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Pudgy Stockton: The Belle of the Barbell

Elizabeth McCracken

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The New York Times Magazine—The Lives They Lived, December 31, 2006.

The passing of Muscle Beach pioneer Pudgy Stockton on 26 June 2006 was notable not only for the loss of a pioneering figure in the history of women's exercise but also for the interest her passing generated among some of the most prestigious media outlets in the world. It wasn't unusual that the *Los Angeles Times* ran an obituary (Dennis McLellan, "Abbye Stockton, 88; Weightlifter Elevated the Status of Women's Fitness," *Los Angeles Times*, 30 June 2006) on Stockton, but it was surprising that her obituary took up nearly a full page of the newspaper. In the weeks that followed, notices of her death appeared in the *New York Times*, *Time Magazine*, and in a variety of other newspapers, like our own here in Austin, which reprinted the wire service versions of the *Los Angeles Times* and *New York Times* obituaries. There were even two different BBC radio shows that dis-

cussed Pudgy's passing. This coverage, together with the coverage in newspapers and muscle magazines, suggests just how important Pudgy Stockton was to the history of physical culture. Of all the attention paid to her death, however, the most surprising was the decision the *New York Times Magazine* editorial staff made to include her in their end-of-the-year special edition called *The Lives They Lived*, in which they featured the stories of the most notable men and women from around the world who had passed away that year. Pudgy—a genuinely humble person—was given two full pages in that magazine, and so we thought we would share with our readers the gracefully-written tribute to Pudgy's life crafted by novelist Elizabeth McCracken. It begins on the next page.



This photo ran as a full page image in the *New York Times* tribute to Pudgy Stockton.

—Jan Todd

The Belle of the Barbell: She Believed That Lifting Could Set Women Free

In those days it seemed that superheros were born—Created? Discovered?—every other day. Kal-El was shot from his doomed home, Bruce Wayne witnessed his parents' murder, an Amazonian princess's life on Paradise Island was interrupted by a crashed plane and a handsome wounded soldier. And in Santa Monica, sometime in the late 1930s, a young woman named Abbye Eville decided she'd put on too much weight in her job as a telephone operator and picked up the dumbbells that her boyfriend had brought her. Then she put them down. Then she picked them up again.

In real life, strength is not a rocket shot or expo-

sure to a wizard or a spider bite: you're not weak one moment and superheroic the next. It's a decision you make daily. Abbye Eville kept lifting the dumbbells. The telephone-company weight dropped away; her childhood nickname, Pudgy, became a fond joke. Her muscles became visible and then impressive. She taught herself to do a headstand, and then a handstand. Her first costume was a two-piece bathing suit jerry-built by her mother: men's swim trunks and a top patterned on an old bra—one-piece bathing suits were too confining for the stunts that she and Less Stockton, with the weights, had started to do with their friends south of the Santa

Monica pier, a stretch of sand that picked up the name Muscle Beach.

There were plenty of superheros in the making on Muscle Beach back then: Jack LaLanne, Steve Reeves, Joe Gold (who would found Gold's Gym). Crowds gathered and gawked. Harold Zinkin, who later invented the Universal Gym, made himself into a belly-up table to support a totem pole of three bodybuilders, feet to shoulders, standing on his stomach. A strongman named George Eiferman—a future Mr. America—lifted weights with his left hand and played the trumpet with his right. Adagio dancers tossed one another around like javelins; acrobats defied gravity and common sense. In photographs of the Muscle Beach hand-balancers, you can find Pudgy as a top-mounter or under-stander, upside down and right side up, with two women on each arm and a man on her shoulders or alone in a handstand, muscular and pocket-size: 5 foot 1, 115 pounds. Make no mistake: She's not toned or firmed-up or any of those timid terms that even 21st-century women persist in using when they decide to change their bodies through exercise. She's built. Her back is corrugated with muscles as she supports a likewise-muscular man—Les Stockton, now her husband, 185 pounds of bodybuilder—upside down over her head.

There were strong women before Muscle Beach, pale, leotarded circus and vaudeville performers, stoic as caryatids as they lifted extraordinary weights. Even their names seem carved from stone: Minerva, Vulcana, Sandwina, Athleta. But Pudgy Stockton was something brand-new. Every inch and ounce of her body refuted the common wisdom that training with weights turned women manly and musclebound. She was splendid as a work of art but undoubtedly, thrillingly, flesh, blood, breath.

What does musclebound mean, anyhow? It's an insult dreamed up by the underdeveloped. Pudgy Stockton's mission was to show women that muscles could only ever set them free. After the war she ran a gym on Sunset Boulevard called the Salon of Figure Development, and then she and Les opened side-by-side men's and women's gyms in Beverly Hills. Her business card

showed her on tiptoes—on the beach, of course—showing off her hamstrings, her biceps, her tiny waist, her impressive bust. “Foremost Female Physical Culturist,” it read. “Writer, Authority of Feminine Figure Contouring, Cover Girl.”

Women could also read “Barbelles,” the column she wrote for *Strength and Health* magazine. Jan Todd, a friend of Stockton's and co-director of the Todd-McLean Physical Culture Collection at the University of Texas in Austin, and a weight-lifting pioneer herself, says that the columns “argued that lifting weights would make you a better athlete—that was a very revolutionary message to be preaching to women.” Stockton featured stories of female athletes and ordinary women who trained with weights. “This woman over 30 years of age,” she wrote of one protégée, “with two children, and with no athletic background whatsoever, has brought about, by her persistence, these amazing changes. Her beautiful figure is a living proof of the intelligent application of this system of figure contouring.”

Pudgy Stockton retired from the gym business in the 1950s to raise her daughter, Laura. A few years later the Santa Monica workout area was torn down, and Muscle Beach—or a vague idea of it—moved down the coast to Venice. By then, Steve Reeves was Hercules and Jack LaLanne was a TV star.

“It seems like it was always sunny,” Pudgy Stockton said of the first Muscle Beach, her Muscle Beach. In photographs it is. See Pudgy and Les in the brushed-steel black-and-white California sunlight, showing off for the cameras and crowds. You can't see all the work it has taken them to get to this bright beach, both of them looking like sculptures come to joyful life; you can't tell who has kissed whom alive. They have lifted all those weights so they can lift each other. The wind pulls back Pudgy's hair and makes her squint. She stands, blond and lovely, on the palms of her husband's upraised hands while she presses a 100-pound barbell overhead. Then they switch places, and she supports him above her, hand to hand, she smiling up and he smiling down, as satisfactory a portrait of a marriage as ever could be.



Pudgy supported her husband, Les Stockton, and a barbell at Sig Klein's gym in New York City, November 1947.