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THE LEGACY OF *PUDGY STOCKTON*

In much the same way that John Grimek ushered in the Modern era of men's bodybuilding, Santa Monica's Abbye ("Pudgy") Eville Stockton is a pivotal figure in the history of women's exercise. Before Stockton there were a few professional strongwomen who trained with weights—large, often massive women such as Minerva and Sandwina who helped perpetuate the myth that weights would make a woman large, unattractive and, perhaps, a trifle coarse. In the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s, photographs of England's amateur strongwoman, Ivy Russell, appeared frequently in *Health and Strength*, and her unusual muscularity and strength created interest and wonder but failed to establish her as a feminine role model.

At the end of the Depression, however, petite Pudgy Stockton with her glowing skin, shining hair, miraculous curves and amazing strength appeared on the golden sands of Muscle Beach and became emblematic of the new type of woman America needed to win the War. Competent, feminine, strong, yet sexy, Pudgy made America's young men pant with desire, and also pant in their gyms as they tried to prove themselves worthy of her.

As bodybuilding author Al Thomas put it, Stockton's influence was enormous:

"The boys who drifted into the iron game in the 40s and 50s are now its chairmen of the board and chief executive officers. And somewhere, tucked away in these graying sensibilities resides a vision of the golden creature who bestrode that auroral patch of sand, the very name of which (Pudgy) still clangs a fire bell in the hearts of many a grizzled sometime iron pusher...She was sexy—let's get that one out of the way up front. If she provided an aesthetic, almost moral focus for her sisters, she was also as her counterparts today, a delight to the opposite sex. However, unlike her counterparts today, who have become almost indistinguishable units in an ever growing parade of physique women, Mrs. Stockton was unique, a nonpareil, the standard meter against which the centimeters and inches of her peers' athletic femininity

was measured. There hasn't been anybody since her who has dominated the field so completely and there won't be anybody who ever will again...There are so many luminaries today that none can dominate the bodybuilding firmament as Abbye once did."¹

Though Pudgy undoubtedly influenced thousands of men, she had an even greater impact on the history of women and exercise. In America, in the 1930s, Bob Hoffman's had been the lone voice calling for women to participate in regular weight training.² In *Strength & Health*, Hoffman used photographs of female gymnasts, acrobats and adagio dancers who did barbell training with their husbands or fathers, and these images helped to break down some of the old prejudices about weights making women large, mannish and inflexible. For instance, two photos of Pudgy Eville appeared in the September 1940 issue of *Strength & Health* with a caption that read, "This small lady has strength equal to a much heavier man, yet retains a small, symmetrical and most attractive physique. . . Further proof that heavy exercise, weightlifting, hand balancing and acrobatics will produce the ideal development for the ladies too."²

But Hoffman's magazine reached only those few already converted to the magic of iron, and it was, in fact, Pudgy's appearance in such mainstream publications as *Life*, *Pic*, and *Laff* that caused women across the country to take stock of themselves and begin to wonder if they, too, shouldn't lift weights.

Abbye Eville was born August 11, 1917 and moved to Santa Monica in 1924 where she remembers spending her free time on the beaches near her home. Her mother taught her to swim in the Pacific Ocean using a pair of water-wings and Pudgy now credits this act, plus her later reading of Bernarr Macfadden's *Physical Culture* magazine as the earliest influences which led her to a life in physical culture. By the time Abbye graduated from high school in 1935 she was known by the childhood name, "Pudgy," given to her by her father, even though, at 112 pounds,



she was hardly pudgy. After graduation, she began work as a telephone operator, later becoming a supervisor for the phone company in its Ocean Park office. She had begun dating her husband-to-be, UCLA student Les Stockton, during her senior year in high school and it was Les who inadvertently started her on her career in physical culture: "After I'd worked for a couple years for the phone company, my weight had gotten up to about 140 pounds, Pudgy recalls, and I was concerned about it. Les persuaded me to start exercising. He brought me some dumbbells and a York training course. I used the dumbbells some, and also did calisthenics, but I quickly discovered that the acrobatic work was a lot more fun to do."³

As Pudgy remembers it, it was in the summer of 1939 that her career as a handbalancer truly began. The WPA had recently erected a low platform on the beach in Santa Monica and it was there that she spent her afternoons learning how to perform "perfect" handstands. "I worked a split shift at that time for the phone company and so I had my afternoons free. Les and I and Bruce Conner, a friend of Les' from UCLA, would all gather there and practice in the sand. The summer that I learned to do handstands was the first time that I was able to hold Johnny Komoff in a low handstand while Don Brown did a handstand on my knees."⁴

As "Muscle Beach" exploded in the early 1940s Pudgy, Les, and Bruce Conner worked on increasingly complicated gymnastic feats and began making public appearances. "We called ourselves The Three Aces, and when Les was called to active duty in the Air Force, Bruce Conner and I did some appearances together. We did a lot of football game halftime shows, including some with Glenn Sundby and Wayne Long."⁵ In the fall of 1939, the foursome appeared at halftime at the UCLA vs USC football game where they were introduced as "Pudgy and her boys."⁶

Pudgy Stockton's unusual combination of strength, athletic ability and shapeliness made her a great favorite with photographers for both weightlifting and regular magazines. In 1939, *Pic* magazine visited the UCLA campus to take photos of the gymnastic team. Cece Hollingsworth, who coached the UCLA team, invited Pudgy to be there for the photo session, which turned into a large pictorial spread and a cover shot of her flying through the air between Les and Bruce Connor.⁷ That same year, a photo of Pudgy and Les was used by the Ritamine Vitamin Company to help market its new vitamin and mineral supplement and on August 7, 1939, the Universal Camera Company ran an ad in *Life* magazine which once again featured Pudgy flying through the air to land in Les' arms.⁸ As her professional appearances increased, and Muscle Beach's fame spread, other magazines and newspapers were also drawn to the Southern California coast to take photos. In 1939, for instance, Pudgy was featured by *Look*, *Pic*, and *Physical Culture* and appeared in all of the Los Angeles and Santa Monica papers. Two newsreels of that era also featured her—"Whatta Build" and "Muscle Town, USA."⁹ By the end of the 1940s Pudgy's figure had graced 42 magazine covers from around the world.¹⁰ All of this exposure gave her a national reputation and, in 1944, she began writing a regular column for *Strength & Health*, called "Barbells"; it appeared for just under a decade.¹¹

Though Pudgy's place in the history of women's bodybuilding is secure simply on the merits of her own career, her *S&H* columns are also extremely important. Writing in what was then the largest magazine of its kind in the country, Stockton featured strong, attractive women who were also good athletes. She featured her friends from Muscle Beach—women like Edna Rivers, Evalynne Smith and Relna Brewer Macrae—all of whom were also featured in such pictorial magazines as *Pic*, *Laff* and *Hit*. Relna Macrae, who then worked as a nurse and now makes her home in San Diego, was an excellent all-around athlete who was accomplished in adagio dance, jiu jitsu, handbalancing, aerial work and wrestling; she could also tear a Los Angeles phone book apart with her hands. Other "*Barbelle*" columns featured competitive athletes such as Walt Disney studio artist Pat King, who began weight training to gain weight and increase her endurance for running. In 1945, King, who trained with bodybuilder Gene Jantzen (and later married him), was performing barbell pullovers, overhead presses, barbell rowing motions and bench presses. These exercises helped her, according to Stockton, to run a mile in six minutes and 50 seconds, five miles in 47 minutes, to swim a mile in 38 minutes and to perform 900 squats (deep knee bends) in 53 minutes.¹²

Edith Roeder, a competitor in track and field as well as basketball, was another barbell devotee profiled by Pudgy. A former beauty contest winner, and trained by Stockton at her health club, Roeder worked hard at the Olympic lifts and, in 1955, she cleaned and jerked 170 pounds in a special exhibition held at the Junior National Weightlifting Championships.¹³

Stockton should also be credited for introducing her readers to the nascent California bodybuilding scene, which was centered then, as it is today, in Santa Monica. Following World War II, as America's servicemen returned home, many men and women interested in weight training and acrobatics gravitated to Santa Monica to watch and participate in the "Muscle Beach" extravaganzas. As Les Stockton recalled recently, "At first, all there really was at Muscle Beach were just some kids who'd go down to the beach to practice doing acrobatics at the Del Mar Beach Club. But under the direction of Deforest Most, or "Moe" as we all called him, who became the director of the Santa Monica playground, things became more organized. A few professional handbalancers began coming down to the beach to train, people like Betsy and Kitty Knight and Johnny Collins, who worked as a movie stunt man. Gradually, it evolved that regular exhibitions were held in the afternoons on the weekends. All kinds of folks participated in the shows—amateurs, professionals, children, weightlifters, bodybuilders, and handbalancers. The crowds were enormous. A large, raised platform like a stage was eventually built. It was just south of where the Santa Monica pier is now."¹⁴

It was during the War, according to Pudgy, that her interest in competitive weightlifting began. She and Les, who married on July 14, 1941, were stationed at Victorville Army Air Base in the early days of their marriage, and they trained in their backyard in Oro Grande, California. During this era, Pudgy was invited to give an exhibition of the three Olympic lifts at the Los Angeles YMCA.¹⁵ As usual, Pudgy was well received by the audience and it sparked her to continue working on the "Olympic three." In early 1947, with encouragement from Les and after eliciting support from some of the other regular women trainers at

Muscle Beach, she was instrumental in organizing the first weightlifting contest for women in the United States. Held at the Southwest Arena in Los Angeles on February 28, 1947, the contest featured nine women competing in three bodyweight divisions; it was called the “Pacific Coast Weightlifting Championships.” As far as can be determined from existing records, this was the first women’s weightlifting contest in the United States to be sanctioned by the AAU. Stockton’s lifts at that meet were 100 pounds in the press; 105 pounds in the snatch, and 135 pounds in the clean and jerk. She weighed 118 pounds. Two other lifting contests were held in the Los Angeles area over the next two years, and, in 1950, the AAU sanctioned a National Championships.¹⁶

In 1948, Pudgy and Les entered the gym business, opening a women’s gym on Sunset Boulevard next door to Walter Marcy’s men’s gym. Two years later, the Stocktons opened side-by-side men’s and women’s gyms on Pico Boulevard in the Beverly Hills area and in 1952 expanded into another gym in the Pasadena area in a partnership with John Farbotnik. Pudgy and Les gradually retired from their Sundays on the Santa Monica Beach as Muscle Beach, itself, wound down. Their daughter, Laura, was born in 1953 and the following year

Pudgy gave up her *S&H* column. Three years later she retired from the gym business in order to spend more time with her pre-school daughter. In 1960, with Laura safely in first grade, Pudgy returned to the gym business, working for Bruce Connor and his wife, Deloryce, at their gym, first on a part-time basis and then full-time until her retirement in 1980. Les, who retired as a Colonel from the United States Air Force, also retired from the gym business in 1980.

The Stocktons still live close to their beloved beach in Santa Monica. Three times a week (or more) they go to the beach for their exercise, which these days generally consists of 10 trips up and down the 200 stairs that go from the promenade along the Santa Monica cliff down to the shore. Their days are also filled with their other passion—collecting. Because of their daughter’s childhood interest in insects, the Stocktons began collecting beetles and butterflies in the mid-fifties. Today, they have one of the largest private collections of such insects in the world and are actively involved in trading and collecting.

Though Pudgy held only one “bodybuilding” title—she was selected by Bernarr Macfadden as “Miss Physical Culture Venus” in 1948 at the age of 31—her influence on women’s weight training has been enormous. When I began lifting weights in 1973, I turned to pictures of Pudgy for reassurance that I was on the right path. And Lisa Lyon, who it may be argued was the first “modern” woman bodybuilder, was inspired by Pudgy in the late seventies when she became a member at the gym where Pudgy then worked. Every woman bodybuilder who puts on a swimsuit and steps up on the posing dais, every woman weightlifter who strains under a clean and jerk, and every woman powerlifter who fights through the pull of a heavy deadlift owes a

debt of gratitude to Abbye “Pudgy” Stockton, who helped make these Modern sports possible.

It should be added that while this is a profile of Pudgy, it would not be complete without taking notice that her career—and her “impact” on men and women—would not have been possible were it not for her husband, Les. For it was Les who was man enough to encourage her—man enough to share her with the slack-jawed youths of Muscle Beach, the cameras, and life in the public eye—and who has been man enough to continue to share her with us all.

If Pudgy had power over men, she had equal, perhaps greater, influence on women. When she and Les Stockton began working out on Santa Monica’s beaches in the late 1930s, she almost immediately attracted major media attention. And, as the photos and stories about Pudgy and Muscle Beach appeared in *Pic* and *Laff and Life* and *Strength & Health*, other women began to see that muscles could be feminine, strength an asset, and working out fun. This was her great and enduring gift to the game.

¹ Al Thomas. “Out of the Past...A Fond Remembrance: Abbye ‘Pudgy’ Stockton.” *Body & Power*. 2(March 1981): 12.

²Todd. Jan. “The History of Strength Training for Female Athletes.” Paper presented to North America Society for Sport History. May 24, 1989, Banff, Alberta.

³*Strength & Health*, (September, 1940), 23.

⁴Pudgy Stockton, personal interview, Downtown Athletic Club, New York City, September 28, 1991.

⁵Stockton, “MBAA Members Pudgy and Les Stockton,” *Santa Monica Muscle Beach Newsletter*, 4(Fall 1990): 2 p2.

⁶Stockton, interview October 28, 1991.

⁷Stockton, MBAA Members,” p. 2

⁸Stockton, “MBAA Members,” p. 3.

⁹*Life*, (August 7, 1939): 22.

¹⁰According to Al Thomas, the two newsreels were made by Universal International in the late 1940s and lasted approximately 10 minutes each. Clips of “Whatta Build,” seen by the author, showed Stockton doing a variety of acrobatic stunts with her husband, Les, including holding him over head bad with one hand. (Stockton newsreel clips, on file, Todd-McLean Sports History Collection, University of Texas at Austin) Pudgy Stockton, herself, does not have a copy of either newsreel, nor does she remember exactly when they were issued.

¹¹Stockton, Les, Personal Interview, Downtown Athletic Club, New York City, September 28, 1991.

¹²Rivas, featured in “Biceps on the beach.” *Hit*, (April 1947).

could hold a “flag” (body extended horizontally in space while supported only by the hands gripping a pole), was a competitive swimmer and first rate tumbler. Evalynne Smith was Los Angeles all-city diving champion in 1937, 1938 and 1939, and was 100 meter swimming champion for 1937 and 1938. She began weight training to rehabilitate a childhood leg injury. [“Evalynne Smith: The Blond Bomber.” *Strength & Health*, (November 1942): 22-23. Rivers is featured in “Barbells” in June, 1944.

¹³Pudgy Stockton, “Barbells,” *Strenght & Health*, (May, 1945): 20-21.

¹⁴L. Arnold Pike, “Roeder taps women lifters”, *Strength & Health*, (March, 1950). 19. Roeder is mentioned again in Stockton’s Barbelle column for May/June 1950. Roeder was also featured in a Fox-Movietone newsreel of the first AAU national weightlifting meet for women held in 1950.

¹⁷Les Stockton, personal interview, Downtown Athletic Club, New York City, October 28, 1991.

¹⁸Unpublished letter, Pudgy Stockton to Jan Todd. October 1991

¹⁹Pudgy Stockton, “Barbells,” (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. The April, 1947 issue contains a report of the first contest. The second competition is reported in her August, 1948 column. In a recent letter from Stockton, she gives the dates of the second contest as January 18, 1948. It was called the Southern California Open Championships and was held in Long Beach, California. Five women competed. Six women competed on April 2, 1949 in a contest held at Marcy’s Gym in Los Angeles and in 1950, the MU sanctioned a national championship.

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