

# IRON GAME HISTORY

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was founded in 1990 by Terry and Jan Todd who wanted to promote academic scholarship related to the history of the strength sports, exercise, nutrition, training for sport, and other aspects of physical culture. Like the Stark Center itself, *Iron Game History* defines physical culture as “the various activities people have employed over the centuries to strengthen their bodies, enhance their physiques, increase their endurance, enhance their health, fight against aging, and become better athletes.” The journal has published a wide variety of articles over the past thirty years exploring physical culture from historical, sociological, anthropological, and gender and race-based approaches.

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# THE TRUE PIONEER OF TV FITNESS: PAIGE PALMER OF CLEVELAND'S WEWS TV

BY KRISTEN WILSON AND JAN TODD, PH.D.  
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

Nearly every biographical article on fitness icon Jack LaLanne describes him as the first person to have a regular television program dedicated to exercise. However, as Ben Pollack explained in his 2018 dissertation, James Paul Fogarty beat LaLanne to the small screen by more than a year, debuting *Your Figure, Ladies*, on channel WGN-TV in Chicago in 1950.<sup>1</sup> Had Pollack dug a bit deeper, he would have found an even earlier pioneer of TV fitness, Dorothy C. Rohrer—known professionally as Paige Palmer—who two years before Fogarty began rousing women to follow her through a routine of fanny bumps, twists, and leg lifts in the privacy of their living rooms while her show played on Channel WEWS in Cleveland.

Unlike LaLanne, who became an international celebrity through his nationally syndicated show and relentless self-promotion, Palmer's reach was limited mostly to TV viewers in Ohio and western Pennsylvania. Because of this, documenting Palmer's life with accuracy has proven challenging. And so, if our aims for this essay seem modest—we have focused primarily on verifying the facts of her life and discussing her ideas on exercise—there is a good reason. There are few reliable primary sources related to her early life, and those interviews that she gave after she was established as a TV celebrity, primarily reveal her “public biography.” Like the air-brushed stories told by many other celebrities, Palmer's stories about her personal life are a combination of truth, exaggeration, and dissimulation.<sup>2</sup> While this essay explores the gray areas in her personal narrative, we want to be clear that we do regard Palmer's contributions to exercise for women as significant. She played an important role in the lives of thousands of Midwestern women who tuned in to her morning show hoping to improve

their figures and their health. And, her linkage of exercise to fashion and beauty was important in the mid-century. As we will show, while not a feminist in the modern sense, Palmer was definitely an independent, ambitious woman, whose message was simple, exercise was transformative and could be the pathway to beauty, charm, and feminine success.<sup>3</sup>

Dorothy Rohrer's life began in Akron, Ohio, where she was born to Paul and Kathryn Rohrer on 17 January 1916.<sup>4</sup> According to a 2000 interview, Rohrer (who shall be called Paige Palmer henceforth in this essay), was the oldest of four children and grew up in a comfortable home, thanks to her father's successful dental practice. From a young age, Palmer was not only physically active herself, but claimed she also led other children to become active. “It started when I was seven or eight years old. I was the one who taught kids in the neighborhood how to play games, put on shows,” she told an interviewer.<sup>5</sup> According to Palmer, her unusual energy and physical skills led her to begin by age 13, “teaching at the YWCA in Akron: swimming, dancing, tennis,” a claim disputed by at least one of Palmer's chroniclers.<sup>6</sup> Yet a photograph of Palmer preparing to ride a mechanical horse at a YWCA circus in 1933 supports the idea that she was involved with the Y in some capacity during her teenage years. Her description of how she came to the game of tennis, however, is harder to believe. “Shirley Fry, who went on to win Wimbledon, was a friend of mine.” Palmer claimed. “Her father had Shirley and me practice tennis every night of the week. She went to Wimbledon, and I taught tennis all through high school.”<sup>7</sup> Again, Palmer's memories raise questions. Fry was born in 1927, making her 11 years younger than Palmer. It is just not logical that they trained together *as children* because of this age difference.<sup>8</sup>

Palmer maintained that she had also opened a dance and artistic expression school

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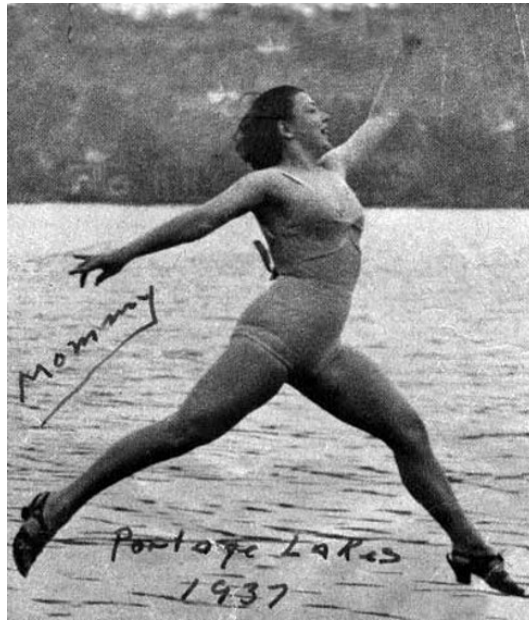
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at age 16. Called The School of Expression, several journalists suggest it was more likely that she was at least 18, and the first mention in the Akron newspaper appears in 1935 when Palmer was already 19.<sup>9</sup> Painting herself as a maverick who set her own path, Palmer claimed that her parents learned of the school's existence only "when she sent them an invitation to the school's opening."<sup>10</sup>

Dance and audacity continued to play key roles in Palmer's career trajectory. In a 1951 interview, Palmer said her father refused to pay for dance lessons when she requested them at age 11. Her father, Paige explained, wanted her to learn to play the violin. Instead, in a move worthy of Tom Sawyer, she told her interviewer that she went behind her father's back and talked to the violin instructor on her own, negotiating a better price for the lessons. "I got the music lessons for half price," she explained, "and used the other half to pay for dancing school."<sup>11</sup> Unless pre-teen Palmer had almost no familial supervision it is difficult to know how this was possible since Akron had more than a quarter million residents by 1930 and it is not likely her parents would be happy for her to be roaming the city on her own.<sup>12</sup> Exactly when, where and how long she took dance lessons is not known. But dance was her favorite activity, and she believed, "I was gifted with dancing. I would see somebody dance and I could turn around and teach it. I feel all of us are given a special something and mine was the ability to teach from the time I was very young, and I knew it."<sup>13</sup> Her "school," began in an old run-down house that, again, she reportedly rented on her own without parental help. Palmer later speculated that her landlord rented it to her at such a young age because of her father's solid reputation in the community, believing that "if she couldn't pay for it, [her] father would."<sup>14</sup> According to Palmer, "the dance classes I held there were enormous. I taught ballroom dancing, ballet, toe, [and] tap."<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, the school seems to have closed in 1937, as advertisements for it stopped appearing in *The*

*Akron Beacon Journal* in January of that year.<sup>16</sup>

Palmer graduated from Akron's Buchtel High School in 1934 and generally told interviewers that she had attended the University of Akron and double majored in physical education and home economics and took a minor in nutrition.<sup>17</sup> During the 1930s, the University of Akron (U of A) was organized into a variety of colleges, and the entry point for undergraduates was called "The General College" which offered two-year degree programs similar to junior colleges. Many students then did two more years of work in a higher college at U of A to get a regular bachelor's degree. In trying to



Palmer, shown here at approximately 21 years of age, at Portage Lakes, Ohio, participated in a variety of sports and activities as a girl and especially favored dance.

document Palmer's time and activities at the University, an examination of online yearbooks from the 1930s and early 1940s shows Rohrer as enrolled in the General College in 1937, along with her future husband Paul Roush.<sup>18</sup> She does not appear in any club, intramural, or other activity photos in the 1937 yearbook. Rohrer did apparently belong to Delta Psi Kappa (a professional health and physical education society) in 1936 and went on to serve as president of the University of Akron chapter.<sup>19</sup> Whether she graduated, however, is unclear. In the 1940 census, when she was then 24, Palmer answered the

question about "highest grade completed," with "third year college." She does not show up in either the 1941 or 1942 yearbooks as a student at any level.<sup>20</sup>

Palmer's other claims about her years at the University of Akron are also hard to verify. In addition to running the School of Expression during her first years in college, she claimed to have taught tap-dancing classes to other UA students because the physical education department lacked dance teachers.<sup>21</sup> As she told it, she taught tap her freshman year, and the University of Akron then recommended her for a position as "the physical education director at Our Lady of the Elms, a private girls' school," a position she reportedly was serving in by May 1937.<sup>22</sup> According to Palmer, she taught her charges how to play field hockey and would



“take the girls down to the YWCA for swimming. I would also choreograph dances, including ones to classical music. We got great reviews.”<sup>23</sup> In a different interview, Palmer claimed that it was 1934 when she started at Our Lady of the Elms and that “she was 18, but her 18-year-old students didn’t know it. They called her ‘Miss Dorothy.’”<sup>24</sup> The same article also indicates that around this same time Palmer “taught physical education . . . at St. Vincent and St. Mary,” two single-gender Catholic high schools in the area.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, Palmer spent her summers as an instructor at YWCA camps, eventually serving as camp director for the non-YWCA-affiliated Clearview Camp in 1939.<sup>26</sup>

While it has proven impossible to verify the details, Palmer did work as a physical educator in both schools and the YWCA in the 1930s and saw it as part of her job to “model” proper femininity for her students. She often disparaged other female physical educators in her later years for being, “. . . so masculine. I decided I was going to prove that a feminine woman could be a good athlete.”<sup>27</sup> Whether Palmer imparted those ideals to her students at Our Lady of the Elms, is not known, but seems likely. The faith-based schools at which she taught would no doubt have agreed with Palmer’s gendered approach to exercise that aimed at creating feminine bodies within the beauty norms of her era.

On 12 June 1937, Palmer married Paul Roush, who worked for B.F. Goodrich in Akron.<sup>28</sup> If, as we suspect, Palmer did not complete a four-year degree, her marriage to Roush helps to explain why she closed her School of Expression and took a job at Our Lady of the Elms in May of that year.<sup>29</sup> The couple had two sons, Richard Roush, born in 1941, and Paul Roush, Jr., born in 1942.<sup>30</sup> However, the marriage did not last. Perhaps Paul’s stint in the Navy during World War II precipitated some of the problems—or perhaps Palmer’s own ambition created too much stress for the relationship to survive. We can only speculate, as the dissolution of their



**In 1942, while husband Paul Rousch served in the Navy, Paige submitted photos of herself to a beauty/perfect figure contest and won a trip to New York City.**

marriage (and exactly when it happened) is not discussed in any of the articles on Palmer. In any case, by January of 1946, Paul was married to 22-year-old Renee Zanetti, and Palmer was on her way to building a new life in New York City.<sup>31</sup>

### THE BIRTH OF PAIGE PALMER

While the timeline is not clear, the transformation of dark-haired Dorothy Rohrer to the glamorous blonde known as Paige Palmer began in the early 1940s.<sup>32</sup> In one interview Palmer claims the changes began when “somebody sent my picture to New York,” and she won “a national ‘perfect figure contest.’”<sup>33</sup> In another interview, she suggests that it was 1942, the same year she had her second child.<sup>34</sup> Again, we have been unable to find an exact date, or the name of the contest. However, Palmer likely did win something, and, if she is to be believed, her prize

was “a complete wardrobe, luggage and a trip to New York City.”<sup>35</sup>

The contest Palmer won was almost certainly put on by the Richard Hudnut Cosmetics Company that produced the DuBarry line of cosmetics. The contest was part of a mail-order “school” that in reality was nothing more than a training course and marketing scheme to sell more cosmetics. The course consisted of six weekly lessons on how to apply makeup, eat, exercise, and dress. It encouraged women to think about coordinating makeup colors with what they were wearing, as the makeup industry dramatically expanded shades and color offerings in the 1940s.<sup>36</sup> Palmer, who had taken a class in textiles at the University of Akron, found this particularly interesting.<sup>37</sup> In 1941, the year before Palmer was supposed to have won, 21,000 women across the nation participated in the “DuBarry Success School” and followed its strategies from home.<sup>38</sup> The members took “before and after” photos that were submitted to judges who then decided who to invite to New York.<sup>39</sup>

In New York, the Hudnut company also ran a women’s studio called the School of Charm that offered six-week courses in etiquette, beauty, fashion, and exercise. Hudnut’s

School of Charm was not the first to include exercise as part of its offerings. Elizabeth Arden began including exercise at her New York salon in 1930. Arden's spacious facility located on Fifth Avenue in New York had an entire floor dedicated to exercise and diet advice.<sup>40</sup> It was run by Ann Delafield who later left Arden and helped develop the DuBarry mail order courses and worked at Hudnut's New York studio. Delafield became Palmer's role model and mentor: "[Delafield] told [Palmer that] I had the ability, the training, all it took. She taught me I could be a star."<sup>41</sup>

Palmer stayed in New York City for the next several years and began working for Cohn-Hall-Marx, one of the largest textile companies in America. Her job "was to find out what the fabric colors would be for the upcoming year, then go to the cosmetic houses and show the girls the fabrics so they'd know what colors would sell. The company used to send me all over the country to promote fabrics and fashion."<sup>42</sup> In addition, Palmer was asked by her bosses to begin making some short television spots that played on televisions inside New York department stores as part of a plan to sell television sets to the public and to sell more fabric and clothing.<sup>43</sup> Her time in New York allowed her to become friends with fashion designers and models and she adopted an aura of fashion sophistication that helped make her TV show a success when it launched in Cleveland in 1948.

The emphasis Palmer would place on "figure" throughout her career (and the various aides that could be used to attain it) was driven by an understanding of appearance as one of the few means women had to improve their self-esteem, their home lives, and their career prospects. Many of the mantras and strategies that Palmer employed first in her School of Charm and Fashion Modeling in Cleveland (first advertised in 1947), and later on her television program were derived from the life changing lessons of the DuBarry Success School. Palmer would tell the women who came on her show to "make the best of what you've got."<sup>44</sup> The quest for the "perfect figure" was less about achieving an abstract ideal than maximizing the appeal one already had with a combination of fitness, nutrition, fashion, and beauty products.<sup>45</sup> As much as her methods focused on "reducing," Palmer also offered advice on gaining weight; Palmer's "perfect figure" was not dangerously thin.<sup>46</sup>

When Palmer swept back into Akron for Christmas in 1945, fresh from three years in

## YOU are to BLAME

if you don't have a beautiful figure


Many women excuse their ugly, overweight figure as an act of Providence, while it is due wholly to neglect. Every woman was born with a beautiful figure and she can regain that figure without effort or discomfort at a very small cost.

**Month's Membership**  
**\$75.00 Value**  
**25 Treatments \$24.50**

- Take off inches where you wish.
- Free figure analysis and trial treatment.
- Guaranteed dimension reduction.

*Silhouette Salon now under personal supervision of Miss Paige Palmer, figure and fashion authority of New York and Hollywood.*

*Silhouette Salon*  
166 S. MAIN ST. HE-9181  
OVER NOBIL'S  
Dorothy Mallaire, Director



Advertisements such as this one appearing in *The Akron Beacon Journal* in 1947 show Paige working for the Silhouette Salon." Proclaiming herself as the "figure and fashion authority of New York and Hollywood," Paige chided women into believing their less-than-beautiful looks were due to neglect.

the Big Apple working at Cohn-Hall-Marx, *The Akron Beacon Journal* reintroduced her to the community: "Paige Palmer, New York fashion designer, has returned [from the] east . . . she is the former Dorothy Rohrer Rousch."<sup>47</sup> Despite the publicity, Palmer did not stay in Akron and instead headed west, to California, where she later claimed she earned an MA in physical education from the University of California at Berkeley, ran several modeling schools, and edited a women's fashion magazine called *Milady*.<sup>48</sup>

In July 1947, Palmer resurfaced in the pages of *The Akron Beacon Journal*, advertising her own "School of Charm and Fashion Modeling" that offered women the opportunity to cultivate "Charm, Poise, Personality" and asking, "Why miss a chance to insure [sic] your future success?"<sup>49</sup> This emphasis on "success,"



particularly of the professional variety, is common in these advertisements. A few advertisements for the school did urge women to employ “charm” to “win your man,” but most focused on “charm” as a means to improve one’s career prospects, pitching Palmer’s services primarily to the young, single women of Akron (who likely would have been in a better position to attempt modeling work), than the housewives that would serve as her steadfast television audience.<sup>50</sup> Palmer described herself as “Paige Palmer of Hollywood & New York” in these advertisements, positioning herself as the sophisticated insider of the two hubs of fashion, beauty, and health in the United States.<sup>51</sup> Whether Palmer included exercise in her charm school sessions is unknown, but it is not mentioned in any of the ads examined for this essay.<sup>52</sup>

### BREAKING THE TV BARRIER

It will come as no surprise that there are also several versions of how Palmer got her start on WEWS in Cleveland. Channel 5 was the first television station in the State of Ohio and it went on the air for the first time in December of 1947. When it began broadcasting it had very little in the way of programming ready to go, but the station did have a small, dedicated crew that included several highly competent women. In Palmer’s version of the origin story, she happened to meet Jim Hanrahan, the director of WEWS while she was home on a visit from New York. He saw her as a celebrity and immediately asked her, “When can you start your show here?” At that time, she explained in an interview from 2000, “I had no intention of coming back to Ohio. I had become a New Yorker,” but the idea of having her own show



Paige Palmer occasionally took her show on the road or to the seas, as this 1957 image indicates.

on TV was intriguing and so she agreed to a 15-week contract and claimed that she had “complete authority on producing and planning the program.”<sup>53</sup> The show proved popular, and so she signed for 26 more weeks. “When 26 weeks came up, they asked me to stay,” she explained. “They just took it for granted I was never going to leave.” She nearly did not, her show ran for the next 25 years.<sup>54</sup>

Historians Mike and Janice Olszewski, author of *Cleveland TV Tales*, tell a different story of Palmer’s start at the station. “We all remember Paige Palmer,” they wrote:

She was able to get her foot in the door, but it wasn’t easy. Paige was running a charm school out of a broken down house in Akron, and she was so down and out that her friends had to chip in and get it repaired. Some time back she had won a beauty contest and posed for “naughty but nice” calendar paintings, but those didn’t pay that well. Paige had a few other fashion-related jobs, and then the call came . . . they offered her a ladies show with fashion tips and exercises that were pretty much a waste of time. Most of them centered on bumping your butt up and down on an exercise mat. Or, you could pull huge rubber bands to tone up flabby arms. . . . all available by mail order through ‘Paige Palmer’s Exercise Equipment.’ For many years, Paige also smoked four packs of cigarettes a day.<sup>55</sup>

However the initial contact was made, The Paige Palmer Show debuted on 13 January 1948.<sup>56</sup> The station initially juggled the daily program around various time slots to accommodate the addition of new WEWS programs that came on line and to fit Palmer’s schedule, which soon included her flying to Pittsburgh every Monday to record “Poise and Personality” for WDTV (later renamed KDKA) TV’s audiences.<sup>57</sup>

Palmer’s show evolved over time, gradually incorporating more segments to supplement the central exercise component of the program.<sup>58</sup> By 1965, Palmer’s show included a “Beauty Clinic” in which “Clinic Gals” followed Palmer’s exercise regimen and then regularly received “individual advice on diet, grooming



**WEWS was the first TV station in Cleveland and it began broadcasting in December 1947. Palmer began her show in January 1948 and it ran for the next 25 years. As seen here, her two-year-old son, Perry Brown, helped her demonstrate exercises in the mid 1950s.**

and figure improvement.” Chosen from among Palmer’s viewers, the “Clinic Gals” returned on a regular basis to show their progress and thereby demonstrate Palmer’s expertise.<sup>59</sup> Palmer also attempted to foster community among her audience in other ways, running segments like “Share Time” to “recogni[ze] . . . women in the Greater Cleveland community who do outstanding welfare work.”<sup>60</sup>

Palmer’s abiding concern was not to “liberate” Cleveland women from the home, but to point women to the types of self-transformation that were already in reach and that did not fundamentally disrupt their lives or perceived femininity—a set of exercises in front of the television set, a new dress or hat, or a volunteer position in the community. Other segments similarly sought to educate children and homemakers. “Art Forms” was a segment that aimed to bring “art and the appreciation of art right to the homemaker.” “Who Pays” featured a justice panel of attorneys, bar association members, and “Court Judges from Probate, Juvenile, and Domestic benches.” And, for a time she also ran a feature called “Sex Education for the Pre-Schooler.”<sup>61</sup>

Palmer’s show was broadcast live, as

was nearly all early television, and we were unable to find full recordings of any of her shows. One very short clip of Palmer watching a young woman walk across a marked floor exists as part of a 2007 commemorative broadcast made for the station’s sixtieth anniversary.<sup>62</sup> You can hear her voice on her two instructional records, the 45 RPM “Stretch Rope Exercises in Hi Fi” that contains nine exercises, and the LP “Exercise to Music with Paige Palmer.” She also wrote two exercise books—*Fitness is a Family Affair* (1966) and the much less substantial *The Senior Citizen’s 10-Minutes-A-Day Fitness Plan* (1984).<sup>63</sup>

Palmer begins the “Exercise to Music” LP by describing herself as the “physical director for millions of beautiful women.”<sup>64</sup> The record includes forty-five minutes of stretching and exercises, all with an organ playing in tune with Palmer’s prescribed movements. Palmer guides her listeners through bodyweight exercises that focus on repetitive, dynamic movement. One sequence, for example, involves jumping from a squat to a lunge first forward and backward and then side to side.<sup>65</sup> Most exercises last no longer than a minute and a half and she rests about ten to twenty seconds between exercises.<sup>66</sup> Throughout the record, Palmer inspires her listeners with the promise of weight loss, claiming, “And girls, be sure and keep your shoulders on the floor because this helps to slim the waistline at the same time, you’re taking the excess inches off the hips.”<sup>67</sup>

Palmer’s book, *Fitness is a Family Affair* (1966) also makes use of the “stretch rope” and what she called the beauty bar, a rigid bar that could be attached to the stretch rope to make it work somewhat like a barbell.<sup>68</sup> Many of the exercises could be completed, however, without equipment or with household items such as a broom and a chair.<sup>69</sup> Palmer’s prevailing concern in the book seems to be convincing her reader that exercise is not a complicated, arduous process, but an easy, pleasant means to keep oneself and one’s family happy and fit. “Attractive families are active, healthy families,” she writes.<sup>70</sup> There are several exercise plans to choose from, including a ten-minute plan of seven basic exercises designed for the whole family:

1. Run in Place or Jump Rope;
2. Deep Knee Bends [modified squat];
3. “Row Boat” [row with stretch band];
4. Bicycle Exercise [legs perpendicular to the floor];
5. Sit Ups or Tummy Tights;



6. Leg Lifts [with pillow];
7. Push-ups for Men & Modified Push-ups for Women [on knees].<sup>71</sup>

Palmer's "Daily Seven" are still routinely performed in many calisthenic-based fitness classes today and were not original to her.<sup>72</sup> There are no promises of miraculous weight loss or health improvements to be had by ten minutes of exercise a day; these are maintenance exercises to be used in conjunction with some of Palmer's basic advice on nutrition: "Most of us eat too much. We have to learn to cut down and eat the right foods."<sup>73</sup> The "right foods" included whole wheat and whole grains as well as two to four daily servings of fruits and vegetables and limiting starches and sugars.<sup>74</sup>

The longer exercise plans in *Fitness is a Family Affair* are geared directly to the members of normative heterosexual nuclear families, with exercises designated for father, mother, and children. A third of the book is dedicated to exercises for women, and considering the chapters on nutrition, the outdoors, and the general benefits of exercise that take up another third of the book, it is safe to say that Palmer considered women the primary readers for her book and therefore tailored more chapters to them. Palmer begins by pointing out all of the "exercises" women already do on a regular ba-

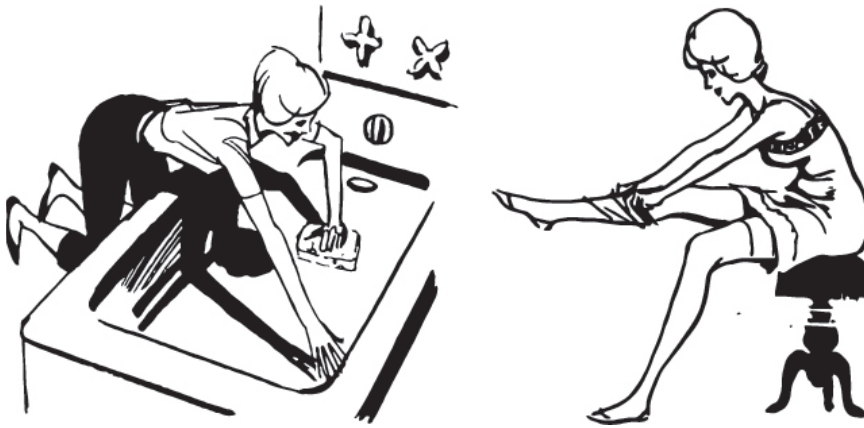
sis—"making beds . . . put[ting] your nylons on . . . planting the garden . . . carrying home the groceries," and suggested that women can modify their housework to make them even better exercises, "conditioning" arms while making the bed, "slimming" legs while putting on nylons, and practicing proper posture while driving, sitting at a desk, and performing other chores.<sup>75</sup> This reframing of normal physical activities as appropriate exercise for women is worth noting, as is the fact that no men appear in any of the illustrations for housework or other kinds of normal household activity. This is the same gender binary that Palmer herself navigated throughout her career, maintaining her identity as a working professional while also mothering three boys.

Palmer rarely mentions her children, or her three husbands, in the surviving interviews and so little is known about the nature of her own family life. Although one source suggested that Palmer's decision to return to Akron in 1947 was to "give her sons a home," there are no other hints about who cares for the children while she is at work, or whether they stay with her, her parents, or her ex-husband.<sup>76</sup> Palmer did reveal in a 2000 interview that she hired a couple who helped keep the house and look after her three boys in the early 1950s: "I never would have been able to have had a television show without them."<sup>77</sup>

This certainly does not invalidate Palmer as a mother or caregiver, but it does illuminate the gap between her life and the lives of the women who were her primary audience. Palmer could have imagined a different future for her audience in the pages of *Fitness is a Family Affair*—a future closer to her lived experience and one in which mothers were not both the sole caregivers for their children and also the only adults who performed housework. Instead, Palmer's support of women's professional labor seems to have been largely conditional, for in her eyes,



Female sporting celebrities such as pro golfers Mickey Wright (left), Betsy Rawls, and Patty Berg, joined Paige Palmer (right) in 1961 at the Sleepy Hollow Country Club to film championship golf lessons. The instructional films aired in eight-minute segments over three weeks on WEWS.



Palmer's definition of exercise for women was not particularly strenuous. In *Fitness is a Family Affair*, she included tasks such as cleaning the bathtub or putting on stockings among her list of beneficial exercises, and showed no arm-strengthening exercises using weights. She did include exercises to create "kissable" lips.

motherhood came before all else. "Get yourself a hobby," she wrote, "which someday can turn into a vocation when your children leave the nest."<sup>78</sup>

The other exercises recommended for women in *Fitness is a Family Affair* promoted a similarly reductive view of the world available to them. A chapter called "Romantic Magic," directs women to perform exercises that were meant to make them more attractive to men and implies that women should take a passive role in their romantic relationships.<sup>79</sup> There are exercises for "kissable lips," such as Baby Talk: "Blow into your lips and make a bll-bll sound just like a baby does," and Lip Stretch: "Put your little finger in the corner of your mouth and stretch the lips first to the right and then to the left. Repeat 6-10 times."<sup>80</sup> The chapter also contains advice on "Remove the Hump . . . Prevent Facial Sag . . . [Develop] Eye Appeal . . . and "Beautiful Bosoms" as well as leg and waist exercises and a skin care routine.<sup>81</sup> It seems almost too obvious to state, but there are no comparable chapters for men. Instead, men are given a near monopoly on arm exercises in *Fitness is a Family Affair*, further reifying the gender stereotypes. Men should be muscular while women should be kissable.

Palmer was quick to understand the power of television to sell products just as Jack LaLanne was doing on the West Coast. She began selling self-branded exercise equipment, as well as leotards and exercise clothing like she wore on the show, along with other "Paige Palmer" products. When faced with criticism that she used her own products continuously in her shows, Palmer responded, "I'm just interested in people's health," and that "she resent[ed] people who t[ook] advantage of health-minded

folks."<sup>82</sup> But a show like Palmer's required outside sponsorships, and so she also delivered live advertisements for department stores, cosmetics companies, appliances, and other items targeted at women with impressive panache. The funding model of live television in the 1950s demanded someone who could act as an entertainer and as a saleswoman, and Palmer was eminently equipped to be both. In 1960, *Women's Wear Daily* wrote that in Cleveland, "TV personality Paige Palmer has sold more

hats, nightgowns, furs and swimming suits this year than any other person in their city."<sup>83</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Palmer was forced to end her show in 1973 after 25 years on the air. She stopped because she developed Meniere's disease, a disorder of the inner ear that affected her balance and made her susceptible to vertigo and hearing loss. Following her retirement, she did a radio show for WELW until 1983, and then as her vertigo eased, she began traveling internationally and writing travel books filled with advice for her readers.<sup>84</sup>

During her 25 years on the air, however, Palmer entered the homes of thousands of women as her show reached throughout Ohio, western Pennsylvania, and even into Southern Ontario.<sup>85</sup> Palmer's appeal was that she filled her hour of airtime with much more than just exercise and healthful tips. She loved fashion and makeup and hats and jewelry, and so brought in New York fashion designers to talk to her audience and brought local women to the studio for makeovers. Although she was not coaching women to be good athletes, she succeeded in her goal to become a physical educator while still being a feminine role model, instilling in her viewers the same appreciation for "the feminine" that she herself embraced.

Palmer's message was essentially that beauty coupled with fitness empowered women. In an interview with Debbie Hanson in 2008, Palmer explained that while she supported the idea of equal rights for women she did not believe in "burning bras," and that she had walked out of a meeting in Washington at which Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan were speaking. Her basic attitudes fit well in the zeitgeist of



what historians call the Long Fifties (1947-1963), when American women were encouraged to once again become stay at home mothers and leave America's labor force.<sup>86</sup> The reassertion of femininity as a crucial part of American womanhood, coupled with the new medium of television and its daytime programming aimed at housewives, gave Palmer both the message and medium she needed to build a midwestern empire.<sup>87</sup>

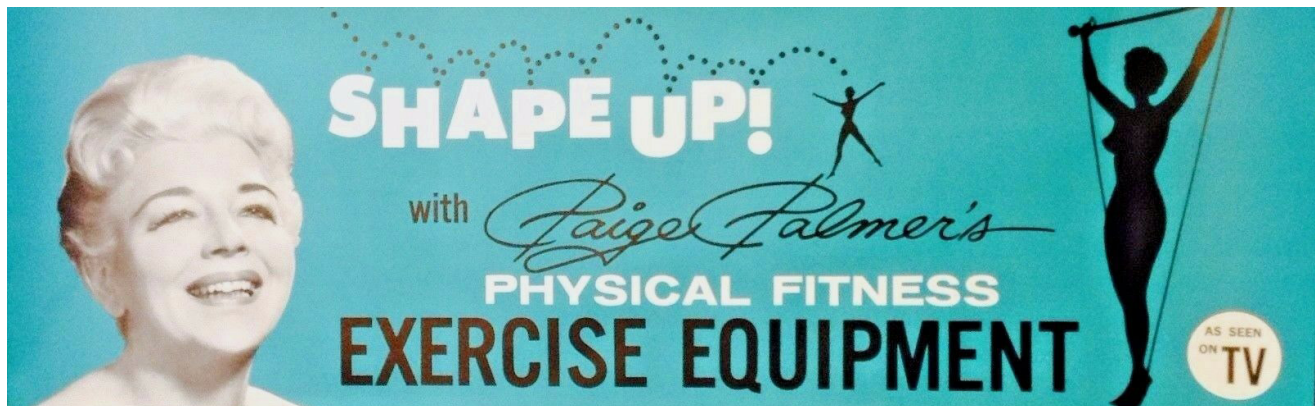
Fashion also played a key role in both Palmer's show and the larger national conversation about the ideal postwar American woman. Designer Christian Dior's 1947 show introduced "The New Look," and the world quickly embraced his hyper-feminized silhouette glorifying large breasts, small waists, and extremely full skirts.<sup>88</sup> As historian Elizabeth Matelski described it, the New Look "reflected the combination of social repression and sexual exploitation. Hemlines fell to mid-calf length and flared skirts were held out by starched crinoline petticoats. . . . Young women compared their tiny waists and exulted in their measurements, which had now become the most important numbers in a woman's life."<sup>89</sup> Palmer was undoubtedly happy to tell her viewers and the members of her charm school how to work toward these socially supported goals.

Palmer won multiple awards for "The Paige Palmer Show," including a Cleveland chapter of American Federation of Television, Radio Artists award for beauty instruction; a Golden Slipper from the National Shoe Institute for her work as the director of WEWS's women's programming; and an award for television fashion reporting from the New York Couture Business Council, among other honors.<sup>90</sup> If awards for her work as a fitness icon seem lacking, it is important to consider that TV was regional un-



American women could exercise along with the self-proclaimed "physical director for millions of beautiful women" using their own record players and this LP, *Exercise to Music with Paige Palmer*. It contained 45 minutes of exercises and stretches coordinated to organ music. The back of the jacket contained illustrations of the various body positions used in the routines: stride position, deep knee bends, lunge, leg flex, torso lift, fanny scoots, fanny bumps, shoulder stands, and "perfect position" body alignment on the floor.

til well into the 1950s. Palmer's show never had a national reach, and it is impossible for us to suggest why Palmer's television show was not picked up and syndicated nationally when we are not able to view even a single episode. If we had to guess, however, one thought would be that Palmer's views on beauty, fitness, and femininity had begun to fall out of fashion by the early 1960s when TV was becoming more nationalized. Her local Cleveland guests and fashion tips may have also begun to feel a bit out of



Palmer was an excellent pitchwoman and sold a variety of products bearing her name. Her rubber "stretch" rope could also be connected to a bar or wand, as shown on the right side of this label, for additional exercises.

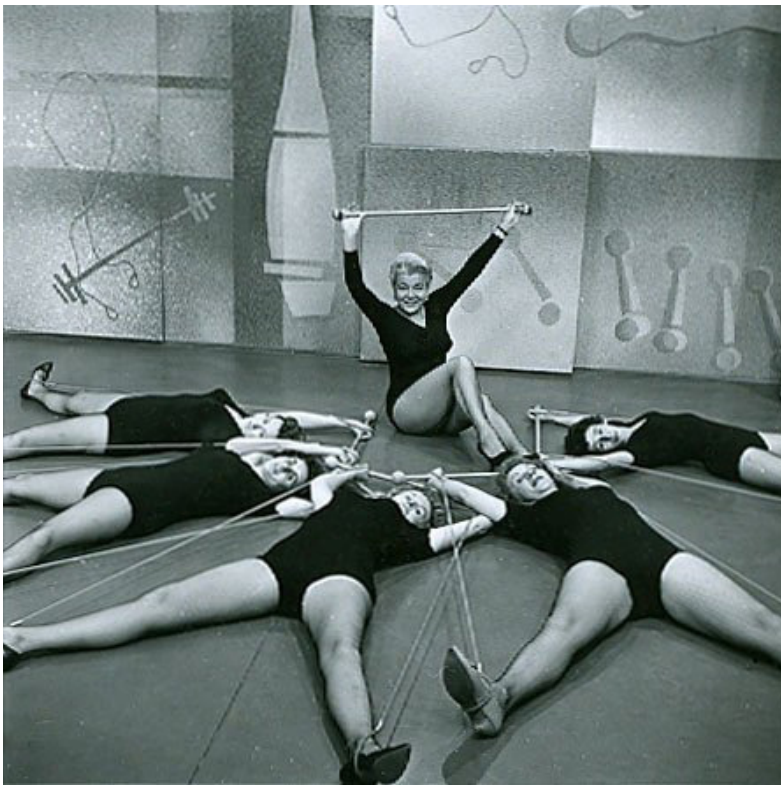
date in the era of Twiggy, hippies, the Vietnam War, and the fight for Women's Rights. Another factor may have also been her advancing age and the meteoric rise of Debbie Drake, the younger and more shapely exercise personality whose "Debbie Drake Show" was syndicated nationally in 1961.<sup>91</sup>

Paige Palmer had a long and successful life, accomplishing a great many things. She not only began one of the longest-running fitness television programs in the United States, but she also marketed her own line of women's fitness products, served as president of the American Women in Radio and Television (AWRT) for a time, wrote at least eight travel guides, and claimed that she had even interviewed the Dalai Lama.<sup>92</sup> Palmer spent a lifetime working towards a fitter self, exercising a youthful curiosity and energy that served to keep mind, body, and spirit healthy and lively. It was this broad vision of fitness that Palmer peddled on her TV show, a vision that allowed women of the post-war era to embrace their femininity, embrace domesticity if they chose, while also encouraging women to pursue opportunities outside the home that might give them greater financial independence. There are definitely aspects of Palmer's

life that demonstrate an altruistic nature, but she was also an entrepreneur who viewed her audience as an untapped market and used the new medium of television, as LaLanne and Debbie Drake would, to market both her products and herself, thereby becoming a wealthy woman. Paige Palmer passed away on 21 November 2009 at the age of 93.<sup>93</sup>

## NOTES

1. Fogarty's fifteen-minute program, aimed at women, played on WGN-TV until 1957. Ben Pollack, "Becoming Jack LaLanne," (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas, 2018), 240-247.
2. Alice Williams, "Paige Palmer: Sparkling TV Personality," *The News-Herald* (Cleveland, Ohio), 17 June 1965, 7. See also Milt Freudenheim, "Paige Flirts With Big-Time TV: Reducing Show Fattens Akronite's Income," *Akron Beacon Journal*, 6 November 1951, 35; Benjamin Rose Institute on Aging, "Mythbuster: Paige Palmer." October 2000; Xerox of article that is no longer on Rose Institute website; Jan Todd personal archives, Austin, Texas. See also Diane Fenel, "The Palmer Story," *Horizons Senior Monthly*, n.d., Paige Palmer Collection, University of Kent, Ohio.
3. For information on beauty in the postwar years see Elizabeth M. Matelski, "The Color(s) of Perfection: The Feminine Body, Beauty Ideals and Identity in Postwar America, 1945-1970," (Ph.D. diss.; Loyola University, 2011).
4. For Palmer's birth announcement, see "It's a Girl," *Akron Beacon Journal*, 20 January 1916, 1. The 1920 US Census confirms she is the baby referred to in the announcement. Goldner suggests that Palmer was born in Bath, not Akron) from Cheri Goldner, "Getting to Know Paige Palmer," *Past Pursuits: A Newsletter of the Special Collections Division Akron-Summit County Public Library* 15, no. 4 (Winter 2016): 5. This latter source was written after Palmer donated things from her career to the public library.
5. Goldner, "Getting to Know Paige Palmer," 5.
6. Accounts of Palmer's early life are scarce and are not all in agreement with what Palmer later claimed. Williams, "Paige Palmer: Sparkling TV Personality," 7, suggested she did not start teaching at the YWCA until she was sixteen years old, casting doubt that she was teaching swimming at the Y at age thirteen.
7. Rose, "Mythbuster."
8. "Shirley Fry," National Tennis Hall of Fame: [www.tennisfame.com/hall-of-famers/inductees/shirley-fry](http://www.tennisfame.com/hall-of-famers/inductees/shirley-fry).
9. Palmer claimed during interviews in 1951 and 2000 that she was 16 when she founded the school, but different sources suggest she was closer to 18. See: Freudenheim, "Paige Flirts With Big-Time TV;" and Rose, "Mythbuster." In Williams, "Paige Palmer: Sparkling TV Personality," 7, Williams writes that Palmer was 18 when she started her school. The earliest record we found for Palmer's School of Expression is from 1935: "Republican Women Hear Mrs. Mary Forrest; Rose Moriarity Will



Dorothy Rohrer adopted the stage name Paige Palmer and began teaching exercise on WEWS in Cleveland, Ohio, in January of 1948. Paige's girls are seen here performing some shoulder and leg work using her rubber ropes hooked to wands.



- Present Candidates," *Akron Beacon Journal*, 18 June 1935, 10. An ad for the school also appeared in the *Akron Beacon Journal* on 23 January 1937, 23.
10. Quotes from Amanda Garrett, "Paige Palmer, 93, Fashionable 'First Lady of Fitness' on Cleveland Television: Obituary," *The Plain Dealer* (Cleveland, Ohio), 22 November 2009.
11. Freudenheim, "Paige Flirts With Big-Time TV."
12. City of Akron, "History of Akron Timeline," viewed at: <https://www.akronohio.gov/cms/1900-1949/index.html>.
13. Rose, "Mythbuster."
14. Her father, Dr. Paul Rohrer, had maintained a dentistry clinic in Akron since at least 1920 and was elected a director of the Home Savings Company (later the Savings & Loan Corporation) in 1920. "Dr. Paul Rohrer," *Akron Evening Times*, 9 June 1920, 13. The Home Savings Company was taken over by the Savings & Loan Corporation in 1921, see Harvey C. Smith, *Ohio General Statistics for the Fiscal Year Commencing July 1, 1920 and Ending June 30, 1921* (Springfield, Ohio: The Kelly-Springfield Printing Company, 1922), 145. This supposition is supported by a February 1939 map of "residential security" (projected home values) that gave Palmer's Akron neighborhood a B- grade (the family had lived at 134 S. Portage Path since at least 1931). A B- grade meant that an area was "completely developed...within recent years [these areas] have reached their peak, should continue to be static for a number of years and remain desirable places in which to live." Home ownership would serve as the foundation for a growing American middle class, homes a valuable asset that appreciated and were key to the creation of generational wealth, passed from parents to children and helping to ensure the maintenance of class standing. February 1939 map can be found on an Ohio State database of redlining maps: [guides.osu.edu/maps-geospatial-data/maps/redlining](https://guides.osu.edu/maps-geospatial-data/maps/redlining).
15. Rose, "Mythbuster."
16. Advertisement for The School of Expression, *Akron Beacon Journal*, 23 January 1937, 23. This is the final ad found in the *Akron Beacon*.
17. Goldner, "Getting to Know . . . Paige Palmer."
18. University of Akron, *Tel Buch 1937 Yearbook*, 61, viewed at [www.e-yearbook.com/sp/eybb?school=771-year=1937&up=2&startpage=61](http://www.e-yearbook.com/sp/eybb?school=771-year=1937&up=2&startpage=61).
19. "Miss Rohrer Goes to Convention," *Akron Beacon Journal*, 24 June 1936, 12.
20. "Dorothy C. Roush in the 1940 United States Census," viewed at: <https://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?d-b=1940usfedcen&indiv=try&h=34209981>. And, University of Akron, *Tel Buch Yearbooks for 1939, 1940 and 1941*, viewed at: <https://www.e-yearbook.com/sp/eybb>.
21. Rose, "Mythbuster." The *1938-1939 University of Akron Bulletin* shows several kinds of dance classes listed on page 43. Viewed at: <https://sc.uakron.edu/registrar/bulletins/ugrad/1936-1940/GeneralBulletin1938-39.pdf>.
22. Garrett, "Paige Palmer, 93."
23. Rose, "Mythbuster."
24. Freudenheim, "Paige Flirts With Big-Time TV."
25. Ibid. St. Vincent and St. Mary would merge in 1972. See St. Vincent-St. Mary High School, "School History." See also Brad Townsend, "Flashback: Thirteen years ago, we visited LeBron James' [sic] high school and saw the future," *The Dallas Morning News*, 21 June 2016.
26. Palmer mentions her experiences working at camps in the Rose, "Mythbuster" interview and is supported by the following articles: "YWCA Camp on Shores of Lake Erie Opens Season Sunday for Large Number of Akron Girls," *Akron Beacon Journal*, 7 July 1934, 9; "Stay-At-Home Camp To Give Program," *Akron Beacon Journal*, 31 July 1935, 13; "Parents, Friends Invited to Camp," *Akron Beacon Journal*, 16 August 1939, 8.
27. Rose, "Mythbuster." In the 1940 census, Palmer listed her occupation as "Teacher Physical Education," and listed the "Industry" as "Church." The census report further states that she worked 38 weeks in 1939 and had earned only \$390.00. "Dorothy C. Roush in the 1940 United States Census."
28. On his marriage license, Mr. Roush listed his occupation as "Goodrich," see "Marriage Record No. 72, Summit County, Ohio," Summit County, Ohio, Marriage Records, 1936-1937 vol. 72, 12 June 1937. Additionally, in the 1940 Census, Roush lists his occupation as inspector in the rubber industry, see Margaret M. Harthis, *Sixteenth Census of the United States—Population, Akron, Summit County, Ohio, Ward 8, Block 37*, Sheet 8A, Line 18-19, 11-12 April, 1940.
29. The wedding notice in the Akron paper cites her as teaching at Our Lady of the Elms in 1937, see "To Wed," *Akron Beacon Journal*, 29 May 1937, 8.
30. "Marriage Record No. 72, Summit County, Ohio," *Summit County, Ohio, Marriage Records, 1936-1937*, vol. 72, 12 June 1937. For information on their son, see "Obituary: Paul A. Roush, 1942-2019," *Akron Beacon Journal*, 7 January 2020, and "Marriage Record No. 172, Summit County, Ohio," *Summit County, Ohio Marriage Records, 1960-1961* vol. 172, 4 December 1960.
31. No divorce records could be found for the Rohrer v. Roush divorce. Palmer also remarried—first to Robert Brown in 1951 (they divorced in 1963), and then to Caryl Ashbaugh, her partner until his death in 1998. Palmer had a son with Robert Brown in 1953 or 1954 named Perry Brown. Palmer (as Dorothy R. Brown) appears in the Ohio Divorce Records on 5 November 1963, requesting a divorce from Robert N. Brown after twelve years of marriage on the grounds of "gross neglect and/or extreme cruelty"—see certificate number 21404 in volume 1376 of the Ohio Divorce Abstracts, 1962-1963. Caryl Ashbaugh's 1998 death is recorded in the Ohio Death Records, see "Caryl Hamilton Ashbaugh," *Ohio Death Records, 1938-2018*, certificate number 026467, 7 March 1998. Palmer's maternity leave for Perry Brown was announced in *Variety*, see "From the Production Centres—In Cleveland..." *Variety*, 16 December 1953. Perry Brown's name appears in the obituaries of his mother and brother, see "Obituary: Paul A. Roush, 1942-2019," *Akron Beacon Journal*. See also Garrett, "Paige Palmer, 93."
32. Garrett, "Paige Palmer, 93." One of the first references to Paige Palmer is found in "Visits Father Over Holidays," *Akron Beacon Journal*, 31 December 1945, 3. One of the final references to Dorothy Rohrer in newspapers appears in "Karl Rohrer Has First Trip East As Pre-Army Holiday," *Akron Beacon Journal*, 16 July 1944, 15.
33. Rose, "Mythbuster."
34. Palmer talks about this period of her life in the Rose, "Mythbuster" interview. Of the few sources we've been able to piece together about this figure contest, one is a book full of short biographies of Ohio women (including Palmer.) The book was written by an academic for a popular audience (i.e. without citations): Jacqueline Jones Royster, *Profiles of Ohio Women, 1803-2003* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003), 209. Royster's book suggests that the contest was held by Richard Hudnut. Hudnut's New York cosmetics company (DuBarry) advertised in many major newspapers and women's magazines between 1940 and 1946, and offered not only cosmetics, but in-home "Success Courses" that culminated in contests with prizes offered to women who had improved the most. See "Beauty Editors Vote on 'Success School' Contest," *Women's Wear Daily*, 7 April 1941, 4. See also DuBarry Success Course, "Fat Girl Flunks—Slender Girl Succeeds," *Vogue* 99, no. 10 (15 May

- 1942): 93.
35. Goldner, "Getting to Know...Paige Palmer."
  36. Matelski, "The Color(s) of Perfection: The Feminine Body, Beauty Ideals and Identity in Postwar America, 1945-1970."
  37. Goldner, "Getting to Know...Paige Palmer," 5.
  38. "Beauty Editors Vote," 4.
  39. Ibid.
  40. "Cosmetics and Skin: Stories from the History and Science of Cosmetics, Skin-care and Early Beauty Culture," Dubarry Success Course," viewed at: <https://www.cosmeticsandskin.com/efe/dubarry-success.php>.
  41. Rose, "Mythbuster."
  42. Ibid.
  43. Ibid.
  44. Ibid.
  45. Ibid.
  46. Williams, "Paige Palmer: Sparkling TV Personality." Palmer reported herself at 5'4" and 118 pounds in 1951, see Freudenheim, "Paige Flirts With Big-Time TV."
  47. "Visits Father Over Holidays." More information about the modeling jobs she held between 1942 and 1945 in Freudenheim, "Paige Flirts With Big-Time TV."
  48. Verification of these claims is slim. Her Berkeley MA is mentioned in Royster, *Profiles of Ohio Women, 1803-2003*, 209; the modeling schools are in Freudheim, "Paige Flirts With Big-Time TV;" Alice Williams mentions her as an editor of *Milady* in "Paige Palmer: Sparkling TV Personality."
  49. Advertisement, "Paige Palmer Inc.: Look For The Woman," *Akron Beacon Journal*, 15 October 1947, 11; Advertisement, "Paige Palmer Inc.: Good Grooming is an Asset," *Akron Beacon Journal*, 9 July 1947, 8.
  50. "Win Your Man in '49," *Akron Beacon Journal*, 5 December 1948, 62. See also "Paige Palmer Inc.: For Attractive Girls A Distinctive Career," *Akron Beacon Journal*, 16 November 1947, 54.
  51. "Paige Palmer Inc.: Good Grooming."
  52. For example: "School of Charm," *Akron Beacon Journal*, 2 November 1947, 54; and "Charm School," *Akron Beacon Journal*, 7 April 1948, 13.
  53. Rose, "Mythbuster."
  54. Ibid.
  55. Mike and Janice Olszewski, *Cleveland TV Tales* (Cleveland: Gray and Co., 2014), 84-85. The authors do not suggest who shared these opinions with them.
  56. Kent State University, "Panache: Paige Palmer-A Salute to Fifty Years of Fashion and Fitness," viewed at: <https://www.kent.edu/museum/event/panache-paige-palmer-salute-fifty-years-fashion-and-fitness>.
  57. "Poise and Personality," *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegram*, 11 June 1951, 23. For WDTV-KDKA switchover, see Lynn Boyd Hinds, *Broadcasting the Local News: The Early Years of Pittsburgh's KDKA-TV* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 109.
  58. Williams, "Paige Palmer: Sparkling TV Personality." See also Freudenheim, "Paige Flirts With Big-Time TV."
  59. Williams, "Paige Palmer: Sparkling TV Personality."
  60. Ibid.
  61. Palmer also helped to destigmatize pap smears and other women's health subjects, foregrounding the care and maintenance of the body as a means to happiness within the home, Ibid.; and Garrett, "Paige Palmer, 93."
  62. "Paige Palmer Interview," viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cI96lUrSX40>. Palmer's short clip starts at approximately 1:01.
  63. Paige Palmer, "Stretch Rope Exercises in Hi Fi (with Uncle Cran at the Organ)," PP: 345-A, 45 RPM Record. Paige Palmer, "Exercise to Music with Paige Palmer," Paige Palmer Enterprises, Inc., PK 2956, LP Record. Paige Palmer, *Fitness is a Family Affair* (New York: Famous Features Syndicate, 1966). Paige Palmer, *The Senior Citizen's 10-Minutes-A-Day Fitness Plan* (Babylon, New York: Pilot Books, 1984).
  64. Palmer, "Exercise to Music."
  65. Ibid., 5:36-6:54.
  66. Ibid.
  67. Palmer, "Exercise to Music," 17:38-17:42 and 12:55-13:08.
  68. Palmer, *Fitness*, 34.
  69. Ibid., 42.
  70. Ibid., 7.
  71. Ibid., 33-36.
  72. One example of just such a calisthenic plan: Alex Robles and Brittany Robles, "The Complete List of Calisthenic Exercises [Beginner To Advanced]," *The White Coat Trainer*, 26 June 2019.
  73. Palmer, *Fitness*, 10.
  74. Ibid, 75, 81.
  75. Ibid, 37-40.
  76. Goldner, "Getting to Know...Paige Palmer," 6.
  77. Rose, "Mythbuster." Birth date of third son unclear, but *Variety* notes her maternity leave: "From the Production Centres: In Cleveland..." *Variety*, 16 December 1953, 34.
  78. Rose, "Mythbuster."
  79. Palmer, *Fitness*, 51-57.
  80. Ibid., 53.
  81. Ibid., 51-56.
  82. Jack Major, "She's on Girl-Watcher's Side," *Akron Beacon Journal*, 11 March 1962, 146-147.
  83. "Selling Pointers," *Women's Wear Daily*, 11 October 1960, 34. See also Jessica Brandt, "She's Selling Up a Storm," *Women's Wear Daily*, 11 October 1960, 18. Palmer's sales expertise is also discussed in Jessica Bradt, "Television Report—Thru Daily Fashion 'Specs': Two Toy Firms Again Sponsor Macy Telecast," *Women's Wear Daily*, 13 October 1960, 12.
  84. For example: Paige Palmer, *The Senior Citizen's Guide to Budget Travel in the United States and Canada*, (Babylon, NY: Pilot Books, 1983); Paige Palmer, *The Travel and Vacation Discount Guide*, (Babylon, NY: Pilot Books, 1987); Paige Palmer, *The Best of India* (New York: Pilot Books, 1987).
  85. Debbie Hanson, "Paige Palmer: Television Pioneer, First Lady of Fitness, Fashionista and so much more," at <http://www.clevelandwomen.com/people/paige-palmer.htm>, 5.
  86. Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).
  87. Marsha F. Cassidy, *What Women Watched: Daytime Television in the 1950s* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005).
  88. Matelski, 27-28.
  89. Ibid.
  90. "Media Women Win Annual Shoe Award," *The Chicago Defender*, 16 January 1965, 12; "Cleveland AFTRA Awards Announced," *Broadcasting, Telecasting*, 8 March 1954, 92.
  91. Ben Pollack, "Hot Body for a Cool Medium: Debbie Drake, Television, and the Sexualization of Exercise in Post-War America," typescript, Jan Todd Collection. Pollack's paper won the North American Society for Sport History Graduate Essay Contest in 2017.
  92. For AWRT President election: "TV Radio Production Centres," *Variety*, 29 May 1968, 38. Palmer's fitness products were often sold under the "Paige Palmer Inc." or "The Complete Home Gym" label and included a stretch rope that could be used for light resistance training, each stretch rope sold with a sheet of recommended exercises. For Palmer's claim that she interviewed the Dalai Lama, see Rose, "Mythbuster."
  93. Garrett, "Paige Palmer, 93."

# UNCOVERING THE HISTORY OF WILLIAM L. MURRAY, BODYBUILDING'S FIRST CHAMPION

BY CONOR HEFFERNAN, PH.D.  
ULSTER UNIVERSITY, NORTHERN IRELAND

William L. Murray of Nottingham, was a magnificent type of English manhood.  
—*Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, 21 September 1901\*

My researches in the periodicals and newspapers of his era did not reveal anything at all about his background or abilities and he seemed to disappear from the pages of the magazines almost as soon as the competition was over.  
—David Webster on studying Murray's Life\*\*

In September 1901 William L. Murray made bodybuilding history with a victory in Eugen Sandow's "The Great Competition." Announced in late 1898, Sandow's contest began as a "postal competition." After men submitted photos and letters to the magazine, a series of regional (or county) contests were then held in 1899. The regional meets ran over the course of the next two years as they sought Britain's best male physique.<sup>1</sup> At a time when British society was becoming alive to the possibilities of physical culture, Sandow's goal, as he routinely reminded readers of his *Magazine of Physical Culture*, was simple: to provide encouragement to a then-budding movement, while simultaneously highlighting the great physical strides already taken by men in the cause of physical culture.<sup>2</sup> From among hundreds of submissions, Murray was invited to compete at the 1901 finale in London's Royal Albert Hall. At an extravaganza also featuring numerous athletic displays, Murray flexed and posed alongside his fellow competitors, while Eugen Sandow, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and Sir Charles Lawes critiqued the men's physiques.<sup>3</sup> Claiming the top prize, Murray was awarded the title of "the most

perfectly proportioned subject" of the King.<sup>4</sup> Embarking on a music hall career just weeks after his victory, Murray was known forevermore to the public as the winner of Sandow's contest.

Murray's name and story has, for obvious reasons, appeared often in histories of bodybuilding and physical culture.<sup>5</sup> Sandow's contest is considered by many to be the first major physique contest despite earlier shows held by Edmond Desbonnet in France and John Atkinson in Britain.<sup>6</sup> This marks Murray as one of the first, if not the first, recognizable bodybuilding champions in the sport's history. Yet, despite his place among the pioneers of competitive bodybuilding, Murray's significance in this regard has not translated into historical attention. Aside from numerous sporadic comments noting his victory in Sandow's contest, few historians have given a detailed account of Murray's life.<sup>7</sup> One of the few to do so, David Webster, discussed Murray's life and accomplishments in the early 1980s, when access to newspaper records was significantly more limited than it is today. Webster's commentary on Murray was, and is, excellent.<sup>8</sup> Trawling through newspaper records and even tracking down Murray's family, Webster was able to piece together information about Murray's early life in Nottingham, his career after Sandow's contest and, ultimately, what happened to the trophy Murray won. Since that time, none have attempted to expand on, or match, Webster's short biography.

Two developments have finally made

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\* "Sandow's Contest," *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, 21 September 1901.

\*\* David Webster, *Bodybuilding: An Illustrated History* (New York: Arco, 1982), 37.

**Correspondence to: Dr. Conor Heffernan, Ulster University, Email: heffercp@tcd.ie.**



an update to Webster's work possible. First, the digitization of online newspaper records in Britain has made it far easier to find information on Murray's career as a music hall strongman. As Webster noted, many magazines and newspapers seemed to forget Murray soon after the contest. Digitization has made it possible to find references to Murray in multiple regional newspaper sources and, thankfully, in British census and death notices. Second, Murray's family contacted the current author and kindly provided additional information about Murray's history.<sup>9</sup> This included family anecdotes and scrapbooks which helped clear up several misconceptions about Murray's life.

William Murray did not enjoy the same stratospheric fame that Eugen Sandow did. He did not write any books on bodybuilding, he only sporadically coached individuals, and he did not patent or invent any specialized training equipment. Murray did, however, join a new generation of strongmen and women seeking to forge a living as a music hall strongman. His distinction was his association with Sandow's competition.

This article provides a full biography of William Murray's life, which both utilizes and builds on Webster's excellent research. Further, the article positions Murray as an individual who managed to navigate the notoriously fickle world of music hall strongmen by parlaying his title and reputation into a credible career. For historians and fans of bodybuilding, the article finally fleshes out the biography of one of bodybuilding's first champions.

### EARLY LIFE OF WILLIAM LANG MURRAY

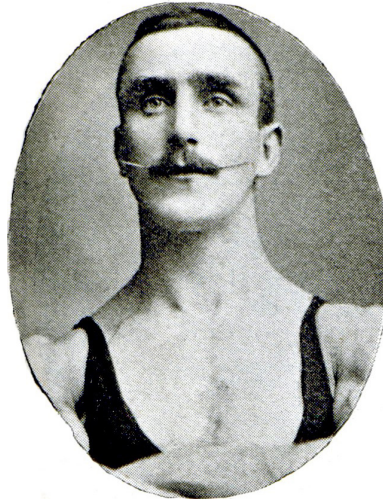
Born in Paisley, Scotland, in 1873, and not 1874 as is sometimes stated, Murray was one of ten children born to Alexander and Elizabeth Murray. He was the second eldest child.<sup>10</sup> During the early 1880s, Alexander and Elizabeth moved south to Nottingham, England, where Alexander and his brother George established a dyeing and finishing firm called "Murray Brothers."<sup>11</sup> William, as was common for the period, began his working career at the family firm. The 1891 British Census lists William as an "appren-

tice dyer" when he was 17 years old.<sup>12</sup> Although Alexander and George later parted ways for reasons that are unclear, and Alexander moved back to Scotland, William remained in Nottingham with the rest of his family. Befitting his later athletic career, William was known in his late teens as an all-round sportsman. A brief biography of Murray, published later in his career by a regional newspaper, noted that as a teenager he won several prizes in sprinting and cycling in local Midlands' meets.<sup>13</sup>

He also played alongside his brother Leonard on a local football (soccer) team. Several biographies cite Murray's career as a football player, and one goes so far as to say he played several seasons for Notts County.<sup>14</sup> While it is true that William played for Notts County, then a top-division football team, his appearances amounted to only two games played in 1894, both in friendly or exhibition matches.

This discovery was made following correspondences between Murray's family and a later club historian for Notts County.<sup>15</sup> Part of the confusion about Murray's football experience likely comes from Murray's own self-promotion. Marketing himself as an "all-round athlete" rather than a strongman, Murray often boasted about his career as a footballer.<sup>16</sup> When Murray

won Sandow's contest in 1901, a local newspaper gushed that Murray is well known "in Nottingham as a good footballer and an all-round athlete."<sup>17</sup> Interviewed by the *Eastern Evening News* in 1904, Murray himself credited his lower body strength to his experience "in running, football, and cycling."<sup>18</sup> Such comments helped ingratiate Murray within the footballing community, and by 1906 *The Football News* reserved special praise for "our friend" William Murray who was well known to the periodical's readership.<sup>19</sup> It was during this period in the 1890s that Murray began experimenting with physical culture exercises. While certain newspaper articles claimed that Murray came to physical culture after an injury during a game for Notts County ended his football career, there is little evidence from Murray's own interviews or his family recollections to substantiate this theory.<sup>20</sup> For example, the *Paisley and Renfrewshire Gazette* gave



W. MURRAY (Nottingham).  
*Gold Medal.*

**William Murray submitted this photograph as part of his entry into Eugen Sandow's Great Competition. It appeared as one among many such images in *Sandow's Magazine of Physical Culture* in the months leading up to "The Great Competition."**

the following account of Murray's introduction to physical culture following an injury supposedly incurred during a match for Notts County: "He was removed to an inn in the vicinity, and there had to undergo an operation. It was two months before was able to go to his home at Daybrook, being then in a very poor condition; but he has finally recovered and turned his attentions naturally to some means of recovering his vigour and strength."<sup>21</sup>

This was the only time a newspaper attempted to detail Murray's physical culture interest and there is reason to be suspicious of its validity. What system Murray used to recover from his injury is equally obscure. For obvious reasons it was claimed after his victory in Sandow's competition that Murray was a devoted follower of Sandow's exercises, but Murray himself claimed to use his own training systems in building his body.<sup>22</sup>

Given that Murray played in only two friendly matches for Notts County in 1894, the injury story appears unlikely. Far more likely is that Murray, like many men of his generation, was introduced to physical culture through repeated exposure in newspapers, magazines, and music hall performances.<sup>23</sup> Although Eugen Sandow intensified England's interest in physical culture with his victory over fellow strongman Sampson in 1889, gymnastics and physical training was already being practiced in the country prior to this time. Jan Todd's work on the history of dumbbells, barbells, and Indian clubs made clear that weight training in Britain had a following prior to the popular ascent of physical culture in the late nineteenth-century.<sup>24</sup> From the 1860s, Nottingham, like several other burgeoning industrial hubs, welcomed a series of gymnastic societies and gymnasiums open to men and, oftentimes, women.<sup>25</sup> Murray's generation benefitted from this older Victorian health interest and capitalized on new physical culture exercises, training systems, and training equipment.

In 1860 the British military created a mandatory training system for troops.<sup>26</sup> Created by Scottish gymnast Archibald MacLaren, the military's system relied heavily on dumbbells, Indian clubs, and rigorous calisthenics. This system, which remained in place until the early 1900s, helped in many ways to prepare British society for the advent of physical culture.<sup>27</sup> In the past, historians have commented on the British peculiarity for games during the nineteenth century. In Scandinavia and many parts of mainland Europe, societies were coming

alive to the possibilities offered by gymnastics and physical training. Britain, on the other hand, seemed far more preoccupied with sports rather than physical training for many decades.<sup>28</sup> MacLaren's system helped, albeit temporarily, bring more focus to gym-based activities. When British schools and public gymnasiums began experimenting with physical training, they asked for military officers.<sup>29</sup> Likewise, many civilian men during the 1860s and 1870s were introduced to physical training through their participation in volunteer armies.<sup>30</sup> Murray's career began after this development and certainly benefited from its impact. Eugen Sandow and other strength athletes from the 1880s and 1890s intensified the British interest in strength



**This image of William Murray as the grand prize winner of The Great Competition of 1901 appeared in Sandow's *Magazine of Physical Culture*.**

cultures but this interest had been building slowly since the mid-century at least.

Equally important was the rise of organized sport during this period. While the growth of rugby, football, and cricket has been dealt with in great detail by historians, it is worth highlighting the prestige given over to elite athletes in British society.<sup>31</sup> This was most clearly found in the “muscular Christian” ethos, which encouraged the belief that a strong and athletic body was reflective of a morally upright and admirable man. Strongly promoted in British fee-paying schools, the ‘muscular Christian’ ideal nevertheless spread into wider sporting patterns.<sup>32</sup> The respectability given to sport in British society, especially middle and upper-class sport, created a space for new sporting celebrities to emerge. W.G. Grace, a late nineteenth-century cricketer, is generally regarded as Britain’s first sporting celebrity. A trained physician, Grace embodied the “amateur athlete” trope expected of British athletes whereby individuals devoted themselves to sport for the love of the game rather than a desire to earn a living.<sup>33</sup> Discounting the social class implications of depicting professional athletes as somehow lesser, the combination of the amateur athlete with the “muscular Christian” made being an athlete a respectable thing for British men.<sup>34</sup>

The idea that an athlete was an admirable figure came to be applied to the organizer of Murray’s 1901 competition, Eugen Sandow. Entering the British consciousness as a weightlifter and strongman, Sandow deftly parlayed the admiration for athletic bodies in Britain into a lucrative career. During the 1890s and 1900s Sandow slowly, but expertly, began to position himself as more than a strongman. He opened alternative health institutes which promised to cure diseases through physical culture exercises alone. Magazines, children’s toys, books, nutritional supplements, private lectures, and women’s corsets were all sold by Sandow in the pre-war period.<sup>35</sup> Since mid-century, elite strongmen in Britain had received a certain amount of societal attention. As an example, the heavy Indian club swinger, Professor Harrison, played before Queen Victoria in the 1850s.<sup>36</sup> Underpinning part of Sandow’s fame was the assumption, based on the respect given to athletes in Britain, that Sandow’s physique and athleticism were reflective of a large intellect. This explains how and why Sandow was asked to comment on military training, public health, nutrition, eugenics and so on. The ability to move from mu-

sic hall to mainstream, as Sandow and many of his contemporaries did, was reflective of the vibrant and exciting sporting world of which Murray found himself a part. Sandow emerged as an excellent example of how one could enhance their relevance as a strength athlete by appealing to much larger social movements.

Turning to Murray, this explains his promotion of the idea that he was an all-round athlete rather than just a strongman. Although it was possible to earn a living solely as a strength athlete, promoting oneself as an all-round athlete appeased conservative Republicans, and later assuaged early Edwardian concerns that Murray, Sandow, or other strongman entertainers might be less worthy, or less noble, than other men.<sup>37</sup> Unfortunately, there is frustratingly little information about Murray’s work at the time of Sandow’s contest in 1901. In 1891, Murray worked as an apprentice dyer. Murray was not captured by the 1901 Census, but we do know that in 1900 William taught boxing to local schoolboys “in a room over a pub in his local hometown of Arnold, Nottingham.”<sup>38</sup> At the time of Sandow’s competition in 1901, there were some suggestions that Murray was an instructor at Sandow’s School of Physical Culture in Nottingham.<sup>39</sup> That Sandow excluded all Sandow School instructors from competing in his “Great Competition” on the day of his finale in September 1901 makes this suggestion unlikely.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, many of Sandow’s instructors proudly advertised their connection with Sandow; Murray did not.<sup>41</sup> What we do know is that Murray was, at the very least, a consumer of Sandow’s magazines. Begun in 1898, *Sandow’s Magazine of Physical Culture* was the avenue through which the Great Competition was announced. To enter the competition, entrants had to submit a photograph of themselves alongside six magazine coupons.<sup>42</sup> This was the beginning of Murray’s career as a physical culturist.

## **BECOMING THE BEST DEVELOPED MAN IN GREAT BRITAIN**

In order to promote the spread of Physical Culture, and to afford encouragement to those who are anxious to perfect their physiques, the proprietors of ‘Physical Culture’ propose to hold a unique competition, to the winners of which, prizes of the value of over 1,000 guineas will be



awarded . . .<sup>43</sup>—*Sandow's Magazine of Physical Culture*, 1898

In late 1898, *Sandow's Magazine of Physical Culture* announced his "Great Competition," which would evaluate British and Irish men based on their physiques. This was a contest open not to the professional athlete, but rather to the amateur physical culturist, which fed on the previously discussed esteem for amateur athletes at this time.<sup>44</sup> First announced in the July issue of *Physical Culture*, Sandow's contest envisioned a three-tiered process by which applicants would first submit a photograph of themselves to Sandow's magazine for evaluation.<sup>45</sup> If someone passed the photography round, they were invited to regional Sandow contests. Winners at the regional contests would, finally, be invited to Sandow's competition at the Royal Albert Hall in London. Although it was hoped that this process could be managed over the course of a single calendar year, logistical and political challenges prolonged the process. It is impossible to know how many initial entrants participated in the contest. One, perhaps fanciful, newspaper estimate put the number at more than 1,000 photographs over the course of six months.<sup>46</sup>

As prizes for the finale, Sandow offered the lofty title of "Best Developed Man," as well as a golden statuette of Sandow said to be worth £500. A silver Sandow statuette worth £60 would be given to the runner-up and a bronze statuette worth £20 was reserved for the third-place contestant.<sup>47</sup> Following the preliminary photograph round, Sandow hosted 12 regional competitions, with five found in England, four in Scotland, two in Ireland and one in Wales. In these 12 contests, 656 men competed, which represented roughly £33 in entry fees alone, which was a handsome fee for Sandow.<sup>48</sup> Murray competed in the Nottingham contest where he finished ahead of G. A. Hickling, J. Briggs and R.C. Twist to win a gold medal.<sup>49</sup> Judging these shows was Sandow himself, a Dr. Beaumont and, occasionally, a sculptor chosen to adjudicate at the finale itself, Sir Charles Lawes. The judging process was split between the following areas: general development, equality or balance of development, the condition and tone of the tissues, general health, and condition of the skin.<sup>50</sup> The criteria, which focused on a variety of health metrics, were thought to encompass the numerous ways in which one could evaluate overall health and vibrancy.

Initially it was hoped that Sandow's

competition would be held some time in 1900. Disrupting these plans was the outbreak of the Second South African War in 1899.<sup>51</sup> Erupting in October 1899, the war was an issue of great embarrassment for the British Empire. Although the British were confident of a speedy victory, the war was protracted as Boer and African forces outmaneuvered British troops in the field through a series of quick victories.<sup>52</sup> British defeats in the war's opening campaigns led to a great deal of soul-searching back home about the health and strength of British troops. As more men were sent to fight, newspaper stories began anxiously noting the large number of British men who failed the basic physical requirements for enlistment. Contrasting British men with their Boer or African counterparts, it was claimed that the former were physically weaker and that this was contributing to British losses.<sup>53</sup> Eventually Britain overcame Boer and African forces but not until thousands of additional men were sent to South Africa.<sup>54</sup> Sandow's contest, inadvertently, benefitted greatly from these anxieties. During the conflict, *Sandow's Magazine of Physical Culture* began citing the number of strong Sandow pupils that had enlisted.<sup>55</sup> When concerns about British men's strength circulated in British newspapers, Sandow offered to train prospective British soldiers free of charge.<sup>56</sup> Stories of Sandow's exercises being used in prisoner-of-war camps were likewise used by Sandow to show his universal appeal.<sup>57</sup>

The Second South African War helped elevate Sandow's position in British society as an individual who could influence both personal and institutional fitness. More importantly, Sandow's contest, which served to discover the best physique in Great Britain, now seemed to be offering a practical solution to a serious geo-political problem. His contest encouraged men to increase their strength and muscularity at a moment when British men seemed to be physically degenerating. So, although Sandow complained in his physical culture magazine about needing to delay his contest's finale due to the war—the war undoubtedly raised the profile of what he was doing.<sup>58</sup> On the night of the contest, in September 1901, Sandow and his organizers made several efforts to link themselves to the war. These included exhibitions of military drill and the announcement that all proceeds would go to a charity fund for those widowed by the South African War.<sup>59</sup>

The contest finale, held at the Royal Albert Hall in London, was supposedly a sell-out

affair with tickets ranging from £3 3s for a box, to a single shilling for a promenade.<sup>60</sup> The audience was described in various media outlets as enthusiastic and engaged by the night's proceedings. Sandow's own magazine claimed that traffic around the Hall reached a standstill as thousands of spectators made their way to the show.<sup>61</sup> The night began with Chopin's Funeral March, played by the Band of Irish Guards in homage to the late American President William McKinley who had been assassinated days earlier by anarchist Leon Czolgosz. This performance was followed by a drill display by boys from the Watford Orphan Asylum, led by a Sergeant King. Commenting later on the display, Sandow's magazine stressed that the purpose of the Watford display had been to demonstrate the boys' physical development from training. Over the course of the evening, the audience was met with wrestling and fencing displays, a demonstration of Sandow's workout equipment and more songs, one of which was said to have been penned by Sandow himself ("The Athlete's March"). Next came a military gymnastics display led by Colonel Fox.<sup>62</sup> Interestingly, it appears that medals were awarded for some, if not all, of the sports/activities on display (which ranged from chest expanding to wrestling and gymnastics). This was nowhere near the scale of the events hosted by Bernarr Macfadden in his American contests of the 1900s but nevertheless highlighted the encompassing nature of Sandow's show.<sup>63</sup>

The final event of the evening was, of course, the physique display in which the competitors or, the "magnificent specimens of the race," were brought to the stage dressed in black tights and leopard singlets.<sup>64</sup> Judged by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, author of the Sherlock Holmes series, Sir Charles Lawes, a famous sculptor, and Sandow himself, the men were whittled down from an initial 60 to just 12. In between the original group and the select few chosen for further consideration, Sandow gave a posing performance of his own which, according to later reports, served as a timely reminder of his own credentials in organizing such a competition.<sup>65</sup> When the 12 men were brought back out, they stood atop individual plinths, and flexed their muscles while the judges, and the audience, discussed their strengths and flaws. At times such examinations took on a farcical appearance, as illustrated when Sandow "went on his hands and knees to examine the nether limbs of the men."<sup>66</sup> At the end of such deliberations, it was decided that William Murray from

Nottingham was the winner, having defeated D. Cooper from Birmingham, and Middlesex's A.C. Symthe. Greeted with rapturous applause, an announcement was made that the gathering would become a yearly event to further the cause of perfecting the British race.<sup>67</sup>

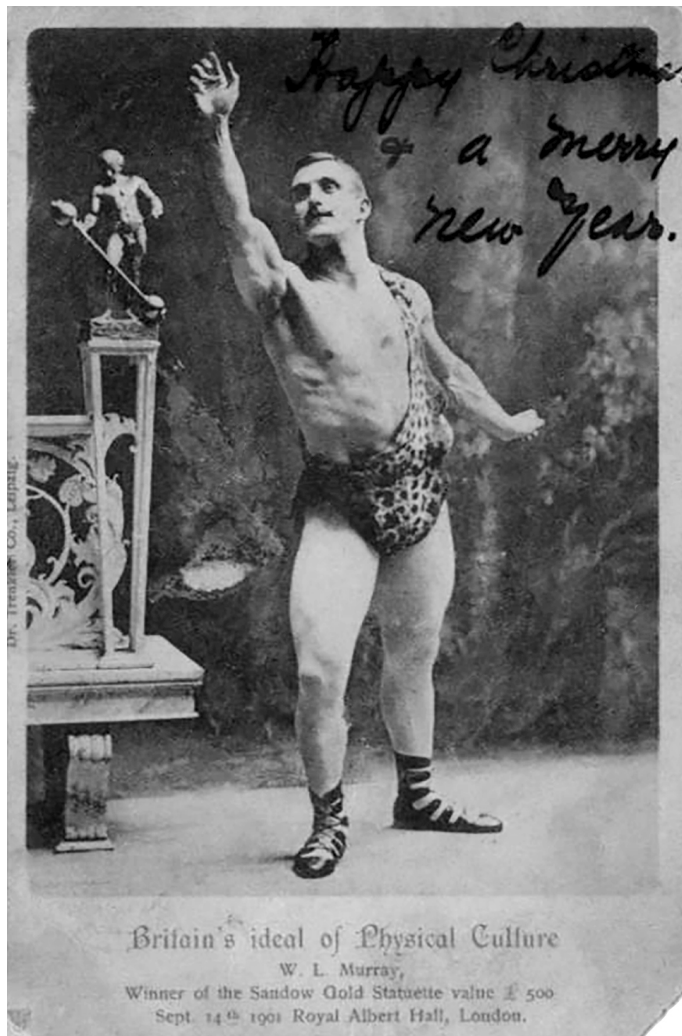
While this never happened, the contest marked the beginning of Murray's performing career despite his initial confusion about what to do next. Arthur Conan Doyle later recounted Murray's post-victory experience in his memoirs:

As I left the place of banquet I saw in front of me the winning athlete [Murray] going forth into the London night with the big golden statue under his arm. I had seen that he was a very simple countryman, unused to London ways, so I overtook him and asked him what his plans were.

He confided to me that he had no money, but he had a return ticket to Bolton or Blackburn, and his idea was to walk the streets until a train started for the North. It seemed to me a monstrous thing to allow him to wander about with his treasure at the mercy of any murderous gang, so I suggested that he should come back with me to Morley's Hotel, where I was residing.

When at last we reached the hotel I told the night porter to get him a room, saying at the same time, 'Mind you are civil to him, for he has just been declared to be the strongest man in England.' This went round the hotel, and I found that in the morning he held quite a reception, all the maids and waiters paying homage while he lay in bed with his statue beside him.

He asked my advice as to selling it, for it was of considerable value and seemed a white elephant to a poor man. I told him he should open a gymnasium in his native town and have the statue exhibited as an advertisement. This



William Murray illustrates Britain's "Ideal of Physical Culture" and his winning form on this cabinet card. He also shows his readers the "solid gold" statuette that he won and which later was determined to be gold-plated.

he did, and I believe he has been very successful.<sup>68</sup>

Murray, as the next section will discuss, did not open a gym. Instead, he began a career as a music hall strongman. Before discussing that, however, it is worth noting the broader reaction to Murray's victory. In British newspapers, Murray was celebrated for his "splendid" physique, and for being the most "developed" specimen in Britain.<sup>69</sup> In terms of British physical culture media, few periodicals existed outside of Sandow's own magazine of physical culture. An obvious exception to this was *Health and Strength* magazine, which reported its own evaluation of the contest. Written by Professor Josef Szalay—who was sued by Sandow in 1903 over copyright infringement—the article proved to be one of the few critical ones.<sup>70</sup>

Later substantiated by another contributor to *Health and Strength* named "Strong Arm," Szalay began by commending Sandow for organizing such a worthwhile show before citing several complaints he and others had. In the first instance both Szalay and Strong Arm took issue with the contest's selection criteria, but for different reasons.<sup>71</sup> Less impressed with Murray's physique than others, Szalay claimed that "I fancy the first prize, if awarded to Mr. Cooper, of Birmingham, would have more satisfied the greatest part of the spectators."<sup>72</sup> Strong Arm went further in criticizing the decision to make competitors wear black tights which, they believed, hid Murray's underdeveloped legs.<sup>73</sup> Strong Arm also claimed that on the night of the contest several dozen competitors were barred from competing after a last-minute decision was taken to exclude those individuals who worked in Sandow's physical culture institutes.<sup>74</sup> While Szalay's complaints could be brushed off as the inevitable result of a contest based on subjective measures, Strong Arm's were more serious. They insinuated that Sandow and his organizers had wantonly interfered with the contest's criteria. The result of this was that, although Murray had a fine physique, he may have competed against a slightly easier group. There was little to substantiate Strong Arm's accusations and they were certainly not repeated in any periodical. Such commentary nevertheless highlighted the attention that Sandow's contest garnered both inside and outside the world of physical culture. Such interest was quickly used by Murray to build his career in the music hall circuit.

### "THE BULWELL HERCULES": MURRAY THE STRONGMAN

In the immediate aftermath of his victory Murray appeared, if Conan Doyle's account is truthful, entirely unsure of what to do with his victory in Sandow's competition. What directed his mind to performing is unknown, but it is clear that the music hall and variety act offered a great deal of opportunity to the performer blessed with creativity. In late 1902, Murray began touring Ireland and Great Britain with his strongman act.<sup>75</sup> Much like Sandow, Murray benefitted greatly from the cultural importance of the music hall in British society. Music halls, much like the American vaudeville theater, were the primary means of entertainment in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>76</sup> Ex-



isting prior to the nineteenth century, they rose in importance during this period. While it is difficult to ascertain the exact number of music halls and stages that existed during this period, it is important to stress their accessibility. Aside from London, which boasted dozens, if not hundreds of stages of various sizes, regional towns in England often offered a multitude of halls to perform in.<sup>77</sup> This meant that Murray, like so many other strength performers of his era, had the opportunity to play throughout the British Isles. It would be spurious, of course, to say that this was an easy life, but it is important to note that at the time of performing, music hall shows had never been more popular.<sup>78</sup> Equally important was the kind of show on offer. From the 1880s, variety acts had grown in popularity. Such shows were defined by the multitude of performers they contained, all of whom were given a short period of time to entertain the audience. Thus, Murray would regularly share the play bill with clowns, singers, jugglers, and a host of other entertainers. Strength feats were particularly attractive in variety shows during this period as they could be offered as a stand-alone segment or incorporated into one of the many other acts. One of Murray's contemporaries, the Indian club swinger Tom Burrows, was known to perform endurance feats in the music hall while musicians completed their sets.<sup>79</sup>

One of the first shows Murray played came in May 1902 when he featured in a strongman act in Derbyshire. This was followed by performances in Nottingham, London, and Dublin, Ireland.<sup>80</sup> Murray's victory in Sandow's contest may have afforded him some celebrity during this time but it is telling that shows advertising his upcoming feature noted his association with Sandow rather than his own strength act. Throughout Murray's career, even when his popularity as a strongman truly took off, he was presented as the man who won Sandow's contest.<sup>81</sup> Performing throughout Britain at this time, Murray's positioning on the card bill typically hovered around the middle.<sup>82</sup> It was only in 1904 that Murray began to headline shows and act as the final performance.<sup>83</sup> This likely represented an increase in both wages and, more significantly, recognition that he now had some form of star attraction.

By 1904 Murray began to attract far more attention for his shows and his services. Remarkably, it took until this time for a British newspaper to solicit an in-depth interview from Murray. *Sandow's Magazine of Physical Culture* ran until 1907, but never once interviewed Mur-

ray about his experiences despite the fact that many of Murray's competitors wrote to detail their memories of the contest.<sup>84</sup> Similarly, British newspapers, including those from Murray's hometown, wrote positively about the event, and about Murray's physique, without ever seeking Murray out for further comment.<sup>85</sup> This explains why his life has suffered from repeated misreporting, and also why David Webster initially struggled to put together Murray's biography. His interview with the *Eastern Evening News* in 1904 thus provided a window to Murray's own insights on his career. When questioned on how he classed himself, Murray insisted he was an "all round athlete" and not a strongman: "Please don't refer to me as a strong man—a navy is a strong man—but rather as an all-round athlete. I don't perform my feats of brute strength. I do them mostly through the knowledge of the position and the training of the muscles, and most of my success is due to a fine physique combined with a right use of my head."<sup>86</sup>

In this regard, Murray was following in Sandow's footsteps in marketing himself as more than a mere strongman. From the mid-1900s until his effective retirement from the stage in 1909 or 1910, Murray's act had an Ancient Roman theme. Posing on stage as a Roman centurion or gladiator, Murray ran through a series of poses before finally engaging in some strength acts.<sup>87</sup> Murray's apparent aversion to the term *strongman* was likely a marketing one. Continuing in his interview Murray claimed not to be a "faddist" or dogmatic in his training and nutrition: "I believe in living just a pure healthy life. I eat just what I fancy, and I smoke and drink in moderation but I do not drink spirits."<sup>88</sup>

Such comments provide some hints as to why Murray did not market any nutritional supplements or workout devices during this period. His status as Britain's best developed man would likely have attracted companies seeking to associate themselves with his physique. This was a period when physical culturists like Sandow, Arthur Saxon, Eustace Miles, and Thomas Inch promoted everything from Plasmon (a milk powder protein supplement) to Hovis Bread.<sup>89</sup> Murray's simplicity in diet was also echoed in his exercise system. Unlike others who claimed to have derived their strength and power from a certain device or way of training Murray claimed that his love of sport, in a variety of capacities, helped build his body.<sup>90</sup> At a time when others were selling patented workout devices, such comments set Murray aside

from his contemporaries. In terms of his actual strength, few columns noted his best lifts. One of the few newspapers to do so during the early 1900s, noted the ease with which he lifted 125 pounds and 200 pounds—although they did not specify how he lifted them.<sup>91</sup> In 1908, the *Dover Express* wrote that Murray was capable of balancing “a real Roman chariot on his chin and the lifting with one hand of a bar bell weighing 140 lbs above his head.”<sup>92</sup>

One of the few services that Murray did offer was individual coaching or advice. Published in 1904, again during Murray’s time in Norwich, was a newspaper article offering individuals the chance to meet Murray and learn how to build their own physiques.<sup>93</sup> This does not appear to have lasted particularly long, but it was indicative of Murray’s efforts to expand his economic opportunities. Whereas others sold special nutritional supplements or devices, Murray briefly marketed his expertise. His vagabond lifestyle as a performer likely hindered his chances of success as, aside from well-known physical culturists

like Sandow, physical culture instructors tended to operate from local gymnasiums where they could be regularly met. Where Murray did experience greater success was in artistic posing. In 1905 Murray posed for Sir Charles Lawes, the sculptor who had judged Murray’s physique during Sandow’s 1901 show. Posing as Amphion and Zethus in Lawes’ recreation of *The Death of Dirce*, Murray’s physique was shown at the Franco-British Exhibition of 1908 and was also placed in the Royal Academy.<sup>94</sup> This, as the *Oxford Journal Illustrated* reported in 1910, was the beginning of several sculptures based on Murray’s body.<sup>95</sup> Such engagements only ever served as a secondary form of income in Murray’s career, as evidenced by the fact that he kept performing during this period. Interestingly, there exists no record of Murray’s bodily measurements during his strongman career, or even from his victory in 1901. Given the stress

that Sandow, and other performers, placed on their perfectly proportionate physiques, this is a strange absence from Murray’s own self-promotion.

From 1904, the time of his first interview, to 1908, Murray’s act does not appear to have changed greatly. As late as 1908 *The Nottingham Daily Express* reported on Murray’s Roman act which featured muscular poses, feats of strength and balancing acts. For his final act, Murray lifted “what is termed a real Roman chariot and balances it for a moment on his chin.”<sup>96</sup> When the *Oxford Journal Illustrated* took a photograph of Murray for the periodical in 1910 it did so with Murray in his full centurion outfit. Such images were also used in the photographs Murray sold during this period.



**After winning *The Great Competition*, Murray began a strength act. As part of his show, he posed as a Roman soldier and finished by balancing a Roman chariot on his chin.**

It was in 1910 that Murray transitioned into managing other performers. The same periodical, the *Oxford Journal Illustrated*, called Murray a “courteous and genial manager” who was responsible for the latest successes of a Mr. Milton Bode. Noting his “muscularity and splendid propor-

tions,” the unnamed journalist regretfully wrote that Murray was no longer performing, and instead, was content managing the successes of others.<sup>97</sup> Once more Murray’s records are not easily accessible through the 1911 British Census, although family members have been able to resolve confusion about his pre-War livelihood. In 1912 Murray was resident manager at the Newcastle Hippodrome Theater, which opened that year.<sup>98</sup> Despite the excitement surrounding the position, Murray did not stay at the theater particularly long. In fact, he emigrated the following year to Canada to join three of his sisters who had already made the move to North America. His reputation preceding him, Murray’s arrival in Hamilton, Canada was announced in the local newspaper. According to the *Hamilton Herald*, Murray was planning to open a physical training school in the city while staying with his three sisters.<sup>99</sup> The outbreak of the Great War the fol-



lowing year hurt these plans. The United States did not join the War until 1917, but Canada, owing to her imperial relationship with Great Britain, entered the War in its early months. Murray was part of the first batch of 33,000 Canadian men who enlisted in the War effort.<sup>100</sup> Murray, himself, was sent to France.

A still underexplored area in the history of physical culture is the impact that the Great War had on the first generation of strongmen and women. Arthur Saxon's wartime experience contributed to his failing health.<sup>101</sup> Sandow's companies went bankrupt and future physical culture stars like Alan Mead were injured during the conflict.<sup>102</sup> Murray's fortunes were sadly similar. During his wartime service, Murray's lungs were damaged, permanently, in a gas attack.<sup>103</sup> According to David Webster, this did not stop Murray from entertaining wounded troops with feats of strength. In return for his services in keeping troop morale strong, Murray was awarded a guitar inlaid with mother of pearl by Lady Astor.<sup>104</sup> Returning to Britain at the end of the conflict, Murray did not return to the stage but instead moved back into the career he had as a teenager. The "best developed" man in Great Britain and Ireland retired from the stage, married in 1924, and spent the next decade working as a hosiery dyer.<sup>105</sup>

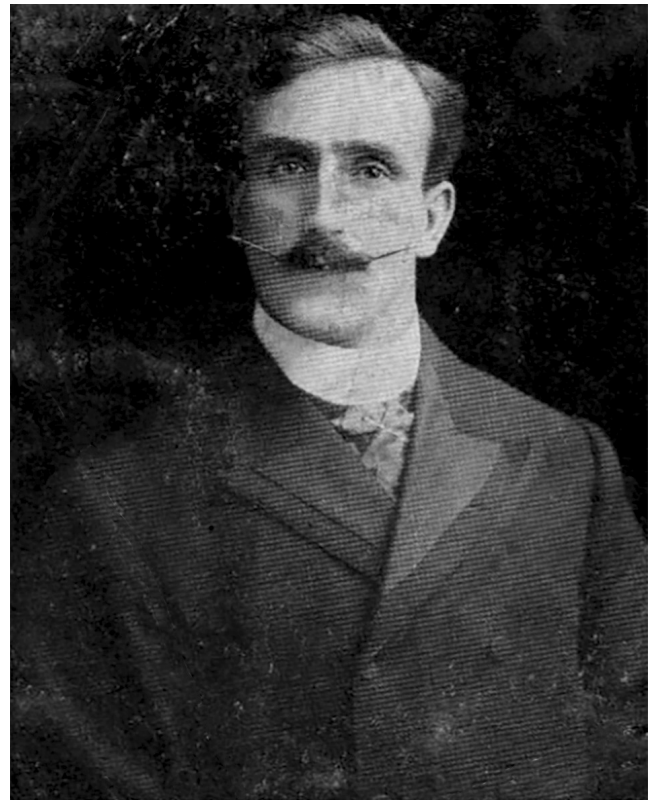
When Murray passed away in 1949, local newspapers in Nottingham began to pay tribute to the "Bulwell Hercules" who had once boasted the best body in Ireland and Great Britain. His obituary spoke of his all-round athleticism: "He also posed for many leading sculptors. An all-round sportsman, he won many prizes for cycling and running and once played full-back for Notts County. During the First World War he served with the Canadian forces..."<sup>106</sup> Other papers focused on his physique: "A man of exceptional physique, he won the gold medal of England in his early days as the finest developed man in the country, and also won the Sandow statuette."<sup>107</sup> All mentioned his association with Sandow.

## CONCLUSION

Seeking to trace the history of the Sandow trophy in the 1970s, David Webster first attempted to meet, and then successfully met, Murray's descendants in Nottingham where he found Murray's original gold statuette from Sandow. It was here that Webster realized that Sandow's advertised gold trophy was, in fact, gold-plated. Webster's discovery was a small, but significant, reminder of what Murray's life

can tell historians about Sandow and his business operations.<sup>108</sup> Because of Sandow's "Great Competition" of 1901, Murray's legacy is, in one sense, intimately tied to the fortunes and operations of Eugen Sandow. Murray first entered the world of physical culture because of Sandow's contest, and it was through his victory there that he earned a title that would sustain him for the next decade. Throughout his time performing, Murray was advertised first as the winner of the Sandow trophy and then as a performer in his own right. That Murray and Sandow did not appear to engage with one another professionally after 1901 did little to weaken this connection and, in fact, several newspapers would later erroneously claim that Murray toured with Sandow for several years.<sup>109</sup>

Looking past 1901, Murray's life highlights the opportunity, and the difficulties, faced by strength athletes during this period. During his career, Murray travelled from town to town, slowly moving into becoming the main attraction of music hall shows before transitioning into management. From 1901 to 1904 his act slowly evolved from strength acts to a Roman-inspired show, featuring posing and strength. The need to incorporate posing into



Murray, like Sandow, generally dressed as a gentleman and as many Edwardian men did, he carefully waxed his impressive mustache.

his performances was reflective of a new public interest in the “body beautiful” spurred on by Sandow and other high-profile performers. Being strong was no longer enough for many performers; they also had to highlight the beauty of their musculature. As a former physique star, Murray fit neatly into this new world of physical culture performances. Where he diverged from many of his colleagues was in labelling himself as an all-round athlete rather than as a strongman. Owing to his athletic past, Murray preferred to see himself as a fully developed performer, one whose strength stemmed from athletics, soccer, and of course, physical culture. The consequence of this decision was that Murray, unlike many others, failed to capitalize on the burgeoning world of physical culture commerce. Murray’s decision to incorporate posing into his routine, while simultaneously eschewing the idea of selling specialized systems and diets, was reflective of the multiple physical culture pathways at this time.

Finally, Murray’s experiences during the First World War provide a sad reminder of the

impact that the conflict had on the first generation of physical culturists. More work needs to be done on the impact that the war had on shortening, or in some cases, ending physical culturists’ careers. Murray’s health was permanently injured during the conflict and likely contributed to his decision to move away from his plans to run a physical culture institute. Depending on one’s motivation, Murray’s life tells much about the nascent world of physical culture in Great Britain, from Sandow’s legacy to the trials of the strongman performer and, of course, the impact of War. There is much to be learned then from Sandow’s first, and only, Most Perfectly Developed Man.



## NOTES

1. “The Great Competition,” *Sandow’s Magazine of Physical Culture* 1, no. 6 (Jul-Dec 1898): 79-80.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Arthur Conan Doyle was known, of course, as the creator of Sherlock Holmes, while Charles Lawes was a sculptor and athlete who had participated in rowing, endurance running, and cycling contests.
4. “The Final of the Counties at the Crystal Palace,” *Sandow’s Magazine of Physical Culture* 4, no. 3 (1900): 88-96.
5. David L. Chapman, *Sandow the Magnificent: Eugen Sandow and the Beginnings of Bodybuilding* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 129-145; Conor Heffernan, “The Irish Sandow School: Physical Culture Competitions in Fin-de-siècle Ireland,” *Irish Studies Review* 27, no. 3 (2019): 402-421; Dominic G. Morais, “Branding Iron: Eugen Sandow’s ‘Modern’ Marketing Strategies, 1887-1925,” *Journal of Sport History* 40, no. 2 (2013): 193-214.
6. Chapman, *Sandow the Magnificent*, 130-131. John Atkinson’s show was held in 1898 and won by former Sandow trainee Launceston Elliot. Desbonnet claimed to have intermittently held contests from 1892 onwards.
7. *Ibid.*, 133-135.
8. Webster, *Bodybuilding: An Illustrated History*, 37-38.
9. I am indebted to Murray’s relative Heather Belcher who shared personal scrapbooks, family anecdotes and newspaper records. The material derived from these sources will be referred to as *Heather Belcher Scrapbook* in this article.
10. “William L Murray–Abbey Paisley, Renfrew Scotland,” *1901 Scottish Census Records*.
11. *Heather Belcher Scrapbook*.
12. *Ibid.*
13. “Nottingham’s Strong Man: Death of W.L. Murray,” *Nottingham Evening Post*, 7 February 1949.
14. *Ibid.*; “Death of Bulwell Hercules,” *Nottingham Journal*, 7 February 1949; Webster, *Bodybuilding: An Illustrated History*, 37-38.
15. *Heather Belcher Scrapbook*.
16. “A Renfrewshire Sandow,” *Paisley and Renfrewshire Gazette*, 28 September 1901; “A Strong Man in Norwich: An Interview with Mr. W.L. Murray,” *Eastern Evening News*, 22 August 1904.
17. “A Renfrewshire Sandow,” *Paisley and Renfrewshire Gazette*.
18. “A Strong Man in Norwich,” *Eastern Evening News*.
19. “W.L. Murray,” *The Football News*, 31 March 1906.
20. *Heather Belcher Scrapbook*.
21. “A Renfrewshire Sandow,” *Paisley and Renfrewshire Gazette*.
22. “W.L. Murray,” *Oxford Journal Illustrated*, 5 October 1910.
23. Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Managing the Body: Beauty, Health, and Fitness in Britain 1880-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 12-45.
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27. Nikolai Bogdanovic, *Fit to Fight: A History of the Royal Army Physical Training Corps 1860–2015* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 13-17.
28. Haley, *The Healthy Body*, 45-88.
29. Hamad S. Ndee, “Physical Education in State and Private Schools in Britain in the Late-Nineteenth and Early-Twentieth Centuries: Elementary Schools and Other Schools,” *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 27, no. 5

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30. Patricia Morton, "A Military Irony: The Victorian Volunteer Movement," *The RUSI Journal* 131, no. 3 (1986): 64-65.
  31. James Anthony Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School: The Emergence and Consolidation of an Educational Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).
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  35. Morais, "Branding Iron."
  36. Todd, "The Strength Builders," 75.
  37. Stone, "Deconstructing the Gentleman Amateur."
  38. *Heather Belcher Scrapbook*.
  39. Strongarm, "The Sandow Gold Statuette Competition," *Health and Strength* 3, no. 5 (1901): 371-372.
  40. *Ibid.*
  41. Heffernan, "The Irish Sandow School," 416-420.
  42. "The Great Competition," *Sandow's Magazine of Physical Culture* 1, no. 3 (1898): 79-80.
  43. *Ibid.*
  44. Dave Day and Samantha-Jayne Oldfield, "Delineating Professional and Amateur Athletic Bodies in Victorian England," *Sport in History* 35, no. 1 (2015), 19-45.
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  46. "Sandow's Contest," *Worthing Gazette*, 9 March 1910.
  47. "Sandow's Contest," *Western Daily Press*, 22 November 1898.
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  49. *Ibid.*
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  69. "A Renfrewshire Sandow," *Paisley and Renfrewshire Gazette*.
  70. Professor Szalay, "The Sandow Competition," *Health and Strength* 3, no. 2 (1901): 245-246.
  71. Strongarm, "The Sandow Gold Statuette Competition."
  72. Professor Szalay, "The Sandow Competition."
  73. Strongarm, "The Sandow Gold Statuette Competition."
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  86. "A Strong Man in Norwich," *Eastern Evening News*.
  87. *Ibid.*
  88. *Ibid.*
  89. Conor Heffernan, "Superfood or Superficial? Plasmon and the Birth of the Supplement Industry," *Journal of Sport History* 47, no. 3 (2020): 243-262.
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  92. 'The Royal Hippodrome', *Dover Express*, 12 June 1908.
  93. "Physical Culture," *Eastern Daily Express*, 23 August 1904.
  94. *Heather Belcher Scrapbook*.
  95. "W.L. Murray," *Oxford Journal Illustrated*, 5 October 1910.
  96. *Ibid.*
  97. "W.L. Murray," *Oxford Journal Illustrated*.
  98. *Heather Belcher Scrapbook*.
  99. *Ibid.*
  100. Brock Millman, *Polarity, Patriotism, and Dissent in Great War Canada, 1914-1919* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 1-25.
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  102. Chapman, *Sandow the Magnificent*, 170-177.
  103. *Heather Belcher Scrapbook*.
  104. Webster, *Bodybuilding: An Illustrated History*, 37-38.
  105. *Heather Belcher Scrapbook*.
  106. "Death of Bulwell Hercules," *Nottingham Journal*.
  107. "Nottingham's Strong Man," *Nottingham Evening Post*.
  108. Webster, *Bodybuilding: An Illustrated History*, 37-38.
  109. "Nottingham's Strong Man," *Nottingham Evening Post*.



# CHARMION AND THE BUSINESS OF PHYSICAL CULTURE AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

BY BIEKE GILS, PH.D.  
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH-EASTERN NORWAY

Vaudeville performer and strongwoman Laverie Cooper, better known by her stage name “Charmion,” was born in Sacramento, California in 1875.<sup>1</sup> Charmion was well known for her provocative trapeze disrobing act, featured in one of Thomas Edison’s early silent films, as well as her exhibitions of strength and muscularity on the vaudeville stages in New York between 1897 and 1910.<sup>2</sup> Charmion was part of a wave of muscular female performers around the turn of the twentieth century whose acts flew in the face of Victorian values as they pushed the boundaries of traditional notions of femininity and demonstrated new ways for women to express themselves through bodily reform.<sup>3</sup> Women like her were physical culture promoters and keen entrepreneurs who, both out of desire for adventure as well as necessity, had to be inventive and use creative strategies to keep their performances interesting and their businesses alive. Charmion therefore combined exhibitions of her upper-body muscularity with a sensual disrobing act on the trapeze, drawing much attention, criticism, and revenue. What is more, to gain widespread recognition, she was

one of the first female vaudeville performers to take advantage of the developing photography, cinema and print industries to promote her act, testifying to her entrepreneurial spirit and business mindedness.



**Charmion showing off her upper body muscularity.**  
*Courtesy of the Billy Rose Theater Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.*

The vaudeville industry around the turn of the twentieth century was one of the most successful mass entertainment markets in North America. Its wide range of performers, including dancers, singers, acrobats and comedians, drew large and increasingly female audiences. While vaudeville had its roots in burlesque performances, which were considered vulgar and appealing only to a “male working-class” appetite, keen businessmen like Tony Pastor and B.F. Keith, and Edward Albee made sure they promoted vaudeville as a pleasant leisure time activity for the middle-class family and they forbade smoking and drinking, activities commonly associated with

male culture and burlesque. The success of the vaudeville industry at the time lay in the ability of its managers and performers to maintain a veneer of purity and respectability and to conceal nudity by representing it in a morally acceptable way. These strategies not only enabled managers to cater to a growing group of female clients, but also held censors at bay and prevented theater closings.<sup>4</sup>

Charmion also adopted such strate-

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Correspondence to: Dr. Bieke Gils, Department of Sports, Physical Education and Outdoor Studies, University of South-Eastern Norway. Email: [bieke.m.gils@usn.no](mailto:bieke.m.gils@usn.no).

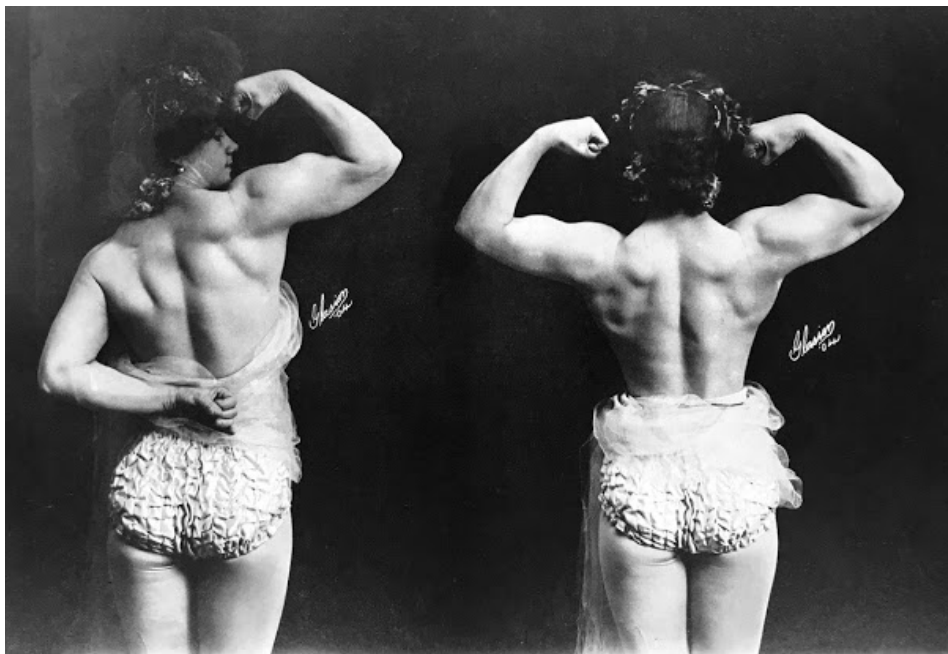
gies and tried to offset initial negative reactions to her provocative disrobing act and “unfeminine” muscularity by presenting herself as a physical culture advocate and dress reformer. In concurrence with increasing fascination with the well-developed muscular body during this era, as well as feminist campaigns to reform clothing that restricted women’s movements, she framed her performances as instructional examples for women who wished to show their strong bodies and learn how make physical activity part of their daily lives. While flexing her muscles in front of spellbound audiences, she promoted physical activity to her female admirers, stating that “[e]very woman ought to exercise on getting up in the morning. Take a drink of cold water, then exercise with small dumbbells—if you have none, take flatirons—going through motions with arms up and down.”<sup>5</sup> To enable free movement of the body, she also advised women not to wear corsets or long skirts.<sup>6</sup>



**Charmion posing provocatively without corset, circa 1898.** Courtesy of the Billy Rose Theater Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

performers’ agency. While they made it possible for women like her to gain more widespread acclaim, they also, to a large extent, contributed to the objectification of the female body. Images could be bought, collected and fetishized and, different from the staged performances during which Charmion would interact and talk to the members in the audience, the silent movie left much to its audience’s imagination. Cinematography thus, to some extent, intensified the divide between women pushing the boundaries as agents of their own sexuality and a movie industry that tried to capitalize on the female body as sexual object.<sup>7</sup>

The advantage beautiful and strong performers like Charmion did have, was that they were rarely directly linked with any kind of



**This image of Charmion’s back and biceps originally appeared in 1904 in Frederick Whitman Glasier’s *The Circus Book, 1870s-1950s*.**

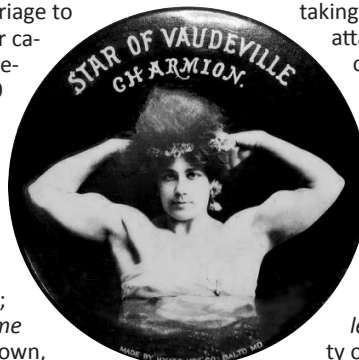


feminist radicalism. The carnivalesque atmosphere of the theater, where reality seemed temporarily suspended, allowed for daring and sexually provocative performances to be staged without much social repercussion. As historian Susan Glenn has noted in her work on female spectacle and the theatrical roots of modern feminism, female performers around the turn of the twentieth century constituted a kind of “proto feminist vanguard.” While performers like Charmion may not have had a widely shared set of ideological values or a specific political agenda, their unconventional acts helped lay the groundwork for feminism even before the term was coined.<sup>8</sup> In other words, Charmion and her colleagues played crucial roles in helping to carve out women’s demands for the right to sexual expressiveness and autonomy over their bodies and identities.

Regardless of whether or not performances like Charmion’s at the time were read as liberating or restricting, they helped question and challenge traditional notions of the (Victorian) female body as passive, weak, and physically unfit. And while Charmion alone did not dismantle patriarchal structures that tended to objectify women’s sexuality for the pleasure of men, she helped set new standards for female health and beauty that combined physical fitness, strength and freer movement of the female body.

## NOTES

1. See Theodore J. Hull’s genealogical project: William M. Vallee/Laverie (“Charmion”) Cooper at: [http://web.archive.org/web/20030213013229/http://home.aol.com/~ht\\_a/pubdog/fam00187.htm](http://web.archive.org/web/20030213013229/http://home.aol.com/~ht_a/pubdog/fam00187.htm).
2. See Trapeze Disrobing Act, 1901, dir. Thomas Edison, Edison Manufacturing Co., 2 mins., Trapeze disrobing act Library of Congress at: <https://www.loc.gov/item/96514756>. Newspaper clippings in a large variety of American as well as some European newspapers informing about Charmions’ career were found for the period 1897-1910. Little is known about Charmion’s career after 1910, and it may well be that her marriage to William M. Vallée in 1912 marked the end of her career as a vaudeville performer. According to genealogist Theodore J. Hull, Charmion died in 1949 in Orange County, California. William M. Vallee/Laverie (“Charmion”) Cooper (archive.org).
3. See Andrew L. Erdman, *Blue Vaudeville: Sex, Morals and the Mass Marketing of Amusement, 1895-1915* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2004); Jan Todd, “Center Ring: Katie Sandwina and the Construction of Celebrity,” *Iron Game History* 10, no. 1 (November 2007): 4-13; Jan Todd, “The Mystery of Minerva,” *Iron Game History* 1, no. 2 (April 1990): 14-17; Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); Janet Davis, *Culture and So-*



Charmion sold pins and cabinet cards that displayed her muscles.



Charmion’s disrobing act garnered much attention even though she was never actually nude. When “undressed” on the trapeze she still wore tights and an acrobat’s costume. This image appeared ca. 1898 as part of a set of Ogden’s “Guinea Gold” Cigarette cards. Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London.

- ciety under the American Big Top: *The Circus Age* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Rachel Shteir, *Striptease: The Untold Story of the Girlie Show* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Alison Kibler, *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).
4. See Erdman, *Blue Vaudeville*, 4.
5. “The Drama: Synopsis,” *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, 20 March 1904. According to the *Utica Sunday Tribune*, Charmion even wrote a book for women on “how to enjoy life by taking simple exercises,” which, according to the report, attained “an immense sale” and led to the adoption of her system in many leading schools and colleges for women around 1906. No information about this book has surfaced, however, and it may well be that Charmion made it up as part of her stage biography. “Charmion, The Perfect Woman at the Orpheum this Week,” *Utica Sunday Tribune*, 23 November 1906.
6. “She Hangs by Her Heel in Mid-air,” *Sunday New York World*, 9 January 1898.
7. See Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 270-271.
8. Susan A. Glenn, *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 4-6.



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

BY JAN TODD, PH.D.  
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> Since Fitzsimmons's life is well documented and

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Correspondence to: Dr. Jan Todd, NEZ 5.700, Dept. of Kinesiology & Health Education, Stark Center, University of Texas at Austin, 78712. Email: jan@starkcenter.org.

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.<sup>7</sup> 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.”<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.”<sup>14</sup> 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.”<sup>15</sup>

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.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> 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.”<sup>18</sup> 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.”<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> 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."<sup>21</sup>

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.<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup>

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.<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup> 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."<sup>27</sup> 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."<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup>

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.<sup>30</sup> 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."<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup> 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.”<sup>33</sup> 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.<sup>34</sup>

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.<sup>35</sup> 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.<sup>36</sup> In the short article accompanying his photo, Curtis is described as “a boxer of quite some ability and an entertainer

of rare merit.”<sup>37</sup> 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.<sup>38</sup>

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.<sup>39</sup>

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.”<sup>40</sup> 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.”<sup>41</sup>

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.<sup>42</sup> 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*.<sup>43</sup> 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.<sup>44</sup> She was reportedly only 16 years old when this contest was held.<sup>45</sup> 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.<sup>46</sup> 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.<sup>47</sup> 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.<sup>48</sup>

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.<sup>49</sup> 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.<sup>50</sup> 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.<sup>51</sup> 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.”<sup>52</sup> In January of 1902 she even challenged world champion Jim Jeffries to an exhibition bag punching match and reportedly out-pointed him.<sup>53</sup>

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.<sup>54</sup> 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.”<sup>55</sup> 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.”<sup>56</sup>

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.<sup>57</sup> 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.<sup>58</sup> 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.<sup>59</sup> 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.<sup>60</sup> 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.<sup>61</sup> 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.<sup>62</sup>

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.<sup>63</sup> 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.<sup>64</sup> 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.<sup>65</sup> 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.<sup>66</sup> 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."<sup>67</sup>

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.<sup>68</sup> 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.<sup>69</sup>

Gordon and Curtis's movie, titled "Comedy Set To," was captured on 50 feet of film and could be viewed in 40 seconds.<sup>70</sup> 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.<sup>71</sup> 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."<sup>72</sup>

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."<sup>73</sup> 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.<sup>74</sup> The press reports and advertisements connected to her appearances just begin listing her as a single act.<sup>75</sup> 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.<sup>76</sup> 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.<sup>77</sup>

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.<sup>78</sup> 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."<sup>79</sup> In San Francisco, in 1904, the act was described as a "phenomenal athletic showing . . . she kept the spheres under perfect control."<sup>80</sup> 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."<sup>81</sup> 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.<sup>82</sup>

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.<sup>83</sup>

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."<sup>84</sup>

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.<sup>85</sup> 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.<sup>86</sup> 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."<sup>87</sup>

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.<sup>88</sup> 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.<sup>89</sup>



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.<sup>90</sup>

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.”<sup>91</sup> She was described at times as a “perfect woman,” as if she is the feminine counterpart to Sandow, often billed as The Perfect Man.<sup>92</sup> 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.”<sup>93</sup> 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.

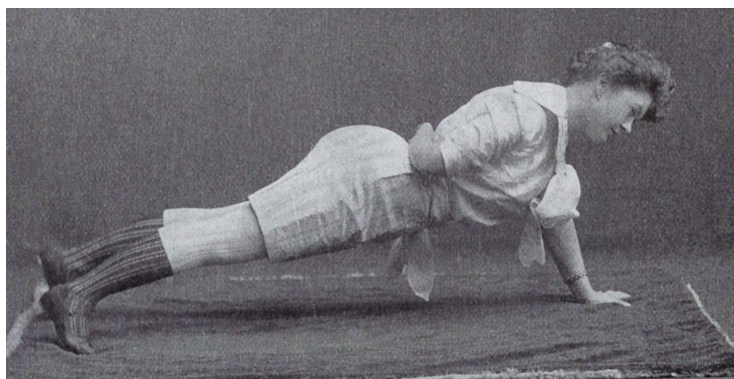
Below the central image are two physique photographs, the first a double biceps shot that displays her back and shoulder muscles, and the other shows her flexing one of her arms.<sup>94</sup> By 1903, Belle also began incorporating a lecture on physical culture in her stage act at times. In a show she 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.”<sup>95</sup> 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.<sup>96</sup> 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.<sup>97</sup>

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.<sup>98</sup>

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.”<sup>99</sup> 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.”<sup>100</sup> 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.<sup>101</sup> 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.<sup>102</sup> 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.<sup>103</sup> 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.”<sup>104</sup>

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.<sup>105</sup> “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.<sup>106</sup>



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.

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



figure . . . she is most pleasing to look upon and there is no suggestion of the pugilist about her."<sup>107</sup> 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.<sup>108</sup> 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.<sup>109</sup>

### 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."<sup>110</sup>

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."<sup>111</sup> 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.”<sup>12</sup> 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](http://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/](http://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/](http://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."



# GARY CLEVELAND: THE TRIUMPHS AND TRAVAILS OF AN IRON GAME OUTLIER

BY JOHN FAIR, PH.D.  
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

I've never been successful searching for perfect enlightenment in any type of perfection. I don't think most people have. . . . I'm not sure what I'd do with perfection. I think perfect people would be boring. It's our defects that make our accomplishments admirable and our failures commiserable and our lives interesting.\*

—Gary Cleveland

Gary Cleveland not only excelled as a national and international level weightlifter but also contributed subsequently to our understanding of the intrinsic meaning of sports. Unlike most other champions, Cleveland took an introspective view of his lifting and attempted to draw parallels with the human condition. His approach was unique in that it went beyond his achievements and what he observed in gyms and on the weightlifting platform to include fictional aspirations drawn from the best traditions of the sport. Using the legendary Louis Cyr, reputed by some to be the strongest man in history, as his touchstone, Cleveland created a revealing portrait of his own life as an exceptional athlete. But he viewed weightlifting as bereft of essential meaning, serving merely as a parody for human striving and his participation in it. The Gary Cleveland story thus reflects the cultural change America experienced at an important juncture of his life when, frustrated over his inability to achieve the American dream, which seemed so easily obtainable to a youth growing up in the 1950s, he gained a more philosophical outlook, turned to fiction, and confronted his disillusionment with irony and an awareness of the human comedy.

## MODEST MIDWEST ORIGINS

Gary Gayln Cleveland, the only child of Darrell and Eunice Cleveland, was born on 18

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\* Gary Cleveland, "Thoughts from the Editor," *The Avian Movement Advocate* 54 (April 2003): 1.

Correspondence to: Dr. John Fair, NEZ 5.700, Dept. of Kinesiology & Health Education, Stark Center, University of Texas at Austin, 78712. Email: john.fair@austin.utexas.edu.

January 1942 in Hastings, Nebraska, urban kin to the much smaller Pawnee City, the birthplace of Boyd Epley, founder of the National Strength and Conditioning Association.<sup>1</sup> Hastings is perhaps best known as the town where Kool-Aid was invented in 1927 by Eldwin Perkins, an event celebrated each August with a Kool-Aid Days Festival.<sup>2</sup> Gary's father was a sales representative for a major appliance-maker and so was frequently traveling. The family moved as well to Omaha first, and then when Gary was ten, to St. Louis. Though nurtured more by his mother, he shared his father's temperament. According to close friend and fellow weightlifter Douglas Stalker, Gary's father was "a quiet man who sat in the living room reading the daily paper" while his mother was "animated and outgoing and . . . knew all about Gary's lifting meets. In fact, I never heard Gary say a word about his father but did hear him say many [things] about his mother."<sup>3</sup> "His mother was very religious," Stalker observed, but Gary "hated all this and recoiled from strict religiosity the rest of his life. He was an atheist, I reckon."<sup>4</sup>

## DISCOVERING A LIFELONG PASSION

Gary became interested in weight training at age 13 after seeing a television clip of Paul Anderson's impressive performance in Moscow in January 1955. "Given his huge size, maybe Anderson didn't lift that much," Stalker quotes him saying, "but he got more publicity for the sport than anyone in history, I think. After his trip to Russia, he appeared on *What's My Line*, *The George Gobel Show*, *The Today Show*, and others that I don't remember. He's the reason I first heard about weightlifting."<sup>5</sup> Cleveland's

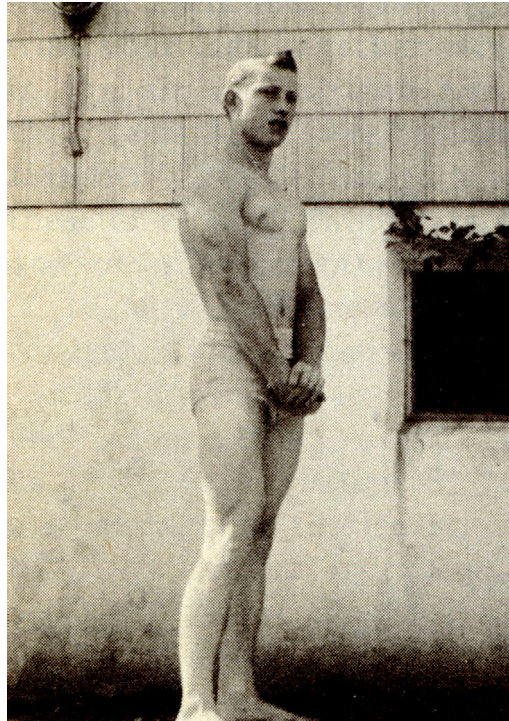
discovery of Anderson was followed by his purchase of the September 1955 issue of *Strength & Health* magazine with “Tarzan” Gordon Scott on the cover. At first, Gary trained at home with a 60-pound barbell set purchased by his parents, doing mostly bodybuilding exercises. Then he joined the St. Louis Boys Club where he was tutored by veteran coach Joe Joseph who taught him the Olympic lifts—the press, snatch, and clean and jerk.

Over the next several years as he trained regularly, Gary’s adolescent growth spurt was complemented by significant gains in muscular strength and size. In 1957, as a 15-year-old high school sophomore, he entered the Self Improvement Contest for Boys conducted by *Strength & Health*. The May 1958 issue, with an impressive physique photo, pronounced Cleveland the winner over hundreds of entrants nationwide. “He registered some wonderful gains in measurement, appearance and strength. His lifting total improved 130 pounds in the course of the three month contest and has continued to go up since.” For his efforts, Cleveland was awarded an engraved trophy and a York

Olympic Standard Barbell.<sup>6</sup> “I worked my tail off for three months,” he recalled, it “was almost like winning the lottery. . . . I was the happiest kid in the world.”<sup>7</sup> It was not so much the trophy but the barbell that most pleased Gary, as it allowed him to train at home with his new set, between workouts at the boys club three days a week. In addition to technique coaching from Joseph, his interest and knowledge were supplemented by reading lots of muscle magazines, including *Strength & Health*, *Iron Man*, and *Muscle Power*. Initially, he was able to press 145 pounds, snatch 130 pounds, and clean and jerk 160 pounds, utilizing a routine that emphasized squats and pulls to complement his technique training on the Olympic lifts. At his first competition, the Missouri State Championships on 23 November 1958, he won the lightweight class with lifts of 210 pounds, 200 pounds, and

250 pounds.

Emboldened by his success, Cleveland moved up a weight class and entered a regional meet in Oklahoma City on 7 March 1959 where he pressed 235 pounds, snatched 210 pounds, and clean and jerked 270 pounds, to finish third. But at the Junior National Championships in Cleveland, Ohio, after pressing 240 pounds, and snatching 215 pounds, he failed three times to clean 275 pounds, which put him out of the contest.<sup>8</sup> Although Gary focused on improving his strength to make gains, he also studied the successful techniques employed by the champions. “I mainly studied the magazines for correct clean and snatch positions and copied them. If Tommy Kono said in the mags this was the correct technique, it was good enough for me. Of course, my coach Joe Joseph helped me a lot and he was one hell of a motivator, but he kind of let us do our own thing.”<sup>9</sup>



**When *Strength & Health* magazine announced their 1957 Self-Improvement Contest for Boys, 15-year-old Cleveland entered by submitting this photo, as well as his measurements and lifting accomplishments. His photo was chosen at random to be published in the October 1957 issue along with eleven other “typical” contestants.**

pounds.<sup>10</sup> At age 17, he equaled or surpassed every national teenage record in his class and was regarded as “far and away the best teenage lifter in this country with his fine aggregate of 850 [pounds]” at the 1960 National Championships in Cleveland. Placing second to the legendary Tommy Kono, Cleveland was viewed by Bob Hoffman as a “bright star” who would soon be an international star. “Young Gary won this year’s Junior National championship with 825, and not just three weeks later in the Seniors he showed a 25-pound gain. Several years ago Gary won our Boys Club Self-Improvement [contest] and a prize of a York Olympic Standard Barbell.”<sup>11</sup> On the basis of his strong performance at the Senior Nationals, Cleveland was named an alternate for the American team going to the 1960 Olympics in Rome which enabled him to train with the greats of the game at the York Barbell

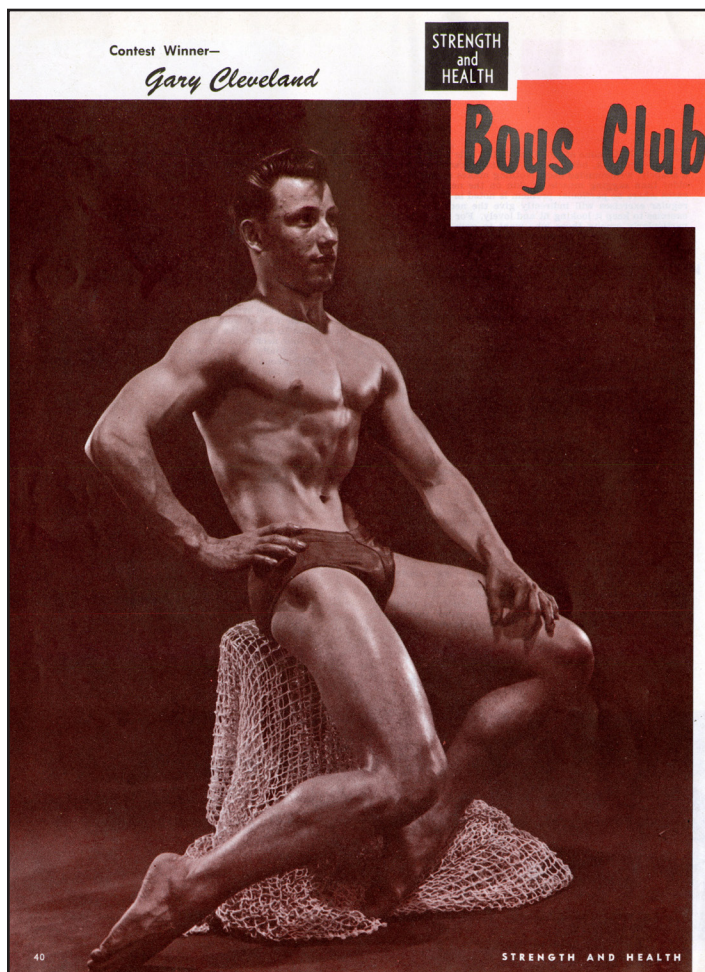


Club gym in Pennsylvania. It was pretty heady stuff for a teenage kid. "It was great, like dying and going to Heaven," Gary recalled. "I mean I was 18 years old at the time and training with the top lifters in the world. I do not remember learning any particular secrets but it certainly was inspirational."<sup>12</sup> With his lifting in high gear, Cleveland moved up to the light-heavyweight class during the summer of 1960 and at a meet in the Missouri State Prison he negotiated an 870-pound total via lifts of 280-255-335 to take the best lifter trophy. As a St. Louis University freshman in early 1961, he reflected on his progress to *Strength & Health* Editor Bob Hasse, stating that he concentrated on his weak points, namely pulling movements, knowing it was no longer possible to become a champion show-

ing extraordinary ability on one lift and mediocrity on the other two Olympic lifts. Furthermore, though endowed with an abundance of natural strength and athletic ability, his progress was hindered by some serious training challenges. "Since much of his training is done at home," wrote Hasse, "he does not have access to all of the equipment to be found in a gym. On top of that, he usually trains alone."<sup>13</sup> In succeeding months, Cleveland's advancement was further stymied by a serious bout of pneumonia and his struggle to gain weight to become a full-fledged light-heavyweight.

Fully recovered by the end of 1961, he was able to overcome these obstacles and broke the 900-pound barrier twice within a week, at meets in St. Louis and Dallas, and thereby exceeding his total at the national championships five months earlier by 30 pounds. At the 1962 nationals in Highland Park, Michigan, he went on to total 935 (via lifts of 305, 275, and 355), second only to Kono's 945 pounds. It was his best lifetime total and would have placed him third in the previous year's world championships. It was enough to qualify for the 1962 team going to Budapest.<sup>14</sup>

Cleveland's dramatic improvement can be attributed in great part to a new training routine, utilizing a power rack he built for himself, and the revolutionary system of Functional Isometric Contraction, both of which were employed under the tutelage of *Iron Man* Editor Peary Rader. It elicited a new muscular sensation, he told Rader on 25 July 1961. "I am exerting more pressure on the bar with each workout but I wouldn't say that it is entirely from increased strength. . . . I am just learning to strain harder." Isometrics, despite its lack of movement, seemed to activate a form of mental energy which allowed him "to force the muscles to strain harder through intense concentration. For this reason I take my time and concentrate deeply before each strain." Despite the intense summer heat and a new job at Monsanto where he was constantly on his feet, Gary reported that his Olympic lifts were rising rapidly. He felt better, and his physique was also improving. "I have a new spring in my step," he reported to Rader. Most importantly, since his first workout on the new plan less than three months earlier, his training lifts total had jumped nearly 50 pounds.<sup>15</sup> When asked about isometrics in a 1998 interview



This "after" photo of Gary Cleveland announcing his victory in the self improvement contest appeared in the May 1958 issue of *Strength & Health*. Cleveland's win was announced much later than originally planned due to the unexpected death of Harry Paschall in October 1957, as Paschall handled most of the administrative duties for the contest. Over the three months of the contest, Cleveland gained three inches on his chest, one-and-a-quarter inches on his biceps, two-and-a-half inches on his thighs and added 90 pounds to his squat and 55 pounds to his clean and jerk.



with Osmo Kiiha, Cleveland confirmed that he “made tremendous gains from it.” Although he was later talked into substituting a partial movement, isotonic routine when working out in York, it was the “strict isometric program” designed by Rader that “worked for me.”<sup>16</sup>

### THE INTERNATIONAL PLATFORM

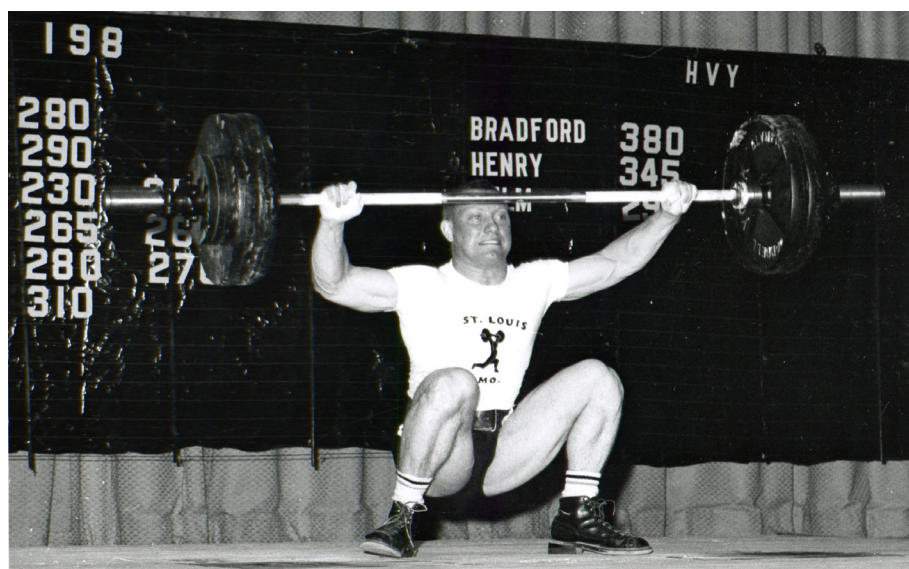
Although Gary finished a disappointing fifth at the Budapest World Championships and garnered fewer team points than his companions, optimism prevailed in the American camp. “He actually performed sensationally,” and proved to be “a very worthy lifter by international standards,” was the view of Bob Hoffman. “He should lift 11 pounds more in each lift very soon, which would put him at the thousand total, and he will press anyone in the world for the Olympic title in 1964.” Hoffman called him “young, strong, enthusiastic,” and “a steady performer who can and will improve considerably in his form.”<sup>17</sup> Peary Rader was no less enthusiastic for the fledgling international star. “Gary’s 964 total gave evidence of his possibilities for the future” and the prospect of a 1,000 total. Rader regarded him as “our hope in the light-heavy-weight class. With rapid improvement in this coming year, he may be hard for anyone to beat next year. Gary has his eyes on the Olympics.”<sup>18</sup> In late 1962, however, his training environment changed abruptly when he moved to Minneapolis and started attending the University of Minnesota. At first, he trained at the garage gym of Mel Hennessy, a well-known powerlifter who went on to bench press a record 560 pounds at 217 bodyweight. “I was always grateful to Mel for letting me workout there for free, but Mel’s gym was set up for powerlifters. So I moved to the garage at the house where I resided. This garage had more room and was better suited for Olympic lifting, but boy was it cold in the winter, an uninsulated building with a small oil heater.”<sup>19</sup> What seems remarkable in retrospect is that he continued to make progress despite such adverse conditions and having to train alone. Although he only made a 930-pound total in May 1963 at the Minnesota State Championships in St. Paul, Cleveland again excelled at the world championships in Stockholm, Sweden, in September with lifts of 325 pounds, 286½ pounds, and 363¾ pounds for a 975¼ pound total. The total was a personal best and 11 pounds more than 1962, but he again finished in fifth place.<sup>20</sup>

Hopes remained high, however, that Cleveland had not yet reached his potential. Hoffman still believed that he “has the ability to

move up in the world rating, as he is very, very, strong, a lifter we are quite proud of.”<sup>21</sup> Prior to his trip to Stockholm, fellow lifter, lightweight Tony Garcy asked him when he intended to win the world title. Gary responded that he was “not planning to go all out in any certain year, but rather train hard as possible every year with the hope of making sufficient gains to overtake the leaders.” His optimism was founded partly on his faith in isometrics and isotonics and the need to keep changing his routine to avoid staleness, and not overtrain.<sup>22</sup> He also had confidence in his mental powers of concentration. “I used to get more worked up at the World’s,” he later told Osmo Kiiha. “I was able to channel my nervous energy better. I was never a gym lifter, the bigger the contest, the better I lifted.”<sup>23</sup> This was most obvious in his international performances at Budapest and Stockholm. Cleveland also benefited from the tuition scholarship he received from Hoffman for his last two years at the University of Minnesota and the opportunity, as a member of the Olympic team, to spend the summer of 1964 at York Barbell training and working in the shipping department.<sup>24</sup>

Another likely influence on Cleveland’s progress at this time was the possible use of performance enhancing drugs. Stalker suspects that “Gary tried amphetamines of some kind . . . at the Stockholm world meet or before. He told me they made him so jittery he could not lift well. He stopped using them.” Indeed, Hoffman observed that he was “very nervous” and “shaky” in his Stockholm report.<sup>25</sup> Stalker avows that later in life Gary was

certainly anti drugs and would say with emphasis that the winners now only show you who has the best chemist. Well, when I stayed at Gary’s when I was in high school and also prior to my first term at the U, I slept in Gary’s room. On his dresser, there were two prescription pill bottles. Gary had to go to work early and I was sleeping in the room. He came in quietly and took a pill from one or both bottles and swallowed them. I recall one was anavar, one was winstrol. I made sure to note what the label on the pill bottles said; after all, I wanted to copy the ways of the top lifters, which was the only thing we could do back then without CDs, internet, etc.



In the lead-up to the 1961 AAU Senior National Championships, Cleveland suffered a prolonged bout of pneumonia. As a result, he lost bodyweight and training time. Here he misses his third attempt in the snatch, a weight of 275 pounds. Gary posted lifts of 280 press, 265 snatch, and 325 clean and jerk, for an 870-pound total, tying his total from the previous summer.

That is why I made a beeline for York so often. He may not have liked taking pills—he didn't in general, even aspirin for a headache—but I was not dreaming. . . . Anyway, Gary took steroids for a couple of years. Nothing more than the prescribed doses. . . . Anyone who was a top lifter 1965-75 used, frankly. It has become such a black mark that older lifters don't like to bring it up and prefer not to answer questions about the topic. . . . Gary would not have taken steroids if the other top lifters in the world were not taking them, I feel confident in saying. He did not know about them when he did his isometric rack workouts in Mpls; he told me that, saying he didn't know [Bill] March was gaining, using the rack plus steroids. So sometime after that, he may have started and he stopped, of course, when he retired in the fall of '65.<sup>26</sup>

While it would be difficult to establish a precise time frame of Cleveland's alleged steroid use, a significant elevation in his totals might be suggestive. A dramatic rise took place at the 1963 World Championships in Stockholm when he registered a personal best total of 975¼ pounds,

which exceeded his previous best at Budapest. More importantly, it established a pattern over the remaining ten meets of his weightlifting career when his performance never fell below 950 and on three occasions exceeded 1,000 for an average total of 972.18 pounds or an increase of 43.61 pounds per contest over his previous outings as a light-heavyweight. Similarly, in the wake of adopting his isometrics routine in 1961, his average total for eleven meets was 928.57 or an increase of 59.41 pounds per contest. What can be concluded from these data is that in addition to the influence of Peary Rader in 1961

and Gary's fellow Olympians in York in 1963, the combination of isometrics and probable steroid use helped Cleveland become a weightlifter of international caliber on the verge of winning Olympic and world championships.

The climax to Cleveland's athletic career occurred in 1964 when he had the opportunity to gain sports immortality at the Tokyo Olympics. Hoffman was confident he would at least earn a bronze medal. "He is a very powerful young man and seems to have muscles he has not used yet. I believe he could do it." Those who observed him training in the York gym concurred. "Gary has a case of the dread disease, 'Olympic Fever.' The symptoms are sleepless nights, dreams of missed lifts, and an uncontrollable compulsion to be in the gym lifting weights at all hours of the day and night. The disease leaves only after the last Clean and Jerk in the Olympic Games."<sup>27</sup> At Tokyo, Cleveland totaled a personal best of 1,003 pounds via lifts of 336, 297½, and 369½ pounds, which would have been good enough for a silver medal at Budapest in 1962 and a bronze at Stockholm in 1963, but the ante had been steadily rising on the international scene, and Americans were not keeping up. Gary was again relegated to fifth. In an almost pitying tone, Bob Hise in *Lifting News* commented that "Cleveland needs more leg power and a little more International seasoning and he will be right up at the top."<sup>28</sup> Hoffman seemed equally perplexed, again noting Cleveland's muscularity. "His back is a larg-

er edition of the famous [Chuck] Vinci back. I could never understand why he did not Snatch more with all that muscle, but this time he did gain." But it was not enough to place.<sup>29</sup>

Still Cleveland could be consoled that he was rated by the German publication *Athletik* as the sixth best light-heavyweight in the world for 1964, only 25 kilograms from the top spot, and that he seemed set to defend his national championship title at Los Angeles in June 1965.<sup>30</sup> But he would need to defeat his nemesis, Tommy Kono, and overcome the threat of up-and-coming powerhouse Joe Puleo of Michigan to be named national champion. Gary served notice that he was prepared to do just that in a meet in St. Paul, Minnesota, on 20 March 1965 when he set a new American total record of 1,015 pounds, which eclipsed Kono's record of 1,014. The three-way showdown in Los Angeles, as described in *Strength & Health*, provided a thrilling climax to Cleveland's aspirations.

Tommy was trailing Cleveland by 20 pounds going into the clean and jerk, but Cleveland only made his first attempt with 360. Tommy also made the 360 on his first attempt, and so easily that it seemed that 380 was possibly within his ability. However, after much pacing, hand-chalking and false starting, the weight proved to be a bit too heavy for [Kono] to fix at the shoulders. After some hard luck in the snatch, explosive Joe Puleo came back to slip past Kono for second position with a magnificent clean and jerk of 385 pounds, 15 better than his previous best.<sup>31</sup> Peary Rader, impressed by Cleveland's "fine lifting" by defeating Kono and Puleo, believed he "shows great promise and we predict he will be of world class, that is, capable of winning a world title for us in the near future."<sup>32</sup>

Cleveland, however, was having second thoughts about his triumph and plans for the future. He "did not feel good" about beating his idol, he told Osmo Kiiha. Kono, though "at the end of his long fabulous career" and "past his time . . . was a constant threat at that contest" and "never out of the race. I was even pulling for him to succeed with the 380 C&J that would have won the contest for him."<sup>33</sup> Gary told Stalker that Kono was "the most dynamic and competitive lifter of that time, maybe ever. He thrived on competition, at his best when pushed." Sadly, it seems that Cleveland, the man whose "career consisted of getting beat repeatedly by Tommy Kono," had finally beaten his adversary, yet found no joy.<sup>34</sup>

National Champion Cleveland appeared

to be at the top of his game, but he was not tapped for the team that competed at the World Championships in Tehran in September. According to Hoffman, he was "a man who should have been the world champion," but "his future is a bit uncertain." Hoffman claimed Cleveland was not invited because he was in college and "would have lost a full semester of school."<sup>35</sup> Gary, however, insists that no one asked him to join the team. "I really don't know why." And he would have gone, "no question about it. I was in excellent condition at the time. Just prior to the world's I totaled 1010 pounds (335-295-380) with only two attempts in each lift."<sup>36</sup> Stalker sheds further light on Cleveland's non-participation, noting he never knew the North American Championships on 25 September in Montreal were intended to be a tryout for the World Championships and his assumption was that his Senior Nationals victory would naturally make him a team member. "I recall emphatically saying why didn't you call York, and he had no reply aside from a shrug. Gary was not one to make the first move on things. He waited on others to do that, rarely if ever promoting his own interests by speaking out."<sup>37</sup> In all likelihood he would have placed second in the Games, based on his earlier best total of 1,015, thereby surpassing the 1,013 pounds of Russia's Alexander Kidyaev and the 980 pounds of Poland's Jerzi Kaczkowski and enabling him to earn his only world championship medal.

## A NEW BEGINNING

After missing the World Championships, Cleveland finished college and decided to pursue a different life course. He recollected in 1999 that "at some point in 1965 or '66 at a meet at the St. Paul YMCA, it struck me that the magic was gone. I wasn't attracted to this activity anymore."<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, the road ahead to become an international champion seemed steep and insurmountable. "I had been in two World Championships and one Olympic Games and got fifth place each time," he explains. "I decided that was about as good as I was going to do, and it was not worth carrying on, so I just retired."<sup>39</sup> He told Stalker that "four more years at the top level was a lifetime" and he needed to look ahead to his future beyond weightlifting when he was no longer chained to a barbell and could do the things other people do. His decision in June 1966 to join the Peace Corps would enable him to chart a different course, he reasoned. Stalker claimed Gary "did not join the Peace Corps out of some do-gooder drive,"



though he was interested in helping those less fortunate. “He joined to see the world and do some good [and] to get away on an adventure.”<sup>40</sup> His assignment in Ecuador, to his great dismay, consisted of giving weightlifting exhibitions and clinics in nearly every town in the country. “I had a boss that wanted to get publicity for the Peace Corps, so he put me in the physical education program.”<sup>41</sup> What was new and different for Cleveland, who had previously not dated, was falling for, and then marrying Santos Alejandra Cervantes in September 1967.<sup>42</sup> When his tour was up and Gary and his wife returned to Minnesota two years later, Cleveland discovered that future employers did not “care that much if you were a lifting champion.”<sup>43</sup> After holding several positions, Cleveland became a systems analyst in the Information Technology Department for Hennepin County, Minnesota, in 1973. He worked there until he retired in 2000, repairing computers and problem-solving breakdowns in the county’s infrastructure.<sup>44</sup>

As for his personal life, he and Santos remained married until 1983 and had one child, Maria, born in 1968. After his divorce, Cleveland lived alone for the most part and “kept his cards close to his chest,” according to Stalker. He remained interested in lifting and attended the two world meets held in Columbus, Ohio (1970), and Gettysburg, Pennsylvania (1978). He also became a collector of books and magazines, including *World Weightlifting*, the official organ of the IWF.<sup>45</sup> He satisfied his craving for physical activity and companionship by becoming an avid bike rider and hiker, often accompanied by Susan Elsner who worked in a cubicle on the same floor as Gary at the county office. Theirs was a “complicated relationship” that lasted 17 years. “At times we were romantically involved,” Susan reported, “and at other times just friends. He wanted to get married, and that’s not something I ever wanted to do, but we had a lot of things in common and enjoyed each other’s company.”<sup>46</sup>

As evidence of his quirky sense of humor, YouTube currently contains two videos, both made in 1998, that help demonstrate the ironic lens through which Gary viewed the world. The first is a five-and-a-half-minute video titled “1998 Tettegouche Winter Olympics—Gary Cleveland Reading Long Day’s Journey Into Abs.”<sup>47</sup> The video shows Cleveland, sitting in a cabin with several unidentified friends, reading a Xerox copy of an article from the *New Yorker* about a man who begins a fitness program; there is much laughter from his appreciative

audience as this is being read. The second, and even more whimsical video is titled “1998 Tettegouche Winter Olympics—Gary Cleveland—Individual Snow Dance.” It shows Gary dressed in black pants and shirt, holding a cane and top hat in front of a cabin, singing and dancing to two Irving Berlin songs, “Top Hat, White Tie, and Tails,” and “Puttin’ on the Ritz.”<sup>48</sup> The Tettegouche Olympics were, of course, just a figment of Gary’s vivid imagination, as Tettegouche is a state park in Minnesota, and the videos reveal just a group of friends fooling around at a cabin. However, the reading and the dance were not without *some* meaning as Gary had begun to look critically at the world in which he lived, and he soon found a new way in which to share his increasingly ironic world view.

### THE WISDOM OF DIVINE AVIAN FLUID MOVEMENT

In the same year as his legendary snow dance, Gary wrote a lengthy treatise titled *First Principles of the Wisdom of Divine Avian Fluid Movement*, which he described as “an ‘interpretation’ of the ‘lost teachings of Louis Cyr.’”<sup>49</sup> It is impossible to know what inspired him to write this satire/reminiscence connected to Cyr, but a plethora of publications by Ben Weider and others in mid-century focused on the Quebec strongman, and likely caught his attention.<sup>50</sup> That Cyr was “strong as hell” and relied on no one but himself, no doubt appealed to the loner aspects of Cleveland’s psyche just as Cyr’s strength inspired his ideas of human possibility.

According to Stalker, Gary had begun fooling around with writing before he began on the book. “Gary wanted to do more than lifting,” Stalker explained, and was a devoted Bob Dylan fan, but he was “. . . not cut out for music, or the visual arts as he once confessed to me when he looked at art, he had no reaction. . . . He read a good deal of fiction for a systems analyst guy, and he started writing . . . science fiction-esque stories. I don’t know if he submitted any for publication, but he doesn’t have any published fiction out there.”<sup>51</sup>

As was the case when James Joyce published *Ulysses*, not all readers of Cleveland’s stream-of-consciousness memoir understood what they were reading. On one level, *The Wisdom of Divine Avian Fluid Movement* is a compilation of Cleveland’s life experiences, philosophical musings, lifting lore, and his struggle to understand the human condition. Although some consider it nothing more than a rambling, hodge-podge of disconnected thoughts, Gary



**A 363 ¾-pound clean and jerk on the way to a 975 ¼-pound total, a personal record that was good enough for 5th place at the 1963 World Championships in Stockholm, Sweden.**

actually applied a pedagogic framework to the treatise. His aim was to impart “first principles” of wisdom contrived and imparted from “the lost teachings of Louis Cyr.” His ironic, humorous imagination permeated every page of the work, resulting in an admixture of fact and fiction. This is reflected at the outset by both the whimsical title and the publisher’s name of “Kleanand Press,” conveniently derived from a Twin Cities dry cleaning and laundry establishment founded in 1987.<sup>52</sup> No less fanciful is Gary’s story of the origins of his account, which he traces back to 1959 when confronted with the perennial question, “Who am I?” He discovered “the most effective, the most efficient self help system the world has ever known—Louis Cyr’s Wisdom of Divine Avian Fluid Movement. That he did not publicize it at age 17 in a society dominated by Cold War fads, the Edsel, Sputnik, Fabian, and the “pleasures of pizza” is not surprising. He assumed there would be no interest in his system of physical, mental, and emotional development. Eventually, after allegedly withdrawing into solitude and privately practicing his system for several decades, Cleveland noticed a surge of interest in physical culture and self-fulfillment with the emergence of giant health clubs, self-help sections in bookstores, and celebrity offerings. Wrote Cleveland, “Public attention has been captured by a variety of these ‘therapeutic systems’ that range from Transcendental Meditation, The Zen of Running, Primal Scream Therapy, to Aerobic Yoga for Couples. Very few offer anything worthwhile—most are useless

quackery.”<sup>53</sup> Now as he advanced in age, this “invasion of the charlatans” stirred him, much like “the old soldier that gets out the uniform and flag when peril approaches.” Deciding to give it another try, in 1995 he joined the fictitious, yet according to Gary, “vivacious Brenda Di Carlata” to form the Louis Cyr Institute of Divine Avian Fluid Movement as a refuge for seekers of “genuine and lasting self-improvement.”<sup>54</sup>

Cleveland’s book consisted of 12 chapters, each with three sections: a narrative of his personal efforts to rediscover Cyr’s

teachings, an explanation of each of Cyr’s twelve golden actions leading to an “actualization of mind, body, and spirit,” and a description of a Cyr strongman exercise to enhance one’s physical prowess. While this sounds like a logical approach, internally the chapters were disjointed and often hard to follow. The first chapter, for example, wanders from a description of Cyr’s strongman reputation, to the emergence of a sect of Cyrites in Iraq, to a disquisition on dynamic visualization through soothing thoughts and sounds, to “taking a leashed dog for a walk” as an exercise to increase strength and sooth one’s spirits.<sup>55</sup>

In Chapter Two Cleveland draws on his experience as a “circus strongman” in Ecuador where he discovered an “old” biography of Louis Cyr and decided he was destined to investigate his life. In the process, he explained, he would apply Cyr’s understanding of dynamic visualization to exploring one’s “real self.” For Cyr, “with mind calmed, he looked within, analyzed and shattered his subjective reality.” He contemplated the four interrogative pronouns: Who? (Who are you?), What? (What are you?), Why (Why are you what you are?), and How? (How did you become the who and what you are?) arguing that answering these questions would lead to “a future of unlimited potential.” Gary’s prescription for a strongman exercise involved progressive resistance from bending paper clips to coat hangers to curling irons to horseshoes in order to build strength “the way of Louis Cyr.”<sup>56</sup>

In Chapter Three, Cleveland recounts

that after leaving Ecuador, he worked as a business analyst for nine months then made his way to Montreal to uncover more about Cyr's life and ideas. On the Greyhound bus he encountered a traveler named "Lucky" and a hotelier named Leo who acquainted him with the French Canadian tradition of square dancing. It was practiced by Cyr who once "not only out-danced everyone, but had the creativity to redefine the entire Square World." This interaction led to Gary's Action Number 3 entitled "Affirmations of Being" that Cyr revealed after encountering a bystander at a stone-lifting competition in 1885. In response to the question of whether he was the world's strongest man, Cyr responded, "Madame, your challenge is most formidable, your intentions are most pure, your question is direct, without ambiguity and the three poisons—anger, greed and ignorance—do not contaminate your motives. Yet, when I look upward, beyond the mundane world, up where the birds fly, I can find nothing to question."<sup>57</sup> It was an epiphany for Cyr who had

"collapsed, discouraged and exhausted from his struggle for self-improvement, lying motionless, his gaze fixed on the serene clear blue sky above. 'Suddenly,' to quote his own words, 'I noticed three birds soaring across my field of vision. I noticed their effortless flight, the naturalness of their movement. In that ephemeral moment I experienced the intuitive flash, the peak experience missed by most mortals. With my perceptions shattered, thereafter, my life was never the same.' Louis would later label this vision "*The Wisdom of Divine Avian Fluid Movement*," the final product of a ten-year quest. In that moment, for Louis, the affirmation of his being was no longer in question."<sup>58</sup>

In light of Cyr's revelation, the Cartesian slogan of "Cogito ergo sum" [I think, therefore I am.] had special meaning for Cleveland. Thus motivated, he recommended using automobile inner tubes to simulate the strongman exercise of breaking chains with chest inhalations.<sup>59</sup>

In succeeding chapters, Gary delves into "dynamic conceptual processing" as a means of charting unfamiliar territory for Cyr follow-

ers who should "imagine, visualize, approach, adjust," enabling them to "live with cyclical change" and to "actualize our ideal self." He also begins introducing what may be fictional characters that help him move his narrative. In the course of attaining this understanding, Cleveland revealed his personal experience of curing the business writing flaws in the corporate office where he worked; his Montreal lodging encounters with Franklin, "an aging Mississippi gentleman type;" and Heather, "an exquisite thirty something" who was "stunning without adornment." With the former, Gary could relate from having grown up "in the steamy border city of St. Louis" and "exposure to Southern speech as a boy" and to the latter from her knowledge not only of square dancing, but Cyr's musical training on the cello, likely gained by Gary from Ben Weider's biography. For strongman exercises he recommended, "instead of boulders," lifting one end of a couch or bed, and in lieu of lifting a blacksmith's anvil by the horn, he suggested hoisting an unpleasant person by their shirt or coat near the throat.<sup>60</sup>

In Chapter Six, devoted to "critical evaluation of the self," Cleveland regretted the relative onset of inactivity of his own aging self, brought on by office work during the day and studying Cyr's parchments at night. "My physical condition, once that of a trained circus performer, was declining from long hours hunched over a desk with little rest and lack of vigorous physical activity. The exhaustive nights followed by days of office work left me with headaches, progressing eventually to a mental state resembling a prolonged Bensedrine jag." To replicate a strongman exercise, Cleveland suggested improvising a human bridge with a member of the family or a friend stepping lightly on a plank resting on one's chest.<sup>61</sup>

Wild leaps of imagination often show up in the last half of Gary's book. In Chapter Seven, for example, he explains to Heather that when he worked with a small circus in Ecuador, he performed a strongman act "laying on a bed of nails while someone smashes a sledge hammer into a concrete slab that's on my chest." He also relates an incident in 1902 when Cyr was in such great demand as a lecturer and performer of square dancing that it rivaled classical ballet, and he was named lifetime artistic consultant for the Bolshoi Ballet. Little wonder that the emergence of skeptics to Cyr's teachings necessitated a golden action entitled "Recognizing Signs of Danger" where Gary cites the example of how Galileo's doubts about existing



beliefs about the universe led to logical conclusions about the nature of truth. "Truth is a very elusive concept," he contended, and the advent of computers presented an additional challenge for those attempting to extract wisdom from knowledge. "Nowhere in this continuum . . . does the word 'Truth' arise." His strongman exercise prescribes somersaults as a substitute for those who cannot duplicate Eugen Sandow's performance of back flips while holding a 40-pound dumbbell in each hand.<sup>62</sup>

Chapter Eight pertains to living a sane life by having "realistic expectations," illustrated by his inability to whistle *What'd I Say* anymore or his preference for opening light doors over heavier ones. Louis Cyr, however, could hardly be held to the same realistic expectations as normal people. When a Princeton philosophy professor named Clark M. Breaver, at the behest of his students, visited Cyr as he was sitting in his garden contemplating the movements of sparrows, he called the strongman a "fake and a fraud" for claiming to be the world's strongest man, at which point the professor

thrust his hand toward Louis Cyr's neck, Louis reached for the professor's frock coat collar and lifted him with one hand above his head. Then, holding the screaming professor in that position, Louis climbed the ladder of the water tower. . . . When they reached the top of the tower, Louis Cyr held the professor outward, at arm's length, and said, "Professor Breaver, perhaps, as you say, I am not the world's strongest man, perhaps I am a very weak man, so weak that my arm will grow weary and drop you. Would you now care to hear my ideas on the fluid motion of birds?"<sup>63</sup>

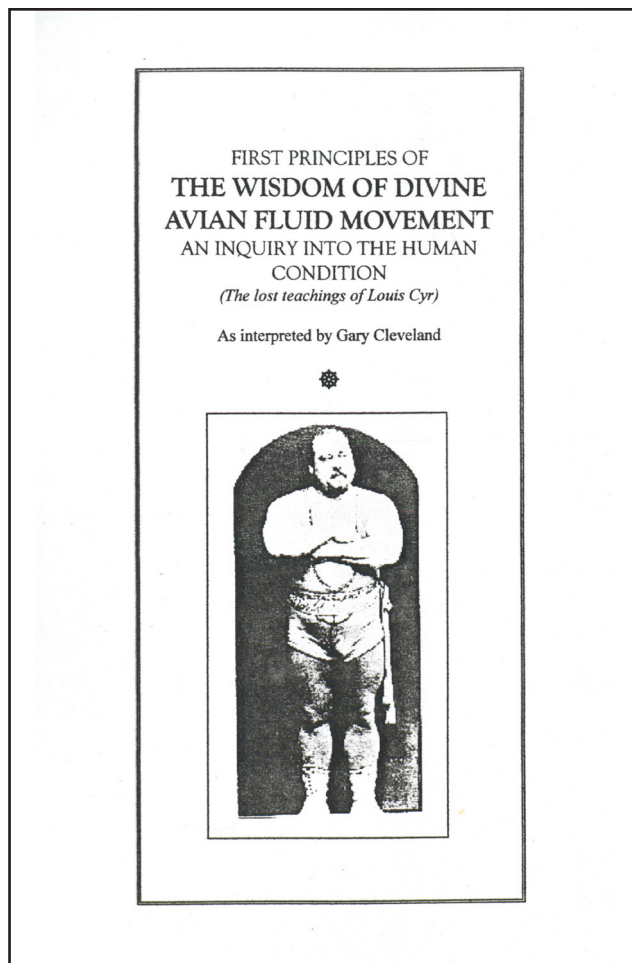
Gary obviously had an obsession with strength, and it hardly mattered if he exaggerated the feats of Cyr to illustrate its importance. Also, to illustrate a point, he could always minimize as well as maximize. He did so in his strongman exercise by suggesting that one could always take pride in breaking pencils in lieu of breaking coins, or humor your friends by telling them, "Yes, I break coins. Give me a quarter and I'll give you back two dimes and a nickel."<sup>64</sup>

"Mental time lapse" was the theme of

Chapter Nine where Gary endows his hero with the gift of time warp, which enabled Cyr through fluid movement to move "the body's limbs in a slow, graceful manner while mentally visualizing the movement as a single continuous flow." In this focused mental state, "Cyr could actually see into the future." He was thus able to predict in 1895 the accession of Calvin Coolidge to the American presidency in 1923. Cleveland was convinced that through self-discipline and a healthy lifestyle "we can control our own future—and that's true *fortune telling*." His strongman exercise was inspired by witnessing Joe Greenstein, "the Mighty Atom," bite through a 20-penny nail at the York Barbell Company. Gary recommended that nail-biting enthusiasts should practice by biting strands of uncooked spaghetti twice a week.<sup>65</sup>

As a fan of Bob Dylan, also a Minnesota native, Cleveland heads Chapter Ten with an epigraph from him: "Let me forget about today until tomorrow." Its golden action of "Adding Final Touches through Avian Observation" added little to information conveyed in the previous chapter, except for a discussion of Cyr's foreseeing the development of computers and the emergence of Mick Jagger a half century later. The tenth strongman exercise is more believable, aside from the fact that Cyr never performed it. Yet Gary devotes nearly two pages to the history and description of the bent press, encouraging readers to "get out on that lifting platform and nail a few bent presses the next time you're at the spa."<sup>66</sup>

In his final chapters, Cleveland imparts some gems of wisdom to seekers of self-improvement. True Divine Avian Fluid Movement, he assures readers, "originates in the mind" and "results in the free liberated movement of mind." He argues that the universe is slightly out of balance. "If it were not there would be no movement, no life. It is from that slight imbalance—that dynamic state—that all creativity emerges. . . . It is only through the interaction of change and stability (the dynamic and the static) that anything worthwhile can be attained." Especially disturbing to Cyr were the self-indulgent lyrics of modern songs "which showcase the composer's narcissistic juvenile state of emotional and intellectual development." As suggested in golden action eleven, Avian Fluidity in Everyday Life, "having freed our mind and body of the limitations of mundane practices, having elevated our awareness beyond superficial stimuli, we develop more discriminating tastes and require higher quality from



The cover to Cleveland's *First Principles of The Wisdom of Divine Avian Fluid Movement, An Inquiry into the Human Condition* in which he interpreted the "lost teachings" of Louis Cyr. It was published in 1998 by Kleanand Press.

our composers." But the strongman exercise, as demonstrated by those who stayed at Mrs. MacElroy's boarding house in south Philadelphia during idle times between bookings, could have hardly been more mundane—"their ability to open ketchup bottles." To develop health and strength, Gary suggested lid removal challenges of ordinary jars of mayonnaise, ketchup, and pickles.<sup>67</sup>

Chapter Twelve, ironically titled "Going Beyond Everyday Life—The Completed Evolution of Self," is even more mundane with a lengthy description of Cleveland's return to St. Louis and reminiscences of everyday events of his youth. Despite Cyr's parting advice that one should "look beneath the surface" and also "look above the surface" to "understand the essence of all things" and "find serenity in what you are," the accompanying strongman exercise brings to mind frustration for most people rather than serenity. What Gary describes as

"developing hand-eye coordination and unsurpassed mental concentration" is the challenging feat of "opening a new compact disk in less than five minutes without damage to the case and *without using knives or razor blades.*" Only with tongue in cheek could he conclude that "all good physical courses should hold the most difficult exercise for last. I can't open a CD wrapper, Louis Cyr couldn't, and neither can you. Good luck with your self-improvement."<sup>68</sup>

It was a feeble whimper rather than a robust climax which fell far short of resolving or clarifying the many confusing issues that permeated the previous hundred pages of Cleveland's tale. "It is a satire," Stalker contends, "a spoof of self improvement books and tapes and lectures" and also "improve your business hucksters, MBAs, today's song lyrics, and more. . . . There were no end of self improvement books in Borders [bookstores] in the 90s," he rightly reckons. "Even in the 80s and before. Wayne Dyer made his money from them. Gary just took their lingo, added some philosophy terms (being is a good one), some New Age crap, some business babble, and he was on his way. Satire is comedy with a point, and here the point is the emptiness of all these self help books, courses, and lectures."<sup>69</sup> Beyond that, it was a revelation of Cleveland's psyche and emotional state at this stage of life. As Susan Elsner reflects, "Gary was very calm, thoughtful, unassuming, and low-spoken. I knew before we spent time together he got seriously into Zen meditation for quite some time. And I think that was sort of his transition after his divorce. Seeking some deeper spiritual meaning to existence he frequented the Zen Meditation Center."<sup>70</sup>

Part of Gary's problem was that he was trying to combine fact, fiction and the present with the past. He was also trying to reconcile his generational status, having been born in 1942, and thus missed the baby boomers, born four years later who induced a cultural turn in the 1960s and beyond. He tried to connect with that generation intellectually by developing an affinity for Bob Dylan music, Peter Sellers films, and the creative writing genius of David Foster Wallace. But he never adopted the accoutrements of the hippie culture such a long hair, psychedelic dress, or living in a commune, and unlike some of the drug-using guys at York in the 1960s, Gary never smoked pot or drank alcohol.<sup>71</sup>

What followed the publication of Gary's book was a period of depression according to Stalker. It seemed that life ceased to have any intrinsic meaning as Gertrude Stein once wrote

about Oakland, California, “There’s no there there,” or as Ike Berger told Gary at an Oldetime Barbell and Strongman Association banquet, “Do you know what all this means? It means absolutely nothing.” So disenchanted was Gary at this point that he told his friend, Stalker, “Getting poems published in a journal is something you may take for granted, but I would rather be able to do that (any journal) than be a former weightlifting champion. I would rather be ABLE to teach philosophy (even if I hated doing it) than to have lifted heavy weights.”<sup>72</sup> It was in this frame of mind that he composed his book, which Stalker speculates was an attempt to “do something far from lifting.”<sup>73</sup> He undoubtedly also did it to amuse himself.

### THE AVIAN MOVEMENT ADVOCATE

Gary’s next literary effort was *The Avian Movement Advocate*, Gary’s serial journal that first appeared in September 1998 and continued for 59 issues until January 2004. Susan Elsner recalls that the newsletter concept was inspired by workouts with members of his work-related exercise group in 1987 and 1988.

During the first few summers we were together and doing all of these car trips and biking and camping. At the end of two of those summers he wrote a little travelogue on the biking, all the places we went. Yeah. It’s something he started doing to entertain himself, and he’d pick it up and take it farther when the next piece of inspiration came along. I think it was something he just kind of discovered and enjoyed, and when the opportunity inspired him, he would get involved a little more deeply into the whole writing thing. He didn’t call them newsletters. It was something like the biking season was over, so it was just a narrative about the places we had been and the things that had happened with a creative spin to it.

They were personal and somewhat romantic where Gary would share “a lot of beautiful things over time,” Susan concluded.<sup>74</sup> Given his taciturn manner, Cleveland was often prone to express himself indirectly through writing rather than person-to-person.

*The Avian Movement Advocate* was meant as a follow-up to his book, which Gary admits was not initially intended for weightlifters. *First Principles* was conceived “in a moment when I felt a rising up of an old passion that ebbs and flows throughout the years, a passion for weightlifting and the personalities of its history.” He traces this passion back to his fascination with Charles Atlas ads, the early strength he showed to his sixth-grade peers, the gains made from his sixty-pound dumbbell set, and the lifting camaraderie he enjoyed at the St. Louis Boys Club. “Nothing since has ever motivated me more than the desire to become a great weightlifting champion once did,” he wrote in 1998. Although Gary’s hopes never materialized, he regarded himself as “extremely lucky. I got to train with five or six of the greatest weightlifters in the history of the sport.”<sup>75</sup>

This lingering passion led not only to Gary’s book and the Cyr Institute, but to new activities such as the aforementioned Tettegouche Olympics that required “a blending of speed, strength, woodsmanship, and grace” with opportunities to practice Avian Fluid movements. Like his contemporary, the journalist Hunter S. Thompson, Cleveland’s fertile imagination continued to create new fictional institutions and characters to populate his writings. He created the Eugen Sandow Conservatory of Reverse Engineering to resolve technology issues. “We don’t mind dumb questions, just don’t ask hard ones.” As he explained in the first issue, the impetus for publishing the journal really came from a decision to invest the cash surplus from the sale of his book to either it or a new lamp for his living room.<sup>76</sup>

It was this sort of low-key humor, along with combining reality with unreality within a weightlifting context, that permeates most of the newsletters and accounts for their ongoing appeal. In the second issue, Cleveland reveals his penchant for attractive females, often as a diversion, with his reference (and picture) of actress Meg Ryan who he imagines wants his phone number. The next three references are weightlifting related, the first a letter from long-time weightlifter Rex Monahan who read Gary’s “magnum opus with considerable interest. You have such a facile pen that I can’t tell where the tongue-in-cheek parts end and the other parts begin. I must say it caused me to laugh a lot and think a lot.” Gary responded by saying that Monahan’s “inability to tell the difference between truth and fantasy in ‘First Principles’ really strikes a chord with me. That’s exactly



what my therapist claims is *my* problem (though I can't tell if he means it)." Cleveland's next comments relate directly to weightlifting—the sport has been ill-served by the elimination of the press, the adoption of kilograms for US meets, and the unflattering wearing of Spandex lifting garb. The sport was well-served, however, by Isaac Berger who he recognized as “a perfected lifting machine” whose achievements come not from “structured programs or organized training centers controlled by bureaucrats comfortable with planning documents and position papers,” but from “the spirit and struggle of the single individual.”<sup>77</sup> It was a formula for success that once characterized Gary's own lifting.

### BRENDA AND PRYCKER

Cleveland's fascination with beautiful women continues in issue three with his one-time fantasy that building a big upper body would lead to an opportunity to meet Brigitte Bardot, or that performance-enhancing drugs would appeal to *Living Out Loud* actress Holly Hunter.<sup>78</sup> But much more long-lasting was his infatuation with the fictional and “Vivacious Brenda Di Carlata” who he allegedly met when she was teaching line-dancing at a senior adult activities class. “We formed a friendship through stories about the 1950's dances that I had seen performed on *American Bandstand*, such as The Madison and The Stroll. I succeeded in rekindling her interest in the Avian Movement by convincing her that those dances had their roots in Square Dance,” wrote Cleveland. Gary introduces readers to Brenda and her “hapless” boyfriend Prycker M. Graves, an alleged Sandow Conservatory employee, on a trip to some biking trails in southeast Minnesota. They took Brenda's “late model luxury car” with Gary in the back seat and Prycker in the front, “she driving and he riding, thus stretching the abil-



Douglas Stalker (left) and Gary Cleveland in the latter's garage gym during a training session in August 1965. Stalker was in Minneapolis attending school orientation. These two men remained friends and exchanged correspondence until Gary passed in 2004.

ities of both.” What transpired during their cycling journey through the green hills, river valleys, and quaint villages of Minnesota's “Sleepy Hollow” is uncertain, but Gary seems distracted by Prycker's chimerical scheme to use Brenda's money to convert a Lanesboro laundromat into “an exact replica of Sandow's boyhood home” and his plans for an International Membership Conference for Cyr followers in Monaco.<sup>79</sup>

Brenda and Prycker became recurring characters in sub-

sequent newsletters and Cleveland never told readers they were figments of his imagination, so he could use them to convey ideas that were often philosophical and frequently motivating. Brenda's commitment to the Institute seemed to be wavering, he wrote in 1999, much like his own previous commitment to weightlifting. “She's always believed that everyone could reach their dream,” he reported. “Maybe the ‘get rich and play hard’ approach isn't for everyone any more than the ‘get spiritual and contemplate goodness’ approach.” Gary advised Brenda to adhere to Cyr principles, that “life is movement,” and if she keeps training, her enthusiasm would eventually return. When we reach the point that we can only lift 50 pounds, he told his readers, lift it with the same resolve and grace you once lifted three hundred. “Unlike Brenda,” he explained, “I don't believe each of us have unbounded potential, but we owe it to ourselves to revel in what we have.”<sup>80</sup>

These words coincided with the arrival of an article sent to Cleveland by Tommy Kono entitled “Life Struggles.” According to the article, “Sometimes struggles are exactly what we need in our life. If we were to go through our life without any obstacles, we would be crippled. We would not be as strong as what we could have been. Give every opportunity a chance, leave no room for regrets.”<sup>81</sup> Although Cleveland still harbored regrets over relinquishing his

once-in-a-lifetime chance to be a great weightlifting champion, Kono's message had an exhilarating impact. "A nice note is always uplifting," he told readers, and "when it's from the greatest lifter of all time it's positively exhilarating. . . . Since our daily challenges are unavoidable, anyway, it's comforting to realize that there's an ultimate benefit, a balance between effort and fulfillment."<sup>82</sup>

Brenda's importance grew in the pages of Cleveland's newsletter as he began regularly including a sultry picture of her relaxing with a glass of wine in a Parisian café.<sup>83</sup> It would be easy to conclude that she was a pseudonym for his cycling partner Susan Elsner, but Gary told Joe Puleo that "It wasn't anybody. [I] cut her picture out of a magazine and just came up with a name." Prycer Graves' image and name were also fake.<sup>84</sup> But Brenda's sex appeal and Prycer's asinine adventures often had the effect of drawing unwary readers to more profound philosophical content.

Interspersed among such physical culture notables as Bernarr Macfadden, John Grimek, and Clarence Johnson, Cleveland injects his own world view, *a la* Louis Cyr, that "it's not our proficiencies but dealing with our imperfection that gives us character." To British philosopher Bertrand Russell, he attributes the observation that "the passion with which one holds a belief is inversely proportional to the strength of the evidence supporting that belief." Nor was he swayed by trendy language. "I've never used the words 'hubba hubba,' 'coolcat,' 'groovy,' or 'far-out' in my life and I'm sure not going to start embarrassing myself now by using 'exciting' to describe the mundane."<sup>85</sup> In physical culture, Gary ascribed to the solid values of Louis Cyr who "rejected the fluff of the corporate Slim Jim studios" and "tanning booths of the capitol growth fitness club where I train. I don't see many trainees who have ever been within shouting distance of a draft horse (much less tried to hold back four). Try to get some of the younger members interested in lifting those stones down by Shingle Creek? You might as well ask squirrels to recite mathematical proofs in French," he wrote disdainfully. To escape the throes of modernism and "regain a positive outlook," he would "run down to my basement and knock off a few sets of stiff legged deadlifts and some Zottman curls. Life can't get much better."<sup>86</sup> What permeates Gary's newsletters is a feeling of nostalgia and a need to justify and recapture an activity whose meaning is in jeopardy.

Central to Cleveland's weightlifting remembrances was Bob Hoffman, so-called Father of American Weightlifting. He was mesmerized by Bob's "unique characteristics that enabled him to be both admired and derided, sometimes by the same people at the same time." But few could gainsay that, but for Hoffman's single-minded efforts, along with uncommonly talented athletes, American weightlifting could have reached such prominence in the 1940s and 1950s. Also impactful was Tommy Kono, often called America's greatest weightlifter. Gary reckons that most weightlifters have seen "one lift that was so impressive that it became our standard, a lift that evoked images of Hellenic heroes more than Atlas' sand in the face." This "AHA" moment occurred for Gary at age sixteen when he attended the first of three weightlifting meets between the USA and the USSR in Chicago on 12 May 1958. Ironically, it was a failed lift, and the first time Kono was ever beaten in international competition. Tommy had to clean and jerk a world record 380 pounds to make up a 28-pound deficit to his opponent, Fyodor Bogdanovsky. After Kono failed his second attempt miserably, Cleveland said he

. . . wasn't expecting much. But Kono could captivate an audience and he pulled us in again—and again the tension grew. Standing over the bar, his face had the look of extreme concentration as he must have been waiting for that exact moment that would tell him 'Now.' Finally he bent over, grasped the bar and began the pull from the floor. I recall a strained groin with the second pull. That's where I expected the lift would end but it didn't—he was diving under it. Then I thought he'll never pull it in but there it was on his shoulders. I was certain he'd never stand up, but he began, very slowly and with extreme effort, to rise and at some point near the top we all realized he had just cleaned 380—and that's the most impressive lift I've ever seen.<sup>87</sup>

Also etched deep in Gary's memory, though sight unseen, were Joe DePietro's 231½-pound press at 122 bodyweight and Hyman Schaffer's bent press of 200 and snatch of 200 while

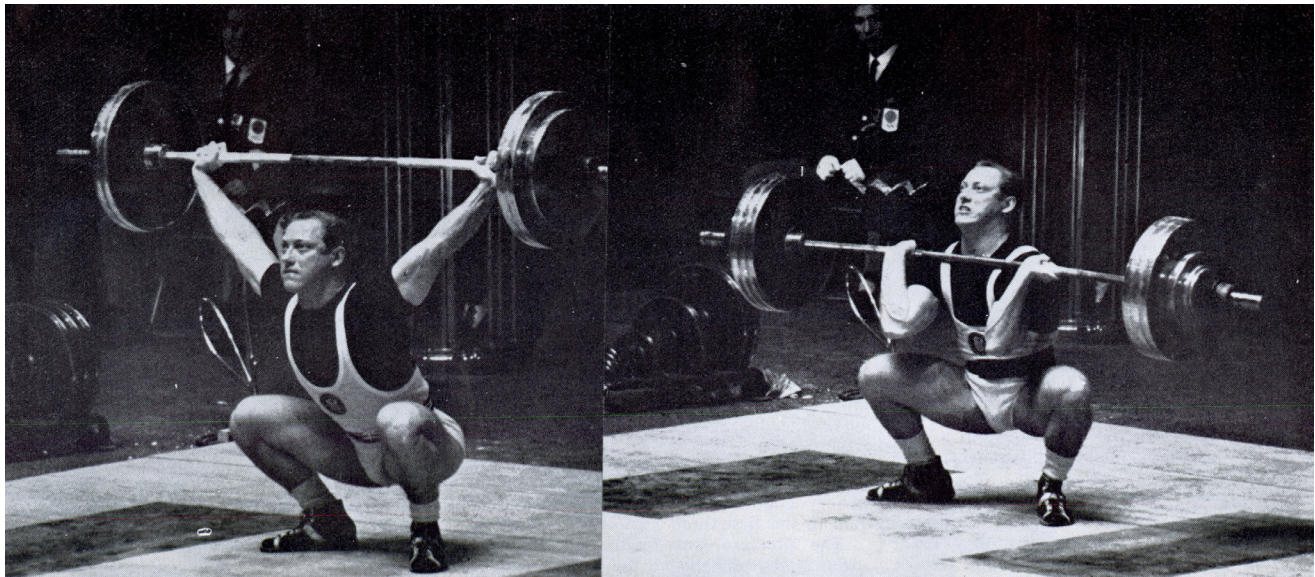


weighing only 132 pounds during weightlifting's golden age in the 1940s.<sup>88</sup>

Such meaningful recollections set the stage for Gary to venture further into the realm of fiction with Brenda Di Carlata and Prycer Graves. To help him “fill white space,” Brenda agreed to write an occasional article. But he warned readers not to expect too much because “her vivaciousness doesn't always transfer to the written page as well as it does to other settings—if you get my drift,” a definite double entendre. Brenda's first article was entitled “A Visit to the Coiffeur,” which integrated *Avian Fluid Movement* into her local hair-dressing shop. Gary made the mistake of telling her that Denis Reno had recently inquired about her. “Now she thinks she's being recruited by a ‘real’ (her word) newsletter and pictures herself behind one of those big executive desks like they all have in the plush mahogany paneled editorial offices of *Denis Reno's Weightlifter's Newsletter*. There are stars in her eyes and little else on her mind.” Gary was tempted to let her go to West Newton to “discover what real pressure is.”<sup>89</sup> Instead, he commissioned two more articles from her, “Royal References in Weightlifting,” about the clean & jerk, the so-called “King of Lifts,” and “An Experiment that Went Bad” about an attempt by one of Cyr's followers in 1915 to merge square dance forms with Cuban Mambo rhythms. “The point is,” Di Carlata asserts, “we all must keep experimenting. Life is reaching and reaching is the natural manifestation of our creative gift.”<sup>90</sup> Jealous over “how quickly Brenda has moved

up in the organization,” Prycer wanted to submit an article about efficiency. His contribution, “I Don't Have Time to Shower,” was puzzling to Gary “because Graves has time for six hours of showering a day if he wanted as he has *no* demands on his time.”<sup>91</sup> It seemed remarkable that a simple daily task could be analyzed in such technical terms and related to weight training.

Cleveland claimed to be so gratified by the attention his newsletter was receiving that he contemplated making it “an organic being” where he would bring it directly to readers. “I'll come and visit each of you, maybe stay a week or two. We can talk a little about what kind of mileage your car is getting, clean out your basement . . . maybe mow the lawn a couple times. We'll watch *The Antiques RoadShow* and some *Seinfeld* reruns.”<sup>92</sup> Most meaningful was a letter that warranted the title of “Tommy Kono Endorses Brenda Di Carlata,” where Kono described her as “something else. We need to see more of her.” Gary seized the opportunity for another double entendre, saying “I've tried for years to see more of Brenda but it got me nowhere.”<sup>93</sup> As Brenda's articles and picture continued to appear, Dale Harder of Castro Valley, California, was moved to ask, “Does Brenda Di Carlata really exist?” Gary's response linked Brenda to the aphorism of seventeenth century philosopher Rene Descartes, “I think, therefore I exist.” When queried about her existence, Gary's alter ego provided five physical culture scenarios. “If you doubt my existence just look around. I'm there when the last light goes out at the gym and the pain of an



Peary Rader described Gary Cleveland as “a continually improving lifter” when he published these images in *Iron Man Lifting News* in January 1965. Although Cleveland displayed “fine style” while lifting at the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games, he finished in 5th place in the 181-pound weight class. He is snatching 297 pounds on the left, and attempting to clean 380 pounds on the right.



old injury is throbbing or when you've just discovered some new damage. . . . And when your body becomes so exhausted that you no longer feel the sting of the torn calluses you yearn for a warm whirlpool—I'll be. . . ." Gary then explained, "I cut her off right there. Her voice was getting a little sultry and I didn't want to experience any thoughts that might cause awkward situations later."<sup>94</sup> Eventually, after allegedly receiving an anonymous letter linking Brenda to a convicted Chicago felon named Vinnie Di Carlata, Gary had enough. He reminded readers that "this is supposed to be an inspirational newsletter focusing on the ideals of Golden Age weightlifting and wholesome life-choices. It's called *The Avian Movement Advocate*, not the *Brenda Di Carlata Advocate*." In a clever ruse to divert attention away from his fantasy figures, Cleveland suspected the letter's author was Joe Puleo with whom he explained he had disagreements over the writings of Bertrand Russell which occasionally led to an exchange of profanities.<sup>95</sup>

Mixing the real Joe Puleo with the fantasy of Brenda and his other characters was part of Gary's genius and was an indication of his fascination with introspection and nostalgia. His favorite subjects and personalities invariably related to the springtime of his youth. "Eventually, we reach an age when we look back, a little wiser, and recognize greatness is not decided solely by the amount lifted nor the measurement of one's biceps, but by the influence one had on the sport during their time. By that criterion, Dave Sheppard qualified" as having been "the greatest weightlifter that never won a world title."<sup>96</sup> For Cleveland, the 1950s were special, "1955 was my first year of weight training, and each workout was stronger than the one before it." It was also the year that Paul Anderson "was opening the consciousness of the public to the existence of the sport," and Tommy Kono was becoming "the weightlifter's weightlifter." The August 1955 *Strength & Health* cover of him "represented what every weightlifter wanted to become—the best in the world, master of the game." What Gary calls "the 1955-56 Camelot" culminated in the United States Olympic victory in Melbourne with Anderson, Vinci, Berger, Kono, Anderson, Sheppard, and the George brothers as medalists. "Thanks to all those guys, for the inspiration and memories. If you had to go live back in time, 1955 might not be too bad."<sup>97</sup>

## STRENGTH

Cleveland was not the only person to

write for the *Advocate*. More realistic and relevant to the newsletter's nostalgic purpose was a memoir by Joe Puleo of fellow "Michigander" Stan Stanczyk and reviews of bygone muscle magazines. Gary also reprinted materials in older lifting magazines such as the September 1922 advertisement in *Strength*, which included a pitch for a "'newly developed' garter for people with crooked legs. It makes trousers hang straight if legs bend either in or out. It also holds the socks up and the shirt down."<sup>98</sup> He also included an ad about hemorrhoid treatments at Dr. Galatian's sanitarium in Baltimore that suggested before "being cut" that readers try their *wonderful* treatment. Gary noted that "It's seldom that you see the words 'piles' and 'wonderful' used in proximity."<sup>99</sup>

In examining the older lifting magazines, Gary guards against concluding that "those were innocent times and people were simpler back then." He believed men like Bernarr McFadden and Earle Liederman were "astute businessmen who were perceptive enough to accumulate millions of dollars back when a million dollars was a million dollars. More importantly, they transmitted a teaching that continues to evolve."<sup>100</sup> These reflections led him to ponder the trajectory of his own literary contribution from that tradition. "*The Wisdom of Divine Fluid Movement*," he admitted, was a nebulous phrase. "That's how I wanted it to be. I wanted it to have an early 1900s huckster's sound—a little tacky, but also a little intriguing." He believed its meaning was a matter of individual choice. "Like me, you've probably been developing your version over the years. For some it's performing the snatch and clean and jerk. For others it's the bench press or yoga, running, or a round of golf. For some it's sitting absolutely motionless in a meditative pose. For many of us it keeps changing over time." In some respects, this statement sounds like Buddhism, a philosophy in which he dabbled at length. No one can define the right course of action or inaction for any individual. "You have to go out and get it yourself," Gary advised. He likens enlightenment to the momentary "sweet sensation" when exerting a muscle or breathing deeply to "taking a drink of cold water on a hot summer day." As for his ill-defined Avian Fluid Movement, he chose to "just call it 'life.'"<sup>101</sup>

*Strength* remained central to the *Advocate*, however and can be seen in his extensive coverage of weightlifters and weightlifting competitions and passion for Louis Cyr. He also featured bodybuilders, especially if they were

## Seasons Greetings from the Avian Movement Advocate staff



Brenda Di Carlata



Gary Cleveland



Our Research &amp; Statistics staff



Prycer M. Graves



Stu Drummond

Gary and the fictional staff that starred in, and helped create, the *Avian Movement Advocate* appeared in the December 2002 issue. Though the sultry Brenda Di Carlata did not exist in the same sense as Gary, his descriptions of her, and articles attributed to her, were so elaborate and consistent that more than one reader missed the joke.

extraordinarily strong. Marvin Eder of New York, who was featured in the “Self Improvement Heroes” section in a 1949 issue of *Strength & Health*, was both strong and well-built. Gary illustrates it with several photos of his phenomenal physique and an observation that around 1953 at 197-pounds bodyweight, Eder bench pressed 510 pounds, did a straight-arm pullover with 210 pounds, 80 wide-grip pull-ups, and a parallel bar dip of 435 pounds with two men attached.<sup>102</sup> On his “Ripped” website, iron game author Clarence Bass calls Eder “Pound-for-Pound the Strongest Man of His Time.” Unfortunately, owing to the ongoing feud between Bob Hoffman and Joe Weider and the prevailing amateur code of his day, Eder was never able to compete in the Olympics or for the Mr. America title.<sup>103</sup>

Although strength training had become mainstream over the previous several decades, it surprised Gary to come across those who clung to old muscle-binding myths. “Younger people ignore or laugh off those references. But we who grew up when coaches and physical educators ridiculed the activity that we had made our passion still react by trying to set the record straight. Sometimes it’s not worth the trouble.”<sup>104</sup> Of the many strength-inducing innovations over the past century, isometrics held a special fascination for Cleveland. But this fad was muddled by the fact that its proponents “weren’t honest with us.” Results made by isometric training were “supplemented with privately ingested steroids.” Contrary to the benefits once derived from his own use of isometrics, he concluded that “the wool was pulled over our eyes. In the end, isometric training failed to produce a single world champion.” On the other hand, “the isometric craze led to mass mar-

keting of the power rack which made possible a whole variety of exercises and became a standard piece of equipment.”<sup>105</sup> To allay his uncertainties about the efficacy of steroids vis-à-vis isometrics, Gary analyzed the increase in world records for all weight classes, decade-by-decade, from the 1920s to the 1980s to determine whether there was ever a “surge” after the introduction of steroids in the 1960s. Although he found that there was a notable increase in totals for all classes for all decades, it was more gradual than sudden. He concluded that there were many other variables during this period that also contributed to this progression, including innovations in technique, equipment, training methods, nutrition, organizational support, and rules. Whatever the reason, he concluded there was “no surge in the overall pace of world records coinciding with the steroid revolution.”<sup>106</sup> Gary later wrote that he was skeptical that “pure strength” could ever be attained and measured, taking the view of David Willoughby that “there is no feat in weightlifting, gymnastics or any other field of muscular effort that can be performed by ‘pure strength.’” Skill, speed, and specialized training were present to some degree in all acts of bodily strength.<sup>107</sup>

### SLOWING DOWN

A frequent theme for Gary and his generation was their commitment to lifting weights as the best way to build strength. “Back then we all wanted everyone to know our secret—the transformational power of weight training. Well, now they know. And muscles are admired.” But this satisfaction brought additional grounds for skepticism. “Some appear as we age,” he believed. “Of all the body’s systems, we never concerned ourselves with any except the mus-

cular system. Now we've discovered the cardiovascular, circulatory, digestive, eliminative, immune, nervous and neurological systems."<sup>108</sup> As Gary reached age 60, growing old became an increased concern. "In our prime the purpose of workouts was to get stronger and bigger muscles. . . . But, "we aren't working-out for the same reasons anymore. . . . I still do strength training. But I'm not getting stronger. In fact, I'm becoming imperceptibly weaker." Upon the advice of his cardiologist, his exercising was reduced to "physical therapy activities like walking a treadmill, riding a stationary bicycle, and waving 5 pound dumbbells. I didn't like the turn of events but during that period a wonderful thing happened. I started feeling great. All my joint pain and muscle stiffness vanished and I felt years

younger." Declaring that his strength days were over, he modified his goals to suit an old-timer's training philosophy. One should therefore not worry if the weight on the bar feels too light, but worry a lot if your bodyweight feels too heavy. It was also important to distinguish between muscle and performance exercises and to vary them frequently. And finally he strongly recommends aerobic exercises of various kinds to "spread the abuse."<sup>109</sup>

Gary wrote about his own loss of strength and aging in the *Advocate*, sharing several dreams he had had about his inability to lift weights he had mastered in the past. In one dream that really bothered him he was unable to snatch even 95 pounds. When he woke up, he knew that he could still snatch 95 pounds,

"At least I was pretty sure I could. However I didn't think I'd ever know for sure because I wouldn't go into a gym where other people are watching, load a bar to 95 pounds and snatch it. I've suffered countless humiliations in my life but publicly snatching 95 pounds stretched my own capacity for self-defacement." To resolve his self-doubts, Gary "took the bull by the horns," drove to his gym at "the bustling hour of 6 PM," walked into "the crowded weight room . . . grabbed a 100 pound solid barbell, carried it over to a vacant spot and whipped it over my head a few times." On leaving, however, "some guy paid me a well-meaning but deeply wounding compliment. 'You should try 110, I think you could make it.'" Gary reflected that "aging weightlifters deserve better. We deserve dreams of meadows, rippling brooks, cumulus clouds, and leaping trout—not nightmares that drive us to secretly psych-up for 95 pounds."<sup>110</sup>

The line between truth and fiction became somewhat blurred for Gary and his fans in 2001 when he reported in December 2001 that Brenda Di Carlata was threatening to resign unless she received a raise to offset a recent adjustment in federal interest rates. "Since her photo is the main reason anyone reads these newsletters, there would be a flood of cancellations following her departure." Not able to handle rejection well, Gary hoped she would stay. "I know that she revels in the glamor at [the] heart of the Brooklyn Center's renowned Newsletter District and suspect she'll find some way to stay. I also suspect her inheri-



**Cleveland missing his first attempt at 280 pounds in the press at the 1961 AAU Senior National Championships, held at the Santa Monica (CA) Civic Auditorium. Gary would successfully lift 280 on his second attempt, and missed at 290 on his third. His 870 pound total at the meet was good enough for a third-place finish behind Tommy Kono and Louis Riecke.**



tance annuity is doing better than she lets-on.” Contrariwise, Cleveland hoped Prycer would leave, but “he said he would stay-on indefinitely. Since he’s paid nothing I have little leverage with him.” Gary’s uncertainty was eventually dispelled when a portrait of Brenda by an unidentified artist appeared on his doorstep. “It’s the splitting image of Brenda and even I, who know nothing about art, know that you can’t draw splitting images of fictitious people.” This discovery was treated as “an act of providence” and served as the occasion to celebrate a “Brenda Di Carlata Week” with festivities that included a trip to the Panda Gardens Buffet.<sup>111</sup>

In June 2002, the line between truth and fiction became even murkier when Gary claimed that Brenda and Prycer had accompanied him to the annual meeting of the Association of Oldetime Barbell and Strongmen in Saddle Brook, New Jersey. Gary actually had an old friend impersonate Prycer that evening, as his face was much less well known. Gary reportedly even arranged an *Avian Movement Advocate* hospitality suite. But reported later that owing to confusing directions, no one showed up except “a teen-age couple that wandered in by mistake wanting to get married,” thinking the Avian Movement was affiliated with Reverend Sun Myung Moon. The trio were able to observe iron game celebrities, however, including Denis Reno and *Strength Journal* editor Bill Clark, who “arrived in their private limos with their entourages, barking orders at their overworked staffs. I took the opportunity to remind Brenda (who occasionally thinks about jumping ship) that all is not flowers and candy in the mahogany-paneled office suites of those two newsletter giants.”<sup>112</sup>

Later that summer, Cleveland again called Brenda to task for nearly causing a riot. The problem, he explained, was that they were all now so famous that “Despite our sullied reputation, the tourists keep coming. . . . During our staff meeting last Thursday,” Gary wrote in the *Advocate*, “I heard a terrible ruckus from the street below. I ran over to the window where Brenda Di Carlata was sitting, painting her toenails. Outside was one of those English style open-air sightseeing buses filled with Portuguese tourists. They had all crowded on the top level, pointing at our window, wildly shouting, ‘Olhar! Olhar! E Brenda.’ When Prycer walked over to the window their shout changed to an angry, ‘Prycer no! No Prycer!—Brenda! Brenda!’ Gary did not appreciate this interruption “by a crowd of lustful tourists” and told Brenda if



Gary Cleveland and Tommy Kono catch up at an annual meeting of the Association of Oldetime Barbell and Strongmen.

she has to paint her nails, she should “use the employee’s lounge, not the front window and reminded her that we are not running a Panamanian taberna here.” While most readers understood that Brenda lived only in Gary’s imagination, letters printed in the *Advocate* from supposed readers with names like “Kickin’ Billy Kendrick” sustained the fiction. In the August 2002 “Correspondence” column, Kendrick reportedly wrote, “she has changed the course of my existence.”<sup>113</sup>

In September 2002, Cleveland began looking more deeply into the fictional Prycer’s role and used him to launch several new philosophical ideas. Prycer, “in a rare moment of mental clarity,” wrote Cleveland, “concluded there is a greater audience for de-motivational speaking than motivational speaking.” He reportedly delivered several lectures that revealed three important principles: that what you are trying to accomplish is probably impossible, that it is difficult at best, and you are likely not qualified to do it. Achievement was vastly overrated. As Prycer explained it, “I see mediocrity being lauded as greatness. What some see as miracles, I see merely as the ordinary unfolding of nature’s processes.” So profound were Prycer’s declarations, Gary claimed, his listeners assumed he held advanced degrees. As Gary explained this revelatory moment, “By the end of his remarks, he had the audience in an emotional frenzy and he moved quickly to sell his book, *Don’t Try*. It comes with those icons of mediocrity, a laminated ‘Mission Statement’ and a ‘Quality Partnership’ checklist. I’ve seen gifted architects leave Prycer’s lectures vowing

to resign their positions and become telemarketers. I've seen talented surgeons become financial planners, and plumbers become psychic counselors—all through the influence of our own Prycer M. Graves."<sup>114</sup>

This turn to a less aspirational and more saturnine view of the world was confusing to many.<sup>115</sup> No doubt most newsletter readers, easily seduced by her charm and beauty, were confused that he had abandoned the optimistic outlook of Brenda for Prycer's defeatist approach.<sup>116</sup> One follower, reportedly in Milledgeville, Georgia, however, saw merit in this twisted turn of events:

It does really work, the idea of meeting lower expectations and goals. I've successfully pressed it on family members and colleagues and have used it on myself. Also, I have seen too many cases of people, especially students, who have set their goals too high, and when they can't meet them, they crash and burn—usually an all or nothing proposition. It's sorta like starting too high with your opening attempt and then bombing out in lifting. He really does have a point, and much though I'd like to read *Don't Try*, I won't request a copy.<sup>117</sup>

## BOWING OUT

Cleveland's somber tone continued into the early months of 2003, exacerbated by the deaths of numerous iron game notables and perhaps his own ill health. On 26 January, Soviet Olympic high jumper Valery Brumel who was a gold medalist in the 1964 games and an early advocate of weight training for athletes died in a Moscow hospital. In early February, Rudy Sablo, known for his no nonsense attitude as perennial director of the USWF rules committee, died at his New York City home. John Askem, a prolific author of strength-related books, died on 16 March. And Mel Siff, author of the massive *Supertraining* and other authoritative works on weight training and exercise science, died of a heart attack in Johannesburg, South Africa.<sup>118</sup> Most impactful to Gary, however, was the death of Steve May, whom he met in the University of Minneapolis weight room in 1963. They were close friends for forty years and shared many sporting interests until a back injury began to

dog him. "Over the years his interests gravitated toward more back friendly activities and he mastered so many. I've seen him juggle like a professional and he became one of the better table tennis league players in Minnesota in the 1970s. The past three years were mentally and physically tough as he tried to recover from a form of cancer with very low survival prospects." Still, he was well enough to impersonate Prycer Graves at the 2002 AOBS meeting. Doug Stalker remembers him as "a quiet and amused guy" who worked for the post office, then after getting cancer he became depressed and killed himself on 23 January at age 59 by inhaling carbon monoxide from his car.<sup>119</sup>

Although Cleveland showed no sign of grieving for his long-time friend, it soon became obvious from the less frequent publication of the newsletter that he was less vigorous. Then in the May/June issue of 2003 he revealed that he was recovering from surgery and beginning a long period of chemo and radiation therapy.<sup>120</sup> Henceforth he confined his physical exertions to such simple activities as landscaping, gardening, tree trimming, and carpentry which provided a sense of continued self-worth. Less fulfilling were mental tasks such as composing articles that were often nebulous and needing revision. He admitted that his "current medical treatments have filled me with a great void characterized by indolence and apathy and there can be as much as a twenty-minute time-lapse between me making a decision to do something and actually doing it. Since I firmly believe that you are what you do—not what you believe, think, or advocate—this current condition has led to self esteem issues as well as a messy house, dirty dishes, and uncertainty about the laundry situation."<sup>121</sup>

It was not until the December issue of that same year that Gary explained to readers he had been diagnosed with esophageal cancer and in April 2003 had undergone "reasonably successful," surgery. Despite the surgery, the cancer had spread and was no longer treatable.<sup>122</sup> Susan Elsner confirms that Gary had gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD) of the lower esophagus but refused to have it checked out. "The whole time I knew him he had indigestion a lot, and it was pretty bad at times."<sup>123</sup> Early treatment could possibly have saved him, but as Stalker explains, "he didn't like to see doctors" and "didn't even like to take aspirin." As a palliative, Gary was taking aloe vera juice. It sounded like Barrett's esophageal disorder to Stalker "which leads to cancer of the esophagus

which he eventually got."<sup>124</sup> Cleveland died on 4 January 2004, a fortnight prior to his 62<sup>nd</sup> birthday.

Any assessment of Cleveland's life must first consider his rapid rise to eminence during the latter stages of weightlifting's golden age. By dint of his natural ability and sheer determination he became one of the strongest men in America. That he never became an Olympic and world champion may be attributed to his overreliance on strength at the expense of other athletic qualities that contribute to making a great champion. Gary was a great presser, according to Doug Stalker, but his "downfall was the quick lifts [snatch and clean & jerk] . . . He needed more speed, and like most American lifters was not flexible enough in the shoulders and wrist and hips."<sup>125</sup> In this respect he resembled his lifelong idol, Tommy Kono, who was well served by his focus on the press which accounted for thirteen of his eighteen world record lifts and contributed to his five world record totals from August 1952 to June 1961.<sup>126</sup> Yet Gary, unlike Tommy, could never press enough to break a world record or provide enough lead against international opponents to offset his subsequent deficit on the quick lifts.

What motivated Cleveland to give up his lifelong dream of becoming an Olympic champion, seemingly on a whim, remains a mystery, but the decision would nag him for the rest of his life. Bereft of close family relationships and relegated to an occupation that appears to have lacked personal fulfillment, he reverted to an activity whereby he could relive those thrilling days of yesteryear through nostalgia and fantasy. Although his outpouring of thoughts ranged from the ridiculous to the sublime, there was always a thought-provoking message about the relevance of trivial, real-life encounters to human existence, often within a weightlifting context. While many readers looked on Gary's ramblings as "crazy" or just plain "folly," they legitimately served a broader function of invoking joy for thousands of iron game enthusiasts through his sense of humor, his understanding of the irony of life, his insights, and his personal sharing of his own youthful memories. For Cleveland the *Advocate* provided a catharsis and closure for his otherwise inexplicable flirtations with greatness. Alas, it is "the curse of human existence that we will always prize most that which we didn't get."<sup>127</sup>

## NOTES

1. "Gary Gaylyn Cleveland," Obituaries, *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis), 8 January 2004, found at: <https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/startribune/obituary.aspx?n=gary-gaylyn-cleveland&pid=1779779&fhid=9267>; and "Boyd Epley, 2003 Collegiate Inductee," *USA Strength and Conditioning Coaches Hall of Fame*, found at [usastrengthcoacheshf.com](http://usastrengthcoacheshf.com).
2. See "Kool-Aid Days" at [kool-aiddays.com](http://kool-aiddays.com).
3. Stalker email to the author, 31 March 2021.
4. Stalker email to the author, 25 March 2021.
5. Cleveland email to Stalker, 7 June 1999.
6. "Boys Club," *Strength & Health* (October 1957): 40; and "Boys Club," *Strength & Health* (May 1958): 40-41. Gary's gains were made despite primitive facilities at the St. Louis Boys Club, which he described as "a basic lifting gym—two Olympic bars, a squat rack and a platform. The best Olympic bar was made in the 1930s. The other was newer but bent so we used it for squats. The platform was made from 2x8 planks, and there were usually deep holes where the plates hit. We made the squat racks from 8x8 timbers." "Thoughts from the Editor," *The Avian Movement Advocate* (hereafter *AMA*) 22 (June 2000): 1.
7. "Gary Cleveland," *The Iron Master* 25 (April 1998): 6.
8. See contest results in *Strength & Health* (April 1959): 11; *Strength & Health* (August 1959): 11; and *Strength & Health* (September 1959): 14.
9. "Gary Cleveland," 7-8. During the summer of 1959, Gary worked in a factory loading trucks and boxcars for a company that made foam rubber and industrial binding glue, and the following summer he got a job installing air conditioners. In both cases he found the hard physical labor in the summer heat oppressive. "Speculation," *AMA* 45 (June 2002): 2.
10. *Strength & Health* 28 (April 1960): 26. For Gary the state championships was one of the most memorable experiences of his lifting career because of Bill Clark, who later edited the *U.S. All-Round Weightlifting Association Strength Journal*. "Clark is one of my heroes for many reasons. One reason goes way back to 1959 when he, completely new to the sport of Weightlifting, hosted one of the most spectacular contests I ever competed in. It was the Missouri State AAU Championships (usually not a terribly exciting event), but somehow, Bill managed to promote it and to produce a crowd of spectators that over-flowed the Columbia Missouri Armory, the most enthusiastic crowd I ever lifted for. The platform was an elevated stage trimmed with bunting, just like the world championships. Accustomed to competing in contests held under a basketball hoop, I thought I had been promoted to weightlifting's major leagues. Every attempt was a new personal record that night." "Publication Survey," *AMA* 55 (May/June 2003): 3-4.
11. "The Iron Grapevine," *Strength & Health* 28 (September 1960): 27; and Bob Hoffman, "Senior Nationals & Olympic Tryouts Report," *Strength & Health* 28 (October 1960): 12.
12. "Gary Cleveland," 9.
13. "Weightlifting News," *Strength & Health* 29 (March 1961): 11; and Bob Hasse, "Taking a Workout with Gary Cleveland," *Strength & Health* 29 (June 1961): 16-17.
14. Bob Hoffman, "1962 Senior National A.A.U. Championships," *Strength & Health* 30 (September 1962): 16.
15. Cleveland letters to Perry Rader, 25 July 1961, 10 August 1961, 22 August 1961, and 25 August 1961, *Iron Man*-Peary Rader Collection, H.J. Lutchter Stark Center.
16. "Gary Cleveland," 8-9.
17. Bob Hoffman, "Budapest World Championships," *Strength & Health* 31 (January 1963): 60.
18. "World Championships—Greatest Ever," *Lifting News*



- 9 (November 1962): 7; and "Grunt & Groan," *Strength & Health* (September 1962): 4.
19. "Gary Cleveland," 10.
20. "Weight Lifting News," *Strength & Health* 31 (June 1963): 12.
21. Bob Hoffman, "World Championships Action Report," *Strength & Health* 32 (February 1964): 17.
22. John Terpak, "Lifters Corner," *Strength & Health* 32 (August 1964): 50.
23. "Gary Cleveland," 10.
24. Magazine editors Gord Venables and Tommy Suggs quipped that Cleveland, along with Joe Puleo and Isaac Berger, spent more time "talking about what weights they are going to lift and making bets than they do working. That crooked label on your Energol bottle probably resulted when Cleveland told Puleo that another unknown middle-weight recently totaled 990." *Strength & Health* 32 (November 1964): 61.
25. Bob Hoffman, "World Championships Action Report," *Strength & Health* 32 (February 1964): 16-17.
26. Stalker email to the author, 28 March 2021.
27. Bob Hoffman, "Olympic Weightlifting Predictions," *Strength & Health* 32 (October 1964): 58; and "The Iron Grapevine," *Strength & Health* 32 (October 1964): 59-60.
28. Bob Hise, "It Happened At The Olympics," *Iron Man Lifting News* 11, no. 4 (January 1965): 22.
29. Bob Hoffman, "Olympic Games Action Report," *Strength & Health* 33 (February 1965): 18.
30. "Weightlifting News," *Strength & Health* 33 (August 1965): 10.
31. "1965 Sr. Nationals and Mr. America Results," *Strength & Health* 33 (August 1965), Extra.
32. Peary Rader, "The Sr. Nationals—As I Saw Them," *Lifting News* 11, no. 9 (August 1965): 18.
33. "Gary Cleveland," 11.
34. Cleveland email to Stalker, 18 November 1998, Stalker Papers, and Stalker email to the author, 25 March 2021.
35. Bob Hoffman, "Senior Nationals." *Strength & Health* 33 (June 1965): 76.
36. "Gary Cleveland," 13. Stalker, however, questions Gary's credibility concerning his 1010 total. "Sort of out of spite, he put up that over 1000 total on the day he should have been lifting in Teheran, and most likely in his garage gym." Stalker email to the author, 8 April 2021.
37. Stalker email to the author, 8 April 2021.
38. Cleveland email to Stalker, 24 February 1999.
39. "Gary Cleveland," 13.
40. Stalker email to the author, 8 April 2021.
41. "Gary Cleveland," 14.
42. They married in Dade County, Florida, and divorced in 1983, see <https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/10150610:1081>.
43. Stalker email to the author, 25 March 2021.
44. "Gary Cleveland," 14. Gary later recalled that for ten years he worked at a job that "caused me to be called in the middle of the night and go downtown to fix failed computer systems. They had to be fixed by 6:30 in the morning to be ready for the start of the business day at 7:00. Often I had no clue what the problem was and always feared that this would be the time when I couldn't figure it out." "Thoughts from the Editor," *AMA* 44 (May 2002): 2.
45. Stalker email to the author, 21 April 2021.
46. Interview with Susan Elsner, 11 July 2021, Minneapolis, Minnesota.
47. "1998 Tettegouche Winter Olympics—Gary Cleveland Reading Long Day's Journey Into Abs," uploaded 6 January 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sOo7hzkGu-vY&t=37s>; Frank Gannon, "Long Day's Journey Into Abs," *The New Yorker*, 17 March 1997.
48. "1998 Tettegouche Winter Olympics—Gary Cleveland-Individual Snow Dance," uploaded 6 January 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UxO7a2aafLM&t=7s>.
49. "Gary Gaylyn Cleveland."
50. Martin Franklin, *Louis Cyr, L'homme le plus fort du monde* (Montreal: Your Physique Publishing Co., 1946); George F. Jowett, *The Strongest Man That Ever Lived* (Montreal: Your Physique Publishing Co., 1949); Ben Weider, *Louis Cyr, L'homme le plus fort du monde* (Montreal: Editions Beauchemin, 1958); Ben Weider, *Les hommes forts du Quebec* (Montreal: Editions du Jour, 1973); Ben Weider, *The Strongest Man in History Louis Cyr, "Amazing Canadian"* (Vancouver: Mitchell Press, 1976); Ben Weider, *Louis Cyr, Memoires de l'homme le plus fort du monde* (Montreal: Edition du Club Quebec Loisirs, 1982); and Ben Weider, *Louis Cyr, L'homme le plus fort du monde* (Outremont: Les Editions Quebecor, 1993).
51. Stalker email to the author, 21 April 2021.
52. Gary Cleveland, *First Principles of The Wisdom of Divine Avian Fluid Movement, An Inquiry into the Human Condition (The lost teachings of Louis Cyr)* (Minneapolis: Kleanand Press, 1998) and "Clean 'n' Press," <https://cleannpress.com/our-story/>.
53. *First Principles*, 9.
54. *Ibid.*
55. *Ibid.*, 12-20.
56. *Ibid.*, 21-27.
57. *Ibid.*, 28-35.
58. *Ibid.*, 33-34.
59. *Ibid.*, 35.
60. *Ibid.*, 36-53. See also Weider, *The Strongest Man*, 17-18 and 21-22.
61. *First Principles*, 54-61.
62. *Ibid.*, 62-69.
63. *Ibid.*, 72-73.
64. *Ibid.*, 75-76.
65. *Ibid.*, 77-81.
66. *Ibid.*, 82-93.
67. *Ibid.*, 94-102.
68. *Ibid.*, 103-115.
69. Stalker email to the author, 21 May 2021.
70. Interview with Elsner.
71. Stalker email to the author, 29 March 2021.
72. Cleveland emails to Stalker, 21 December 1998, and 7 January 1999.
73. Stalker email to the author, 15 May 2021.
74. Interview with Elsner.
75. "Preface—on a serious note," *AMA* 1 (September 1998): 1.
76. "Thoughts from the Editor," *AMA* 1 (September 1998): 5.
77. "Focus on the Louis Cyr Golden Actions," *AMA* 2 (October 1998), 3-5; and Virginia Culver, "Oilman Monahan Had Many Talents," *The Denver Post*, 25 January 2009.
78. "Thoughts from the Editor," *AMA* 3 (November 1998): 4; and "Thoughts from the Editor," *AMA* 6 (February 1999): 3.
79. See "Thoughts from the Editor," *AMA* 3 (November 1998): 4; "Thoughts from the Editor," *AMA* 4 (December 1998): 1-2; and "Brenda Di Carlata at a Crossroads," *AMA* 5 (January 1999): 1-2.
80. Brenda Di Carlata at a Crossroads."
81. *Ibid.*
82. *Ibid.*
83. "Thoughts from the Editor," *AMA* 3 (November 1998): 4; "Thoughts from the Editor," *AMA* 4 (December 1998): 1-2; and "Brenda Di Carlata at a Crossroads;" and "Life Struggles," *AMA* 5 (January 1999): 1-3.
84. Interview with Joe Puleo, 22 May 2021, Fort Myers,

Florida.

85. "Thoughts from the Editor," *AMA* 6 (February 1999): 3.
86. "To Purchase or To Join, A Trainee's Dilemma," *AMA* 10 (June 1999): 3.
87. Cleveland comments on "Letters from Readers," *AMA* 8 (April 1999): 5; and "The Many Bob Hoffmans," *AMA* 11 (July 1999): 4.
88. "Passings," *AMA* 9 (May 1999): 3.
89. "Thoughts from the editor," *AMA* 10 (June 1999): 1.
90. "Royal References in Weightlifting," *AMA* 11 (July 1999): 7; and "An Experiment That Went Bad," *AMA* 12 (August 1999): 4.
91. Prycer M. Graves, "I Don't Have Time to Shower," *AMA* 13 (September 1999): 1. Gary later noted that "we were besieged by subscription cancellations following publication of that article by Prycer." "Thoughts from the Editor," *AMA* 46 (July 2002): 1.
92. "Thoughts from the Editor," *AMA* 16 (December 1999): 1.
93. "Correspondence," *AMA* 13 (September 1999): 3.
94. "More Correspondence," *AMA* 18 (February 2000): 5-6. It would be tempting to ascribe Cleveland's occasional sexual innuendos to loneliness and sexual deprivations, but Joe Puleo did not detect anything from his conversations with Gary that he was "sexually frustrated." His focus on Di Carlata was more "a comical exercise. He had a great sense of humor. I don't think there was any sexual connotation in it. I think it was just something he put together, a sort of humorous, fantasy, comical, so-called intellectual kind of thing with tongue-in-cheek." Susan Elsner, however, has a different take on Gary's fixation on Brenda. "I would guess that some of the things from her personality could be me," she believes. "It could have been his way of working things out. We had a complicated relationship, and it didn't go where he wanted it to go." Whether Gary was sexually frustrated, her response was "could be. We hadn't had a sexual relationship in a while." Another not unlikely scenario could be that the sexually suggestive references were injected mainly to perk up the interest of Cleveland's largely male readership! Interviews with Joe Puleo and Susan Elsner.
95. "Correspondence," *AMA* 19 (March 2000): 4.
96. "Back Issues—*Strength and Health*, October 1954," *AMA* 17 (January 2000): 4. Much the same sentiment applied to his appreciation for Iron Game pioneer Harry Paschall whose inimitable characterization of "Bosco" in *Strength & Health* cartoons was inspired by the legendary Arthur Saxon. Paschall's final words for Bosco, Gary tells us, were "'The Champ is still the Champ.' That's how we felt about Harry too." *Strength & Health*—December 1939," *AMA* 20 (April 2000): 2.
97. "Back Issues—S&H August, 1955," *AMA* 19 (March 2000): 2-3.
98. "Back Issues—*Strength*, September 1922," *AMA* 26 (October 2000): 4-5.
99. *Ibid.*, 4.
100. "Joe Puleo on Stan Stanczyk," *AMA* 29 (January 2001): 2-3; and "Back Issues—*Strength*, September 1922," *AMA* 26 (October 2000): 4-5.
101. "Thoughts from the Editor," *AMA* 30 (February 2001): 1. Stalker reckons that Cleveland was an atheist, "though he never discussed the matter with me directly. His disdain for organized religions was obvious enough. His foray into Buddhism was to rid his mind of all thoughts and desires. I once asked Gary what he was thinking as he stood before the barbell in a meet getting ready to lift. He said he tried to not think of anything." Stalker email to the author, 25 March 2021.
102. "Marvin Eder at age 17," *AMA* 34 (June 2001): 2.
103. *Ibid.*; and "Marvin Eder: Pound-for-Pound the Strongest Man of His Time," Clarence Bass' *Ripped Enterprises*, 1 November 2018, found at <https://www.cbass.com/marvineder.html>.
104. "Thoughts from the Editor," *AMA* 36 (August 2001): 1.
105. "Correspondence," *AMA* 37 (September 2001): 5.
106. "World Records," *AMA* 46 (July 2002): 2-6; and "World Record Setters," *AMA* 47 (August 2002): 2. A year later Cleveland, having second thoughts about his findings, decided to analyze world championship results rather than world records to determine whether there was a different rate of progression. "To my surprise (and relief) this second search for the steroid surge didn't reveal anything different from the first." "Steroid Surge Revisited," *AMA* 56 (July/August 2003): 4.
107. See "The Saxon Trio," *AMA* 38 (October 2001): 3-4; Harry B. Paschall, "Behind the Scenes," *Strength & Health*, (June 1957): 58; and David P. Willoughby, *The Super Athletes* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1970), 81.
108. "Thoughts from the Editor," *AMA* 41 (January/February 2002): 2.
109. "Thoughts from the Editor," *AMA* 43 (April 2002): 2-3.
110. "Thoughts from the Editor," *AMA* 44 (May 2002): 1; and "Thoughts from the Editor," *AMA* 48 (September 2002): 1.
111. "Thoughts from the Editor," *AMA* 40 (December 2001): 1; and "Thoughts from the Editor," *AMA* 42 (March 2002): 1.
112. "Thoughts from the Editor," *AMA* 46 (July 2002): 1-2.
113. Thoughts from the Editor, *AMA* 47 (August 2002): 1; and "Correspondence," *AMA* 46 (July 2002): 7.
114. "News from the Institute," *AMA* 48 (September 2002): 2-3.
115. *Ibid.*, 2.
116. Likely intended to contrast his two fictional constructs, Gary explains that he was giving his employees a month off in the fall of 2002. The always elegant Brenda "plans to join her cousin, the effervescent Heather Montage for a stay at an expensive spa in Sweden then on to Paris for a week of café hopping," while Prycer, relishing his unpaid position at the Institute as a "family success story, intended to return to work early to "work on his autobiography." "Thoughts from the Editor," *AMA* 49 (October/November 2002): 1.
117. See letter by John D. Fair in "Correspondence," *AMA* 49 (October/November 2002): 3.
118. "Passings," *AMA* 51 (January 2003): 4; and "Passings," *AMA* 54 (April 2003): 6.
119. "Passings," *AMA* 51 (January 2003): 4-5; and Stalker email to the author, 29 March 2021.
120. "Thoughts from the Editor," *AMA* 55 (May/June 2003): 1.
121. "Thoughts from the Editor," *AMA* 56 (July/August 2003): 1.
122. Cleveland letter to his subscribers, 16 December 2003.
123. Interview with Elsner.
124. Stalker email to the author, 25 March 2021.
125. Stalker email to the author, 25 March 2021.
126. See "Tommy Kono's Athletic Performances" in Tommy Kono, *Championship Weightlifting, Beyond Muscle Power, The Mental Side of Lifting* (Honolulu: Hawaii Kono Company, 2010), 185.
127. Cleveland email to Stalker, 7 January 1999.

# AMERICAN MADE: HOW JUDY GLENNEY PIONEERED THE INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S WEIGHTLIFTING MOVEMENT

BY KIM BECKWITH, PH.D.  
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

On 17 September 2000 Judy Glenney reported to her first assignment as a member of the officiating jury for women's weightlifting at the Sydney Olympic Games. It was a moment like no other in her life; it was her dream come true. She had been working toward this moment since her first weightlifting competition in 1972 in Little Rock, Arkansas. While she would rather have been one of the women getting ready to compete, that barbell had been unloaded and stowed over a decade earlier. Simply being in Sydney and being part of the first Olympic Games in history that allowed women to participate in weightlifting was more than enough. It represented the culmination of almost 30 years of work to get women's weightlifting recognized by the United States' Weightlifting Federation (USWF, currently USA Weightlifting), the International Weightlifting Federation (IWF), and the International Olympic Committee (IOC). While not discounting the role that Mabel Rader played, as discussed in the last issue of *Iron Game History*, this paper explores the journey that Judy Glenney took, and the roles that she played to make this historic moment a reality.

Born Judith Ann Zimmerman in Portland, Oregon, in March 1949, Judy spent most of her school-age years in the small town of Bend, Oregon.<sup>1</sup> Living in an activity-oriented family within a recreationally active community, Judy was not hampered by ideas that women should not participate in sports. She grew up snow skiing, playing tennis, and throwing a football or

baseball around with both her father and older brother. She participated in as many sports as she could throughout high school, excelling in basketball and the sprint races and hurdles on the track team.<sup>2</sup>

When it was time to pick a college in 1967, she chose Pacific University—a small, private, Christian school west of Portland—because she would not get lost in the crowd, and it allowed her to continue participating in multiple sports. A physical education major, Judy played intercollegiate volleyball, basketball, tennis, field hockey, and sprinted on the track team.<sup>3</sup> She craved competition and desired to eventually test herself at international levels. Toward the end of her collegiate career Glenney decided that, even though she loved sprinting, she was not fast enough to compete at an elite level. She had toyed with the shot and discus in high school, so she began to think that she might be eligible for further competition by becoming a thrower.<sup>4</sup> She began training with the throwers thinking her

size—5'7" and about 150 pounds—would help her go to the next level, but she found that she had to compete against much larger women, some of whom weighed 200 pounds or more. If she was going to compete with these women, she knew she had to build her strength. Even though resistance training for her other sports was non-existent, she knew by looking at the size of the throwers and the stories being circulated that they lifted weights.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, she began looking around for help and found it in a most unusual place—Campus Crusade for Christ (CCC).

Judy's family-life growing up had re-



**Judy Glenney nee Zimmerman's 1967 high school senior picture from Bend High School in Oregon.**

**Correspondence to: Dr. Kim Beckwith, NEZ 5.700, Dept. of Kinesiology & Health Education, Stark Center, University of Texas at Austin, 78712. Email: kbeckwith@austin.utexas.edu.**



volved around the church, so she became involved with the CCC ministry while at Pacific University. Fortunately for women everywhere, she took a summer job at their headquarters in Arrowhead Springs, California, in 1970. While at Arrowhead Springs, Judy cleaned the CCC facilities and kept everything in good order. The complex at Arrowhead Springs had undergone significant renovations in the years prior to Glenny's arrival. As part of those renovations, the CCC added a weight room to facilitate the training of their Athletes in Action ambassadors, national champion weightlifters Russ Knipp and Gary Glenney.

Both lifters had trained with Bob Hoffman at York Barbell in York, Pennsylvania. Many lifting aficionados at the time considered York to be the Mecca of American lifting because Hoffman had coached the most successful US lifting teams during the 1940s, 50s and 60s. By 1970, Knipp had already lifted in the 1968 Olympic Games and was training for Munich in 1972. He held multiple national and international titles and had broken the world record for the press numerous times. Knipp's face had also appeared several times on the cover of *Strength & Health* magazine.<sup>6</sup> Now he led the Athletes in Action evangelism efforts. When Judy went to the gym on an errand for another CCC staff member looking for Knipp, the head of the weightlifting team and therefore in charge of the weight room space, Judy found Gary Glenney instead. An accomplished Olympic weightlifter himself, Gary held multiple titles, but only at the national level. Gary found Judy wandering around the weight room and showed her the facility. He taught her some basic strength training exercises like bench pressing and squatting and, because Judy became fascinated with the explosive snatch and clean and jerk exercises, he showed her those too. Having found a kindred

lifting soul, Gary and Russ trained Judy through the summer. When Judy returned home to Oregon at the end of summer, Gary claimed, "we dated through the mail," for the next year.<sup>7</sup> Judy graduated with her bachelor's degree in physical education in 1971; she and Gary married later that summer in Arrowhead Springs. Because of Gary's notoriety in the weightlifting world, a short blurb even announced his wedding in *Weightlifting Journal*.<sup>8</sup>

Soon after the wedding, Judy and Gary joined Russ, his wife, and several other athletes to begin touring the country visiting high schools, colleges, and military bases as the Athletes in Action Weightlifting Team. According to Judy, "Lifting was just the vehicle to get us inside the door, to get their attention" and then they could conduct their Christian ministry.<sup>9</sup> Little did Judy realize at the time, but it also allowed her to begin her "lifting ministry" to women she met along the way. Her demonstrations of strength along with her feminine, but lithe and athletic, physique may have planted a seed in more than one woman's mind as to the possibilities opening for women in the near future. Athletes in Action also published magazines and a training manual in which Judy addressed the women's concerns and tried to dispel the myths surrounding women and weights:

You've heard all your life that "weightlifting" is very harmful

for girls. Well, since you won't be doing weightlifting, you're safe. You're only using light weights with your exercises. It won't give you big, bulgy muscles, either. This is because you won't be using heavy weights, and then, girls have a little layer of extra fat in their bodies to round them out. Weight training can actually en-



**Gary and Judy Glenney traveled with Campus Crusade for Christ's Athletes in Action ensemble demonstrating weightlifting and providing Christian ministry. This image appeared in their *Weight Training Manual*. It was the mid 1970s and no doubt the conservative, faith-based organization preferred Judy to appear in a dress.**

hance the girl's figure rather than hinder it. It firms and trims and develops the muscles as they were meant to be, so that takes care of another fallacy—using weights makes you unfeminine. . . it really makes you more feminine.<sup>10</sup>

As the Athletes in Action group traveled across the nation, eventually settling down in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Judy practiced what she preached and continued to improve her own strength and technique. When Gary and Russ entered competitions as they prepared for upcoming national and international meets, Judy went with them and helped. At a meet in Little Rock, Arkansas, in either December 1971 or February 1972, they invited her to lift with them; her first time actually competing in a meet. Judy finished with an 82-pound press (the press was eliminated from competition after the 1972 Munich Olympic Games), an 82-pound snatch, and a 132-pound clean and jerk.<sup>11</sup> The most significant development, however, was that Judy had been bitten by the Iron Bug.

Bob Hoffman had ruled the Weightlifting arm of the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) for decades, but by the early 1970s, his control over the organization was waning. New leadership emerged from within AAU Weightlifting in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and Bill Starr proclaimed in his 1971 editorial for *Weightlifting Journal*, "The 1970s are going to be known as the decade of change in American weightlifting. The National Weightlifting Committee has broken away from the 30-year domination of the York organization."<sup>12</sup> The AAU Weightlifting Committee, to which Starr referred, encompassed not only the sport of Olympic lifting, but also powerlifting and physique contests in the early 1970s. One man, the AAU Weightlifting Committee Chair, who was an unpaid volunteer, controlled all three of the Iron Game sports. When the three activities were fairly small, one man could run them; however, the sports of powerlifting and bodybuilding were increasing dramatical-

ly in popularity and membership at this time, and several contemporaneous AAU newsletters reveal mounting frustrations. In 1973 Bob Crist, the National Weightlifting Chairman, had had enough and decided that each of the three sports needed a separate coordinator, but they would still report back to him. He appointed Murray Levin as the Olympic lifting representative.<sup>13</sup> Levin entered the position with \$300 in his budget and a severe image problem for Olympic lifting. Lifters en masse were beginning to migrate away from weightlifting and toward powerlifting, so the Olympic membership coffers were declining. The larger concern of the decade was keeping the sport alive.<sup>14</sup> Adding women's lifting would help solve that problem.

Also helpful to the cause of women's weightlifting was the passage of Title IX in 1972. Educational institutions that received federal money of any sort had to provide equal sporting opportunities for men and women. Even though the AAU's Weightlifting Committee did not fall under this educational umbrella, it brought attention to women's non-participation in various sports due to the lack of opportunities and, it looked wrong. Organizations, such as weightlifting, where men had historically reigned supreme, had to become more open to women.

These attitudes, along with the traditional mores of the time that women should not overly exert themselves, created barriers for the female athletes of the 1970s, and Judy had a front row seat. Trying to find weight room facilities that allowed women in the gym while on the road with Athletes in Action proved challenging, but Gary and Russ always figured out a way to get Judy in so she could train with them. Judy remembers hearing the occasional disgruntled comment from men when she entered a weight room with Gary and Russ, and several challenged her right to lift in some of the early contests, but she also encountered women who voiced their concern about her lifting.<sup>15</sup> In 1973, for example, Judy performed, "a fairly significant squat" in a skirt (she still had to adhere to the Athletes in Action's preferences), when Peggy, one of the



**Gary and Judy often lifted in the same competitions before a severe knee injury limited Gary's lifting days. Above, they are holding trophies won at a local meet in the mid-to-late 1970s.**



non-athletic wives of another couple in the touring ensemble, called Judy over after her lifting feat, and confided in a whisper, “You know, if you continue to lift like that your parts will fall out.”<sup>16</sup> As entertaining as this may sound today, this attitude toward female athletes was not uncommon during the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries.<sup>17</sup> Judy intuitively knew otherwise and kept training.

In the early 1970s, weight training was merely a means to an end for Judy; she still dreamed of competing in the Olympics in track and field. According to a September 1972 letter written to *Iron Man* publisher Peary Rader, Gary had begun training and preparing for the 1976 Montreal Games and Judy was “training hard for the 220 meter and 440 meter and may try a few of the field events in preparation to make the USA team, also in ’76.”<sup>18</sup> By modern standards the idea of weight training for enhanced sport performance may not seem out of the ordinary, but in 1970 it was not common, even for men.<sup>19</sup>

During the next few years Judy found, however, that she really enjoyed the lifting aspects of her training and, even better, she did not have to gain bodyweight to compete against larger competitors as she did in track and field. She continued to train and looked for meets that would have her; however, there did not seem to be many weightlifting contests for women in the 1970s. In fact, there were none. She had read in older issues of *Strength & Health* that women such as Abbye “Pudgy” Stockton lifted in and coordinated women’s AAU-sanctioned meets in southern California in the 1940s, but they never “caught on” and had disappeared.<sup>20</sup> Judy complained to Gary that there were no opportunities for women, so he helpfully suggested that she try to revitalize women’s lifting.<sup>21</sup> Judy, therefore, began to think that the best way to attract women lifters was for her to be seen competing and be a role model for other women.

When Judy competed, Gary usually had to talk with the meet director ahead of time to make sure it was okay, just as he did at her first

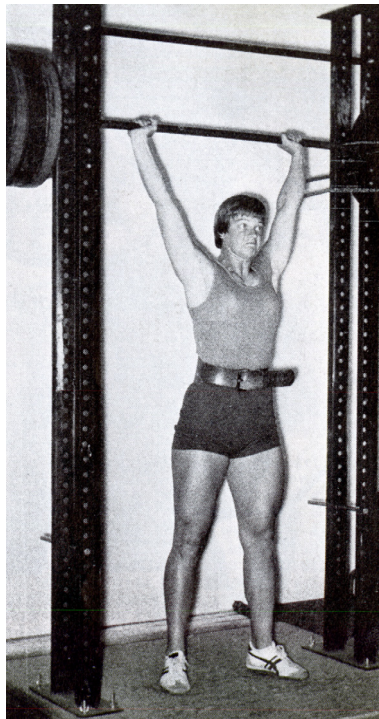
meet in Little Rock, Arkansas. Some meet directors were fine with Judy lifting as a guest lifter, which meant no rewards and no recognition in the results, while others did not want her lifting at all. The men who opposed the idea of women competing often cited the IWF rules that quite distinctly indicated “lifters must be male,” that the weighing-in of athletes must be in the nude, and of course, that those weigh-ins had to be conducted by male officials since there

were not many women officials in all of weightlifting.<sup>22</sup> Judy was lucky; when a meet director allowed her to lift, Gary would be the official who weighed her. However, other women did not have a well-known, national champion, weightlifter husband come to their assistance. According to reports, some male officials adhered unapologetically to the nude weigh-ins thinking to run the women off. Some women did not care and weighed in anyway; others said it was creepy and felt that the officials were ogling them.<sup>23</sup>

Judy remembered seeing no other women lifting at the meets she attended, but there actually were a few other female lifters out there pressing the boundaries like Judy.<sup>24</sup> Although, they encountered the same challenges as Judy, they were supported by men like Denis Reno and Bill Clark who tried to do the right thing. Denis Reno encouraged the training of and competition by women through his

*New England Association AAU Weightlifters’ Newsletter*. In December 1974 when reporting the results for the Willimantic Open Weightlifting contest, he observed the following:

Holyoke’s Sue Murray and Nancy Lowe who recently were winners in the Adirondack Jr. Olympic contest, continue to compete under the watchful eye of New England Chairman Armand LaMarr. Armand says that the enthusiasm and desire to improve is stronger with the girls than it is with any of the boys he trains. Although there are a few techni-



**Judy performs overhead lockouts in this image that appeared in the July 1978 issue of *Iron Man* magazine. Articles highlighting female Olympic lifters were rare during the 1970s.**





**Judy Glenney exhibits great technique and form while performing the snatch exercise at a local meet in what appears to be a recreational facility.**

calities which make it difficult for women to compete in weightlifting, the interest is strong with a growing number of women who wish to compete.<sup>25</sup>

He went on to suggest “that a national committee . . . be formed [to] investigate a way to inaugurate either women’s weightlifting competition or to somehow officially include women in our present competition[s].”<sup>26</sup>

Bill Clark in Columbia, Missouri, must have read Reno’s comments because he found a way to “include women in our present competitions.” He believed that allowing the women to compete against other women was only common courtesy and the fair thing to do.<sup>27</sup> This attitude prompted him to apply for and, ultimately, receive an AAU sanction for an all-women’s contest on 14 February 1976. Many years later, Clark remembered that he simply ignored the “for men only” rule and when he applied for the competition sanction, he did not call attention to the fact that he intended it to be just for women.<sup>28</sup> Mabel Rader, the AAU Midwestern States Weightlifting Chair, helped him advertise the contest when she announced in her newsletter: “Bill Clark is holding a weightlifting meet for the *ladies* in both power and Olympic on February 14. This is a *first* as far as we know and should be very exciting . . . This will be a regular AAU sanctioned meet. I would really like to attend, but we have already promised to attend the power meet at Brookings on that day.”<sup>29</sup>

Clark had a few female lifters at his gym, including his daughter, and wanted to get women’s lifting off the ground. Clark admitted that he had heard about Judy and invited her to lift in the meet in the hope she would inspire more women lifters.<sup>30</sup> Glenney, even though she had to drive five hours from Tulsa, Oklahoma, excitedly agreed to come just so she could lift with other women.<sup>31</sup> Clark told Gary and Judy when they arrived, “It won’t be big, but it will be a start.”<sup>32</sup> It really was a tiny meet with only five total lifters, but they combined the Olympic lifts and the powerlifts to get in a lot of lifting for the women, and since it was an officially sanctioned meet, to establish some women’s records

in the process.<sup>33</sup> Both Reno and Clark were several years ahead of the curve, but it illustrates that the women did have some supporters among the men.

Once powerlifting began having national competitions for women in 1977, more and more women began showing up in the meet results published by the AAU regional weightlifting newsletters, which continued to cover all three of the Iron Game sports. Women competed wherever they could, and that meant on both the weightlifting and powerlifting platforms. Judy even strayed into a few powerlifting events, including the United States Powerlifting Federation’s (USPF) Women’s National Powerlifting Championships in January 1980, and the inaugural Women’s World Powerlifting Championships held in New England in May 1980.<sup>34</sup> The dramatic increase in female participation in powerlifting following the sanction of a women’s national championships encouraged Judy and others to fight for the same recognition on the weightlifting platform in the late 1970s. It proved to be an effective argument.

Because of her instruction and training with Gary and Russ, Judy developed into a “class lifter” according to Bill Clark.<sup>35</sup> She had great form and technique, but she did not really know what to do to advance the cause of women everywhere. Once again, Gary came to her rescue; he began introducing Judy to the men in the administrative ranks of the United States Weightlifting Federation (USWF) that were supportive of the women’s plight.<sup>36</sup> The most

important person in her network of contacts was Murray Levin, whom Judy considered to be one of her most valuable supporters within the USWF. Levin held the National Chair position for the USWF from 1975, when the sport became totally autonomous from powerlifting and physique, until 1988.<sup>37</sup> During his tenure as Chair, Levin dramatically enhanced the overall image of US weightlifting. In 1978 he hosted the Men's World Weightlifting Championships in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, and gained the friendship of the Chinese team. In one of his conversations with the Chinese delegation he asked about the number of women training with weights in China. Levin claimed that their response was "one hundred thousand women in the schools and universities."<sup>38</sup> One possible reason for so many Chinese women participating in resistance training may have been a product of Cold War era politics. During this time many countries used the sporting arena instead of the battlefield to wage ideological war. They used the large international competitions to "prove" the supremacy of their political ideology; the more medals won, the more supreme the economic system.<sup>39</sup> As a result of this view, many Eastern Bloc countries, and allies including China, spent millions of dollars developing their athletes with a particular emphasis on their women's programs. The Soviets, for example, capitalized on the Western indifference toward elite female athletic performance to win eleven out of thirteen dual meets with the United States in track and field between 1958 and 1975.<sup>40</sup>

For Levin, the sheer number of Chinese women lifting weights convinced him that American women should be lifting competitively and recognized for their efforts. Another key factor that helped advance women's weightlifting in the United States was the dramatic underperformance on the men's side.<sup>41</sup> That poor showing of the men's team can partly be blamed on powerlifting, which was drawing talented, young lifters away from the technically difficult sport of weightlifting. Additionally, drug scandals around the globe were becoming increasingly common, and the IWF and IOC demanded that the sport's national governing bodies clean up their acts. For Levin, these issues, along with the 1980 boycott of the Summer Olympic Games in Moscow, were a nightmare to deal with, but he also recognized that they created opportunities for the women. He believed the addition of women would bring a desperately needed glamour into the flagging sport.

## THE WOMEN'S COMMITTEE & NATIONAL RECOGNITION

Murray appointed Mabel Rader to be the first Chairperson of his newly organized Women's Committee in early 1980. Bill Clark helped her get the word out by making an announcement in his 20 February AAU newsletter: "Mabel Rader is the new national chairman . . . of Women's Weightlifting. She's starting from scratch and needs input from all interested. She'd like to generate enough interest to have at least some regional meets this year."<sup>42</sup> Clark continued helpfully, "Weightlifting for the gals is a fine sport. It tends to bulk less than power and streamlines the body for those dirty old chauvinists such as Yours Truly who enjoys the sight of a finely-turned female."<sup>43</sup> Mabel and her husband Peary had been involved in weightlifting, powerlifting, and bodybuilding since the 1930s when they began to publish the highly respected *Iron Man* magazine. They had traveled to many of the World Championships, as well as the 1960 Rome Olympic Games, as judges, meet officials, and photographers. As a result of their lengthy involvement in several facets of the Iron Game, the Raders knew most of the folks involved in each of the competitive lifting sports.<sup>44</sup> Mabel was already the AAU Weightlifting Chairman for the Midwestern States and knew the workings of the national federation; it was a logical choice for Levin to have Mabel lead this new venture.

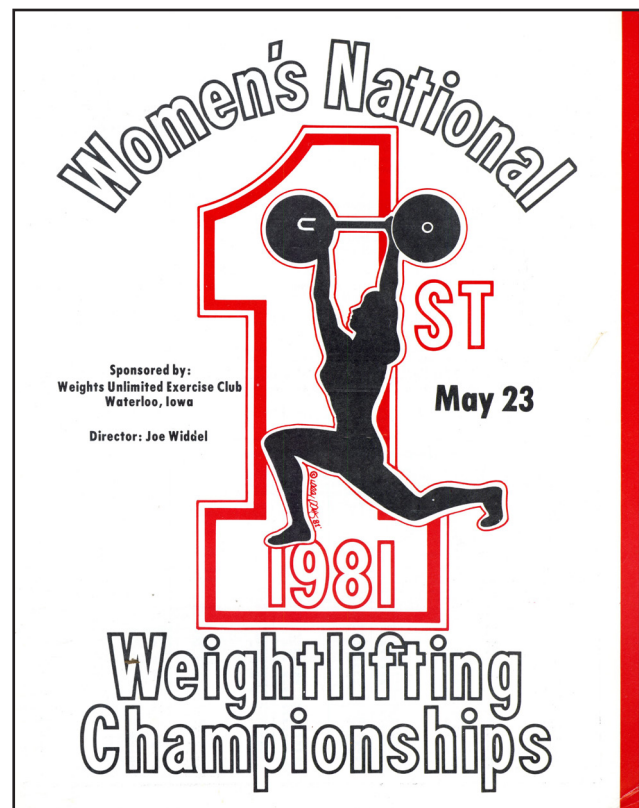
One of the first things Mabel did was start pressing the USWF board members for permission to hold a women's national competition. She had witnessed the rise in women's participation when powerlifting allowed a women's national championship contest, and she had read the letters sent to *Iron Man* magazine about women's increased interest and their quests to compete. "The only way to get things off the ground," Mabel believed, "is with a National meet."<sup>45</sup> As the Women's Committee Chair, she used the pages of *Iron Man* to begin sending out notices to women and the men who coached women. Judy, who had moved to Farmington, New Mexico, by this time (Gary had been hired to serve as pastor for the San Juan Bible Church), had been the focus of a lengthy article published in *Iron Man* in July 1978, and she had met Mabel at an earlier meet, so she was happy to help; this was the sort of action she had been wanting all along.<sup>46</sup> Judy reached out to James J. Fox, Executive Director of the USWF, in September 1980 to obtain the names and addresses of the AAU Regional Chairmen to begin

spreading the word about women's weightlifting and to drum up support for their proposed national championships.<sup>47</sup> Judy and Mabel contacted the Regional Chairmen asking them to put in their AAU newsletters information about the new Women's Committee, which also encouraged interested women to contact them. The duo of Mabel and Judy were a force to be reckoned with. However, Levin cautioned them that they needed to develop "rules and regulations to govern the women's program."<sup>48</sup> Rader and Glenney would need to establish body-weight classes, competitive attire policies, qualifying totals, weigh-in procedures, and "a lesser meet . . . before attempting to start at the top. It is too premature for a national championship. The program should first get off the ground."<sup>49</sup>

Judy and Mabel complied and decided to have the same weight classes as the powerlifters to avoid confusion. They required the same competitive outfits as the men, "a lifting suit with a vest" (and a non-supportive bra), but they did not want qualifying totals for the first few meets. Mabel advised, "We need to get the girls together, mostly for information and possibly a clinic to learn more about the lifts and how to train for them. I believe there are lots of women who are interested, but they do not know how to go about training." She also inquired if Judy would be able to conduct a few lifting clinics for the women's development.<sup>50</sup>

By the 29 November 1980 USWF Committee meeting in Miami, and their ensuing December 1980 meeting in Colorado Springs, the women had ironed out these items with Levin, and the proposal for a women's national competition was brought to the USWF Committee for discussion. Apparently, the administration was divided: about half the men supported the women's venture, but half of them did not want to spend money on the women, preferring to invest more money in the junior's program.<sup>51</sup> Murray let the other members vote since he believed he should hold himself, as the chairman, apart from the voting. However, the vote ended in a 5-5 tie. Murray held the crucial tie-breaking vote; this was the chance he had been waiting on, he stood up and said, "I want them in."<sup>52</sup> Prior to the vote, Mabel had walked out of the room and Murray Levin recalled finding Mabel crying outside the meeting room when he gave her the good news.<sup>53</sup> She had such a passion for the women's quest she could not bear the thought of loss, and because of the heated discussion, she believed that the women had lost.

Once the approval was gained, the wom-



**The first Women's National Weightlifting Championships took place in Waterloo, Iowa, on 23 May 1981. This is the cover of the program provided to attendees.**

en really got to work. Dottie Schubert and Sara Smith joined Mabel and Judy on the Women's Committee.<sup>54</sup> They struggled to find a site and director to host the first women's competition. Originally, the meet was to be held on 11 April 1981 in Cleveland, Ohio, at the Olympic Health Club run by John Schubert with Dottie, his wife, as the point of contact.<sup>55</sup> It is uncertain why the Schuberts could not complete the deal, but the multi-time national champion Joe Widdel in Waterloo, Iowa, decided at the last minute, that he could direct the meet for the women at his gym on 23 May.<sup>56</sup> Judy and Mabel worked hard to make sure the first Women's National Championship was a success. Mabel took care of the meet details while Judy acted as the personal relations-type person that dealt with the athletes. As a compromise to the USWF's desire for "a lesser meet" and to present a positive image at the national competition, Judy and Mabel required the women to have lifted in at least one previous meet. The women did not disappoint.

The women's first national undertaking was a success with 29 women representing 14 clubs in attendance. Judy lifted in the 148 pounds bodyweight class and displayed her nearly ten years of experience well; she finished



with a total of 380 pounds—higher than any other woman's total in the meet and a shoo-in for the Best Lifter award. Women's lifting was off and running! Afterwards, Levin sent a letter to the competitors complimenting them on their "first class championships." He also informed the women that he had reappointed Mabel since she was "totally familiar with the program and has already done much work in organizing it." However, he wanted to give Judy an official title so he suggested to the women, "You also need someone active in competition and also dedicated, and I cannot think of anyone better than Judy Glenney to be your athletes rep. These two will be your anchor in getting the program off the ground." To keep tabs on their progress and to provide support when needed, he appointed himself, Bill Jamison, and Rudy Sablo as a committee of USWF officials to work with the Women's Committee. Levin also encouraged Mabel and Judy to coordinate "a women's newsletter listing meet results, rulings that we adopt, anticipated meets, and possibly records and training ideas." "Ours is the only federation in the world to have women's weightlifting," he informed the women, "so we are a first and many will be watching us to see if the program catches on."<sup>57</sup>

Mabel began the desired newsletter for the women when she typed up a short report and included the results of the first national competition on a single sheet of paper.<sup>58</sup> In the second newsletter, Mabel began advertising meets for women, including Pat Malone's Women's Open Weightlifting meet on 4 October 1981 in West Lafayette, Indiana. She encouraged women to "enter as many weightlifting meets as possible for the experience of lifting before an audience and also to perfect your form. Enter men's meets, if necessary."<sup>59</sup> Beginning with Newsletter #3 Judy wrote articles such as "Variety: The Spice of Your Training Life", "A Little Help for a Weak Jerk," "Get on the Stick with Your Pull!" "Deadlift for a Purpose," and "Overload on Partial Movements."<sup>60</sup> The newsletter grew as the women's movement grew; from a one-page letter of results in 1981 to an eight-page glossy-paper mailer filled with the latest news pertaining to women's weightlifting in 1983.

Attendance and participation at the national competition rose in the ensuing years—46 women traveled to St. Charles, Illinois, in 1982, and 60 lifters made it to Mil-

waukee, Wisconsin, in 1983. Judy lifted in and won her weight-class in both of these championships earning the Best Lifter Award again in 1982 and runner-up in 1983. Joe Widdel wrote in the 1982 report that Glenney was not at her best, but "could sleep through the meet and still win the [Best Lifter] award."<sup>61</sup> The women's technique and strength improved as the women continued to train and became more experienced. Judy had been lifting for ten years and she had been coached by national and world champions; her technique was superb according to those who saw her lift. Judy became a hero for the women. They looked up to her and wanted to lift like she did.<sup>62</sup>

In 1983 after the third successful national championships were over, the women had an election for the Women's Committee Chair position. The women decided that they want-



**Judy Glenney is shown here snatching 176 pounds on her third attempt at the 1981 Women's National Weightlifting Championships. It was a narrow miss; she received credit for 165 pounds. The contest was the first nationally sanctioned weightlifting contest for women anywhere in the world.**



**Rachel Silverman and Judy Glenney earned the Best Lifter awards at the 1982 Women's Weightlifting National Championships. Silverman totaled 259 pounds (114.5-pound weight class) and Glenney totaled 369 pounds (148-pound weight class.)**

ed someone younger and an actual lifter to represent their cause. Mabel Rader had been a tireless and passionate advocate for women's weightlifting, but she was in her sixties and would not have been confused with an active lifter. The athletes chose Judy; she had already won three gold medals, two best lifter titles, and set several American records in the first three women's national championships. Although Dan Ruchames' report indicated Mabel had been elected Secretary, she did not mention the position when listing the results of the election in her last newsletter to the women.<sup>63</sup> In the same newsletter, Judy thanked Mabel "for all the struggles and efforts she's gone through to put us women on the boards. . . . She broke through seemingly closed doors to bring together an organization we can be proud of. We all owe her a lot."<sup>64</sup>

### **PUSH FOR INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION**

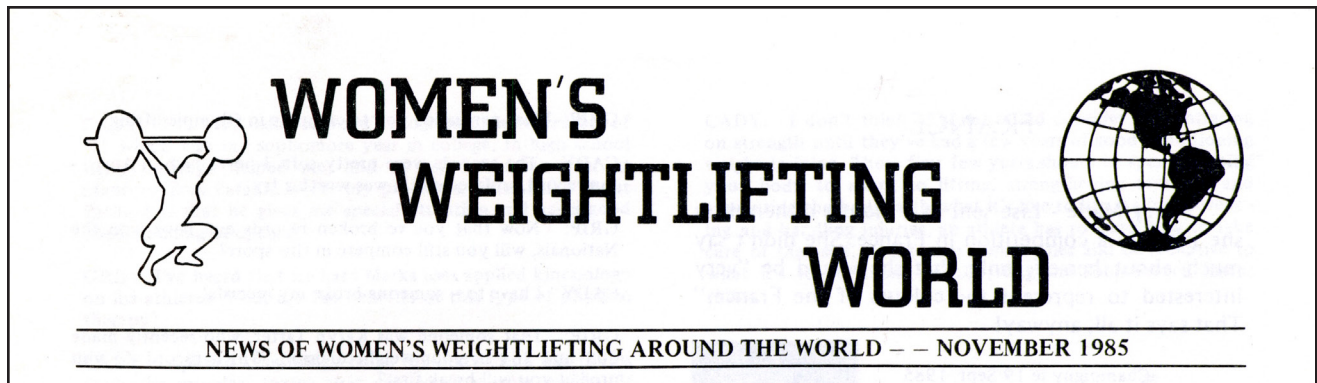
During her last year of work on the Women's Committee, Mabel had been in contact

with Tamas Ajan, the General Secretary of the IWF, in an effort to get international recognition for the women's sport. Ajan gave Rader the good news in November 1983 when he assured her that "the IWF Executive Board [had] discussed and approved in principle weightlifting for women." This milestone for the IWF included a desire to work through the national federations on the issue, to discuss "special rules" for women's weightlifting (e.g. bodyweight categories, age groups), and "to organise world championships only if the participation of at least 12-15 countries is guaranteed."<sup>65</sup> Although Mabel responded negatively to the "unreal" requirement of 12-15 countries for a world contest, Judy was ecstatic because she now had a goal.<sup>66</sup> The "in principle" clause meant that women's weightlifting was approved on an exhibition basis only. This was hugely important because the clauses which caused women so much grief in the early days were removed or modified in the rulebook. Lifters could now be male or female, and weigh-ins for the women would be conducted by a female official.<sup>67</sup>

The next hurdle was to gain approval for a Women's World Championship. Glenney kept pushing Ajan, but she also had to gain the support of her own USWF Board members. She attended USWF Board meetings to ask for money for the women's program. Murray Levin described her as "nervous" prior to entering an early budget meeting and remembered Judy asking for advice about the amount of money to ask for. Murray told her, "Ask for \$10,000 but take \$3,000."<sup>68</sup> "I had no problem being in the room with the men [on the Board]," Judy remembered, "however, I realized I was invading their space."<sup>69</sup> According to the Minutes of the Board of Governor's meeting in March 1984, she had been granted a \$4000 budget, which she used for travel expenses, her newsletter, a postal meet, and the national championships.<sup>70</sup>

The international organization now recognized women as lifters, but the women still had not lifted internationally. Judy and the Women's Committee dreamed up ways over the next few years to get more countries involved. In March 1984 she wrote to 120 national governing bodies within the IWF informing them of a "postal meet" for women. Her committee would "collect the best lifts of the women lifters worldwide and publish them, presenting an award to the 1<sup>st</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> place lifters in each of the bodyweight categories."<sup>71</sup> Judy suggested that each country delegate one person to provide the results for their country's women. She hoped the postal





This masthead appeared at the top of Judy Glenney's international newsletter, "Women's Weightlifting World." November 1985 was the first issue and September 1989 seems to be the final issue (12 issues in total.) Glenney published the newsletter to attract more women lifters to the cause and to keep women around the world up-to-date on issues important to them.

meet would be "the forerunner of a worldwide women's movement and the forerunner of a true world championship."<sup>72</sup> By September she had received 18 responses, from which "a mere handful" had indicated they had women lifters and agreed to send results. Encouraging the women to keep their spirits up at the dismal response, "most of the nations responding," she explained, "were not of the Eastern bloc countries; many barely had a *men's* team."<sup>73</sup>

By March 1984 Judy had also earned her Class II International Referee's card; the first and only woman in the world to do so.<sup>74</sup> In doing so, she embodied and reiterated a message that had originated with Mabel Rader: women should get involved at contests and start working on their own referee cards. "Helping out and officiating at local meets," Judy explained to the women, would help them clear the biggest hurdle: "five years of experience in lifting or officiating."<sup>75</sup> They needed more female referees, especially if they were headed toward international competition.

One of the requirements to obtaining permission to hold a world meet was to obtain proof that at least ten countries would participate; this was a lower number than Rader had received in 1983. By August 1985 Ajan and the IWF Secretariat had agreed to give "full support" to another letter-writing initiative by Glenney to find those ten nations who would be willing to compete in a women's world championships contest.<sup>76</sup> Glenney was able to gain the needed information and in November of the same year, Ajan wrote a letter informing her that "under the auspices of the IWF I would like to organise next year the 1<sup>st</sup> International IWF Weightlifting Tournament for Women." In doing so, the IWF "wish[ed] to size up the interest of the ladies for this kind of activity and weigh the possibility and

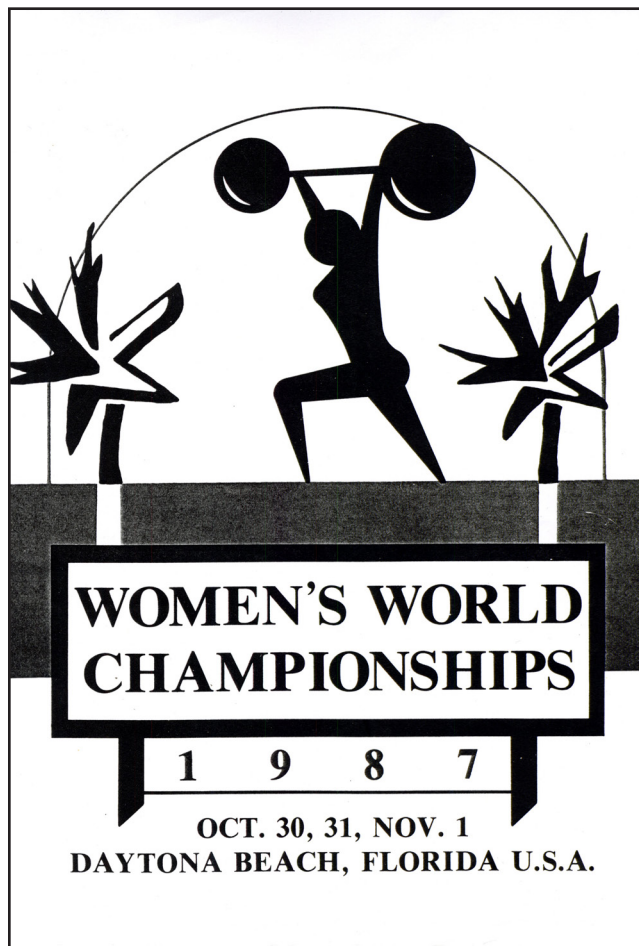
chances of a future World Championship."<sup>77</sup> Victory was coming slowly, but surely for the women. This news also gave Judy a reason to start a women's newsletter geared toward the international scene: *Women's Weightlifting World*. Her first issue contained information about lifting in China, Great Britain, and France. Kim "The Grip" Goss provided a Personality Profile on Carol Cady. Women could check meet results and update their calendars with upcoming meets, as well as check out the women's American Records.<sup>78</sup> Future issues held to the same format and lasted until at least September 1989.

Budapest, Hungary, hosted the first international contest for women—the 1986 Pannonia Cup competition—on 23 March. Aside from the fact that Tamas Ajan personally invited Judy to attend the Cup as a lifter, she was considered a lock to represent the US because of her competitive track record. The purpose of the 1986 National Championships in the minds of many was to determine the two women who would accompany Glenney to Hungary.<sup>79</sup> Unfortunately, Judy suffered a shoulder injury during the snatch competition and had to withdraw, but the USWF decided she could still travel with US delegation—Colleene Colley, Arlys Kovach, and Giselle Shepatin—as an international referee and team coach.<sup>80</sup> At the Pannonia Cup, believing the women's event to be a *non*-event, nothing more serious than an "opening act" for the men's lifting the following day, IWF President Gottfried Schödl, and General Secretary Tamas Ajan, were immensely surprised when the crowd went wild for the 23 women representing five nations. Judy described Schödl as being "totally against women lifters" initially, and Ajan as a "shrewd businessman" who, even though he was originally against women lifting, came to understand how the women's pro-



gram could benefit the sport as a whole.<sup>81</sup> After the meet was over Judy wrote an editorial in her April newsletter to thank the many people who had helped get women to that point in history, including Mabel Rader, Harvey Newton, and Murray Levin. The best she left for last: "Through his [Tamas Ajan's] persuasion and enthusiasm of the women we were accepted as a bona fide part of the weightlifting theater. The curtain has just been lifted, Act I completed, and the performance was a hit. Stay tuned for Act II. The best is yet to come!"<sup>82</sup>

Act II came in the form of the first World Weightlifting Championships for women. Ajan wrote to Glenney in June 1986, shortly after the Pannonia Cup, to inform her that the IWF Executive Board had approved the first world contest for women to be held in 1987 in Florida. To support the endeavor, they published in the IWF newsletter a call to "all National Federations to establish women's sections and promote their ladies to the World Championship."<sup>83</sup>



The contest program for the first Women's World Weightlifting Championships in 1987 depicted a woman lifting large weights overhead and the palm trees of sunny Florida.

He also conveyed the "the best thanks and gratitude of the IWF for your enthusiastic work as our women's coordinator. However, the IWF Executive Board decided that the ladies' activities are now so widely spread that they have to be directed from the IWF Secretariat. So we are trying to take over the lot from you, but of course we continue to count on your expert help in the future."<sup>84</sup> After all that she had done, now the international federation wanted to take over the whole show. Many might have been upset; Judy just started thinking about the final challenge—Olympic recognition.

Daytona Beach, Florida, hosted the first Women's World Championships from 29 October through 1 November 1987. It was a rousing success, 100 lifters from 21 countries competed—more than double the IWF goal for athlete participation.<sup>85</sup> Murray Levin crowed about the meet's success in his December letter to the USWF membership. He praised Glenney and believed the US would be respected as "the innovator of the best thing in weightlifting since discs were used instead of solid barbells."<sup>86</sup> Even Gottfried Schödl sent Judy a letter congratulating her:

I was very impressed and feel it as a highlight in my career as an official. Your dream became true! This First Women World Championship in Daytona Beach was a powerful step into the future of a new development with positive consequences we can not overlook . . . I would like to thank you for your long and strong efforts in the interest of women weightlifting and I feel sure that all our strong women around the world will join my gratitude.<sup>87</sup>

Because of the success, Schödl and the IWF confirmed their willingness to organize a second Women's World Championships, encouraged their nation members to "organize national championships and international tournaments for your women competitors," suggested a Women's World Cup series to begin in 1993, established the women's world records, and informed the women of their intention to "enter into preparatory negotiations with the Programme Commission of the IOC to put women's weightlifting on the programme of the Olympic Games," if the women's movement kept progressing in a positive manner.<sup>88</sup>

This last bit of news was music to Glenney's ears. She had stayed focused on the ultimate prize in the lead up to the first World Championships. Almost three full months before the contest Judy had already tried to "capitalize on the momentum" being gained by hosting a world event. She hoped that the IWF would present women's weightlifting to the IOC at the upcoming 1988 Seoul Olympic Games.<sup>89</sup> Ajan kindly responded with shared sympathy, but informed Glenney that the Olympic program was determined four to six years in advance, and they needed at least two or three successful world championships, as well as evidence that the sport was practiced in 50 countries.<sup>90</sup> The IWF, by indicating in their end-of-year newsletter that they were considering the idea, kept the fire within Judy blazing. It was so hard to stay patient, time was running out for her; the younger, incoming women were beginning to surpass her abilities on the platform, but Judy persevered.

In another move to improve the involvement and education of women in the US, the Women's Committee proposed to the 1987 USWF Board to have the 1988 men's and women's national contests on the same weekend. Ultimately approved, this simple act saved everyone money by reducing travel to only one competition site, allowed the men and women to support each other, let them put faces to the names on the results and record lists, and gave women an opportunity to attend the various national committee meetings.<sup>91</sup>

At the combined 1988 Men's and Women's National Championships on 29 April - 1 May in Minneapolis, Minnesota, one of the highlights for Glenney (other than getting second place in her weight class) was the presentation of the first USWF Mabel Rader Achievement Award. Intended to identify someone who demonstrated outstanding contributions to women's weightlifting, this award naturally was given to Mabel as the "prime mover" in getting the women's movement started.<sup>92</sup> Not long after the 1988 World Championships in Jakarta, Indonesia, in early December, Judy again wrote to Ajan asking if there had been any movement on the Olympic recognition front. However, she knew there would be problems. There had been multiple positive drug tests at the 1988 Seoul Olympics (five of the ten positives were from Weightlifting) and the IOC "does not look rather favorably on the sport of weightlifting," Glenney allowed. "But having the women included with their 'clean slate' may help," she suggested, try-



**Although Judy Glenney didn't get to compete at the first Women's World Weightlifting Championships in Florida, she did get to officiate due to her IWF Class II referee status. Here she stands with IWF President Gottfried Schödl (left) and IWF General Secretary Tamas Ajan (right).**

ing to remain positive.<sup>93</sup> The concern about the IOC recognition was the one remaining question mark for Glenney.

The year 1989 was a momentous year for Glenney. She decided to step down from the chairmanship of the Women's Committee. She informed the women of the USWF in a letter and told them they had "an opportunity to help decide the direction of the program with a change of administration." She encouraged interested parties to send in resumes and goals for the organization and she would post them so everyone could be ready at the next national committee meeting.<sup>94</sup> The year also saw some of their work lead to fruition when the USOC training center in Colorado Springs began offering training clinics for women, as well as the men. Glenney and other lifters had discussed this idea at least as early as 1983 as a way to gain solidarity and training advice; it was finally going to happen in 1989.<sup>95</sup> Also, Master's level female lifters, those aged 40 and older, noticed an announcement that they would be included in the 1990 Masters National Championships in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, for the first time.<sup>96</sup> More and more dreams were becoming reality.

Glenney had a group of women around her that helped organize and pursue those dreams. They had become just as invested and motivated in the running of the women's program. Women such as Mary Beth Cervenak and Karyn Tartar, who had been working with Glenney since their elections as Vice Chairman/Records Chairman and Athletes' Representa-

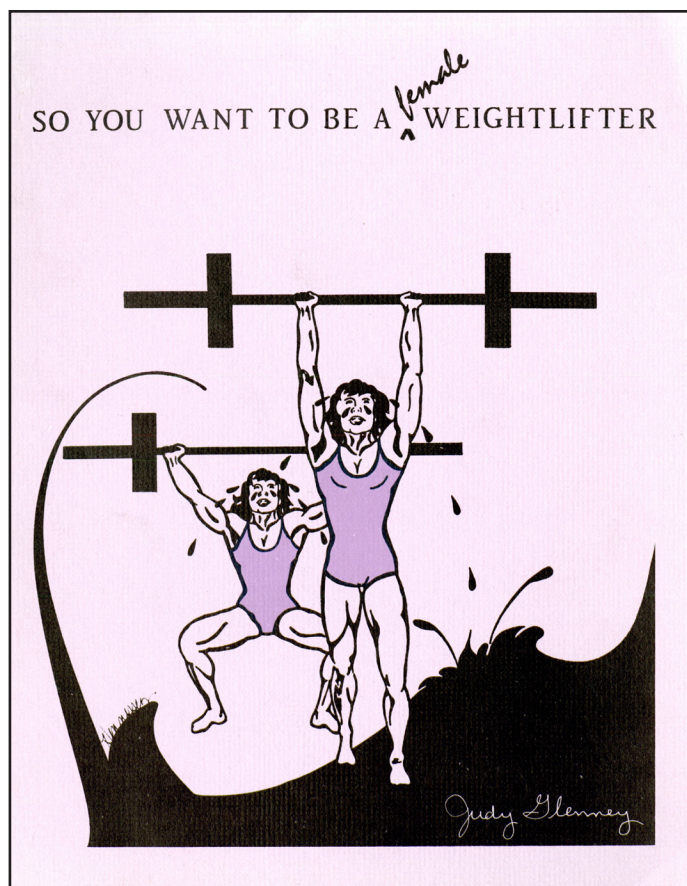


tive, respectively, in 1983. Karen Derwin and Rachel Silverman joined the officers' club in 1985 as Vice Chair (Cervenak retained the Records Chair) and Secretary/Treasurer, while Jody Anderson took over as Vice Chair, and Giselle Shepatin took Cervenak's Records Chair position in 1987. Glenney was confident the women's program was in good hands and could step down and move on to other things. For her efforts, the USWF awarded Judy with the 1989 Mabel Rader Achievement Award at the national championships.<sup>97</sup>

She receded from national committee work and took on more international duties, but she was also more than likely led to this decision by the fact that she had become pregnant. She delivered her and Gary's only child, Scott, in September 1989, but she still attended meets, especially when it symbolized another first for the women. She helped officiate at the Olympic Sports Festival in Oklahoma City in late July to keep her referee's card valid and to experience the newest, large-meet competition for the women.<sup>98</sup> Judy returned to the Olympic Festival platform in 1990 as an athlete, placing fourth in her weight class. She also spent that year completing a book project she had been working on—*So You Want to be a Female Weightlifter*.

Judy's training book, *So You Want to be a Female Weightlifter*, hoped to fill "a void in women's weightlifting." This 70-page book was not designed for the women who wanted to stick to the light weights, it was designed for women who wanted to be competitive lifters and handle heavy weights.<sup>99</sup> Advertisements for the book proclaimed that it would serve as "a useful tool for women getting into weightlifting."<sup>100</sup> In an easy-to-read style and with quite a bit of humor, Judy explained the differences between bodybuilding, powerlifting, and Olympic lifting. The majority of the book was spent teaching the clean and jerk and the snatch, as well as basic assistance exercises for each, using plenty of pictures to illustrate what she described in the text. She advised that even though the reader would get general knowledge of the competitive lifts, her book was not intended to take the place of a knowledgeable coach. She provided information on conditioning, flexibility, speed, strength, and program design. She also discussed what to expect at a competition and basic nutritional advice.

As Judy rolled into the 1990s, she con-



Judy Glenney wrote *So You Want to be a Female Weightlifter* in 1989 for women who wanted to lift heavy weights and compete. Its cover, shown above, illustrates muscular women sweating and clearly exerting great amounts of effort. Judy wanted there to be no mistake that this was a demanding sport.

tinued her quest for Olympic recognition. A return letter from USWF President Jim Schmitz let Judy know that 1996 Atlanta Games acceptance "doesn't look too good."<sup>101</sup> However, he included materials from Ajan confirming that the IWF had submitted an "official request" in December 1989 followed by "a presentation at the Commission's meeting in July, 1990."<sup>102</sup> Ajan listed several of the "principles, facts, and arguments" used by the IWF in an effort to convince the IOC to approve their request. They discussed 1) the rising popularity of women's weightlifting around the world (around 55-60 countries holding contests yearly); 2) the addition of women would "make more colourful the Olympic programmes and increase the number of women's programmes being on the Games"; 3) like the men, only the top totals (not individual snatch and clean and jerk contests) would receive medals; and 4) if necessary for acceptance, the IWF was prepared to create "a qualifying system for the 1996 Olympic Games (for both, men and women) which would foresee an increase



of cca. 20-25% only” compared to the current number of male lifters in the Games.<sup>103</sup> The IOC had turned down this same proposal in 1990, but they took it up again after the Atlanta Games ended. One of the IOC’s overall concerns when examining their entire program was the lack of women’s sports, so the resubmittal of the arguments was timely from that perspective, but it did not do Judy and women’s weightlifting any good in the early 1990s.

Because of her visibility and reputation in the international arena, Judy was appointed to the IWF’s International Technical Committee from 1992 to 1996 to help address issues pertaining to women. For example, she helped to implement usage of a 33-pound bar (versus the men’s 44-pound bar) with a slightly smaller diameter grip for women’s smaller hands. Judy’s comment, “I had to protect my women,” sums up how she viewed her responsibilities and actions on the committee.<sup>104</sup> Judy and Gary moved to Vancouver, Washington, by 1994, and she kept in touch during these years with Lynne Stoessel-Ross, the Women’s Committee Chair, about Olympic recognition. Judy gives much credit to Stoessel-Ross for doing most of the “heavy lifting” regarding the final push into the Olympic Games.

In 1996 shortly after the Atlanta Games had concluded, the IOC finally voted to put women’s weightlifting onto the 2000 Olympic Games’ program as part of their plan to incorporate more women into the spectacle. Judy could finally take a deep breath and relax; her dream had finally come true. But her influence was far from over. From 1999 to 2018, Judy touched a new generation of novice lifters while teaching at Clark College in Vancouver.

## CONCLUSION

Described in 1984 by Richard Reno, as “the spark which lights the fire of women’s lifting,” Judy had been passionate about the women’s program; but when reflecting years later, she knew she had had to proceed carefully.<sup>105</sup> “I was never out to prove that I was as strong as a man or that I was going to break this barrier of men’s sport,” Judy proclaimed. “You win more with honey than you do by smacking them upside the head.” Instead, Judy encouraged women to perfect their lifting techniques and get stronger. In doing so, they “let [their] lifting do the loudest talking.” They sent the men an important message: “I can be strong. I can be a woman. I’m not floundering around out there with the weight flopping over my head.

I look like a lifter.”<sup>106</sup> In the end, Judy was correct; women were accepted as lifters. In May 1995 the USWF Board of Governors voted Judy into the USWF Hall of Fame in York, Pennsylvania.<sup>107</sup> In 2013 Judy was honored for her trailblazing efforts by the IWF at a grand celebration for the thirtieth anniversary of women’s weightlifting.<sup>108</sup> At the gathering in Poland, Dr. Tamas Ajan reminded Judy of the promise she gave him thirty years earlier when she was pushing him to help her push the boundaries of women’s sport, “Women’s weightlifting will go on with or without you.”<sup>109</sup> While it would have gone on with or without Ajan, it is certain that the sport would not be where it is today without the vision and efforts of Judy Glenney.

## NOTES

1. Bend sits on the eastern edge of the Cascade Mountains in the central part of the state. The town had a population of 11,409 in the 1950 Census.
2. Judy Glenney interview with author, 27 May 2014. See also Judy Glenney, *Uplifting Dreams-The Story of the Pioneer of Women’s Weightlifting* (self-published, 2019).
3. J. Glenney interview with author; and Al Thomas, “Judy Glenney, The Evolution of an Olympic Lifter,” *Iron Man* 37, no. 5 (July 1978): 39.
4. Knowing she wanted to compete as an athlete, Judy read everything she could on female stars in track and field (see Glenney, *Uplifting Dreams*, 47), so it is possible that she read about Cynthia Wyatt’s success as a thrower in *Strength & Health* magazine: Cynthia Wyatt as told to Tommy Kono, “Cindy Wyatt Wants to be a Champion,” *Strength & Health* 30 (November 1962): 28-9, 56-8.
5. Jan Todd, “The Origins of Weight Training for Female Athletes in North America,” *Iron Game History* 2, no. 2: 4-14.
6. See Covers, *Strength & Health* (October 1967) and (April 1968).
7. Gary Glenney interview with author, 27 May 2014.
8. Bill Starr, “The Daisey Chain,” *Weightlifting Journal* 1, no. 3 (Sept/Oct 1971): 21.
9. Al Thomas, “Judy Glenney,” 58.
10. Judy Glenney, “A Word to the Girls,” *Athletes in Action Weight Training Manual* (Arrowhead Springs, CA: Campus Crusade for Christ, Inc.: no date), 21; and Judy Glenney, “For Girls Only!” *Athletes in Action Magazine* 6, no. 1 (Summer 1973): 12-13.
11. The date of the Little Rock, Arkansas meet is unclear. Judy remembered December 1971 in J. Glenney interview with author, but in Glenney, *Uplifting Dreams*, 96, (and all other sources) she indicates the meet was in 1972.
12. Bill Starr, “From the Editor’s Desk,” *Weightlifting Journal* 1, no. 7 (1971): 3.
13. *New England Association AAU-Weightlifters’ Newsletter #16* (1 March 1973): 3, 9.
14. For a discussion of the decline of American weightlifting, see John Fair, “The USA vs the World: An Analytical Narrative of American, World, and Olympic Weightlifting Results, 1970-1992, Part 2,”

*Iron Game History* 12, no. 4:30-53.

15. Glenney, *Uplifting Dreams*, 84-87.

16. J. Glenney interview with author.

17. For more information on women and physical activity, see: Patricia Vertinsky, *The eternally wounded woman, women, doctors and exercise in the late nineteenth century* (Manchester, UK: Manchester Univ. Press, 1991); Martha H. Verbrugge, *Able-bodied womanhood, personal health and social change in nineteenth-century Boston* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988); and Jan Todd, *Physical culture and the body beautiful* (Mercer, GA: Mercer Univ. Press, 1999).

18. Gary Glenney letter to Peary and Mabel Rader, 19 Sept 1972, Glenney folder, Rader Collection, Stark Center.

19. For information on the introduction of strength coaches and strength training into the collegiate and professional football ranks see, Terry Todd, "Al Roy: Mythbreaker," *Iron Game History* 2, no. 1: 12-16; Jason Shurley and Jan Todd, "'If Anyone Gets Slower, You're Fired': Boyd Epley and the Formation of the Strength Coaching Profession," *Iron Game History* 11, no. 3: 4-18; and Jason P. Shurley, Jan Todd, Terry Todd, *Strength Coaching in America: A History of the Innovation That Transformed Sports* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2019).

20. Pudgy Stockton, "Barbelles," *Strength & Health* (August 1944): 11, contains the first discussion of organized Olympic weightlifting competitions for women and a list of the best lifts done by women to that time. *Strength & Health* (April 1947) contains a report of the first contest. Pudgy Stockton, "Barbelles," *Strength & Health* (August 1948) contains discussion on the second competition (5 women), 18 January 1948. Six women competed on 2 April 1949 in a contest held at Marcy's Gym in Los Angeles. See Jan Todd, "The Legacy of Pudgy Stockton," *Iron Game History* 2, no. 1: 5-7, for more information.

21. Glenney, *Uplifting Dreams*, 77.

22. "International Weightlifting Federation Technical Rules - Participants," *US Weightlifting Federation Official Rules 1981-1984* (Indianapolis, IN: US Weightlifting Federation, Inc., 1981), 42; and Letter, Tamas Ajan to Mabel Rader, 26 April 1983, Mabel Rader Folder, Todd Collection, Stark Center. For many years Mabel Rader was the only female referee at the competitions.

23. Jan Todd interview about lifting in the 1970s.

24. Gerard Carey letter (1 June 1974) to the editor, *New England Association AAU-Weightlifters' Newsletter* 26 (29 July 1974): 11. Carey mentions a girl, a 15-year old Ann Turbyne, training at his gym to improve her shot and discuss state high school records. Ann Turbyne represented Team USA in the shot at the boycotted 1980 Moscow Olympic Games, held several world powerlifting records, and was inducted into the University of Maine Sports Hall of Fame in 1987. Denis Reno, "Willimantic Open Weightlifting Contest," *New England Association AAU-Weightlifters' Newsletter* 29 (15 December 1974): 18.

25. Denis Reno, "Willimantic Open Weightlifting Contest."

26. *Ibid.*

27. Bill Clark to Jan Todd telephone interview, 14 July 1998.

28. *Ibid.*

29. Mabel Rader, Weightlifting Chairman, *Midwestern AAU Weightlifting News Letter*, 28 January 1976: 1.

30. Clark interview.

31. Glenney, *Uplifting Dreams*, 120-123.

32. *Ibid.*, 121.

33. *Columbia Daily News*, 22 February 1976. For the women's records see "Women's Records," *Missouri Valley AAU Weightlifting Newsletter* 19, no. 3 (21 May 1979): 6; and "The Record Book - Region Eight Women," *Missouri Valley AAU Weightlifting Newsletter* 20, no. 3 (6 April 1980): 4.

34. Mike Lambert, "Women's Nationals," *Powerlifting USA* 3, no. 9 (March 1980): 6-10. No mention of Glenney was found in Tony Fitton, "Women's Worlds," *Powerlifting USA* 3, no. 12 (June 1980): 6-9, but it may be due to a poor performance. Notice of her making the world team can be found in "Women's Corner," *Powerlift-*

*ing USA* 3, no. 9 (March 1980): 9. Glenney mentions lifting in the first Women's World Powerlifting Championships, Glenney, *Uplifting Dreams*, 248.

35. Clark interview. As evidence of his coaching ability, Gary Glenney was also listed as the national coach for the Oklahoma District in 1976, see "National Coaches as of February 1, 1976," *New England and Region I-Weightlifter's Newsletter* 40 (7 March 1976): 19.

36. Glenney, *Uplifting Dreams*, 139.

37. In March 1976, Murray Levin announced to the weightlifting community that "Olympic Lifting, Powerlifting, and Physique will now be completely independent and autonomous [sic] as three different sports and will govern themselves accordingly as three distinct bodies, with different rulings and administrations to carry out their will." See, letter from Murry Levin "To: National Olympic weightlifting Committee of the AAU of USA," *New England and Region I-Weightlifter's Newsletter* 40 (7 March 1976): 9.

38. Murray Levin interview with author, 23 May 2014; and Murray Levin interview with John Fair, April 2013.

39. Thomas Hunt, *Drug Games: the international policy of doping and the Olympic Games 1960-2008* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010); and Dominic G. Morais and Jan Todd, "Lifting the Iron Curtain: Paul Anderson and the Cold War's First Sport Exchange," *Iron Game History* 12, no.2: 16-39.

40. Joseph M. Turrini, "'It was Communism Versus the Free World': The USA-USSR Dual Track Meet Series and the Development of Track and Field in the United States, 1958-1985," *Journal of Sport History* 28, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 427-471; and Dong Jinxia, "A Reflection on 'Factors Determining the Recent Success of Chinese Women in International Sport,'" *International Journal of the History of Sport* 15, no. 1 (1998): 206-210.

41. The US men went from winning four gold, two silver, and one bronze medal in the 1956 Olympic Games, to one gold, four silver, and one bronze medal in 1960, to one silver and one bronze medal in 1964, to one bronze medal in 1968, to one silver medal in 1976.

42. "Women's Weightlifting," *Missouri Valley AAU Weightlifting Newsletter* 20, no. 2 (20 February 1980): 7.

43. *Ibid.*

44. For more information on the Raders and *Iron Man* magazine, see Terry Todd, "Our best man gone, Peary Rader (1909-1991)," *Iron Game History* 2, no. 1: 1-4.

45. Letter, Mabel Rader to Judy Glenney, 24 October 1980, "Women's Wt. Lift History" folder, Todd Collection, Stark Center.

46. Al Thomas, "Judy Glenney," 38-39, 58.

47. Letter, James J. Fox to Judy Glenney, 17 September 1980, "Women's Wt. Lift History" folder, Todd Collection, Stark Center.

48. Letter, Murray Levin to Judy Glenney, 30 September 1980, "Women's Wt. Lift History" folder, Todd Collection, Stark Center.

49. *Ibid.*

50. Letter, Rader to Glenney, 24 October 1980.

51. Mabel describes her opinion of the attitudes of many of the male administrators in her Letter, Mabel Rader to Tamas Ajan, 8 December 1983. Mabel Rader folder, Todd Collection, Stark Center.

52. Levin interview with author.

53. *Ibid.*

54. "Murray Levin's Letter," *Deni Reno's Weightlifter's Newsletter*, 4 January 1981: 18.

55. "AAU Convention Notes," *Strength & Health* 49, no. 2 (March 1981): 63.

56. Letter, Mabel Rader to Judy Glenney (and other women lifters), 20 February 1981, Mabel Rader folder, Todd Collection, Stark Center.

57. Letter from Murray Levin to Women's Weightlifting competitors, undated, Judy Glenney folder, author's collection.

58. Mabel Rader, "1<sup>st</sup> National Women's Weightlifting Championships," results and letter about the meet. She had handwritten "#1" in the top corner of the document which was included in a set of documents she considered her Women's Newsletters. Ma-

- bel Rader folder, Todd Collection, Stark Center.
59. Mabel Rader letter, 21 September 1981. She had handwritten “#2” in the top corner of the document which was included in a set of documents she considered her Women’s Newsletters. Mabel Rader folder, Todd Collection, Stark Center.
60. Judy Glenney, “Variety: The Spice of Your Training Life” and “A Little Help for a Weak Jerk,” *Women’s Weightlifting Newsletter*, no date: 3-4; Mabel had handwritten “#3” in the top corner of the document which was included in a set of documents she considered her Women’s Newsletters. See also, Judy Glenney, “Get on the Stick with Your Pull” and “Deadlift for a Purpose,” *Women’s Weightlifting Newsletter*, September 1982: 3; and Judy Glenney, “Overload on Partial Movements,” *Women’s Weightlifting Newsletter No. 6*, 11 March 1983: 2. Mabel Rader folder, Todd Collection, Stark Center.
61. Joe Widdel, “Women’s National Olympic Championships,” *Iron Man Lifting News* 42, no. 5 (July 1982): 48i.
62. Ruth Welding Interview with the author, 29 March 2022.
63. Dan Ruchames, “1st National Women’s Weightlifting Championships,” Denis Reno’s Weightlifter’s Newsletter 85 (13 July 1981): 10; Mabel Rader, “Editor’s Message,” *Women’s Weightlifting Newsletter No. 7*, 22 August 1983: 1.
64. Judy Glenney, “A Message from the New Women’s Olympic Weightlifting Chairwoman,” *Women’s Weightlifting Newsletter No. 7*, 22 August 1983: 1. In 1988 the USWF began an honorary award in Mabel’s honor—the Mabel Rader Award—given annually for contributions to women’s weightlifting.
65. Letter, Tamas Ajan to Mabel Rader, 23 November 1983, Mabel Rader folder, Todd Collection, Stark Center.
66. Letter, Tamas Ajan to Mabel Rader, 8 December 1983.
67. Judy Glenney mentions it being “in principle” and explains the requirements for world championships in “Women’s Lifting,” *Weightlifting USA* 2, no. 4 (1984): 8. The IWF website also mentions it being “in principle” on their historical timeline. “Women’s World Championships Update,” *Weightlifting USA* 4, no. 5 (1986): 8. “Women Lifters Soaring Towards Olympic Height,” *World Weightlifting*, no. 4, 1996: 9.
68. Levin interview with author.
69. J. Glenney interview with author.
70. “Minutes to the Board of Governor’s Meeting, March 12, 1984, USWF National Convention” *Weightlifting USA* 2, no. 3 (1984): 3.
71. Letter, Judy Glenney to All National Weightlifting Governing Bodies in the IWF, 5 March 1984, Glenney folder, author’s collection.
72. Ibid.
73. Judy Glenney, “Women’s Lifting,” *Weightlifting USA* 2, no. 4 (1984): 18. Jenó Boskóvics, “World Weightlifting Exclusive Interview—How Can Women’s Weightlifting Get Admitted to the Olympic Games?” *World Weightlifting* 2 (1989): 34; interviews in this article on why they did not have a women’s program as of 1989 found that the USSR “have not met any substantial demand or interest from the girls yet;” Romania said “fans of women’s weightlifting must fight for the victory. Unfortunately, in Romania we have not even done the initial steps;” Czechoslovakia “for the moment does not wish to initiate the development of female weightlifting centrally and the small competitions we have today do not yet evoke sufficient interest;” and the German Democratic Republic “doctors are strongly against it. They are afraid that it would eliminate female beauty and deform the women’s body.” All of these informants, however, concluded that their governments should look into the issue a bit deeper.
74. “USWF News—Glenney Becomes International Referee,” *Weightlifting USA* 2, no. 2 (1984): 2.
75. Judy Glenney, “Women’s Lifting,” *Weightlifting USA* 2, no. 2 (1984): 9.
76. Letter, Judy Glenney to Tamas Ajan, 3 July 1985; Letter, Tamas Ajan to Judy Glenney, 15 August 1985, Glenney folder, author collection.
77. Letter, Tamas Ajan to Judy Glenney, 22 November 1985, Glenney folder, author collection.
78. *Women’s Weightlifting World*, November 1985.
79. Glenney, *Uplifting Dreams*, 176-177.
80. Kim Goss, “Women’s Olympic Lifting Nationals,” *Iron Man* 45, no. 5 (July 1986): 55-56; “Records Fall at the National Women’s Championships,” *Weightlifting USA* 4, no. 2 (1986): 3.
81. Both Levin and Glenney remember the crowd going crazy when the women lifted.
82. Judy Glenney, “Editorial,” *Women’s Weightlifting World* (April 1986): 2. For more information about the 1986 Pannonia Cup see, “U.S. Women Capture Medals in International Competition,” *Weightlifting USA* 4, no. 2 (1986): 1.
83. Letter, Tamas Ajan to Judy Glenney, 12 June 1986, Judy Glenney folder, Todd Collection, Stark Center.
84. Ibid.
85. “Karyn Marshall Wins World Title for US, China Walks Away with Team Title,” *Weightlifting USA* 5, no. 5 (1987): 1-3.
86. Letter, Murray Levin to All USWF Members, Athletes, Coaches, Officials and Administrators, especially “3. Women’s Weightlifting,” December 1987.
87. Letter, Gottfried Schödl to Judy Glenney, 13 November 1987. Judy Glenney folder, Todd Collection, Stark Center.
88. “Women in Weightlifting,” *IWF Newsletter No. 10* (November 1987): 2-3; and “Women’s Weightlifting,” *Weightlifting USA* 5, no. 6 (1988): 2.
89. Letter, Judy Glenney to Tamas Ajan, 5 August 1987. Judy Glenney folder, Todd Collection, Stark Center.
90. Letter, Tamas Ajan to Judy Glenney, 27 August 1987. Judy Glenney folder, Todd Collection, Stark Center.
91. Letter, Judy Glenney to All Women Lifters, 1 February 1988, Judy Glenney folder, Todd Collection, Stark Center.
92. Bruce Klemens, “The USWF Nationals,” *Iron Man* 47, no. 10 (October 1988): 79.
93. Letter, Judy Glenney to Tamas Ajan, 30 January 1989. Judy Glenney folder, Todd Collection, Stark Center. This same quote was also used in Jenó Boskóvics, “World Weightlifting Exclusive Interview,” 35.
94. Letter, Judy Glenney to All Registered Female Athletes, Judy Glenney folder, Todd Collection, Stark Center.
95. Judy Glenney, “Women’s Lifting,” *Weightlifting USA* 1, no. 5 (1983): 10.
96. Judy Glenney, “Attention: Masters Lifters,” *Women’s Weightlifting World* 12 (September 1989): 3.
97. Image of USWF President Jim Schmitz presenting Judy Glenney with Mabel Rader Award, *Weightlifting USA* 7, no. 3 (1989): 6.
98. “U.S. Olympic Festival-’89,” *Weightlifting USA* 7, no. 4 (1989): 4-5. Glenney, *Uplifting Dreams*, 214-215.
99. Judy Glenney, *So You Want to be a Female Weightlifter* (Farmington, NM: Glennco Enterprises, 1989).
100. For example, see Advertisement for *So You Want to be a Female Weightlifter*, *Weightlifting USA* 7, no. 3 (1989): 16.
101. Letter, Jim Schmitz to Judy Glenney, 9 February 1991, Judy Glenney folder, Todd Collection, Stark Center.
102. Fax Message, Tamas Ajan to George Greenway (USWF Executive Director), 30 April 1991, Judy Glenney folder, Todd Collection, Stark Center.
103. Fax Message, Tamas Ajan to Vitali Smirnov (IOC Program Committee Chairman), 4 November 1991, Judy Glenney folder, Todd Collection, Stark Center.
104. J. Glenney interview.
105. Richard Reno, “Women’s National Olympic,” *Iron Man* 43, no. 6 (September 1984): 63.
106. J. Glenney interview.
107. “Notes...,” *Weightlifting USA* 13, no. 2 (June 1995): 4.
108. “USAW female athletes recognized as pioneers of sport,” USA Weightlifting online newsletter, 20 Nov 2013. <http://www.teamusa.org/USA-Weightlifting/Features/2013/November/20/Female-Lifters-Recognized-as-Pioneers-of-Sport>.
109. J. Glenney interview.



# PETE GEORGE: A PERSONAL TRIBUTE

BY JOHN FAIR, PH.D.  
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

When I started weight training in the early 1960s, the name of Pete George, along with other weightlifting greats of the Golden Age of the previous decade, including Tommy Kono, Norbert Schemansky, Isaac Berger, and Chuck Vinci, still resonated. Since then I have had the pleasure of interviewing all of them for my various publications, except for Pete. But it is with him that I developed the closest and most meaningful personal relationship.

Although I had corresponded with Pete and written about him after beginning physical culture research in the mid-1980s, it was not until the Centennial Olympics in Atlanta where I served as a volunteer in the weightlifting venue and Pete was honored as one of the hundred greatest Olympians that we actually met. While working one afternoon at the competition site, I happened to see Pete and his wife Lazarina in the audience. A brief conversation ensued which led to a fruitful correspondence over the next decade. It culminated in a 2010 article in *Ohio History* entitled "The Ethnic Origins of Ohio's Strength Culture" in which Pete and his brothers Jim and George figured prominently. At that time Pete pointed out to me that he was the first person of Bulgarian ancestry to win an Olympic gold medal (in 1952) and that if he and Jim were a separate nation between 1947 and 1960, "we would have scored more points in world and Olympic competition than

**Correspondence to: Dr. John Fair, NEZ 5.700, Dept. of Kinesiology & Health Education, Stark Center, University of Texas at Austin, 78712. Email: john.fair@austin.utexas.edu.**

all but 4 nations." It was a remarkable story of immigrant family achievement, the full extent of which remains to be told.

That Pete held a special place in the pantheon of weightlifting heroes was evident in an all-time ranking of Olympic and world title-holders in weightlifting compiled in 1982 by Hungarian educator Ferenc Fejer. Pete, with six gold medals, placed third, just behind Tommy Kono with eight. A significant feature of Pete's greatness is that he was always willing to contribute his expertise and share his knowledge to benefit weightlifting on a local and national scale and to recognize others' accomplishments. He was especially apt to extol the achievements of Tommy Kono, thereby contributing to the latter's reputation as the greatest weightlifter of all times.

My most significant remembrance in this regard was the critical role Pete played in securing the transfer in 2016 of the Kono collection from Tommy's home in Aiea to the University of Texas. Tommy had not been close to Terry Todd and had expressed his resolve to have nothing to do with *Iron Game History* or any of the worthy enterprises at the Stark Center that Terry had a hand in creating. As Tommy's close friend, Pete shared these sentiments, as did some members of the Kono family. I first encountered this when I asked him to write a remembrance of Tommy for the article I was preparing for a special issue on Kono for *Iron Game History*. During a subsequent conversation, I asked Pete whether Tommy kept a lot of his correspondence and other



**As John Fair wandered through the weightlifting venue at the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games, he happened to look into the audience to find Pete and Lazarina George watching the action. This photograph was the result of their first face-to-face encounter.**

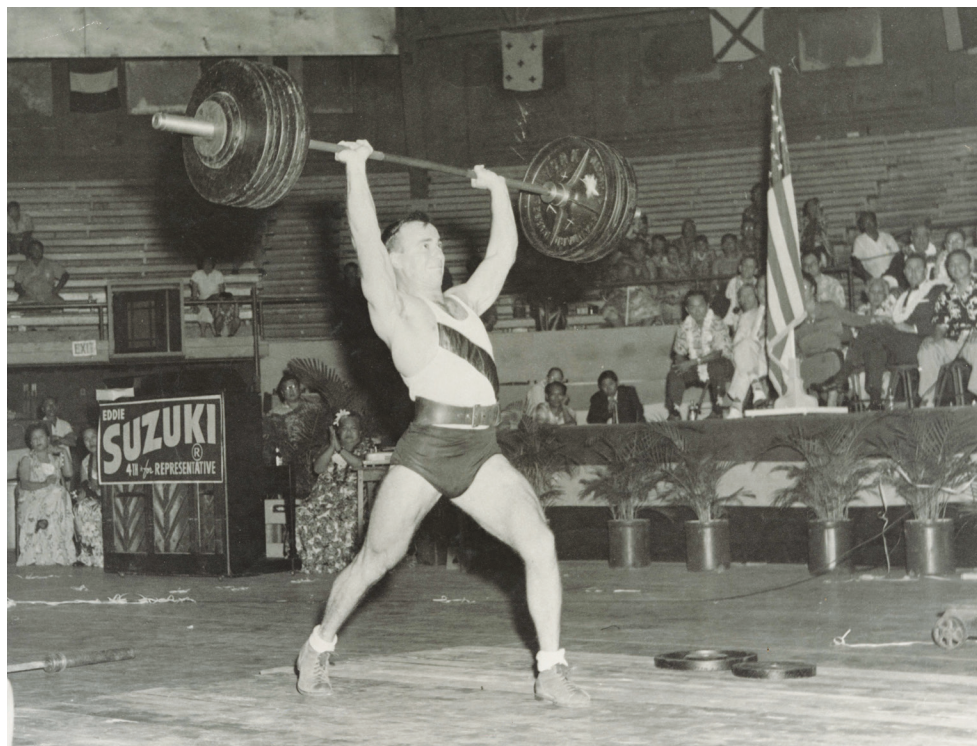
memorabilia from his long career. After Pete assured me that it was an extensive collection, I managed to convince him that the Stark Center was the best place to protect and preserve Tommy's memorabilia. Pete then persuaded Tommy's daughter joAnn that it would be in the best interests of the collection and Tommy's reputation to make it a gift to the Stark Center. When I broached this idea to Terry, he said, "wait a minute, I need to sit down." He was flabbergasted, but also excited to be able to preserve Tommy's legacy. With Pete's encouragement, the Kono family (joAnn, Mark, and Flo) consented to donate Tommy's collection to the Stark. To facilitate that transfer, Jan and Terry Todd authorized and provided the wherewithal for me and my wife Sarah to retrieve all relevant materials from Hawaii in early November 2016.

Upon arriving at the Kono home several critical things happened the first day. During the first hour Pete and I had a serious discussion in the family living room where I explained to him the background behind Tommy's opinion of Terry, and he explained to me that the rationale behind the Konos' preference to donate the collection to The University of Texas so that no portion of it (especially the gold medals) could ever be sold. No less important to the suc-

cess of our mission was the relationship Sarah cultivated with the Kono family who were still distraught over Tommy's death and quite capable of nixing the agreement at any time. To ensure acceptance, Sarah accompanied joAnn into Flo's bedroom to witness her signing the contract for the donation. Her success also led to Flo recruiting some of Tommy's associates at work and the Honolulu Marathon for interviews.

Over the next eight days, Sarah, Pete, and I worked feverishly to sort, pack, and ship Tommy's vast collection by UPS air freight to Austin. During that time we had many meaningful conversations with the Konos (including joAnn's husband Gary Sumida) and Pete. On one memorable occasion we went to an ethnic restaurant for lunch where Pete (usually quite reserved) jumped for joy when he saw tripe listed on the menu. While he consumed a large dish of it with relish, reminding him of his Macedonian roots, I also had to sample this exotic peasant fare to satisfy my curiosity, but I was less than satisfied by the taste, texture, and thought of what I was eating—the digestive innards of a ruminant animal! On another occasion Pete and I came across a copy of the March 1956 issue of *Strength & Health* that featured Pete on the cover performing a jerk. A curiosity frequently

discussed by weightlifting aficionados is how Pete could be so strong without big and bulging muscles. Looking at the picture, I pointed out what must have been obvious to Pete that it was all in the legs and that his relatively thin arms served merely to hold the weight. Perhaps the most memorable event of our Hawaiian sojourn was a luau held on the lanai [veranda] of the house we were renting to commemorate and celebrate Tommy Kono's life. It was orchestrated by Pete and Russ Ogata, one of Tommy's most dedicated proteges, and attended by several dozen former lifters, friends, and the



Two months prior to winning a silver medal at the 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne, Australia, Pete George jerks 350 pounds while weighing around 165 pounds at an unknown Hawaiian weightlifting competition on 15 September 1956. Note the traditional Hawaiian leis, dresses, and shirts in the audience.



Kono family. The event featured various local delicacies and was highlighted by personal remembrances of Tommy, led by Pete. Finally, on our last day in Honolulu, Pete treated us to a farewell luncheon at the Outrigger Club on Waikiki Beach, along with Lazarina and members of the Kono family. There were lots of hugs, tears, and well wishes, and Flo showed her appreciation for our efforts by placing a lei around each of our necks.

No less relevant to our Hawaiian experience was the emotional support Pete rendered to the Konos and Sarah, which helped insure the success of our venture. Sarah was initially under the impression that she would spend half of the trip on a much-needed carefree vacation in the beautiful islands. Although we did spend several days touring Oahu and visiting the tourist sites at Pearl Harbor, she quickly realized how much time and effort would be required to pack boxes and arrange for shipping as well as restoring Tommy's office for Pete's prospective interview with a local television station. Indeed, she virtually took over the enterprise and was constantly barking orders to Pete and me whom she regarded as lax and spending too much time talking about weightlifting. Sarah gives Pete a lot of credit for providing much needed comfort at this time of emotional stress and will always remember his acts of benevolence. Another example of Pete's generosity was the tour he provided us of Honolulu and the visit to Tommy Kono's internment site at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific. Again, despite his own remarkable athletic achievements, Pete seemed intent upon extolling the achievements of his greatest rival.

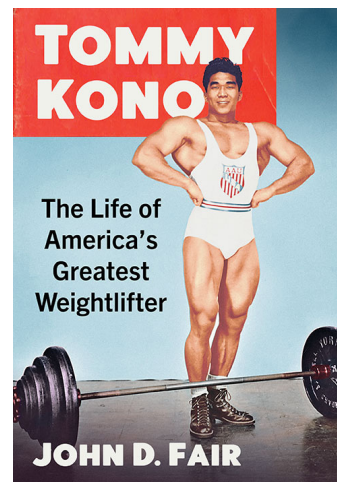
My second visit to Hawaii in January of 2019 was designed to research local archives and conduct interviews with Kono's close associates. Again, Pete provided valuable leads on the life of Dr. Richard You and You's misguided efforts to energize downtown Honolulu with the York International Building. During a tour of this site and other locations, we visited the Nuuanu YMCA where Tommy coached and inspired many Hawaiian lifters for many decades prior to his death. It was a memorable experience. Pete and I were greeted by two very upbeat young trainers (male and female) of the new Nuuanu YMCA who no doubt assumed we



In the spring of 2021 Pete's sons Tryan and Barton and Barton's family visited Pete and Lazarina in Hawaii. Back row (l-r): Barton, Logan, Dane, Tryan; front row: Nicole, Peter, Lazarina.

were likely prospects for membership. They escorted us downstairs to the weight room where I explained that we were interested in the illustrious history of the Nuuanu YMCA where Tommy and many of Hawaii's regional and national champions had trained. After this duo professed no knowledge of that, I explained that my elderly colleague had been a gold medal winner at the 1952 Olympics. At first there was stunned silence. Then one of them asked, "What did you bench?" Pete was no doubt embarrassed, but I thought the question was hilarious, revealing how much the current generation is out of touch with the great figures of their sport from a bygone era. To me, it was one of Pete's finest hours!

It is altogether fitting that my forthcoming biography on Tommy Kono will be dedicated to Pete as "Tommy's Kindred Spirit."



[Ed Note: *Tommy Kono: The Life of America's Greatest Weightlifter*, is scheduled for release in December 2022. It can be pre-ordered at: <https://mcfarland-books.com/product/tommy-kono/>.]



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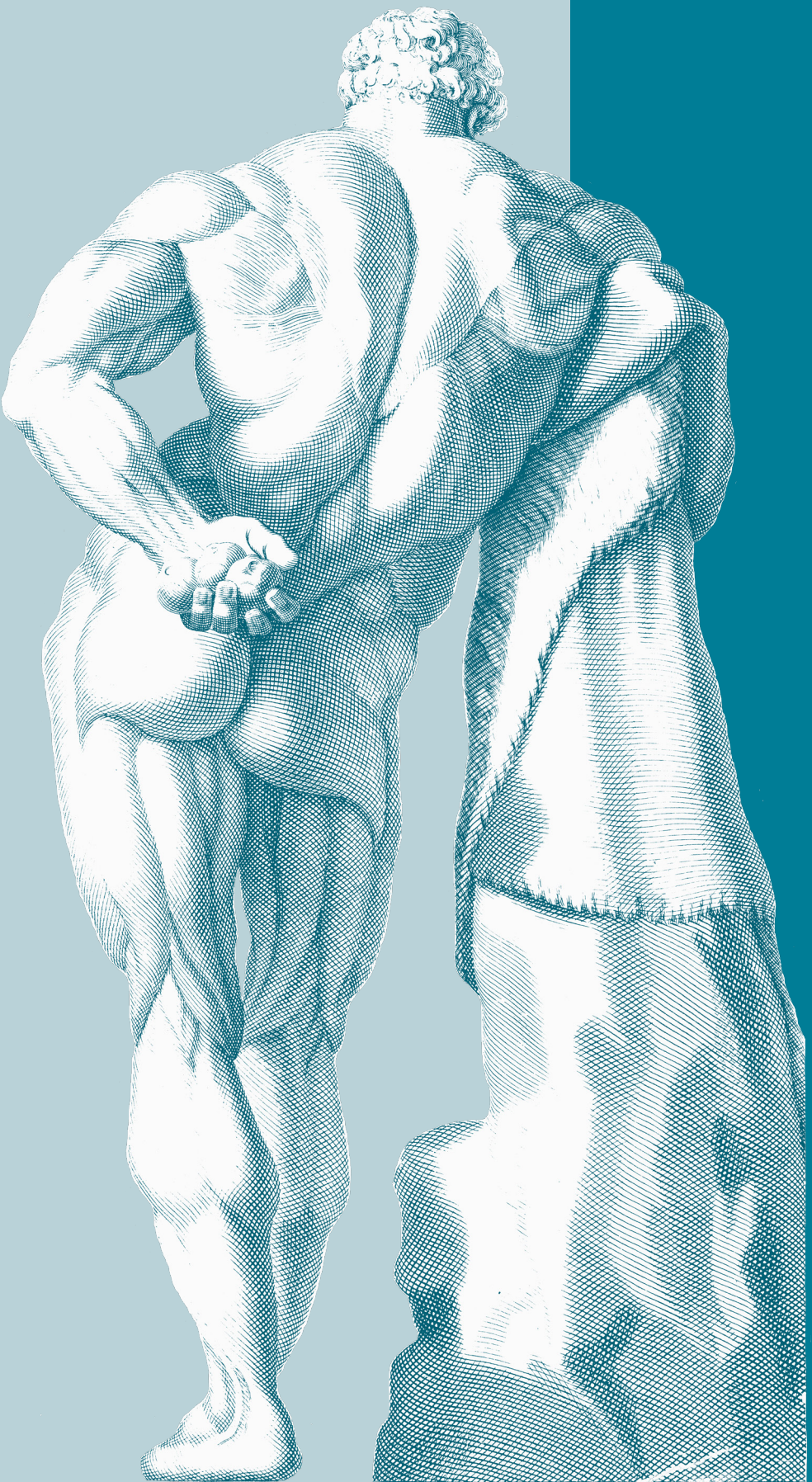
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