Fitness Innovation or Sexual Exploitation? Bob Hoffman and the Women Weightlifters of Muscletown USA

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Form rather than function succeeds in today's world.¹

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For almost five decades Bob Hoffman of York, Pennsylvania—often called "Muscletown"—dominated the sport of weightlifting, along with bodybuilding and powerlifting, in the United States. Largely through his efforts as president of York Barbell Company and publisher of Strength & Health magazine, the use of weights became an accepted means of deriving health and fitness. He also played a major role in other innovations, including weight training for athletes, health foods (especially protein supplements), exercise for convalescent and geriatric patients, isometrics, and even anabolic steroids. Although Hoffman was by no means the first promoter to advocate weightlifting for women, he did more than anyone to produce an acceptance of the principle of heavy training for female athletes. However meager his innovations may appear by today's standards, they were more striking to earlier generations and widely imitated by other promoters. What is equally important is the extent to which Hoffman's progressive views were accompanied by less-than-enlightened attitudes toward the role of women in sport and society and how these contributed to a legacy of sexual exploitation.

In the early twentieth century women's weightlifting was carried out on a limited scale. As Jan Todd points out in her 1992 article, "The Origins of Weight Training for Female Athletes in North America," it was promoted only irregularly by Physical Culture and Strength, the two leading fitness magazines. Only The National Police Gazette continuously publicized women

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weightlifters in that era, though most of those featured "were professional strongwomen, not sportswomen." The most frequent coverage was devoted to Katie Sandwina, a New Jersey "amazon" who in her prime hoisted a 600-pound cannon, jerked 265 pounds overhead, and supported a merry-go-round on her chest while six adults spun around. Even at age 64 she entertained customers in her tavern by bending bars and breaking chains. Sandwina set a standard during the so-called strongman era that many strongmen were hard-put to match.

While Katie Sandwina was not the only strongwoman to grace the pages of strength and fitness magazines at the beginning of the century, it was only with the advent of Bob Hoffman's *Strength & Health* in the early 1930s that women's weightlifting received serious and sustained attention. Hoffman himself was born in Tifton, Georgia in 1898, raised in Pittsburgh, and decorated for valor in World War I. Afterwards he moved to York and cofounded an oil burner company that eventually enjoyed spectacular success in the 1930s. While installing an oil burner in a grocery store, Hoffman met and fell in love with the store owner's daughter, Rosetta Snell. But his desire for money and his devotion to Rosetta never exceeded his love for sport. After taking her to the altar on October 20, 1928, Bob whisked her away to the Carnegie Tech football game. "I was crazy about athletics, but my wife never forgave me for going to a football game on our wedding day." Rosetta recalls that during their early years of marriage Bob "wanted to do barbell and weightlifting more than anything. Bob wanted it bad." The newlyweds first lived in a one-bedroom bungalow along the Susquehanna River. Here Bob recruited his earliest lifters, devised his barbell courses, and engaged in his first serious weight training. In 1929 Hoffman and his partner, Ed Kraber, acquired a permanent building at 51 N. Broad St. in York to manufacture oil burners and barbells. He also purchased some land in north York where he built a bungalow to accommodate his lifting club and in 1931 started constructing the multistory "House on the Hill," designed to be Bob and Rosetta's dream home.

Hoffman began making barbells as early as 1929 from the same facilities used to manufacture home heaters, but 1932 marks the real beginning of the operation. In that year he also began publishing *Strength & Health* magazine—publicizing his products and glorifying his ideas and exploits in the iron game. From its outset, Hoffman projected the feminine allure of his wife in the magazine to attract male customers and recruit lifters for his teams. Her image served also as a possible source of inspiration for prospective women athletes and trainees. Rosetta was portrayed as an exemplar of youthful femininity. In January 1934, *Strength & Health* featured pictures of a trim-looking Rosetta hoisting a set of chrome barbells on the clubhouse grounds. She was "the true glorified version of beautiful womanhood... pulsating with vigorous health and spontaneous youth." Later Rosetta authored the magazine's women's section. Ghostwritten by Bob,
its articles relegated *Strength & Health* women to traditional roles in the kitchen and bedroom. The first article, with the byline “House of Health Hostess,” was entitled “Men Prefer Plain Foods.” It featured recipes of “favorite foods that make the STRONG MEN smack their lips for more!” Emphasizing Hoffman’s love of York County cuisine, especially sauerkraut, chicken corn soup, and string beans, these articles were highly sexist and patronizing, noting that Bob’s exploits were overshadowed by his wife’s cooking. The Christmas issue of 1934 featured a wreath cameo of Rosetta on the cover, with pictures of her inside peddling exercise equipment. In a series on “Beauty Building for Women,” also ghostwritten, she affirmed that it was a woman’s duty to become fit and healthy to appeal to her male. Accompanying the articles were alluring pictures of Rosetta in wholesome settings—in a pensive mood, wearing Sunday attire, frolicking in the snow, sunning herself on the Susquehanna, and in a tender pose with her husband. She was also featured outdoors, canoe camping along the Juniata River, and on a Chesapeake Bay fishing trip with Bob’s employees, where she was not only pictured as having caught the most and the biggest fish but shown in her finest Sunday clothes, holding a 31-inch sea trout, and that in striking contrast to the others, in grubby attire.

None of these promotional features, however, were Rosetta’s doing. Remnants of her letters indicate that she lacked the knowledge of physical culture and grammatical skills to contribute substantively to her husband’s journal. Though Bob was able to capitalize on her youthful good looks, she appeared totally lacking in refinement. Former weightlifters at York most commonly describe Rosetta as “vulgar” and “trashy.” “She had a sailor’s vocabulary,” noted heavyweight Dave Mayor. In Rosetta’s articles there is an incongruity between the feminine subject matter and Bob’s masculine egocentric style. Occasionally the narrative lapses into asides on Bob’s favorite subjects—feats of legendary strong men and war stories of his exploits in France—hardly popular subjects for women readers.

Bob also used Rosetta at public strength fests in the early 1930s to promote camaraderie among his lifters. Iron game patriarch George Jowett observed that the American Continental Weightlifting Association championships in November 1933 featured a banquet hosted by Bob’s “charming little wife”:

> Everybody was welcome, lifter and spectator alike. The festive board groaned with the load of appetizing food. . . . Rosetta Hoffman worked like a Trojan to make the banquet a success, and she surely succeeded. Numerous toasts were given to this sweetheart of the A.C.W.L.A. . . . The bonny girl endeared herself to every one. Throughout the festival, the A.C.W.L.A. Glee Singers sang popular melodies in which all uproariously joined. Good fellowship was everywhere, but then this glorious good time is always the same at the A.C.W.L.A. headquarters in York, PA.
Another highlight was the strength show in December 1934. The York club house was jammed with 200 spectators who were treated to some fine lifting fellowship: "What a wonderful time, what fun. Good fellowship, records smashed galore, plenty of good eats, visits with old friends, meeting with new ones. A day of days." Highlighting the social amenities was a feast of sauerkraut and pork prepared by Rosetta, "the little Strength & Health lady." Unfortunately such servile roles only reinforced her husband's persona, and the oft-used little implied that she was less than a full person.

These considerations undoubtedly weighed heavily on their marriage, especially as Bob devoted far more attention to his business and sport than to his wife. Even the completion of their dream home in north York could not prevent their drifting apart. All who recall the Hoffmans' marital life, however, affirm that both were flagrantly disloyal. Furthermore, Rosetta's proneness for dissipation, in contrast to Bob's emphasis on health and fitness, suggests incompatibility. According to physique champion John Grimek, "Rosetta liked to drink and raise hell. She liked to go down to the bar on George Street." Yet until 1937 the Hoffmans tolerated each other. Signs of a breakdown appear in Bob's preoccupation with sex in his articles. He concluded that "Physical strength and sexual strength go hand in hand." Bob believed that "Strong men are capable of more sexual intercourse than the average man." Although he espoused married love, he also accepted the amoral view, a la Shakespeare, that "nothing is good or bad but thinking makes it so."

Another disintegrating factor to their marriage was Hoffman's total involvement in his work. He boasted in 1936 that he "worked ten days in a row for twenty hours a day" and drove 7,000 miles in five weeks: "On most of these trips there was an all-night drive coming back, five hundred miles or more at times. Three hours sleep while away and little before going. And then a rush of work after I was home." Hoffman, either out of love of sport (which happened also to be his work) or to avoid family responsibilities, was busy. Rosetta less frequently accompanied him on trips and longed for outings where she could relax. Hints of their separation appear in Bob's statement that a man "may acquire an uncontrollable taste for variety which prevents him from living happily with any one woman." Recalling Rudyard Kipling's lines, "The more you have seen of the others, the less you will settle to one," Hoffman concluded that the most frequent reason a man strays is that "the woman neglects herself physically." Pictures of Rosetta in successive issues of Strength & Health in the 1930s indicate that her youthful good looks were waning, and she was gaining weight.

Rosetta denies being disloyal to her husband: "I was a one-man woman." Yet, she admits that she was drifting away from Bob. She got tired of getting up at 3 or 4 a.m. to drive to weightlifting meets: "I didn't like going to the Army-Navy game. I wanted to travel and see something."
In 1936 she escaped with a girlfriend to Annapolis for several weeks. Then, in 1937 she was injured in a serious accident. Details are sketchy, but it appears that Rosetta hit another woman while driving drunk, thus producing much embarrassment and financial expense for Bob. After convalescing “on a lengthy fishing trip by trailer” to Kentucky, Rosetta journeyed to a camp in Santa Monica, where she was treated by a local doctor. She wrote to her husband in despair, longing for a return to an active life and stating how much she loved her husband and her home. About the same time, Bob received another letter from Connie, a woman in Chambersburg with whom he had recently had a fling at a hotel in nearby McConnellsburg. “Darn I’m lonely,” she wrote. Hoffman thus took advantage of his wife’s prolonged absence. Indeed, many years later he admitted to his most outstanding lifter, Tommy Kono: “I didn’t really start having fun until I was thirty-eight” (i.e., in 1937).

Bob remained married to Rosetta until 1944 and supported her for the rest of her life, but she was never again part of his personal or professional life. The departure of the “Sweetheart of the ACWLA” left a large void in his organization. A woman was needed who could be placed on a pedestal for Hoffman’s overwhelmingly male following. Rosetta’s articles still appeared in Strength & Health, but beginning in March 1938 they were illustrated by Gracie Gerzetski, a local model and dancer (stage name, Gracie Bard). Bob became infatuated with Gracie, but his story of how she had converted to the “strength and health” way of life appears fanciful. Formerly she had been “staying out much of the night . . . drinking and smoking too much with friends and patrons of the clubs where she danced,” getting little sleep, and eating only sandwiches. Her reform was pronounced as total—“At least two good meals a day, cream and eggs, good solid food, more than enough sleep, and a great deal of exercise made a difference. And she was happier when she found a new interest.” Few readers probably realized that Gracie’s “new interest” was as much Hoffman as his philosophy of health. “It is possible,” Jan Todd observes, “to follow Hoffman’s marital and extra-marital arrangements via the pages of Strength & Health in its first two decades.” Increasing pictures and endearing references to Gracie indicate that Bob had found a new “sweetheart” to bolster his virile image.

As cheerleader/mascot, Gracie began accompanying the York weightlifting team to meets. In his report of the 1938 national championships in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, Hoffman dwells as much on her personal attributes as on the lifting. She “won the hearts of all those present . . . The world little knows what an important part this little lady has played in helping and encouraging a host of American weight lifters.” In the upcoming dual meet with the German national team, the United States would go into action.
Fortified with some of the world’s finest cooking prepared by this little strength athlete and dancer. A promise of a dish which sounds ordinary at first thought, baked beans, helped Stanko win. For Gracie’s beans have become a legend with all who have tasted them. The writer defeated Weldon Bullock, Dave Mayor and John Grimek in an eating contest, consuming seven heaping dishes of these beans while the best my able rivals could do was six. All the other dainties were passed up to eat beans and the ten pounds of bacon and pork they contained. . . . Gastronomic history will probably be made when the United States team and the German team put their feet under a table literally groaning with beans, at Gracie’s beautiful country home.23

Thus, Gracie’s beans replaced Rosetta’s sauerkraut as the inspiration for American weightlifting. At the subsequent match with Germany, Gracie was ever present, not only serving beans but dressed in an “attractive little uniform” selling souvenir programs. On Thanksgiving 1938, Hoffman, John Grimek, Steve Stanko, and a young Philadelphian, Jack Graves, were marooned by a snowstorm at Gracie’s country home. They disposed of the turkey and some of Gracie’s chickens before Gord Venables and John Terpak rescued them.24 When the York gang went to Cuba in 1939, Gracie is pictured prominently in their frolics.25 She seemed indispensable.

That Gracie might have contributed in any serious or professional way to the York organization seemingly never occurred to Hoffman. Instead, her primary role as sexual partner and booster for Bob’s colossal ego relegated her to an unending series of trivial assignments that would exploit her winsome feminine charm. In addition to helping at shows and accompanying the York team on trips, Gracie modeled Hoffman’s exercises and products in the magazine. Her picture in a dancing pose with Grimek on the April 1940 cover was the most popular to date. As with Rosetta, the woman’s place was portrayed as one of satisfying her man with food and sex. Soon Gracie was placed in charge of the women’s section, her first article being “The Smart Woman Plans Her Meals.” Bob invariably wrote all of Gracie’s articles, as evidenced by his rambling style and references to such legendary strongmen as George Hackenschmidt and Stanislaus Zybyscko, of whom Gracie could have known little. Money, a farmhouse, cars, and clothes were Gracie’s rewards for satisfying male expectations of her gender.26

By the spring of 1941, however, Gracie was becoming restless. She began performing with a dance band in Philadelphia, then consorting with Orville Grabeel, a lifter she had met during an exhibition tour with members of the York team in California. Grabeel, a muscular light heavyweight, soon showed up at York, where he got a job with Bob. His relationship with Gracie blossomed as they developed an acrobatic act called the “Hawaiian Love Dance.”27 Hoffman tried to tolerate their partnership and even
featured them in the magazine, but when Grabeel tried to lure Gracie away, Bob perceived that vital issues—impinging on his manhood—were at stake. He explained to a friend: "A pretty husky weightlifter decided to kill me the other day because Gracie Bard decided to keep her job here instead of going away with him." Aside from bruised hands, Hoffman claimed he didn’t get hurt: "As they often say, you should have seen the other fellow." But Gracie could not be held against her will, and several months later she eloped. From Los Angeles "little Gracie," as Mrs. Grabeel, wrote to Hoffman:

I notice you are still using my name and articles in the magazine. If you wish to continue I would be glad to have you do so providing you pay for it. I am training every day and look better than ever. I intend to publish a book on Nutrition also a special course for ladies, and a booklet on what weightlifters should eat. I’m sure it wouldn’t hurt your business and it would help me. If you would like me to train with a York Bar Bell, I would appreciate it if you would send me one. I could use my chromium plated B.B. which you gave me for a gift. I left it at the Y. Gym. . . . I am enclosing a few late snapshots you are welcome to use.29

Obviously Gracie wanted to become a functional human being—a real contributor in her own right to the physical culture field and not just a male appendage. Hoffman probably could not understand why she would want to escape the security of being a "kept woman," and it must have bit deeply into his ego.

Bob quickly rebounded from Gracie’s rejection by developing relationships with several women. One was Dorcas Lehman, whom Bob introduced as "a leading contender for the title of ‘American Venus,’ or ‘America’s strongest woman.’" The daughter of a local grocer, raised on Pennsylvania Dutch cuisine, Dorcas’s weight once rose to the “frightening figure” of 201 pounds. With Hoffman’s inspiration and courses, she lost over 50 pounds. Like Gracie, Dorcas reformed from a life of rich food, drinking, and smoking, and never ceased to marvel at how “wonderful” she felt.30 A feature article showed her on “Silver,” once dubbed “Gracie’s pony.” And as Gracie had been the “strongest woman for her size in the world,” Dorcas, having pressed 125 pounds, was “the strongest girl we have ever seen.” Soon Bob was extolling the virtues of oversized women. He ascertained that Dorcas’s dimensions were roughly those of Venus de Milo. "Undoubtedly Venus was a strong woman, 39 inches around the hips," with strength derived "from generations of hard working ancestors." Like Dorcas, Venus “must have weighed at least 150 pounds.” Hoffman thought many readers preferred "a girl who has strength and muscle" to the slender "undeveloped" type epitomized in the Miss America Pageant.32
Alda Ketterman was another of Hoffman’s girlfriends. Though not as hefty as Dorcas, Alda was also strong, and she was featured in *Strength & Health* for having pressed 85 pounds the first time she ever saw a barbell.33 Bob predicted she would attain “world fame for her strength and lifting ability.” In 1943 she set a record for “swinging a 50-pound dumbbell from the floor to overhead 30 times with her left arm. Everyone wondered where a girl who is tall and slender, 135 pounds and 5 feet 7 inches could have so much power.”34

Alda recalls first meeting Bob in 1940. She was divorced with two children and lived in Dover, just northwest of York. It was a miserable day. She was depressed and suicidal when she met Bob on a country road and went for a ride with him. “People in York disapproved of him,” she states, and some Dover citizens were even going to tar and feather him. “He can bring in his prostitutes,” they said, “but he can’t have one of our own.” But Alda regarded Bob as “the nearest man to God I ever met and continued to date him.”35 By enlisting his girlfriends to his cause and publicizing their physical prowess at weightlifting shows and in his magazine, Hoffman would do more than any other promoter to advance the concept of weight training for women. Visual portrayals abounded of women’s intrusion into what had heretofore been an almost totally male enclave.

During World War II women remained central to Hoffman’s image as a physical culturist. Dorcas and Alda’s pictures and articles frequently appeared in *Strength & Health*. Alda, who managed some of Bob’s properties, was featured in an article on swing-bells, an ersatz dumbbell that Hoffman was promoting due to material shortages.36 At a 1944 exhibition at New Castle Army Base, Bob offered her a dollar for each swing with a 75-pound dumbbell over five repetitions. She made fifteen and proceeded to clean and jerk 140 pounds in high heels.37 In July 1944, Abbye “Pudgy” Stockton, a West Coast female strength athlete, initiated a “Barbelles” column in the magazine. It featured Dorcas in August. At 160 pounds, she was “super powerful, well muscled and so well developed that she has been called a female John Grimek.” Anxious, however, that she should not be perceived as overweight, Bob boasted that she could pull in her waist to 24 inches: “When she pulls in her waist, one expects to see the backbone come through.”38

Bob was divorced from Rosetta in 1944, but she still occupied one of his farmhouses and held a lien on their House on the Hill. Rosetta remained a personal and financial strain on Hoffman, and the irregularity of his personal affairs continued to alienate York citizens.39 Once, when asked by a *New York Times* reporter about records he held, Bob bragged that he was world champion for sexual intercourse in one night at 16 ejaculations.40 “He has a greater interest in sex than most of us,” observed iron game pioneer Ottley Coulter, who ascribed this “quirk” to Bob’s need to “prove himself his masculinity.”41
Hoffman proved adept at cultivating multiple relationships and integrating his sexual partners into his business. Throughout the war Dorcas remained on the company payroll, and Alda performed government-related work by driving a truck to New Jersey. Afterward, Bob’s girlfriends shared in the postwar prosperity and publicity that converged on York. Hoffman’s success as a physical culturist and weightlifting coach soon prompted the city’s designation as “Muscletown USA.” Hoffman rewarded his male lifters with jobs, trips, and fame, and his women weightlifters with money and favors. When Bob brought Dorcas to New York in the spring of 1947, journalist Red Smith referred to her as a “nonconformist” and a “flower of femininity”:

Her clothes, lips and fingernails have a good deal of red in them and her hobby is letting large gentlemen jump on her stomach. It amuses the lady to form a bridge by placing her feet on one wooden bench and her head on another, whereupon a 230-pound man sits on her abdomen and swings his feet. York, which is a nest of weight-lifters, has a 132-pound Hawaiian named Emerick Ishakawa, national featherweight champion. When Dorcas is making like the Triborough Bridge, she permits little Emerick to leap upon her diaphragm from a height of five or six feet.

Anxious that Dorcas should fulfill the existing stereotype of “a complete woman” Hoffman explained to the reporter:

“She has 200 pairs of shoes, size 9 1/2, lots of which she’s never worn.”

“I just like lots of clothes,” the lady said. “Lots of times I just stop in a store and buy four, five pairs without trying ‘em on. Just give the size.”

“Furthermore,’ Mr. Hoffman said, “she is a wonderful cook and a marvelous dancer. That’s her only dissipation—dancing. She loves to eat.” 42

Concurrently, Fortune magazine, referring to Hoffman as the “unquestioned Czar of American lifting,” noted

[He is] generous to his two girl friends in York, each of whom has a house and a business; one operates a little taproom and the other a dress shop. About his private life Bob Hoffman is earnest and frank. “I’m strong,” he says, “I have to have two girls. I’ve been going with both of them for eight years and I can’t bring myself to break either’s heart by giving up one or the other . . . A strong man can take more than anyone else, but there are limits. He can smoke or drink or make love to the ladies. I don’t smoke or drink.” His two friends are both proficient weight lifters, and a pleasant evening spent in the company
of either often consists of competition lifting in Hoffman’s parlor. “We could use the gym out in the garage . . . but somehow we always seem to work out in here on that thousand-dollar rug.”

Despite his success, Bob was regarded as a social pariah in York. It was easy for community leaders and citizens to look askance at this relative newcomer who pursued improper relationships with local women and published a magazine featuring pictures of nearly naked men.

The promiscuous nature of Hoffman’s female relationships continued into the 1950s. As with male comrades, he tended to discard female partners after their contributions to his company, cause, or ego were passed. The farther back the relationship extended, however, the harder it was to sever emotional ties or rid himself of guilt. He continued to send monthly checks to Rosetta, who sent letters combining fond memories with further appeals to his generosity. There were also supplications from former in-laws, including Rosetta’s mother, for money and housing. Gracie stayed in touch with Grimek and others from the old York gang, but it is doubtful that Hoffman ever saw her again. For years Bob had sustained relationships with Alda and Dorcas and bestowed equal favors on each. And he continued to be drawn to other women. When Bob was in Venezuela in the early 1950s, $3,000 disappeared from his safe. Upon returning, he blamed Dorcas, who promptly moved to Florida, where she married a welder.

After Dorcas’s departure, Bob had another girlfriend, who worked at the Bon Ton department store in York and, according to Strength & Health editor Jim Murray, was “a total prostitute. She was arrested for performing oral sex in a parking lot.” Bob entertained most of his friends at the House on the Hill, according to 1952 Mr. America Jim Park, who lived next door. He and his wife watched many women come and go. It is little wonder that when Murray informed York citizens that he worked for Hoffman their “eyebrows raised.”

Indeed sexual promiscuity was the vice in which Bob indulged freely, and at home or abroad, he used women to bolster his sense of manliness. Rosetta and Alda concur that Bob’s sexual appetite, like his ego, knew no bounds. “Bob Hoffman did what Bob Hoffman wanted to do,” recalls Alda. “If he wanted to date someone else’s wife, he would.” Such multiple relationships were encouraged by the likelihood that he was sterile. Still, he paid for at least four abortions, and the presence of numerous scientific reports on venereal disease in his papers suggests that he exercised some caution in sexual matters. Though Hoffman never remarried, and dated many women, Alda was in essence his wife and the most direct recipient of his generosity. After living with her for a decade in Dover, Bob decided to satisfy her desire for a large stone house in 1956. It was to be their dream home, a handsome one-story bungalow (with bay window) constructed of Italian stone by the same masons who had built the House on the Hill—
“a veritable paradise.” But Alda earned it through many years of tolerating and sustaining Bob’s ego. Being “it” with women was important to him, and Alda never let Bob feel that he was ever anything less than It.49

By this time, however, Hoffman’s girlfriends were ascending into middle age and no longer as inclined to display feats of strength in public. Still, women were no less important in projecting the overall image of fitness at York, chiefly through Pudgy Stockton’s “Barbelles” column in Strength & Health, which featured the likes of Edna Rivers, Evalyne Smith, Relna Brewer Macrae, Alyce Yarick, and Edith Roeder—all of whom, as Jan Todd points out, were “strong, attractive women” and gifted athletes in their own right. Macrae was “accomplished in adagio dance, jujitsu, handbalancing, aerial work and wrestling, and she could supposedly tear a Los Angeles phone book apart with her hands.”50 The addition of Jim Murray to Hoffman’s staff in 1951 further emphasized weight training for athletes and enhanced the coverage of women in this context. It would be a mistake to conclude, however, that his overall portrayal of women emphasized function over form. While Murray’s 1955 article on Canadian thrower Jackie MacDonald did address her athletic training and accomplishments, it is laced with such patronizing adjectives as “attractive,” “shapely,” “glamorous,” “beautiful,” and “cover-girlish.” In the title she is labeled a “Glamazon.”51 Most other depictions of women are set in the many “Miss” pageants that often accompanied physique and weightlifting contests for males. Women, however, were judged for form and beauty (aesthetics) rather than muscularity and definition (work potential). The role of women in virtually all cases was ancillary, with bevvies of beauties expressing astonishment and delight at the flexed biceps of male bodybuilders. Perhaps the ultimate attempt to reconcile some sense of purpose to women’s ephemeral role in physical culture was Al Christensen’s article on “Outdoor Training for Florida Beauty Queens” in the September 1955 issue of Strength & Health.52

Only eight months after the publication of this piece, Christensen’s wife, Vera, replaced Pudgy Stockton’s “Barbelles” with a new column, “To the Ladies,” which would run for the next three decades. Editor Harry Paschall’s outlook, like that of Hoffman and his predecessor, Murray, was innovative toward greater participation of women in health, fitness, and sports activities. But his traditional attitude toward women’s place in society is reflected in his use of the slighting expression “petite and pretty” in introducing Vera Christensen. That Christensen herself, probably reflecting the views of most women of that era, subscribed to this masculine stereotype is evident in her opening remarks:

Why do women exercise? Do they want to get strong, and build “lumps” like the men? The answer is obviously NO . . . a thousand times NO!
What women most desired was "health and beauty," attributes that would be most beneficial in attracting and pleasing males. For the next three decades Christensen plied hundreds of training techniques (specially designed for women) on Strength & Health readers. Aside from whatever statement their very presence made, there is little indication that they had much impact. A 1967 survey of reader preferences conducted by editor Bill Starr indicated that "To the Ladies" was the least popular feature in the magazine. Furthermore, by being relegated to a remote corner of each issue and featuring women in nonthreatening roles, Christensen, no more than Rosetta, Gracie, Dorcas, or Alda, was able to break the mold of male domination at York. The journal's unchanging format, reflecting its inability to keep up with the times, no doubt contributed to the 1985 demise of Strength & Health.

While York remained a center for unreconstructed manhood throughout the liberating 1970s and 1980s, the person most responsible for this attitude was Hoffman. However innovative he may have been in promoting weight training for women, paternalism prevailed in Hoffman's personal relationships and general regard for the opposite sex. To Rosetta, living in Maryland, he continued to send $200/month, for which she regarded him as "the kindest, generous, and most finest man in the world." Alda Ketterman, Bob's current partner, was more than a wife. She was a helpmate who provided him with emotional stability and could even be described as a business partner. In diversifying his holdings for tax relief, Hoffman had created Better Nutritional Aids as a holding company and placed it under Alda. A further means to siphon monies from York Barbell was provided by Dover Advertising, and Alda also owned and operated the Thomasville Inn. Having such a stake in Bob's fortune possibly made his shortcomings more tolerable. That Alda should fault him for being unfaithful is hardly surprising. But Hoffman never viewed it the same way. "Unfaithful!" he once exclaimed. "I've been seeing the same four women... for over twenty-five years, at least once a week when I'm in town. . . . The same four women! If that's not being faithful, I don't know what faithful means." Still, Bob pursued others. At one point, Winston Day, Bob's pharmaceutical supplier, introduced him to a "Philadelphia girl" named Bunny who was a "semi-pro[stitute]." Hoffman would bring her to York by train for an afternoon at the House on the Hill. When he visited Day's office in a not-so-nice area of Philadelphia, he would "often leave a girlfriend sitting in the car for four or five hours" while he transacted business.

In his twilight years in the 1970s, Hoffman's libido slowed down, and he became increasingly preoccupied with the aging process. Often this was expressed by his concern over sexual function and dysfunction. In How To Keep Your Husband Alive Longer (1974) Hoffman discusses the merits of couples sleeping in separate beds: "My wife is not so far away. . . . It's
a walk to the next room but I believe in exercise and we can call that physical fitness.” That separate spheres predominated Bob’s attitude toward women in general, and Alda in particular, is evident in his advice for men:

Your “love” likes affection even when you are not in bed. Don’t forget to kiss her good-bye, and kiss her hello when you come home. Wives, be interested in your husbands work, his business, ask him what kind of a day he has had. . . . Men, don’t forget flowers, little gifts, candy if weight is not a problem. A Hoffman food bar will smooth away a lot of troubles.

Increasingly he referred to Alda as his wife, and in many ways they experienced the joys of married love. “The life she has made for me is the principal reason why I am a leading contender for the title, ‘World’s Healthiest Man.’”58 But if Hoffman’s patronizing though sincere comments are any indication, the real secret to “keeping your husband longer” was to take care of him, as Alda did for Bob.

Likewise, Bob never ceased to take care of Alda and his other girlfriends who contributed so much to his emotional well-being. He was exceedingly generous to them prior to his death in 1985 and made ample provision for them in his will. To Alda he bequeathed his considerable personal property and one-third of the voting stock in York Barbell Company, thereby giving her a considerable financial stake in the corporation. Most of the others named in Bob’s will were also women. Four of them—Rosetta Morris, Helene Lukens, Helen Gemmil, and Ruth Snellbaker—were beneficiaries of a special $335,000 trust. Bob justified a further $105,000 allocated to Lukens on the basis of her appearance when she accompanied him on professional shows. “She, more than any other,” he stated in his will, “was responsible for the early popularity of Hoffman products; since 1948 she has gone to contests and conventions where she with her good looks and sales ability did a great deal to promote . . . our overall business.”59 Neither Rosetta, Gracie, Dorcas, Alda, nor other women at York built lasting reputations as outstanding weightlifters or bodybuilders. Notwithstanding their pioneer role in feminine physical culture, it is doubtful whether they served as extensive role models in a magazine that had an overwhelming male readership and in an organization that was so thoroughly permeated by masculine culture. They served first and foremost to satisfy Hoffman’s sexual appetite and his need to conquer and dominate the opposite sex. Beyond that, Hoffman’s women served to validate the male ethos of his followers by creating and preserving the subordinate and separate position of women. The roles that were constructed for them stressed form over function and did as much to define male as female identities.

However, York was by no means unique in its exploitation of women. Joe and Ben Weider, Hoffman’s most formidable competitors for three decades, were even more explicit in utilizing females for commercial or
self-promotional purposes. From the instigation of the two men’s *Your Physique* magazine in the early 1940s, women were portrayed in a sexier fashion, often with a seductive or cheesecake appeal. Most striking was Val Njord, a Swedish-born secretary from Los Angeles who won many local beauty pageants. Val served frequently as a cover girl. The November 1949 issue of *Your Physique* featured her pinup photo to keep servicemen “happy and contented.” Her name also appeared as a byline on articles. Once she was described as “a perfect example of ‘Beauty and Brains’ with her lovely figure and brilliant mind.” Then again, it is unlikely that Weider’s largely male clientele appreciated her intellect nearly as much as her looks. Later, as Hoffman did with Rosetta, Joe Weider employed his wife and former model, Betty Brossmer, in articles and advertisements. Here a premium was placed on face and figure. Notwithstanding attempts by Judy Glenney (weightlifting), Jan Todd (powerlifting), and Lisa Lyons (physique) to establish a functional presence for women in the iron game, Weider publications and others continue to display women, in an obvious ploy for monetary gain and personal fame, as sex objects. Hoffman’s women weightlifters seem wholesome in retrospect to the pictorial displays in current muscle mags, which exude a salacious appeal. Breast implants, thongs, and total nudes abound in this new context, where the appeal is flesh, not muscle. One of the most striking examples of this new artistry, labeled by some as fitness porn, is John Balik’s annual swimsuit issue in *Iron Man* magazine. Reacting to the March 1998 edition was a mother from Albuquerque who had made the mistake of ordering a subscription for her teenage son and friends, who had become interested in bodybuilding.

I assumed your publication was dedicated to helping individuals become healthier and stronger. Brainless pornography has no relevance to sports medicine. Give the erotic poses of Karla Dutt and her friends to *Playboy* and get on with the serious business of bodybuilding.

Balik responded by juxtaposing two letters from satisfied males, “Babes in Ironland” and “Tasteful, Yet Sexy,” to put a more positive spin on his endeavors. Furthermore, as “consolation” to the irate mother, he offered the sexist scenario that the swimsuit issue had her son and his friends “training with intensity and enthusiasm.” Unwittingly Balik verbalized a stratagem of sexploitation that Hoffman first formulated in the 1930s. However much the women weightlifters of Muscletown might have achieved on their own and inspired in others, they were relegated by the impresario of muscle to traditional roles that would most satisfy male perceptions of women as sexual subordinates in sport and society.
Endnotes

1Alan M. Klein, Little Big Men, Bodybuilding Subculture and Gender Construction (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1993), 274.


9Dave Mayor, interview by author, Philadelphia, 8 July 1990; Weldon Bullock, interview by author, Creedmore, NC, 29 June 1990.


16Interview with Morris.

17Ottley Coulter to George Jowett, 1 February 1938, and Jowett to Coulter, 8 February 1938, Coulter Papers, Todd-McLean Collection, Univ. of Texas.

18R. Hoffman to B. Hoffman, 21 November 1937, Hoffman Papers, author’s possession.

19“Connie” to Hoffman, 1 December 1937.

20Hoffman to Kono, 8 September 1954.

21Bob Hoffman, “How Will I Look This Summer?” Strength & Health 6 (April 1938): 21. Admittedly, rival Alda Ketterman is probably not the ideal person to
comment on Hoffman’s relationships with other women, but she states that Bob’s marriage with Rosetta “broke up because he wanted to move Gracie Bard into the house with Rosetta.” Eventually they got into “a hair-pulling contest. Rosetta was rough, but Gracie was ugly and rough. Gracie was a prostitute from Lancaster that Bob brought over and put up.” Alda Ketterman, interview by author, Dover, PA, 25 August 1987.

24Elmer Farnham, “The Editor’s Birthday Show,” Strength & Health 7 (February 1939): 22.
27“Mid-Atlantic Champ’ships,” Strength & Health 9 (June 1941): 8, 10; and Bob Hoffman, “Procrastination,” Strength & Health 9 (June 1941): 22-23.
28Hoffman to Eugene Wettstone, 24 July 1941, Hoffman Papers.
29G. Grabeel to Hoffman, 18 October 1941, Hoffman Papers.
35Interview with Ketterman.
39Rosetta to Bob Hoffman, 8 June 1945, Hoffman Papers.
41Coulter to Jowett, 18 December 1967, Coulter Papers.
44S.A. Snell to Hoffman, 6 November 1948, Hoffman Papers.
45Grabeel to Grimek, 8 July 1947, Hoffman Papers.
46John Terpak, interview by author, York, PA, 27 December 1990; Charles A. Smith to the author, 10 October 1986.
47Tim Murray, interview by author, Morrisville, PA, 23 August 1987.
49Interviews with Morris and Ketterman.
50 Todd, “Origins of Weight Training,” 10. At a physical education conference in Florida, Todd interviewed Edith Roeder. Though she was married at the time, Roeder explained that Hoffman “hit on her quite badly when he saw her lift” at a meet in Chicago in the 1950s. Todd, interview by author, 15 April 1998.


53 Vera Christensen, “To the Ladies!” Strength & Health 24 (May 1956): 37.


58 Bob Hoffman, How To Keep Your Husband Alive Longer (York, PA: York Barbell Co., 1974), 6–7, 33, 126, 131. Alda states that Bob wanted her to marry him early in their relationship, but she kept turning him down. Once, she fell in love with a Navy Petty Officer and was going to move to California with him. When Bob found out, he flattened all of the officer’s tires and threatened to bring in one of his weightlifters from Chicago “to bump him off for $25.” Alda’s price for not leaving Bob was that “he would have to keep her for the rest of his life.” Ketterman, interview by author, 15 September 1992.

