

Against All Odds: The Origins of Weight Training for Female Athletes

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There is, today, virtually no sport in which some form of weight training is not part of the conditioning programs used by both male and female athletes. Such, of course, was not always the case. Earlier athletes were warned away from the weights by most nineteenth century physical educators, including Dio Lewis, who believed that the use of heavy weights would produce the condition known as “musclebound” and thereby make an athlete slow and clumsy. Lewis and his philosophical kin did, however, encourage the use of lightweight dumbbells and Indian Clubs for women, and this encouragement introduced American women to the idea that their bodies could be strengthened and improved. As women’s athletics grew in popularity, gymnastic training of the sort recommended by Lewis was often required by schools and universities before women could participate in the “strenuous” sport of women’s basketball. In the first two decades of the Twentieth Century, Bernarr Macfadden frequently featured women athletes in his publications and showed them using dumbbells and other apparatus as part of their training.

By far the most important figure in the rise of weight training for athletes was Robert (Bob) Hoffman of York, Pennsylvania, who founded *Strength & Health* magazine in 1932. For the next 40 years, *Strength & Health* was the most important magazine in the physical culture field, and from its very first issue, Hoffman encouraged the use of weights by athletes. The first article for women appeared in 1934, and over the next 10 years similar articles appeared with regularity in the magazine. In 1944, Abbye “Pudgy” Stockton of Santa Monica, California, began writing a regular column for Hoffman in which she frequently featured women athletes who trained with weights.

Stockton’s “Barbelle” column opened many eyes, one pair of which belonged to 1952 Olympic Games swimming coach Walter Schlueter. Schlueter was also the coach of the Town Club Team in Chicago, Illinois; and, in 1952, he decided to place his women’s team on a program of free-weight exercises (squats, curls, bench presses, etc.) in the hope that it would improve their swimming. The training improved both their times and their stamina and marked the first time that a women’s team had been placed on a weight program.

Following the 1952 Olympic Games, at which it was obvious that many Soviet males and females were using weight training as part of their preparation, several women in North America began experimenting with weights. Two of the first were field event specialists Jackie MacDonald of Canada and Cynthia Wyatt (Reinhoudt) of New York, both of whom used weights prior to the Melbourne Games in 1956. For Wyatt, the weights made up for her lack of height and size. She was repeatedly featured in *Strength & Health* and other lifting magazines and her success helped to promote the growth of weight training by American field event specialists during the 1960’s.