

Miss Apollina

by E. Rouzier-Dorcières
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Translated by David Chapman

Who in the athletic world does not know Miss Apollina?¹

She is like a living image of strength, and she certainly does not sigh like the pallid lady of the decadent poets:

I perish on my broken stem ...

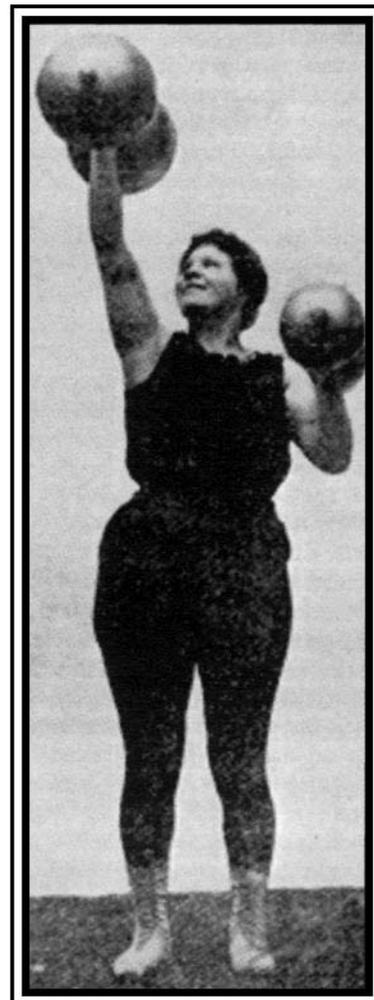
Miss Apollina, I can assure you, does not want to perish on her broken stem like a bloodless flower, for she is determination and energy incarnate packed into a powerful frame.

Elise Gillaine Herbigneaux—alias Miss Apollina—was born in Tongrine, a little village in the [Belgian] province of Namur on March 30, 1875. Her father is a brewer by trade. He has eight children. It is difficult to look after eight children when one is working, especially when a little imp like Apollina is counted in the bunch—she who would play hookey, romp around wildly, participate in violent games in the open air, and thanks to her willful attitude, tussle with the boys. In addition, she grew like Topsy. At thirteen years of age, she cheerfully took on exhausting jobs: she loaded and unloaded wagons with her own mighty and tireless arms. At fifteen years, at a time when the love of dances impels girls in the direction of village festivals, Apollina chose to imitate strongmen, dreaming only of strength and athletic prowess.

Alone and without anyone's knowledge (and regardless of how odd the activities to which she devoted herself) she trained in an attempt to imitate the feats of the Antwerp strongman, Jean Larrey. His act had been a revelation to her, and Apollina's deeply felt love of strength was confirmed from that moment on. She would become a strongwoman! The peaceful family of father Herbigneaux demurred more than a little when this plan was expressed, but Apollina wanted deeply what she yearned for. Did she not already come in secret

to triumph over the barbell of the Dutchman Salomon, the "chain breaker" who, during a performance in Liege allowed his "equipment" to be dragged within reach of the little girl?² Her earnest resolve triumphed over all resistance, and now she dreamed of entering a profession where members of the sex which one is accustomed to call "weak" are seldom found.

The gray Belgian sky was too dark and oppressive for the plans that she wanted to put into effect. She needed Paris—grand Paris—the city where anyone who has brains and muscles can break through to the sunlight. Thus, she went to Paris. There, the way was harsh and paved with disillusionment. The masses could hardly imagine a strongwoman; their idea of a woman was all wrapped up with slenderness and sentimentality, and in consequence, Apollina went through some bitter moments of hopelessness. It hardly mattered! The lines which furrowed her brow denoted an unswerving will, so she pursued her goal. She was dreaded in the world of strength because she was so fierce in her wrestling engagements as to allow little opportunity for fakery. She frequented the Arasse Gymnasium in the Rue de Ménilemontant, which was at that time the meeting place of all the wrestlers and amateurs



Apollina poses with dumbbells in *L'Éducation Physique*.

of Paris, and she trained with Roul de Cahors, Walford, Constant le Boucher, Schakmann, and Aimable de la Calmette.

Finally, after much effort, Fate, which is sometimes motivated by an idea of justice, turned a kindlier face toward Apollina. She left for Hamburg and returned victorious from a championship that was organized there. She emerged world's champion in international competitions in Liege, Brussels, Ghent, Charleroi and Mons where she defeated forty women holding that title which she defeated in wrestling competitions and which has never been taken away.

Next, England attracted her. She toured London and the principal cities, where she raised the audience's enthusiasm, for she often fought amateurs whose weight (11 stone) is the equivalent of around 150 French pounds.

Such is Apollina—a true sportswoman who adores her profession. She lives only for it. Although she has another person (aside from her husband) to whom she is devoted: a little boy, a lost child, a child whom she found in London and who was rightly and legally adopted. The child is now three years old, and Apollina, who is an excellent mummy, is raising him. If he follows the lessons of his adoptive mother, he will later become a famous professor of strength.

Such is the woman. Does it not appear that she well deserved a special mention in our columns? For she is an original: a rarity as well as an object-lesson.

Here are Apollina's measurements and feats in statistical form which were kindly supplied by her husband, Mr. Prud'homme.

Measurements: Height, 1 m. 65 (5'4"); neck, 0 m. 38 (14.96"); shoulder width, 0 m. 53 (20.86"); chest circumference, 1 m. 06 (41.37"); arm length, 0 m. 68 (26.77"); biceps at rest, 0 m. 35 (13.77"); biceps flexed, 0 m. 39 (15.35"); forearm at the bend of the

arm, 0 m. 30 (11.81"); thigh, 0 m. 66 (25.98"); calf, 0 m. 41 (16.14"); weight, 84 kg (185.18 lb.).

Feats: Steady arm extension of 20 kg (44 lb.); throwing a 20 kg. weight and catching it by the little rim; one-hand snatch of 48 kg (105.8 lb). in a single motion; one-hand snatch of 35 kg (77.16 lb). in a single motion and without bending the arm [*Ed Note: one-armed swing*]; 50 kg (110 lb). barbell lifted eight time with two hands; lifting an 80 kg (176 lb) barbell in two stages with two hands without spreading the legs or jumping beneath the barbell; lifting a 250-kg (550.15 lb) load on her shoulders and walking around and dancing with it.



Apollina regularly wrestled men in her stage performances.

—Image from *L'Education Physique*.

Notes:

1. Apparently, in 1906, the answer to the author's rhetorical question was "just about everyone." Although her feats are quite remarkable and she certainly deserves a little fame, the article makes it appear that Apollina was a renowned athletic phenomenon who would be familiar to everyone. In fact, no one I contacted had ever heard of the woman. One can only assume that she was a relatively local phenomenon or (more likely) a flash in the pan.

As for the spelling of her name, there is also some confusion as her name is spelled two different ways in the same article. The title spells the name "Miss Apollina," but in the text her name is written as "Miss Appolina." Since the first version seems closer to the original "Apollon," I have decided to use it in my translation.

2. I have been unable to find any information on Salomon or his act. Chain breaking was a popular stunt among early strongmen. It was also easy to fake. Biographies of most of these men can be found in *Les Rois de la Lutte* by Edmond Desbonnet (Paris: Librairie Athlétique, 1910).