

Pudgy Stockton and the Post-World War II Phenomenon of the Muscle Beach Girls

Jan Todd, The University of Texas at Austin

Abby (Pudgy) Stockton is a pivotal figure in the history of women's exercise. Before Stockton, there were women who trained with weights but, for the most part, they were large, massive professional strongwomen such as Josephine Blatt (Minerva)

and Katie Brumback (Sandwina) who helped to perpetuate the popular misconception that weights would make a woman large, unattractive. and, perhaps, a trifle coarse. But petite Pudgy Stockton, with her glowing skin, shining hair. miraculous curves, and her amazing strength was a new type of woman. In an era that celebrated the new-found competence of womanhood by creating female celebrities like Rosie the Riveter, Stockton was the physical embodiment of the World War II perfect woman. Competent, feminine and strong, she was also unabashedly sexy. As she became famous in the years after the war, she made young men all across America pant with desire -- and also pant in their gyms -- as they tried to prove themselves worthy of her.

Stockton had a power over men -- and an equal, perhaps greater, influence on women. When she and the man who would soon be her husband, Les Stockton, began working out on Santa Monica's beaches in the late 1930's, she almost immediately attracted media attention. And, as the photos and stories about Pudgy and Muscle Beach appeared in Pic. Look, Life, and Strength and Health.

In 1944, Pudgy began writing a column for Strength and Health magazine called "Barbells." From the first, her column featured strong, attractive women who were also good athletes. Pudgy featured her friends from Muscle Beach -- women like Edna Rivers, Evalynne Smith, and Reina Brewer Macrae -- and the fact that these women were shown to be accomplished in acrobatics as well as lifting did much to help the cause of weight training for women in general, and for women athletes in particular. Pudgy and Les Stockton also gave birth to the first sanctioned weightlifting contests for women. The first of these was held on February 28, 1947 and was sanctioned by the Southern Pacific AAU. Nine women competed, including Stockton, whose best lifts were 105 pounds in the snatch 135 pounds in the clean and jerk, and 100 pounds in the press, all done at a bodyweight of only 115 pounds, Three other lifting contests were held in the Los Angeles area over the next two years and in 1950, the AAU sanctioned a National Championship.

Stockton's influence reached well beyond her era, however. When women's bodybuilding started up in the late 1970's, Lisa Lyon, the first woman to win a bodybuilding title, turned to Stockton for advice and support. Every woman bodybuilder who puts on a swim suit and steps up on the posing dais, and every woman weightlifter who strains under a clean and jerk. and every woman powerlifter who strains through the pull of a heavy deadlift owes a debt of gratitude to Abby "Pudgy" Stockton, who, in large measure, made these modern sports acceptable for women.

This paper, drawn from personal interviews with Pudgy Stockton and from Ms. Stockton's scrapbooks, traces the career and the cultural impact of the woman known as "Ms. Physical Culture Venus" and "America's Barbell." Although primarily known for her physique, Stockton also contributed a monthly column to Strength &

Health magazine in which she featured many of her women friends from Muscle Beach. From her championing of these women grew the first American weightlifting contests and the idea that weightlifting and strength training could make women better at other athletic events.



The Todds and Muscle Beach Gang