 19 December 1897; and Bieke Gils, “Flying, Flirting and Flexing: Charmion’s Trapeze Act, Sexuality and Physical Culture at the Turn of the Twentieth Century,” *Journal of Sport History* 41, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 259.

3. “She Hangs by Her Heel in Mid-air,” *Sunday New York World*, 9 January 1898; See also Gils, “Flying, Flirting and Flexing,” 259.
4. Fox was publisher of *The National Police Gazette* and Gordon’s book is Number Five in his series called the “Fox Athletic Library.” Belle Gordon, *Physical Culture for Women* (New York: Richard K. Fox Publishing, 1904).
5. In 2014, I made a short presentation on Belle Gordon at the annual meeting of the North American Society for Sport History and found, when I did research at that time, more than 100 mentions of her in newspapers. In 2022, I found more than 900 articles/brief mentions/advertisements about Belle available on digital newspaper sites. However, I have yet to find a birth certificate, date of death, or solve the riddle of her birth name. I know she was married at least once to Billy Curtis, but after extensive searches on Ancestry.com and other genealogy sites, I have still not been able to verify all the facts of her life.
6. “An Athletic Woman. How Miss Bell [sic] Gordon Learned the Art of Bag Punching,” *Deseret News* (Salt Lake City, Utah), 9 January 1907.
7. “Bob Fitzsimmons,” *The Cyber Boxing Zone Encyclopedia* viewed at: <http://www.cyberboxingzone.com/boxing/fitz.htm>. Fitzsimmons also gave three exhibitions in Cincinnati (December 2, 3 and 5) before the single show in Louisville on the 16th.
8. Belle Gordon and Harriett Hubbard Ayer, “Bag Punching Fashion’s Newest Fad for Health and Beauty,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 6 December 1903, 7.
9. It is possible that this was Billy Curtis who became her stage partner and eventually married her. No biographical information could be found on Curtis, which is sometimes spelled with two s’s in newspapers.
10. *Ibid.*; See also “North Dakota Climate Makes a Hit with Her,” *Bismarck Daily Tribune*, 11 December 1910, 3.
11. Samuel Adams, *Boxing and How to Train* (New York: Richard K. Fox Publishing Co., 1913), 221-223.
12. “Belle Gordon: Champion,” *National Police Gazette*, undated clipping, Otley Coulter Collection, Stark Center, The University of Texas at Austin. See also “An Athletic Woman,” *Deseret News*.
13. *Ibid.*, and “Belle Gordon Wants to Compete for the ‘Police Gazette’ Bag Punching Championship,” *National Police Gazette*, 28 November 1896: 69.
14. “She Punched the Bag,” *Cincinnati Post*, 15 March 1898, 2. Cincinnati had several dime museums that combined performing spaces (in which circus and vaudeville acts performed) along with exhibitions of human and animal oddities. See handeaux.tumblr.com/post/103283738542/cincinnati-family-freak-show-the-vine-street for information on Cincinnati dime museums.
15. “She Punched the Bag.”
16. Newspaper and magazine searches for this paper were conducted on: NewspaperArchive.com; Newspapers.com; ProQuest; The American Periodicals Database; and Britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk.
17. “Athletic Sports at Elwood,” *Indianapolis News*, 19 January 1895.
18. “Another Good Show,” *Courier-Journal* (Louisville, Kentucky) 13 August 1895.
19. “Bag Punching as an Art: Belle Gordon, The Police Gazette Champion, Tells How it May be Learned,” *National Police Gazette*,

- 13 July 1901, 7.
20. "An Athletic Woman," *The Deseret News*. See also "John Donaldson Dead: A Pugilist Who Fought Sullivan and Trained Corbett," *New York Times*, 28 December 1897. Donaldson once went ten rounds against John L. Sullivan and later trained James J. Corbett.
21. "Bill was the Goods When He Woke Up," *Buffalo Enquirer* (New York) 12 November 1903: 8.
22. Gerald R. Gems, *A History of the Sweet Science* (New York: Roman and Littlefield, 2014): 215-217. For Queensbury rules see pages 25 & 28. For additional information on early boxers see: Jeonguk Kim, "Boxing the Boundaries: Prize Fighting, Masculinities and Shifting Social and Cultural Boundaries in the United States" (Ph.D. diss, University of Kansas, 2010); Malissa Smith, *A History of Women's Boxing* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014); and Irene Gammel, "Lacing Up the Gloves: Women, Boxing and Modernity," *Cultural and Social History* 9, no. 3 (2012): 369-389.
23. Gems, *A History of the Sweet Science*, 215-217. The Gordon Sisters, often confused with Belle Gordon, did exactly that sort of act.
24. Historian Roberta Park argues that the *National Police Gazette* was the most important supporter of women's boxing in the late nineteenth century. Roberta J. Park, "Contesting the Norm, Women and Professional Sports in Late Nineteenth Century America," *International Journal of the History of Sport* 29, no. 5 (2012): 741.
25. Photographs of Belle Gordon's back and flexed biceps appear in "Bag Punching As an Art," 7. For Charmion, see photos on pages 25-27 of this issue.
26. Susan Glenn, *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 12-15.
27. Erik N. Jensen, *Body by Weimar: Athletes, Gender and German Modernity* (London: Oxford University Press, 2010), 58-59.
28. Park, "Contesting the Norm," 733, describes the New Woman as a controversial figure who sought to escape traditional domestic roles, wanted the right to vote, and wanted to achieve "greater opportunities for appearances in public." The New Woman era in the early twentieth century functioned in much the same way that feminist women rallied around Title IX in the 1970s and used sport "to free their bodies," and expand their opportunities as social beings.
29. Susan Glenn, *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 12-15.
30. See Park, "Contesting the Norm," 733, for a useful discussion of The New Woman and its connection to athletics.
31. Kasia Boddy, *Boxing: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2009), 164-165. Frank Norris, "One Kind of New Woman: A Girl of Twenty Who has the Frame of a Sandow," *The Wave* 16 (30 January 1897): 6. Reprinted in Joseph R. McElrath, ed., *The Apprenticeship Writings of Frank Norris, 1896-1898* (American Philosophical Society, 1996), 238-240.
32. A drawing showing Alcide Capitaine's muscular arms and back is included in "The Auditorium," *The Philadelphia Times*, 20 September 1896, 14.
33. "Orpheum," *Goodwin's Weekly*, 12 January 1907, 8.
34. See, for example, the advertisement titled "That Dainty Athlete Little Belle Gordon," *Variety* 9 (September 1908): 22.
35. "The Lyceum," *Philadelphia Times*, 20 September 1896, 14.
36. Curtis appears in boxing stance in the 17 May 1899 issue of the *Police Gazette*, but even this solo photo is linked to Gordon for the caption reads, "Billy Curtis, Clever Boxer Now in Europe with Belle Gordon, *Police Gazette* Champion Bag Puncher."
37. "Billy Curtis," *National Police Gazette*, 27 May 1899, 74.
38. Curtis was scheduled for a rematch against boxer Frank Kaveny, who had beaten him previously in 1893. "Sporting News and Notes," *National Police Gazette*, 18 Nov 1893: 10. After separating from Gordon, only one mention of Curtis is found in period newspapers. On 8 December 1897, the *Chester (Pennsylvania) Times*, reported that Billy Curtis of New York and Dave Loag of Philadelphia went three rounds in an exhibition match. "Sporting Events," *Times* (Chester, Pennsylvania), 8 December 1897, 8.
39. "Belle Gordon: Wants to Compete."
40. Ibid. Belle repeated that offer in a letter to the editor of the *Daily Herald* in Fall River, Massachusetts, just a few days after the *Police Gazette* article appeared. "I, Miss Belle Gordon, of Curtis & Gordon . . . will meet any and all comers and I will forfeit the sum of \$50 to any bag puncher I do not outpoint." See "Rich's Theater," *Daily Herald*, 2 December 1986, 6.
41. "Belle Gordon Wants to Compete."
42. Ibid.
43. "Belle Gordon: The Champion Lady Bag Puncher Presented with a *Police Gazette* Trophy," *National Police Gazette*, 14 August 1897. See also "At The Orpheum," Unidentified and undated clipping in Ottley Coulter Collection, Stark Center, The University of Texas at Austin.
44. "Is Champion of the World, Belle Gordon Wears Medal That She Defends," *Wichita Eagle*, 17 May 1906, 6.
45. "North Dakota Climate."
46. "Belle Gordon is the Champion," *National Police Gazette* 70 (1897). 5; and "Belle Gordon: The Champion Lady Bag Puncher Presented," 5.
47. See for a small sample: "Police Gazette Champion Bag Puncher," *National Police Gazette*, 24 December 1898; "Gossip Gleaned from Vaudeville Fields," *National Police Gazette*, 24 December 1898; *National Police Gazette*, 17 June 1899; "Belle Gordon (Photo)," *National Police Gazette*, 17 February 1900; and then on 12 January 1901 the *Gazette* ran four photos of her taking up all of page 78 in that issue. She was also pictured on the cover of the *Police Gazette* on 5 March 1904 and 11 February 1905.
48. "Gossip of the Sports . . . Belle Gordon's Great Bag Punching Exhibition," *Evening Times* (Washington, DC), 2 November 1897, 6.
49. In vaudeville, the "olio" was the section of the evening entertainment when variety acts such as strongmen, acrobats, jugglers, and those who were not actors, singers or dancers appeared. See "The Star," *Daily Eagle* (Brooklyn, New York), 14 May 1897.
50. "Miss Gordon Better than Ward," *Baltimore Sun*, 5 March 1898; "Ward's Match with Carrigan," *Baltimore Sun*, 1 March 1898, 5. The match with Ward was Held at the Auditorium Music Hall. The bet was \$50.00.
51. In Cincinnati she went against Charles Loomis and Willie Mattioli and beat both. See: "Amusements," *Commercial Tribune* (Cincinnati), 17 March 1898, 6; and "Amusements," *Commercial Tribune* (Cincinnati), 18 March 1898, 6.
52. "Notes: Bag Punching Contest: Miss Belle Gordon Easily Defeated Matteoli and Lewis," *Commercial Tribune* (Cincinnati), 19 March 1898, 3.
53. "Fistic Stars Here," *Philadelphia Times*, 12 January 1902, 8. In May of 1902, she met William Quirke in a bag-punching contest in Pottsville, Pennsylvania; "Return of the Orientals," *Miners Journal*, 26 May 1902, 4.
54. See for example: "Champion Belle Gordon is After Those Who Dispute Her Claim," *Philadelphia Times*, 15 May 1901, 10.
55. "Greatest of Medals: It was Presented to Belle Gordon by Mr. Richard K. Fox," *National Police Gazette*, 25 January 1913, 2. See also untitled clipping that begins with "waist of the cleverest bag puncher in the world" on pink paper, (*Police Gazette*) in Ottley Coulter Collection, H. J. Lutchter Stark Center, University of Texas at Austin.
56. Ibid.
57. "A Leap from the Bridge: Steve Brodie's Plunge into the East River," *New York Times*, 25 July 1886, 1.
58. "The People's," *Commercial Tribune* (Cincinnati), 13 March 1898, 11; and "Steve Brodie in Town," *The Times* (Washington, DC), 2 November 1897; and "Actor (?) Brodie: Would Have Lasted Longer in a Dime Museum," *Logansport Pharos Tribune*, 27 November 1897, 3.
59. See "Westminster Theater," *The Providence News*, 18 May 1897, 5; "Empire—New York Stars," *Indianapolis Journal*, 21 November 1897, 14; "At the Theaters," *Washington Post*, 13 April 1897.

60. "Sporting Notes," *Philadelphia Times*, 19 August 1897, 8.
61. "Gossip Gleaned from Vaudeville Fields . . . Belle Gordon, Police Gazette Lady Champion Bag Puncher, Making a Great Hit in Berlin," *National Police Gazette*, 17 June 1899, 2; "Paragraphs of Interest of Vaudeville People . . . Belle Gordon, Police Gazette Lady Champion Bag Puncher is in Hanover, Making a Hit," *National Police Gazette*, 4 November 1899, 2.
62. "Billy Curtis,"
63. Sandow was the first famous performer to appear in front of an Edison camera. "Overview of the Edison Motion Pictures by Genre," Library of Congress Web, viewed at: <https://www.loc.gov/collections/edison-company-motion-pictures-and-sound-recordings/articles-and-essays/history-of-edison-motion-pictures/overview-of-the-edison-motion-pictures-by-genre/>.
64. Dan Streible, "A History of the Boxing Film, 1894-1915: Social Control and Social Reform in the Progressive Era," *Film History* 3, no. 3 (1989): 236-237.
65. Robyn Asleson, Smithsonian Web, "Faster than a Speeding Bullet, Thomas Alva Edison Shoots Annie Oakley," at <https://npg.si.edu/blog/faster-speeding-bullet-thomas-alva-edison-shoots-annie-oakley>.
66. "Comedy Set To," film description at: Turner Classic Movies. www.tcm.com/tcmdb/title/548649/Comedy-Set-To/; Kemp M. Niver, *Motion Pictures from The Library of Congress Paper Print Collection 1894-1912*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1960), 12.
67. Charmion's film was two-minutes long and filmed in 1901. It shows her performing her disrobing act under the gaze of two enthusiastic male audience members. It can be viewed on The Library of Congress's website at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jYIYTrni4-Q>.
68. A photograph in the *New York Clipper* on 15 November 1902, shows a still from the film, and also labels the women Bessie and Minnie. See also from the Library of Congress: <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/h?ammem/varstg:field%28NUMBER+@band%28varsm+1628%29%29>.
69. Edmond Desbonnet, *The Kings of Strength*, edited and trans. by David Chapman (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland Press, 2022), 418-420. The vaudeville star known as Young Sandow is another example.
70. "Set To" was a term then used to describe a boxing match, and the "comedy" came from the fact that the short-skirted Gordon got the better of Curtis. "Comedy Set To," film description at Turner Classic Movies. www.tcm.com/tcmdb/title/548649/Comedy-Set-To/.
71. Kemp M. Niver, *Motion Pictures from The Library of Congress Paper Print Collection 1894-1912*, (University of California Press, 1960).
72. "Comedy Set To," film description.
73. Ibid.
74. In "Miss Gordon Champion," *Buffalo Enquirer* 7 March 1902, 4, the article mentions their "marital smashup" but does not say if they divorced.
75. See, for example "Notes of the Stage," *New York Tribune*, 5 August 1900, 51; or "Way Down East," *Boston Globe*, 10 February 1901, 23.
76. *That's My Girl*, lyrics by C. G. Cotes, and music by Bennett Scott (New York: T.B. Harms, Co, 1900).
77. "Blood Wine Cured Gus Ruhlin," Advertisement from *Indianapolis News*, 10 November 1903, 11.
78. "Best Aid to Beauty is the Punching Bag," *Los Angeles Herald*, 9 June 1904, 7.
79. "Miss Gordon Champion."
80. "This Week at the Orpheum," 23 May 1904, 7.
81. "The Oriental Burlesquers," *Tribune*, (Scranton, Pennsylvania), 5.
82. "Belle Gordon's New Act," *National Police Gazette*, 13 December 1902, 76.
83. Photograph of Belle Gordon, *National Police Gazette*, 20 December 1902, 81.
84. "Bag Punching as a Beauty Maker, Miss Frances Namon of Atlantic City Demonstrates That It Works Wonders with the Human Form," *Evening World* (New York), 20 August 1900, 3.
85. Bag Punching the Latest Fad for Physical Training for Women," *Philadelphia Times*, 7 October 1900, 20.
86. Ibid.
87. Ibid.
88. M. Allison Kibler, *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999): 51-54; and Josh Buck, "Sandow: No Folly with Ziegfeld's First Glorification," *Iron Game History* 5, no. 1 (May 1998): 31.
89. Terry Todd and Spencer Maxcy, "Muscles, Memory and George Hackenschmidt," *Iron Game History* 2, no. 3 (July 1993): 10-15.
90. Glenn, *Female Spectacle*, 13.
91. "At the Lafayette," *Buffalo Enquirer*, 8 March 1902, 6.
92. See David Waller, *The Perfect Man: The Muscular Life and Times of Eugen Sandow, Victorian Strongman* (London: Victorian Secrets Limited, 2011).
93. "Best Aid to Beauty is the Punching Bag."
94. "Bag Punching as an Art," 7.
95. "Vaudeville at Keith's Chestnut," *Inquirer* (Philadelphia), 28 July 1903.
96. Gordon and Ayer, "Bag Punching, Fashion's Newest Fad," 7; Belle Gordon, "Bag Punching for Health and Beauty," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 13 December 1903, 5; and Belle Gordon, "Bag Punching in a Ball Gown for Health," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 20 December 1903, 4. "Bag Punching Fashion's Newest Fad" also appeared in the *St. Louis Dispatch* on 27 December 1903.
97. Belle Gordon, "Limbering up for the Bathing Suit," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 28 May 1905, 7.
98. "From the Mimic World: Belle Gordon, The Champion Woman Bag Puncher," *National Police Gazette*, 23 July 1904, 85.
99. Belle Gordon, *Physical Culture for Women* (New York: Richard K. Fox Athletic Series, 1904), ii.
100. Ibid., iii.
101. Ibid. Resistance Exercises.
102. Ibid., Bag Exercises.
103. Cover photograph, *Police Gazette*, 5 March 1904; and Cover photograph, *Police Gazette*, 11 February 1905.
104. "Physical Culture for Women," advertisement from Ottley Coulter clipping collection, no date, Stark Center, The University of Texas at Austin.
105. As an example of concerns about the dangers of bag punching see "Best Aid To Beauty is the Punching Bag," published in the *Los Angeles Herald*, which presented a positive picture of bag punching as a form of exercise, but then cautioned that "there was a danger of overstraining the heart, suggesting that this was a complaint common in vaudeville artists," 9 June 1904.
106. C. Gilbert Percival, MD., "Bag Punching for Women," *Health* 57 (February 1907): 90-92.
107. *Dallas Morning News*, 14 October 1906.
108. See, for example: "North Dakota Climate;" "Advertisement for New Empire Theater," *Standard* (Anaconda, Montana), 25 December 1910, 22; "Advertisement for Grand Theater," *Tribune* (Bismarck, North Dakota), 11 December 1910), 3; "Advertisement for Acme Theater," *Morning Olympian* (Olympia, Washington), 19 March 1911), 3; and "Advertisement for Huntington Theater," *Herald* (Huntington, Indiana), 14 October 1915, 4.
109. "Seal Act at Century," *Tribune* (South Bend, Indiana), 19 April 1915, 20. Belle followed a trained seal act during this engagement and the newspaper account of her act is very brief, "Belle Gordon Does Athletic Work."
110. Gils, "Flying, Flirting, and Flexing," 253.
111. Allen Guttmann, "Spartan Girls, French Postcards, and the Male Gaze: Another Go at Eros and Sports," *Journal of Sport History* 29, no. 3 (Fall 2002), 382.
112. "An Athletic Woman."