

Jan Todd The University of Texas

For many years, the *Guinness Book of World Records* contained the following listing in its weightlifting section: “The greatest weight ever raised by a human being is 6,270 lb in a back lift...by the 364-lb Paul Anderson...The greatest by a woman is 3,564 lb with a hip and harness lift by Mrs. Josephine Blatt (nee Schauer) (US) (1869-1923) at the Bijou Theatre, Hoboken, N.J., on April 15, 1985.”¹ While Anderson’s career has been well (though not always accurately) documented, Josephine Blatt—or “Minerva” as she was known to the vaudeville and circus audiences of the 1890s—has received scant attention from iron game historians. Even David P. Willoughby, in *The Super Athletes*, devotes only 13 lines of type to her accomplishments.² Yet Minerva was one of the most successful strongwomen of all time and received more mainstream publicity in her day than any other professional strongwoman ever has, with the possible exception of Katie Sandwina, whose career lasted much longer than Minerva’s.³ During the 1890s, for instance, Minerva is mentioned more than 25 times in *The National Police Gazette*, the largest and most widely read sporting/theatrical newspaper of the day. Furthermore, Richard K. Fox, the *Gazette*’s owner and publisher, presented her with a silver and gold championship belt for being the “world’s strongest woman,” a belt comparable to the one Louis Cyr received earlier from Fox as the “world’s strongest man.”⁴

Unfortunately, almost all of the evidence we have of Minerva’s life and lifting exploits comes from the pages of *The National Police Gazette*—a sensationalistic weekly known for neither accuracy nor subtlety. Considered risqué in many quarters for its illustrations of showgirls in tights and low necklines, the weekly tabloid enjoyed a large circulation and made Richard K. Fox a millionaire.⁵

Professional strongwomen began appearing on the gas-lit stages of America and in the pages of the *Police Gazette* in the early 1890s, at roughly the same time as their male counterparts. Though there was a well-established tradition of professional strongmen and women in Europe by 1890, strength acts were not well known in America prior to that time.⁶ However, the public acclaim afforded the French Canadian strongman Louis Cyr and the German bodybuilder/strongman Eugen Sandow heightened the public’s interest in strength and physical culture and opened the stage doors of many American variety theaters to aspiring strongwomen.⁷

In 1890 the first strongwoman, “Mlle Victorine”—then appearing at the Trocadero Theater in London—was featured in *The National Police Gazette*. Fox described her as the “luscious and robust strongest woman in the world.”⁸ One year later, a letter signed by “Josie Wohlford” appeared in the *Gazette*, challenging Victorine’s claim to the title:

The Mystery of

I hereby challenge her to arrange a match to lift heavy-weights and catch cannonballs from 10 pounds to 20 pounds for \$500 to \$1000 a side and the female heavy-weightlifting championship of the world. The \$100 my backer, Mr. C.P. Blatt, has posted with Richard K. Fox, shows that I mean business.⁹

One of the mysteries yet to be resolved about Minerva is that of her maiden name. Though this letter was signed “Josie Wohlford,” an 1893 article in the *Gazette*—no doubt written by a publicist—claims that Minerva was the daughter of a socially prominent physician, Dr. Joseph Schauer of Hoboken, New Jersey, where, according to the article, her family members were leaders in society. The highly suspect article goes on to explain that, unlike her family, “She [Minerva] loathes the emptiness of the social world, and is only happy when juggling with dumbbells.”¹⁰

An interview for *The Mirror*, of Manchester, New Hampshire, is the only reliable evidence this author has found of Minerva’s early life, though it makes no mention of her maiden name. She told the reporter from *The Mirror* that she was born in Hamburg, Germany, in 1865 (not in the US or in 1869 as the *Guinness* book states); that she entered a gymnasium at age seven and “took a fancy for lifting;” and that by the time she was 11, she could “manipulate fifty and seventy-five pound dumbbells with ease.” According to *The Mirror*, She was hired to teach gymnastics and exercise at age 15, which she did for three years, but then she met Charles P. Blatt, an American professional strongman, who asked her to return to America with him and go on the stage. This was in 1887. The interview also reveals that shortly after her arrival in America Fox suggested she take the stage-name “Minerva.” She said Fox “put me in a contest between fourteen other strong women and I outlifted them all. He then backed me for \$1,000 and I have been a protege of his ever since.”¹¹

In a 1931 article, *Police Gazette* author Harry Sheland reminisced about meeting the young Josie Wohlford in Elizabeth, New Jersey. He reports that she was then about 5’8” in height and 165 pounds. He described her as a “mild, sweetnatured woman,” but he added that in later years, whenever she heard anyone refer to women as the weaker sex, “she’d get real mad and it was everybody’s cue to beat it.”¹²

In an 1892 interview, Minerva also mentions her temper and relates a story about a heckler:

I warned him to keep quiet and finally [he] dared me down off the stage. I jumped over the railing in front of the stage and went for him. Grabbing him by the throat, I threw him across the tent against a pole. I was so angry.¹³



By the time the first *Police Gazette* illustration appeared on October 28, 1893, [shown above], Minerva was clearly heavier than 165 pounds. In fact, her husband, in an interview following her death, reports that the two almost always weighed exactly the same—generally around 230 pounds.¹⁴

Though some of her bulk came from heavy lifting, a fascinating interview revealed another contributing factor:

Eating is about the principal part of my existence, and I always have the best I can possibly procure. For breakfast I generally have beef, cooked rare; oatmeal, French-fry potatoes, sliced tomatoes with onions and two cups of coffee. At dinner I have French soup, plenty of vegetables, squabs and game... When supper comes, I am always ready for it, and I then have soup, porterhouse steak, three fried eggs, two different kinds of salads and tea.¹⁵

Minerva

In any case, and at any bodyweight, Minerva was an incredibly strong woman. Shelland reported that he visited with Minerva again, when she was 24 and in her physical prime. He claims she was then capable of a “700 pound lift from the floor with two hands, and a one hand press over her head with 100 pounds.” She could also stand, he claimed, with her feet in a bucket and lift a 300 pound barrel of lime to her shoulders. And, finally, he credits her with being able to break horseshoes, and to catch 24 pound cannonballs shot from a cannon.¹⁶

Though it is easy to dismiss Shelland’s story of the barrel lift as just another example of weightlifting hyperbole, available evidence suggests otherwise. For, in a challenge letter published in the *Police Gazette* on January 20, 1894, Minerva requests that this exact stunt be done as part of a competition for her world title.¹⁷ Unless some trick was involved, it would seem doubtful that she would have made such a suggestion had this not been a feat of which she was confident, especially since Fox was putting up \$10,000 on this occasion to back her claim.

In the *fin de siecle* era, nearly every strongman and strongwoman claimed to be the best in the world, but Minerva was always ready and willing to meet all challengers.¹⁸ Furthermore, other lifts claimed by Minerva seem more or less believable when one considers her large size and massive body structure. The most weight she ever claimed in an overhead barbell press, for instance, is 185 pounds.¹⁹ Most of the challenge letters in the *Gazette* include such competitive lifts as “putting up” dumbbells with one or both hands, lifting the heaviest weight with a harness, breaking 12 horseshoes in the shortest amount of time and, last but not least, catching the most cannonballs in 30 minutes.²⁰

Minerva’s most famous feat of strength and the reason for her inclusion in *The Guinness Book of World Records* was a hip and harness lift performed in front of hundreds of witnesses at the Bijou Theatre in Hoboken, New Jersey, in 1895. The lift has never been approached by any other woman. It should be noted, however, that the *Gazette* says she lifted 18 men and platform for a total weight of approximately 3000 pounds, not 3564 pounds as quoted by *Guinness*.²¹ In his analytical history, *The Super Athletes*, David P. Willoughby disputes the lift and argues, “Evidently this lift was performed by lifting (inwardly) on the supporting chains rather than directly (straight up) on the platform...she may have been capable of a legitimate Harness Lift of 2800 or even 2900 pounds.”²² [Ed. note: Lifting inwardly would raise the weight just as it does when one pulls inwardly on the chains of a swing.] But Willoughby cites no evidence for his claim and, as the only report of the show at the Bijou appears to be

the one in the *Gazette*, it is unlikely we will ever know the truth. One certainty, however, is that in the retelling of this great lift, five men were added to the platform. The Gazette reports are clear that she lifted 18 men at approximately 150 pounds each, which, Willoughby fans will be pleased to note, totals 2700 pounds. As for the harness and chains, according to the coverage of the lift in the *Gazette*, they must have weighed approximately 300 pounds.

Whatever the actual weight, it so impressed Richard K. Fox that following the great lift in Hoboken, he had a solid gold commemorative trophy designed; he presented it to Minerva on April 29, 1895.²³ Earlier, following her victory over Victorine in 1893, Fox had presented Minerva with a championship belt made of golden dumbbells and 17 silver plates, 16 of which contained an engraving of Minerva and the words, “The Police Gazette championship belt, representing the female heavyweight lifting championship of the world...Presented by Richard K. Fox on December 19, 1893.” The center plate contained Fox’s likeness.²⁴ The whereabouts of Minerva’s belt and cup are unknown.

For approximately 20 years, Minerva and Blatt, who reportedly married in 1888, travelled throughout North and South America and Europe giving strength shows. Though a search of the city directories of Elizabeth, New Jersey, reveals that Charles Blatt resided in Elizabeth during 1887-1891, in 1898 and in 1902-1905, there is no mention of a wife, which is unusual.²⁵ Reports in the *Gazette* indicate that the Blatts were in Mexico City with the Orrin Brothers Circus during much of 1891 and that in 1892, they settled for a time in San Antonio, Texas.

Minerva’s arrival in San Antonio was heralded by a front page story in the *San Antonio Daily Light*. Headlined, “A Wonderful Woman,” it notes that she weighed 185 pounds with a 17 1/2 inch biceps, 44 inch bust and 33 inch waist. It also reports, “Mr. Blatt states that he will take two of the best horses in the city and let her take a strap attached to the swing tree, one in each hand, and let them pull in opposite directions without letting go.”²⁶

Finding that San Antonio suited them “to a T”, Blatt soon took over the proprietorship of “Central Park”, which was advertised on the front page of the August 25 issue of the *San Antonio Daily Light* as a “popular family resort now open under a new management.”²⁷ According to the San Antonio city directories, and ads in the *Daily Light*, the Blatt’s establishment was located in the heart of the city on Garden Street. Though Minerva always headlined the shows, ads in the *Daily Light* reveal that she shared the stage with the “renowned Nelson family,” and “Seleman who can lift a 500 pound rock with one finger.” There was also a concert band which performed during each show.²⁸

As for the rest of Minerva’s career, it appears that she spent several seasons with Barnum’s circus, four years in Europe touring with the Rentz Circus, and that she and Blatt also worked for the Orrin Brothers Circus in Mexico and South America. In between their circus engagements, they worked vaudeville, particularly Benjamin Keith’s Orpheum

circuit, which paid the highest salaries and had the best working conditions in the business.²⁹

As the 27 notices in Fox’s *Gazette* make abundantly clear, Minerva gave the impression of being ever ready to meet all challengers to her title. She defeated Victorine in 1892 and for the next several years she and another professional, “Yucca,” exchanged challenges and counter-challenges through the “Sporting News and Notes” column of the *Gazette*, though a real match never seems to have taken place.³⁰ In 1894, the Belgian strongwoman, Athleta, who had become famous appearing at the Alhambra in London, challenged Minerva, but again no match was ever reported in the *Gazette*.³¹ Other names which surfaced in the *Gazette* as possible contenders for the Fox belt during this era were Roberta, the champion strong woman of Cuba;³² M’lle Madro of France; Madame Robusta, who claimed to be “Champion of Europe”; Beulah, the Champion of Germany; and Myra, the champion of France.³³

Minerva retired in 1910, and reportedly spent her remaining years in Perth Amboy, New Jersey and Tottenville, New York, where she invested successfully in real estate. She died on September 1, 1923.³⁴

Although it may have been the case that, at age 42, Minerva was tired enough of life on the road and wealthy enough that she simply decided to hang up her belt and tights, it is worth noting that she retired at almost precisely the moment young Katie Brumbach (or Sandwina) arrived in America to grace Barnum and Bailey’s center ring. Despite her fame, Minerva’s life still leaves us with a number of unanswered questions. What was her real name? What happened to her championship belt and her loving cup? Did she have children? What were her actual lifts? How was she perceived by the men and women who saw her?

¹ McWhirter, Norris, ed. *Guinness Book of World Records*, (New York: Sterling Publishing Company, 1985) p. 462.

² Willoughby, David P., *The Super Athletes*. (Cranbury, New Jersey: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1970) p. 577.

³ Sandwina, whose real name was Katie Brumbach, began performing with her parents, who also did a strength act, while still a child in Europe. She made her American debut around 1907 with the Ringling Brothers Circus and continued performing in circuses and vaudeville halls through the early 1940s. She died in January, 1952. Information on Sandwina’s early life is available in Edmund Desbonnet’s *Les Rois de la Force*, (Paris: Librarie Berger-Levrault. 1911) pp. 375-377.

⁴ Gaudreau, Leo, The life of Louis Cyr, *Your Physique*, 7(August 1947) pp. 26-28.

⁵ Frank L. Mott, *A History of American Magazines: 1850-1865*. Vol. II. (Cambridge: Belknap Press. Harvard University, 1957) p. 325.

⁶ Desbonnet’s *Les Rois De La Force* contains biographies of many European male and female strength athletes who appeared during the Nineteenth Century. A partial list of professional strongwomen appearing in Europe prior to 1890 would include: Madame Gobert, Madame Doublier, Madame Ali Bracco, Madame Stark, “Olga and Kaira”, Anna Abs, Madame Montagna, and Athleta. Following 1890, there was an explosion of interest in professional strongwomen, particularly in England, and profes-

sional athletes such as Vulcania, Miss Robinson, Veluga, Athelda and Velua made good livings by giving strength exhibitions. (Strongwomen clipping file. Coulter Collection, Todd-McLean Sport History Collection)

⁷ Louis Cyr, Eugen Sandow, August Johnson, and Professor Atilla were frequently featured in the *Gazettes* and other publications of the 1890s. The peak year for strongman activity in the Police *Gazette* was 1893, the year Sandow appeared at the Chicago World's Fair. In 1894, Fox put up a challenge belt for strongmen and organized an official competition. Though not a complete bibliography, see: *The National Police Gazettes* of January 14, 1893; March 11.1893; May 5, 1894; September 23, 1893; November 14, 1893; October 13, 1894; September 29, 1894; July 28, 1894; May 5, 1894; April 22, 1893; September 23.1893; October 7, 1893; October 14.1893; October 28, 1893; November 25.1893; December 16.1893; January 27, 1894; February 3, 1894; April 7, 1894; April 14.1894; April 28.1894; etc.

Strongwomen mentioned in the pages of the *Gazette* after 1890 are: Victorine; "Yucca." (Mrs. John T. Welsh, of Oakland, California), Minerva's great rival, who toured with a number of America's largest tent shows; "Myra" the champion of France; Beulah the champion of Germany; Athleta; Madame Robusta, "the champion of Europe"; M'lle Madro of France and M'lle Angelo.

⁸M'lle Victorine, *The National Police Gazette*, (January 25.1890) pp. 7 and 13.

⁹ Letter, *The National Police Gazette*, March 13, 1891, p. 10. A copy of the letter is also included in Gene Smith and Jayne Barry Smith, eds., *The Police Gazette*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972) pp. 134-135. Although it is mentioned in several later *Gazettes* that Minerva defeated Victorine, no contest report appears in any of the *Gazettes* which survived from these years.

¹⁰ Reported in *The National Police Gazette*, (March 11.1893) p. 11.

¹¹ This interview was also reported in the *Gazette*, (March 11, 1893) p. 11.

Harry Shelland, who wrote for the *Gazette* in the 1920s and 1930s. remembered meeting Minerva in Elizabeth, New Jersey in the late 1880s before she made her stage debut. He claims that Minerva came to Blatt's attention by carrying a barrel of potatoes up two flights of stairs. (Harry Shelland, "Recalling the great Minerva, *The National Police Gazette*, December 28, 1931, Coulter Collection, Women's Clipping File). A later clipping from a 1974 re-issue of *Gazette* articles states that Minerva was a "native of Hoboken, N. J., and inherited much of her strength from her father, Joseph Schauer, who was so strong that no one would even shake hands with him the second time if they could avoid it." (Minerva: the strongest woman who ever lived, *The National Police Gazette*, (April 1974) p. 16.

¹²Shelland. Recalling. *Police Gazette*, (Dec. 28.1931).

¹³"Minerva" interviewed: a pleasant hour with the strongwoman. *Sun Antonio Daily Light*, August 15, 1892.

¹⁴ Minerva: strongest woman, *Police Gazette*, (April 1974) p. 16. C.P. Blatt's measurements are included in A strongman from Pittsburgh, *New York Times* (March 21.1891) p.8. He is described as being 5'9 1/2" tall "in his stockings" and weighing 205 without "a superfluous ounce of adipose tissue." He measured 43 1/2" around the chest and 17 1/2" around the biceps. Interestingly, this article makes no mention of Minerva even though, according to most reports. he married in 1888. Blatt is described as a native of Pittsburgh, not Hoboken or Elizabeth, New Jersey.

¹⁵"Minerva" interviewed, *San Antonio Dairy Light*, August 15, 1892.

¹⁶ Shelland, Recalling, *Police Gazette*, (December 28, 1931).

¹⁷ Minerva challenges the world, *The National Police Gazette*, (January 20, 1984) p. 11.

¹⁸ One story Shelland tells, for instance, which is undoubtedly press agentry, is that Minerva was so fond of horses that she used to stroll New York City and help pull big draft horses out of the mud or help push a loaded wagon up a hill. 'This was her manner of being kind to animals and you may be sure, the poor, tired and overworked beasts fully appreciated the assistance..." Shelland Recalling, *Police Gazette*, (December 28, 1931).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Minerva issues another challenge, *The National Police Gazette*, (November 5, 1892) p. 10.

²¹ Although later sources have cited her as lifting 23 men, the May 4, 1895 report of the event in the *Gazette* gives the number as 18. [See: Minerva's wonderful act: lifts eighteen men, combined weight three thousand pounds. *The National Police Gazette*, (May 4, 1895) p. 10.] Rosetta Hoffman in: The world's strongest woman, *Strength & Health*, 5(July 1937) p. 38, gives Minerva credit for 23 men and a total weight of 3564 pounds.

As of April 10, 1990, the author has been unable to verify the source of the often quoted 3564 pound figure. For this article, the author examined every microfilmed issue of the *Gazette* available between 1885 and 1907. While there are a few issues missing from these reels, the majority of the issues are on film. A search of the Hoboken papers from this time period did not turn up any articles citing her lift, though such a citation would have been unusual.

²² Willoughby, *The Super Athletes*, p. 577.

²³Minerva's wonderful act, *Police Gazette*, (May 4, 1895) p. 10.

²⁴The belt was presented to Minerva on December 19, 1893.

²⁵ Telephone interview: Elizabeth, New Jersey, Public Library reference librarian, March 30, 1990.

²⁶A wonderful woman: she lifts heavy weights, horses, etc., as though they were straws, *Sun Antonio Daily Light*, August 12, 1892.

²⁷ *San Antonio Daily Light*, August 25, 1892.

²⁸ Appler, Jules A., ed. *1892 General Directory of the City of Sun Antonio*, (San Antonio: Appler Publishing, 1893). Blatt is also listed in 1893.

²⁹Minerva: *Police Gazette*. (April 1974) p. 16.

³⁰Challenges between Yucca and Minerva appear in the *Gazette* on October 22, 1892 (p. 10); November 5, 1892 (p.10); November 12, 1892 (p.10); November 26, 1892 (p. 10); March 18, 1893 (p. 10); March 25, 1893 (p. 10); April 22, 1893 (p. 11); May 20, 1893 (p.10); October 7, 1893 (p. 11); October 28, 1893 (p. 7); November 28, 1893 (p. 10); January 6, 1894 (p. 10); January 13, 1894 (p. 10); January 20, 1894 (p. 11); and April 7, 1894 (p. 11). Though it was agreed at one point that a match would be held in Madison Square Garden on October 18, 1893, no mention of this contest actually taking place ever appears in the *Gazettes* available for this study.

³¹ Biographical information on Athleta is available in Desbonnet's *Les Rois de la Force*, pp. 380-387.

³²"Sporting News and Notes," *The National Police Gazette*, (November 18.1893): p. 10.

³³ "Sporting News and Notes," *The National Police Gazette*, (January 6, 1894) p. 10.

³⁴ Hoffman World's strongest woman, *Strength & Health*, p. 38.