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**Growing Up Strong: Pat McCormick, Relna McRae,
and Muscle Beach**

Pat Keller McCormick, who won two Olympic gold medals in diving in 1952, followed an unusual path to athletic glory. When McCormick was just ten-years-old, she began to idolize

Muscle Beach regular, Relna Brewer McRae, who had achieved considerable fame as the “world’s strongest girl.” This early hero worship had a profound effect on McCormick’s life. It caused McCormick to begin to spend most of her free time at Muscle Beach where she was taken under the protective wing of Santa Monica gym owner Barney Fry, who introduced McCormick to barbells and trained her specifically for strength. As McCormick explained in 1952, she wanted to be the strongest girl in the world too.

Fry’s workouts for young McCormick built such remarkable strength that she began appearing as part of the public exhibitions held at Muscle Beach on the Fourth of July and Labor Day. In one of her exhibitions she simultaneously supported two grown men and a teenaged girl on her slender 90-pound frame; the total weight was approximately 450 pounds. She was also able to execute 35 handstand press-ups at one time. The most any of the men at Muscle Beach could do at the time was 22.

Relna Brewer McRae proved to be an interesting role model for young Pat. At 5’3” and 115 pounds, she was amazingly strong. Although she trained with weights regularly, she specialized in strongman stunts and could rip phone books, bend iron and do a variety of supporting feats. However, rather than being ostracized for her strength, McRae was famous for her beauty. In 1937 she rode as part of Neptune’s court on Venice Beach’s Rose Bowl float and in 1938 she won the Miss Venetia beauty pageant for Venice, California. In the popular media she, like Pudgy Stockton, was almost always portrayed in favorable language extolling the “miracle” that she could possess both beauty and strength. This paper explores the relationship of these two women and how their lives intersected at Muscle Beach. It is based on interviews done with Relna McRae, her personal papers and scrapbooks, and with interviews of other Muscle Beach regulars.
