

COMBAT AND ‘HEAVY’ SPORTS

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Rosetta Hoffman, Gracie Bard, Dorcas Lehman, and Alda Ketterman: The Women Weightlifters of Muscletown USA

This study focuses on the exploits of Bob Hoffman in York, Pennsylvania, which is widely known as Muscletown USA. For nearly half a century Hoffman dominated the sport of weightlifting, along with bodybuilding and powerlifting in the United States. It was largely through his efforts as president of York Barbell Company and publisher of *Strength & Health* magazine that the use of weights became an accepted means of pursuing health and fitness. Other innovations in which he played a major role included weight training for athletes, health foods (especially protein supplements), exercise as a therapy for convalescent and geriatric patients, isometrics and even anabolic steroids. Although Hoffman was by no means the first to advocate weightlifting for women, he did more than anyone to gain acceptance for the principle of heavy training for female athletes.

The means by which he sought to promote this was by drafting his wife and later his girlfriends to perform strength feats and to feature the women regularly in his publications. As Jan Todd has shown, it was possible to follow Hoffman’s marital and extra-marital affairs via the pages of *Strength & Health* in the magazine’s first two decades. He first glorified his wife Rosetta (Snell) Hoffman as the epitome of all-American womanhood. But by 1937, Rosetta-as a result of weight gain, drinking, and several auto accidents-could no longer be used as a model. Frequent acts of marital infidelity by both partners led to their separation and eventual divorce. In the meantime, Hoffman developed a relationship with Gracie Bard, a local entertainer on whom he lavished many expensive gifts and named as the chief beneficiary in his will. He also idealized and exploited her, like Rosetta, for commercial purposes. This had the effect of showing women readers (as well as their husbands and boyfriends) that weight training for women was not only possible, it was eminently desirable. Unfortunately Gracie’s lifestyle was a little too fast-paced for Hoffman, and she eventually ran off with one of his lifters to California.

Hoffman’s next girlfriend was a Pennsylvania Dutch amazon named Dorcas Lehman. Though at one time she weighed over 200 pounds, Hoffman idealized her as the “American Venus” and took pride that she could leg press over 600 pounds and withstand the shock of a 130-pound weightlifter leaping on her stomach from a step ladder. Unlike

Gracie and Rosetta, Dorcas harked back to the strong-woman days of Katie Sandwina. Eventually Dorcas stole a sizeable sum of money from Hoffman's safe and ran away to Florida where she married a welder.

Hoffman's final girlfriend-and common-law wife—was Alda Ketterman whose feats and form he also extolled in *Strength & Health*. She is shown clean and jerking 140 pounds whilst wearing high heels, and Hoffman rewarded her \$1.00 for each repetition she performed in World War II era exhibitions with York 75 pound ersatz swing bell. Hoffman characteristically showered Alda with expensive gifts and projected her as a paragon of womanhood. Unlike her predecessors, Ada stayed with Hoffmann and when he died in 1985 she inherited a substantial portion of his fortune.

The story I wish to present here is partially one of commercial exploitation, at least in the immediate sense. But in the longer scheme of things, Hoffman laid a foundation for women's participation and improvement in sport through progressive resistance training. An important underlying theme is the contradiction that existed at Muscletown between traditional and modern views of women. While Hoffman was innovative and enlightened concerning women and weightlifting, he continued to view their role chiefly in terms of satisfying men in the kitchen and bedroom.