

The European Corner

William Pagel: Circus Strongman

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Herman Goerner's exploits have been well documented, but less well known is the debt of gratitude he owed a fellow German strongman who helped shape his career before Goerner came under the management of W. A. Pullum. Herman Goerner's sponsor for many of his South African appearances was the unassuming circus proprietor, William Pagel, who had himself been the star of a "strength act" for many years. In his heyday, Pagel had been an exceptional strongman and it was only when his own powers were diminishing that he looked for a replacement. At the suggestion of Tromp Van Diggelen, Pagel contacted Herman Goerner and the rest is iron game history.

Pagel was born to North German parents in February 1878. Christened Frederick Wilhelm August Pagel, he was the second of eight children. While still a lad he left his homeland to become a sailor and part way through one voyage he bid farewell to his ship mates and left seafaring forever. He settled in Australia and although those were tough times he was well able to take care of himself, always being healthy and strong. At age nineteen he was a solid 230 pounds and he got himself a job in a licensed restaurant where he became indispensable to the owner by peeling potatoes, washing dishes and, most important of all, being a most effective bouncer and dealing quietly with any drunken or unruly customers. The perquisites of the job included four good meals daily and that meant a lot to Pagel who, when in hard training, could devour two pounds of bacon and twenty eggs in a day.

He was beautifully built at 6'1", and when he had fully matured he tipped the scales at between 240 and 280 pounds. He possessed huge wrists, much thicker even than the heavy-boned Goerner. When the opportunity occurred, around 1902, Wilhelm joined the Worth Brothers Circus in Australia as a strongman. Finally, after two years of hard work to get firmly established in Australian show business, Pagel bought a tent holding two hundred people. Then, in February of 1905 he sailed to Durban, South Africa, where he set up at agricultural shows in the most southerly part of the African continent. He personally topped the bill as a strongman and he became very much admired not only in this capacity but also as an animal trainer, specializing in presenting a thrilling lion-taming act.

Often he would do ten or more shows a day, each time carrying a 1,050 pound horse up two vertical eighteen-foot ladders placed side by side. He also resisted the pull of four horses, two on each arm. At one time while working for the Fitzgerald Circus, he did this tug o' war stunt using two fairly large elephants. The most thrilling part of his presentation was when he wrestled with an unmuzzled lion. His huge forearms carried hideous deep scars and one of his arms was badly mangled by a lion which mauled him and wouldn't let go until he punched it with his free hand.

In his lion-taming role he never carried a whip or a stick,

but would direct his beast with an ordinary lead pencil, which at the end of his act he would present to a delighted child in the audience. Before the advent of Goerner, Pagel often included other strongmen in his circus: Limudkin the Finn during World War I, and Jan Haven-ga, a Transvaaler he discovered doing extraordinary feats in a field.

The best weightlifting feat we can find credited to Wilhelm (or William as he became known) Pagel is a bent press of just over the hundred pounds. Perhaps if Pagel had been less modest and more publicity conscious we would know much more about this extraordinary German Kraftmann.

Each night he did a right hand bent press with a genuine 250 pounds. F. A. Hornibrook, a knowledgeable athlete who knew Pagel well described him as a singularly modest performer who would not exaggerate weights lifted.

A man of great courage, Pagel once saved "Captain" Rudolph Miller from a mauling but picked up injuries himself. In fact was animal-infected wounds he incurred during a tour of Netherland Indies which eventually led to his retirement in 1933.

Pagel married a small woman thirteen years older than himself. Mary Dingdale was born in 1865 in Leeds, Yorkshire, England, and she became very well known and popular in the circus world because of her personality and spirit. Said to be vulgar but vital, she had been married before and had some money which she gave to Pagel to help him start his circus. Stories of her abounded whenever international performers met and one of the favorites was an incident when they appeared at Gatooma, a Rhodesian mining town. The tough audience there were badly behaved during the first part of the program and then cat-called one of the acts.

Little Madam Pagel flew out of her box office and into the center of the ring and bawled so all could hear her clearly, "If you don't stop your bloody row I'll turn the bloody lions loose." The audience took her to their hearts and gave her a great reception and accorded the same treatment to all the acts which followed.

Madam Pagel's favorite pet, a young black-maned lion, would be driven around by her as she traveled to various pubs publicizing the show. She fed the animal with chocolates as it sat on the front passenger seat of her car and it waited patiently while she delivered posters and downed a few Guinness's at their various stops. The Pagels were quite a contrasting but compatible pair. Mrs. Pagel died in December 1939 at the age of seventy-four.

Pagel, scarred and battered, was still performing with lions at seventy years of age. Suffering a cerebral hemorrhage, "the Old Lion," as he was called died peacefully in his sleep at 5:30 PM on 13 October 1948 at Knysna, Cape Province and, as he would have wished, the show went on as usual.

Profile—Height: 5'11.25"; Weight: 238 lbs. (later 332 lbs.); Chest expanded: 48"; Neck: 17"; Biceps: 18"; Calf: 18"; Thigh: 27".