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The “Barbelles:”

Femininity and Women Bodybuilders at Mid-Century Muscle Beach, California

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL SATISFACTION OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE BACHELOR OF ARTS IN HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis focuses on Abbye Stockton and other women bodybuilders at Santa Monica’s Muscle Beach from the 1930s to 1950s. Despite participating in the ‘masculine’ sport of weight lifting, Stockton was constantly praised for her curvy figure and feminine elegance. By participating at the beach and writing a recurring column in the popular fitness magazine *Strength and Health*, Stockton promoted a new ideal of femininity that paired attractiveness and domesticity with muscularity. Through careful primary source analysis of Stockton’s column, contemporary newspaper articles, and photographs, this project explores this new model of femininity, the *barbelle*, and how it both reinforced and subverted gender roles. This project also explores who the barbelle ideal was primarily accessible to. While Stockton was certainly influential in encouraging the women of the American public to lift weights, *barbelle* femininity was not equally accessible to *every* woman. Instead, it perpetuated an ideal that valued whiteness as a central tenet of femininity.

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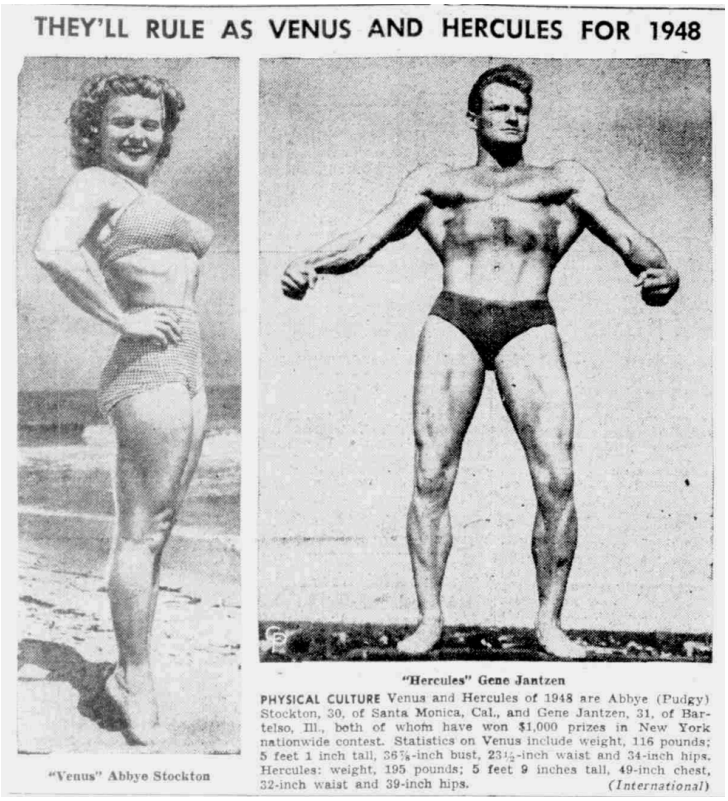
Abbye Stockton and a Changing Beauty Standard

In April and May of 1948, newspapers across California featured photographs of two individuals under the headline: "They'll Rule as Venus and Hercules for 1948." The text below the pictures identified the individuals as winners of a "New York nationwide contest" in "physical culture," what we refer to today as bodybuilding. Awarded for their physiques, the winners emphasized their bodies in their photographs. The man was Gene Jantzen, and he struck a bodybuilding pose with his arms outstretched, his muscles flexed under tension. He certainly looked the part of Hercules. The other photograph, taken from the side, showed a woman posing. She stood on her tippy toes with her hands on her hips and flashed a bright smile at the camera. Her hair was in defined curls, and she donned a form-fitting two-piece bathing suit that emphasized


THEY'LL RULE AS VENUS AND HERCULES FOR 1948

"Venus" Abbye Stockton

"Hercules" Gene Jantzen

PHYSICAL CULTURE Venus and Hercules of 1948 are Abbye (Pudgy) Stockton, 30, of Santa Monica, Cal., and Gene Jantzen, 31, of Bartelso, Ill., both of whom have won $1,000 prizes in New York nationwide contest. Statistics on Venus include weight, 116 pounds; 5 feet 1 inch tall, 36⅞-inch bust, 23½-inch waist and 34-inch hips. Hercules: weight, 195 pounds; 5 feet 9 inches tall, 49-inch chest, 32-inch waist and 39-inch hips. (*International*)

Figure I.1. Abbye Stockton and Gene Jantzen, 1948 "Venus" and "Hercules" (*Hanford Morning Journal*, April 15, 1948, pg. 3).

her slim waist. However, the woman was also clearly muscular. Her arms, shoulders, and legs were well-defined with substantial bulk. Even the musculature of her forearm was emphasized by the lighting of the photograph.[1] She presented herself as traditionally feminine but was also visibly muscular, a paradox considering muscle's associations with masculinity. The woman was Abbye Stockton, a pioneer of a new era of women's exercise in the mid-century United States. By the mid-twentieth century, Abbey and her *barbelles* would embody the new ideal of the mid-century muscular yet feminine woman analyzed in this thesis.[2]

Abbye Stockton was born Abby Eville on August 11, 1917. Her father gave her the nickname "Pudgy" as a child, an ironic nickname that follows her even into current-day scholarship. Still a child, she moved to Santa Monica in 1924. As a high school senior in 1935, Abbye started dating Les Stockton, a student at UCLA.[3] In the late 1930s after graduating high school, she took a job as a telephone operator.[4] In a magazine article from 1940, she explained that this sedentary job caused her to gain weight and look for ways to be more physically active. She explained that Les convinced her to start exercising and provided the dumbbells and training program that introduced her to weightlifting.[5]

Along with weightlifting, Stockton began to practice calisthenics and then acrobatics, which she much preferred.[6] She and Les often took their dates to the beach in Santa Monica, a popular location for a growing group of bodybuilders. As crowds were drawn to the

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[1] "They'll Rule as Venus and Hercules for 1948," *Hanford Morning Journal*, April 15, 1948, 3, https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=HJD19480415.1.3.
[2] In this paper, I use the word "ideal" as in "ideal bodies" to refer to bodies that were most frequently celebrated by and featured in the media. Of course, there is no "ideal body."
[3] Jan Todd, "The Legacy of Pudgy Stockton," *Iron Game History*, vol. 2 no. 1 (Jan 1992): 5-6, Academia.edu.
[4] Elizabeth McCracken, "The Belle of the Barbell," *New York Times*, December 31, 2006, https://www.proquest.com/blogs-podcasts-websites/belle-barbell/docview/2224159387/se-2; Todd, "Legacy of Pudgy Stockton," 6.
[5] Todd, "Legacy of Pudgy Stockton," 6.
[6] Todd, "Legacy of Pudgy Stockton," 6.

ever-increasing public displays of muscles and bodies, the city built a platform for the lifters, and the now-famous Muscle Beach began to take shape.[7] They continued to practice gymnastics at the beach as its popularity took off. In the fall of 1939, they performed with two other athletes as the halftime show for the UCLA vs USC football game.[8] As Stockton continued to master the craft of bodybuilding, she developed a physique that drew a lot of attention (see Figure I.2). That same year, she started to appear in several magazines, newspapers, newsreels, and advertisements, including features in the *Look, Pic,* and *Physical Culture* magazines and an ad for the Ritamine Vitamin Company. Having been partners in the public eye for some time, Abbye and Les married on July 14, 1941.[9]

Figure I.2. (*Pudgy Stockton posing at Muscle Beach*, The Strongman Project-Stark Center).[10]

Stockton continued to carve out her niche as a female bodybuilder in the following decade. She was central to women's growing involvement in weight training and the development of bodybuilding culture in general. Throughout the 1940s, Stockton took center stage on the covers of forty-two magazines, building a "national reputation" for herself, culminating with her column in the popular fitness magazine *Strength and Health* in 1944. She

[7] Jan Todd, "Bring on the Amazons," in *Picturing the Modern Amazon*, ed. Joanna Frueh, Laurie Fierstein, and Judith Stein (Rizzoli, 2000), 56.
[8] Todd, "Legacy of Pudgy Stockton," 6.
[9] Todd, "Legacy of Pudgy Stockton," 6.
[10] *Pudgy Stockton posing at Muscle Beach,* n.d., photograph, the Strongman Project, the H.J. Lutcher Stark Center for Physical Culture & Sports, the University of Texas at Austin, https://strongmanproject.com/browse(resource:9332)?q=pudgy%20stockton&from=16.

also organized possibly the first-ever women's weight-lifting competition authorized by the Amateur Athletic Union, which took place in Los Angeles on February 28, 1947. She participated; weighing just 118 pounds, she put up a 100-pound press, 105-pound snatch, and 135-pound clean and jerk.[11] In a November 1947 advertisement for a strength and physique show in *Strength and Health*, Stockton is referred to as "America's most famous woman physical culture athlete," listed in the same breath as the 1947 Mr. America winner Steve Reeves.[12] She also earned her own title in 1948 at the age of 31 when she was named "Miss Physical Culture Venus." This appears to be her only official bodybuilding record despite her significant and sustained influence in the sport.[13]

Abbye and Les financially capitalized on their popularity at Muscle Beach by getting into the gym business even as Muscle Beach itself began to fade away. In 1948, the same year Stockton was declared "Miss Physical Culture Venus," they opened a women's gym right next to a men's gym on Sunset Boulevard called the Salon of Figure Development.[14] Then, in 1950, they opened men's and women's gyms right next to each other in Beverly Hills called Stockton Studios, and two years later opened another location in Pasadena with a business partner.[15] After achieving impressive fame and business success, the Stocktons retreated from the public eye. After giving birth to her daughter Laura in 1953, Abbye stepped away from some of her roles, including writing for *Strength and Health*, and took time away from the gym business.[16] Around

[11] Todd, "Legacy of Pudgy Stockton," 6.
[12] *Strength and Health*, November 1947, 49, https://link-gale-com.proxy.library.ucsb.edu/apps/doc/FQNRYS970796264/AHSI?u=ucsantabarbara&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=e932c9d4.
[13] Todd, "Legacy of Pudgy Stockton," 7.
[14] Todd, "Legacy of Pudgy Stockton," 7; McCraken, "The Belle."
[15] Todd, "Legacy of Pudgy Stockton," 7; Marla Matzer, "Venus Muscle Beach: Before Xena, Before Arnold, Before Even Jane, Pudgy Stockton was the Queen of Quads," *Los Angeles Times*, February 22, 1998, https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/venus-muscle-beach/docview/2098156055/se-2.
[16] Todd, "Legacy of Pudgy Stockton," 7.

the same time, Muscle Beach as the Stocktons knew it was shut down, an event that will be further explored in .[17] From her participation at Muscle Beach, appearances on the covers of magazines, and the founding of a women's gym, Stockton paved the way for a new type of female athlete in mid-century American society.

Abbye Stockton is one point in a long history of the changing ideal of the feminine form and beliefs about women and exercise. In the first half of the nineteenth century, muscularity was viewed as strictly masculine and a characteristic that made women less attractive.[18] As the century progressed, beliefs began to shift. In the Antebellum period, Catharine Beecher advocated for women's participation in purposive exercise, and is now recognized by historians as the most influential voice promoting calisthenics for women.[19] By the 1870s, the "ideal woman" was no longer frail but had an hourglass shape with a prominent bust, large hips, and a corseted waist. In the 1890s, the ideal of the "Titaness" emerged as a "new woman" in the media and public perception. This new woman had an "S" shape figure that had developed from the hourglass and was tall and sturdy rather than fragile and pretty. Along with the new woman, the Gibson Girl was an important model of femininity in this period. Named from an illustration by Charles Dana Gibson, this woman had a thin but well-developed frame and participated in athletics and exercise.[20] Both of these models of the late nineteenth century reflect a departure from the image of the frail Victorian woman to value a woman who was sturdy and capable.

The success of professional strongwomen during the late nineteenth century reflected this changing feminine ideal. Three of the most prominent strongwomen were Athleta van Huffelen,

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[17] McCraken, "The Belle."
[18] Jan Todd, "Bernarr Macfadden: Reformer of Feminine Form," *Journal of Sport History* 14, no. 1 (1987): http://www.jstor.org/stable/43609326, 70.
[19] Jan Todd, *Physical Culture and the Body Beautiful: Purposive Exercise in the Lives of American Women, 1800-1870* (Mercer University Press, 1998), 137.
[20] Todd, "Bernarr Macfadden," 70-71.

Josephine Wohlford, and Katie Brumbach Heman, known by their stage names Athleta, Minerva, and Sandwina.[21] As historian Jan Todd explains in her book *Physical Culture and the Body Beautiful*, these strongwomen were large and often muscular, yet were well received by audiences and reported as feminine and beautiful in contemporary newspapers.[22] One 1911 *Harper's Weekly* article reported on Sandwina; "... The New Woman is not threatening; she is here. She is modestly billed as Katie Sandwina, Europe's Queen of Strength, Beauty, and Dexterity. She'll be Queen of America too…"[23] Sandwina was an image of the emerging new woman—she was both muscular *and* beautiful.

In the early twentieth century, magazine publisher Bernarr Macfadden joined the campaign to promote the ideal of the athletic American woman and was remarkably successful. Tapped into the public's shifting opinions, Macfadden founded a magazine specifically for women's fitness in 1900, just a year after his wildly successful fitness magazine *Physical Culture* was established. In August of 1900, he featured a woman holding dumbbells on the cover of *Physical Culture*. In 1903, he launched a contest to award "the best and most perfectly formed woman" because he believed in the "importance of strength and beauty and health in women." As part of the 1905 contest, the women even had to compete in eight athletic events that were considered along with their aesthetic appeal by the judges.[24] Macfadden was an important promoter of the athletic woman as the feminine ideal and encouraged women's participation in exercise.

A couple of decades later, another magazine editor named Robert "Bob" Hoffman continued to promote the ideal of the athletic woman to the public. In December of 1932,

[21] Todd, "Bring on the Amazons," 50-54.
[22] Todd, *Physical Culture and the Body Beautiful*, 2.
[23] Todd, "Bring on the Amazons," 54.
[24] Todd, "Bernarr Macfadden," 71-72.

Hoffman founded his fitness magazine *Strength and Health*, which ran until he died in 1985.[25] *Strength and Health* was a monthly magazine focused on weightlifting and bodybuilding, with each edition featuring approximately fifty pages of articles. It was very popular and attracted a considerable number of monthly readers. In August 1947, Hoffman bragged about his magazine's popularity, writing in an advertisement that it was "the world's largest health and exercise magazine," with "over a million readers monthly."[26] The popularity of Hoffman's magazine allowed him to reach a large audience.

In *Strength and Health*, Hoffman promoted the importance of weightlifting to the American public and wrote that training with barbells would improve athletic performance, all the while advertising his own brand of York barbelles.[27] He also worked to fight beliefs in the general public and scientific communities that weightlifting was dangerous and unsafe.[28] As part of Hoffman's crusade to spread barbell training through his magazine, he specifically targeted women, recruiting them into the ranks of weightlifters. He featured articles written by women athletes and advertised products for women specifically. In particular, Abbye Stockton played a pivotal role in Hoffman's magazine, encouraging women to strength train in her column called "Barbelles."[29] Stockton began writing "Barbelles" in 1944, and it was featured in the magazine for almost a decade.[30] In *Strength and Health*, Hoffman and Stockton continued to expand the ideal version of athletic femininity to include women's participation in weight lifting.

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[25] Jason P. Shurley, Jan Todd, and Terry Todd, "Building the Barbell Athlete: Bob Hoffman, Joe Weider, and the Promotion of Strength Training for Sport, 1932–1969," In *Strength Coaching in America A History of the Innovation That Transformed Sports* (University of Texas Press, 2019), 42 & 46, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7560/319796.6.

[26] "Exercise with a Big 12 Special: Famous Strength and Health Builder," Strength and Health, August 1947, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/WIQPBY798350860/AHSI?u=ucsantabarbara&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=309aa95a.

[27] Shurley, "Building the Barbell Athlete," 42.

[28] Shurley, "Building the Barbell Athlete," 50-51.

[29] Shurley, "Building the Barbell Athlete," 57.

[30] Todd, "Bring on the Amazons," 56-57.

There were also other important women weightlifters in the early 20th century that were perceived as both strong and feminine. First was Ivy Russell, born in Surrey, England in 1907. In "Bring on the Amazons," Todd argues that Russell "presented a new archetype for womanhood," different from the earlier strongwomen. She was strong, athletic, and lean, and Todd places her and Stockton in a similar category as women "who substantially changed the course of weight training for women." She performed across the UK and Ireland and lobbied for women's participation in the British Amateur Weightlifting Association.[31] There was also Relna Brewer McRae, who Todd claims was "the first real female star of Muscle Beach." Like Stockton, McRae was featured in the media due to her strength, figure, and "facial beauty," and was very popular in the press before she got married to another Muscle Beach athlete and moved away during the second world war.[32] These women were important figures in demonstrating that women could be both muscular and feminine.

While the American public slowly incorporated athleticism in its definition of the ideal woman's body, women bodybuilders like Stockton also had to navigate the expectations of women's appropriate behavior in post-war American society. As historian Elaine Tyler May explains in her book *Homeward Bound*, as tensions with the Soviet Union increased following the end of World War II, the United States found itself engaged in the Cold War with the superpower, each attempting to spread its influence and ideology across the world. To fight this ideological war, American leaders promoted the idea that capitalism allowed people to live the

[31] Todd, "Bring on the Amazons," 54-56.
[32] Jan Todd, "The Halcyon Days of Muscle Beach: An Origin Story," in *LA Sports: Play, Games, and Community in the City of Angels*, edited by David K. Wiggins and Wayne Wilson (University of Arkansas Press, 2018), 249.

American lifestyle, or the "American Dream," in the propaganda of this period. The archetype of the American Dream was the white, middle-class nuclear family with a home in the suburbs.[33]

The growing prioritization of the white patriarchal family in this period had clear impacts on women's gender roles. As historian Elsa Devienne explains, American men and women in the postwar era had numerous, and often contradictory, social expectations placed on them. Women were obligated to fill their traditional gender roles as mothers and homemakers but were also expected to stay sexually attractive for their husbands. Devienne argues that these contradictory expectations were "part of the answer to the Muscle Beach riddle," that is, part of the reason it was so successful given the time it existed.[34] This complex definition of femininity opened up some space for women bodybuilders to assert themselves in society. Women like Stockton presented themselves in a way that still aligned with the period's gender roles despite their muscularity, embodying a new ideal of femininity that is the subject of this paper.

This thesis synthesizes previous historians' scholarship to better understand the creation of a new feminine ideal in the mid-century. Scholarship by exercise historian Jan Todd at the University of Texas at Austin has been a crucial source for this paper. Todd has written a great deal about women in sports history, including Abbye Stockton specifically. Her article, "The Legacy of Pudgy Stockton," provides a detailed account of Stockton's life and emphasizes her influence on American society. Todd has also written extensively about Muscle Beach and the legacies of its athletes in the modern-day fitness industry. Her chapter in David K. Wiggins and Wayne Wilson's book *LA Sports: Play, Games, and Community in the City of Angels* titled "The Halcyon Days of Muscle Beach: An Origin Story" provides a thorough history of the beach, its

[33] Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound : American Families in the Cold War Era,* Rev. and Updated ed. (Basic Books, 1999), xvii-xviii.
[34] Elsa Devienne, "The Life, Death, and Rebirth of Muscle Beach: Reassessing the Muscular Physique in Postwar America, 1940s–1980s," *Southern California Quarterly* 100, no. 3 (2018): 324, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26499889.

development, and its athletes. Another significant work about the history of Santa Monica's Muscle Beach is Marla Matzer Rose's book *Muscle Beach, Where the Best Bodies in the World Started a Fitness Revolution*, which provides a wealth of information about life on the beach, its history, and the stories of its many athletes.

Historian John D. Fair is responsible for a substantial amount of scholarship on Bob Hoffman and *Strength and Health*. His article "Fitness Innovation or Sexual Exploitation? Bob Hoffman and the Women Weightlifters of Muscletown USA" provides fascinating and vital information about the women subjects of Hoffman's magazine *Strength and Health* before Abbye Stockton. He considers how Hoffman's limited views about women shaped how they were portrayed in his magazine, providing a crucial perspective on *Strength and Health*.

Finally, recent scholarship by historian Elsa Devienne has provided a fascinating insight into Muscle Beach. Her article "The Life, Death, and Rebirth of Muscle Beach" and book *Sand Rush: The Revival of the Beach in Twentieth-Century Los Angeles* are both pioneering works providing a compelling analysis of the site. "The Life, Death, and Rebirth of Muscle Beach" looks at the changing role of the muscular physique in postwar American society and how beach athletes fought the stigma of visible musculature by emphasizing their heterosexuality.[35] *Sand Rush* has a much broader scope and looks at Los Angeles' beach modernization campaign from the 1920s to the 1960s.[36] Importantly, *Sand Rush* examines Southern California beach culture and its associations with whiteness and analyzes the erasure of Muscle Beach and its sister beaches, including a beach historically frequented by African Americans and the "unofficial gay beach" of

[35] Devienne, "The Life, Death, and Rebirth of Muscle Beach," 342.
[36] Elsa Devienne, *Sand Rush: The Revival of the Beach in Twentieth-Century Los Angeles*, translated by Troy Tice (Oxford University Press, 2024), abstract, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197539750.001.0001.

Los Angeles.[37] Devienne's scholarship crucially foregrounds discussions of sexuality and race in her analysis of the history of Muscle Beach, its female athletes, and its closure.

This thesis synthesizes this existing scholarship about related but distinct topics, including Muscle Beach, Abbye Stockton, and Hoffman's *Strength and Health*, to gain new insights into the ideals of femininity in mid-twentieth century America. While previous scholars have considered some of the topics of this study together, especially Todd and Devienne, this thesis considers all three in order to explore the period's new feminine ideal specifically. This thesis examines the roles that Stockton, Hoffman, and the other Muscle Beach athletes played in defining a new model of femininity. Furthermore, this thesis, building on Devienne's work, will consider race, sexuality, and gender together when exploring the history of Muscle Beach and its female bodybuilders in a way that some previous scholarship has not. Furthermore, this thesis also uses Stockton's "Barbelles" articles in *Strength and Health* as essential primary sources, which previous studies often overlook.

The core of the methodology of this study is the close analysis of primary sources written by and about Abbye Stockton. Since this research focuses on understanding the ideal Stockton promoted and embodied, it is crucial to consider her own words. To do this, I analyze articles written for her "Barbelles" column from its duration in *Strength and Health,* from 1944 to 1954. The "Barbelles" articles add Stockton's voice to my paper. I selected articles that best represented the themes present in the entire collection. I also consider the *Strength and Health* magazine as a whole during the period Stockton was an editor. In particular, I look at its covers and advertisements to understand how female athletes fit into the magazine's overall message and better understand the role of Stockton's column.

[37] Devienne, *Sand Rush,* 139 & 171.

This thesis also examines newspapers to illuminate how the American media perceived Stockton, other women bodybuilders, and Muscle Beach. I will look at local *and* national newspapers to gain a broader insight. Local newspapers in the Los Angeles area, like the *San Pedro News Pilot*, *Whittier Star Review*, and *Los Angeles Mirror,* provide information about Muscle Beach's events and evidence of how Stockton and other women bodybuilders were discussed in the media. More prominent newspapers like the *LA Times* give context for how the public understood Muscle Beach and its women on a larger scale. Importantly, I pay attention to who these newspapers featured and who they did not to understand what kind of Muscle Beach athlete was highlighted in the media.

Finally, my study also utilizes photographs from the online archives of the Santa Monica History Museum (SMHM). These photographs give my paper a crucial perspective on beach life and the activities and events that took place. These photographs are essential to show what women athletes looked like on the beach—what they wore and how they styled their hair and makeup. They also demonstrate how female athletes posed for photos and, more importantly, who they posed with. The SMHM photographs are also a good source of information about the Miss Muscle Beach contest. They allow me to analyze who the female participants were and how they presented themselves to the public. Since much of this paper involves analyzing how women physically presented themselves, photographs are critical primary source evidence.

While the ideal body of the American woman was slowly transforming at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries to include athleticism, Stockton's widespread promotion of weight training as a way for women to heighten their femininity was a new and unique development of the mid-century. Although not the only woman in this period to lift weights and encourage other women to train, Stockton was the most widely known and iconic

female weightlifter. This thesis argues that bodybuilder Abbye Stockton promoted a new ideal of femininity in mid-century American society: the bar*belle*. This ideal combined attractiveness and domesticity with muscularity and was promoted in Stockton's recurring "Barbelles" column in the popular fitness magazine *Strength and Health* and embodied by her and other women bodybuilders on the sands of Muscle Beach.

To explore the ideal of the barbelle, this thesis will focus on how it was shaped in Stockton's "Barbelles" column in *Strength and Health* and at Muscle Beach. The first chapter argues that Muscle Beach was a liminal space where a diverse group of athletes challenged societal norms in the conservative city of Santa Monica. It explores how the city worked to shut down this dynamic space and the media erased non-white and queer athletes from the record. Chapter one sets the scene of Muscle Beach as a space where athletes like Stockton simultaneously pushed gender norms and faced the pressures of a Cold War society that valued men's and women's traditional gender roles. Chapter two outlines how Stockton promoted her new model of womanhood that paired muscularity and femininity in her "Barbelles" column. It first contextualizes the role of women in *Strength and Health* to understand how "Barbelles" fit into the magazine and, in the same sense, how muscular women fit into American society. Chapter three brings together the ideas of the first two chapters of the thesis. It explores how Stockton's new model of femininity, promoted in "Barbelles," was lived out at Muscle Beach. The chapter outlines who the barbelles were, what they looked like, and how the Miss Muscle Beach contest perpetuated the idea that whiteness was a central element of femininity.

Chapter 1

Muscle Beach: A Liminal Space in Mid-century California

When asked to picture Muscle Beach, most people likely think of Arnold Schwarzenegger and the Muscle Beach Venice of the 1970s. However, the original Muscle Beach was founded in Santa Monica, California, four decades earlier. In simplest terms, Muscle Beach was an outdoor training area where participants could practice gymnastics and lift weights under the Southern California sun, entertaining excited onlookers.[38] However, it quickly exploded into one of the most popular tourist destinations in the Los Angeles area and became a widespread cultural phenomenon.[39] Historians now credit Muscle Beach with kick-starting the modern fitness movement that is a central part of American culture today.[40] As a critical third space for people of various backgrounds to gather, Muscle Beach is an interesting site to study mid-century American society. With its scantily clad female bodies, interracial crowds, and suggestive acrobatic performances, Santa Monica's Muscle Beach does not fit the standard image of American society in the 1940s and 1950s that worshipped the white, respectable nuclear family.

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[38] Jan Todd and Terry Todd, "Muscle Beach," *St. James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture Online*, (2013): https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/QWTDTW317273089/BIC?u=ucsantabarbara&sid=summon&xid=6c5dd6db.

[39] Devienne, "The Life, Death, and Rebirth of Muscle Beach," 327; Todd, "The Halcyon Days of Muscle Beach," 249.

[40] Tolga Ozyurtcu and Jan Todd, "Critical Mass: Oral History, Innovation Theory, and the Fitness Legacy of the Muscle Beach Scene," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 37, no. 16 (2020): 1697, https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2021.1884072.

This chapter explores this tension. How did Muscle Beach reflect and challenge societal norms around race, gender, and sexual expression?

Because Muscle Beach was constantly at odds with conservative Santa Monicans and mainstream American ideals, it operated as a liminal space on the California coast. Beachgoers were only able to negotiate these conservative values for so long. Despite its significance, Muscle Beach was closed in 1958. Although several influences brought about its end, it was ultimately closed by the city following the arrests of five Muscle Beach participants on charges of sexual assault.[41] However, there were also other factors at play, including the proximity of the beach to other beaches occupied by gay and Black visitors and bodybuilding's association with homosexuality. Examining how individuals of diverse identities participated in Muscle Beach and how they were villainized to justify its closure offers valuable insight into the societal norms of this period. This chapter argues that Muscle Beach functioned as a microcosm where mid-century fitness ideals, gender roles, and sexual norms intersected with racial dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, highlighting broader societal tensions and transformations of the Cold War era.

This chapter will examine Muscle Beach as a microcosm to understand societal norms around gender, race, and sexuality in this period. First, it will recount the origins of Muscle Beach as a place for teenagers to practice gymnastics. It will then explore the beach's transformation into a widespread phenomenon and explain its importance in developing the modern physical fitness movement. After establishing this context, the chapter will explore tensions between the city of Santa Monica's family-oriented image and the diverse Muscle Beach community. It will explore how people of different genders, ages, races, and sexualities participated at the beach. It will examine the Ocean Park area where Muscle Beach was located,

[41] Devienne, "The Life, Death, and Rebirth of Muscle Beach," 327.

focusing on the neighboring beaches occupied by gay and Black visitors. It will also paint a picture of life on the beach and the diverse people who performed on and visited the site, highlighting the beach's acrobatic performances, physique contests, and sexually charged atmosphere. The chapter will then focus on race at Muscle Beach in more detail, exploring historians' debates about the prominence of people of color at the site. To conclude, the chapter will investigate the various forces at play in the beach's closure, emphasizing the tenuous position Muscle Beach occupied due to its diversity. Beachgoers could only bend societal norms for so long, and the tenuous acceptance of Muscle Beach eventually reached a breaking point.

The Rise of Muscle Beach and the Fitness Movement

Several factors led to the formation of Muscle Beach. As historian Jan Todd explained, there has yet to be a consensus about how the beach came to be, and journalists and authors have credited different people for its creation over the years. Todd relies on the testimony of Relna Brewer McRae, one of the original Muscle Beach crew, to tell her version of the story. In 1926, schools across Los Angeles and Santa Monica implemented gymnastics in physical education classes and created competitive teams. This helped build interest in the sport among local kids like McRae's brother, Paul Brewer. Enthusiasm for gymnastics grew with the 1932 Olympic Games, held in Los Angeles. However, a considerable earthquake hit Southern California in 1933, damaging Santa Monica High School. The school postponed plans to build a gymnasium due to the earthquake. As a result, Paul and his gymnast friends turned to the beach, laying out a large rug to prevent sand from kicking up in their eyes. And just like that, Muscle Beach was born.[42] When thinking about the trajectory of Muscle Beach and the criticisms it faced, especially in its later

[42] Todd, "The Halcyon Days of Muscle Beach," 242-244.

years following the sexual assault scandal, it is important to remember its humble origins. Teenagers started the beach as a place to practice gymnastics.

It would take a couple of structural changes for the beach to become more popular. The first platform was constructed at Muscle Beach in 1936.[43] Paul Brewer and another young gymnast at the beach, Al Niederman, successfully appealed to the city to approve the construction of a platform. Their request had been denied the year before, but in the summer of 1936, the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) gymnastics coach, Cecil Hollingsworth, taught gymnastics classes at the beach. This strengthened Brewer and Niederman's request, and the city allowed Niederman to weld the three-by-twelve-foot platform.[44] The platform was a crucial addition to the beach. It gave the athletes the stable ground they needed to participate in weightlifting and gymnastics and also raised them on a stage, making them performers. Two years after the original platform was constructed, a larger one was installed, drawing an even bigger audience and further cementing the beach's popularity.[45] With the addition of the larger platform in 1938, the athletes transitioned from merely practicing to actively performing, drawing crowds and elevating the beach's reputation as a hub of entertainment and physical prowess.[46] The performers provided lively entertainment, and as crowds gathered to watch, Muscle Beach became a popular tourist attraction. When Muscle Beach got its iconic name sometime around 1939, it was well on its way to becoming a cultural institution.[47]

Abbye Stockton was on the frontlines as the beach became popular in Santa Monica. In her brief autobiography, she recalls visiting the beach in the summer of 1935 with her husband, Les, and some of their friends. At that point, there was no gymnastics or weightlifting equipment

[43] Ozyurtcu and Todd, "Critical Mass," 1698.
[44] Todd, "The Halcyon Days of Muscle Beach," 246.
[45] Ozyurtcu and Todd, "Critical Mass," 1698.
[46] Todd, "The Halcyon Days of Muscle Beach," 249.
[47] Marla Matzer Rose, *Muscle Beach* (St. Martin's Griffin, 2001), 33, Kindle.

at the beach, and they just swam and relaxed in the sun. But then, when the Stocktons returned to the beach at the end of 1938 to start working out, the beach had a platform where gymnasts and acrobats practiced. Two sisters, Betsy and Kitty Knight, even practiced an acrobatic act together, which Stockton recalls. Then, during the summer of 1939, Stockton and some beach playground regulars performed in Santa Monica's annual Pioneer Day Parade, which she remembers as "the first walking show." While her husband Les served in the military, Stockton and another beach athlete, Bruce Conner, created a two-person acrobatic act and performed at Muscle Beach and for a few local clubs. Conner and Stockton then joined another two-man act, performing as a group of four on the beach and in the broader Los Angeles area, including the previously mentioned 1939 performance for the halftime show of the UCLA and USC football game.[48] Stockton watched as Muscle Beach grew from a simple beach playground to an important fitness hub and popular point of interest. As the beach rose to popularity, she did, too, as one of its most well-known female athletes.

Figure 1.1. (Photograph by George Tate, *Bodybuilder and Crowd at Muscle Beach, 1953*, 1953, Santa Monica History Museum, 2009.109.12.)

The widespread popularity of Muscle Beach exploded from its founding in the 1930s to the 1950s. From 1930 to 1937, still relatively early in the beach's history, annual attendance jumped from 3,500 to 1.8 million visitors.[49] It was not until the end of World War II in 1945 that

[48] Abbye "Pudgy" Stockton, *Pudgy Stockton Autobiography*, brief typewritten autobiography for publication in *Muscle Beach Alumni Association Newsletter*, accessed March 4, 2025, https://strongmanproject.com/browse(resource:7009)?q=stockton.
[49] Todd, "The Halcyon Days of Muscle Beach," 247.

Muscle Beach reached the peak of its popularity.[50] As depicted in Figure 1.1, the beach became a massive attraction, with crowds of up to four thousand people gathered around the platforms on weekends and holidays.[51] Muscle Beach was popular not just in Southern California but became a cultural phenomenon across the United States and the world. In the 1950s, the most popular tourist organization in Southern California advertised the beach as an attraction in its promotional materials. Tom the cat from the popular cartoon Tom and Jerry even lifted weights at Muscle Beach in an episode called "Muscle Beach Tom."[52] Athletes across the globe wanted to participate in the phenomenon, and a copycat beach popped up as far as Aberdeen, Scotland.[53] While Muscle Beach was an important destination in Santa Monica, it became more than that. It was a widespread cultural phenomenon.

As Muscle Beach rose to prominence, it became a hotbed for developing modern bodybuilding and gym culture and attracted some famous faces. In the late 1930s, Les Stockton started spreading the word about how beneficial weight training was for gymnastics. The Muscle Beach crew listened, and weightlifting soon became a popular activity at the beach. Lifting weights to gain muscle and shape the body, or bodybuilding, rose to prominence after the end of World War II.[54] Muscle Beach was *the* bodybuilding scene. The winner of the first Mr. America bodybuilding contest, Bert Goodrich, was a regular participant at Muscle Beach.[55] Another popular beach performer, Steve Reeves, achieved massive success in bodybuilding. He won three significant titles in the late 1940s and early 1950s: Mr. America, Mr. World, and Mr. Universe.[56] Media coverage of men like Reeves at Muscle Beach exposed the public to muscular bodies,

[50] Todd and Todd, "Muscle Beach."
[51] Rose, *Muscle Beach*, 73.
[52] Devienne, "The Life, Death, and Rebirth of Muscle Beach," 336-337.
[53] Todd, "The Halcyon Days of Muscle Beach," 241.
[54] Todd, "The Halcyon Days of Muscle Beach," 250.
[55] Rose, *Muscle Beach*, 36.
[56] Todd and Todd, "Muscle Beach."

promoting the image of the ideal physique as muscular.[57] Eventually, beach regulars brought weightlifting and bodybuilding, which were rising in popularity, off the beach, and into gyms to make money. Vic Tanny and his brother Armand were two influential Muscle Beach participants who became gym owners. Capitalizing on the popularity of the beach, Vic founded a gym chain that modernized the gym industry. The Stocktons also got into the gym business, and together, they operated several gyms over the years.[58] Muscle Beach was more than just a popular tourist attraction. It was also the heart of the emerging physical fitness movement and where prominent bodybuilders and gym owners started their careers.

In many ways, Muscle Beach emerged in the perfect location at the perfect time to facilitate its rapid growth. The beach was active from the 1930s to the 1960s when the Los Angeles area was experiencing an urban boom. The population rose from two million to six million people, allowing for the emergence of cultural movements like the physical fitness wave.[59] This increase in population meant there were more young people in California. In 1948, California had the most significant increase in youth population in the nation and had the third largest group of people under eighteen. For the first time, a specific cohort of "teenagers" emerged. They attended high school, had time for recreation, and wanted somewhere to hang out away from their parents. For teenagers in Southern California, the beach was the easy answer.[60] The area where Muscle Beach emerged was next to Santa Monica High School. In fact, into the mid-1930s, it was known as High School Beach.[61] When Paul Brewer and his friends needed somewhere to meet up and practice gymnastics, they turned to the Santa Monica sands and planted the seeds of Muscle Beach.

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[57] Devienne, "The Life, Death, and Rebirth of Muscle Beach," 365.
[58] Ozyurtcu and Todd, "Critical Mass," 1702.
[59] Ozyurtcu and Todd, "Critical Mass," 1710.
[60] Devienne, *Sand Rush,* 140-141.
[61] Rose, *Muscle Beach*, 21.

In addition to demographic shifts, the beach's popularity benefitted from its location in Southern California. In the period after WWII, America was enamored with the image of California.[62] As scholar Elsa Devienne puts it, "with its burgeoning suburbs, automobile-centered lifestyle, bountiful jobs, and youthful population, the Golden State came to embody the boundless opportunities that peace and economic growth had to offer." The sunny, picturesque Southern California beaches were central to this shiny image.[63] Furthermore, the tan, fit, and attractive Muscle Beach athletes embodied the "California teen" archetype, which was frequently included in popular media of this period.[64] Muscle Beach rose to popularity because it represented the Southern California beach lifestyle that Americans dreamt of in the postwar period. People wanted to live like, look like, and be like the athletes of Muscle Beach.

A Fundamental Mismatch: Emerging Tensions with the City

Although the location of Muscle Beach in sunny Santa Monica aided its rise to popularity, it clashed with the city's brand. Santa Monica was a small, "sleepy, conservative town."[65] The beach was the perfect place for tourists and residents of Los Angeles to take a relaxing weekend getaway. As a result, the Santa Monica Pier had the reputation of being high-end and family-friendly compared to its neighboring piers, a brand the city of Santa Monica embraced.[66] The loud, flashy group of athletes and their crowd of spectators at Muscle Beach did not fit this image. The continued clash between the city and the beach, culminating in its closure in 1958, can be traced to this fundamental mismatch.

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[62] Devienne, "The Life, Death, and Rebirth of Muscle Beach," 337.
[63] Devienne, *Sand Rush*, 138.
[64] Devienne, "The Life, Death, and Rebirth of Muscle Beach," 337-38.
[65] Rose, *Muscle Beach*, 23.
[66] Rose, *Muscle Beach*, 27.

Also contributing to tensions between Muscle Beach and the city was its location next to beaches occupied by queer and Black beachgoers. Muscle Beach was part of Ocean Park, a one-mile segment of Santa Monica Beach. Ocean Park was a primarily working-class neighborhood of Santa Monica and home to a diverse racial group. Sandwiched between the Santa Monica and Ocean Park piers were Muscle Beach, Bay Street Beach, and Crystal Beach. Bay Street Beach, also derogatorily referred to as the "Inkwell," was primarily frequented by African American visitors—it was an informally segregated beach.[67] Bay Street Beach was narrower and located next to a sewer outlet. Starting in 1924, for years it was the only beach accessible to African Americans in the region.[68] Historian Alison Rose Jefferson provides some clarity on how this beach near Pico Boulevard was referred to, writing that it was "derogatively described by whites and sardonically referred to by blacks as the 'Inkwell.'" She also highlights the importance of this beach, explaining that African Americans were able to find some recreational spaces in southern California where "they were relatively free from bigotry" at a time when they faced ongoing discrimination, social barriers, and restrictions on the property they could purchase and facilities they could use; one of these spaces was this beach.[69] Bay Street Beach was an important space for African Americans in southern California, and it was located right next to Muscle Beach in Ocean Park.

Crystal Beach was also home to a marginalized group. Before Muscle Beach was formed, wrestlers, circus, and vaudeville performers began to gather at Crystal Beach.[70] It was also the

[67] Devienne, *Sand Rush*, 171-172; Todd, "The Halcyon Days of Muscle Beach," 248.
[68] Lawrence Culver, *The Frontier of Leisure: Southern California and the Shaping of Modern America* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 72.
[69] Alison Rose Jefferson, "African American Leisure Space in Santa Monica: The Beach Sometimes Known As the 'Inkwell,' 1900s–1960s," *Southern California Quarterly* 91, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 156, https://doi.org/10.2307/41172469. See her article for more information on this beach.
[70] Rose, *Muscle Beach*, 21.

unofficial gay beach of the area and was a social gathering spot for queer people.[71] Though Muscle Beach is often discussed as an isolated phenomenon, it existed alongside the other beaches of Ocean Park. As historian Elsa Devienne has explained, the beaches of Ocean Park were unique in their representation of marginalized groups throughout the 1950s.[72] Perhaps in the eyes of Santa Monica's white conservative residents, Muscle Beach fell easily in line with Bay Street Beach and Crystal Beach as "undesirable" hindrances to the city's brand. However, on a day-to-day basis, the majority of straight, white visitors were not completely aware of all of the layers of Ocean Park. They simply enjoyed the site's energetic environment and the countless activities it had to offer.[73]

Life at Muscle Beach

There was so much to do at Muscle Beach. Its location right next to the Santa Monica Pier, built in 1916, was home to a fun house, carnival rides, a bowling alley, and various restaurants. Sometimes, concerts were even held on the pier. The pier drew so many people that historian Jan Todd contends it was instrumental in the development of Muscle Beach, partly because the beach was close enough that visitors could observe the performers from the pier above. When they got hungry, beachgoers could enjoy the food the pier had to offer or stop at a cafe nearby and pick up a Muscle Beach burger.[74] Alternatively, they could grab something to eat at one of the many snack shops along the beach or enjoy picnics brought from home to save the change.[75] A brave visitor could buy a bite from "Crazy Al," a particularly unique character who operated a food stand on the beach and was known for his impression of Adolph Hitler. Or, beachgoers seeking a

[71] Devienne, *Sand Rush*, 171.
[72] Devienne, *Sand Rush*, 171.
[73] Devienne, *Sand Rush*, 171.
[74] Todd, "The Halcyon Days of Muscle Beach," 241.
[75] Rose, *Muscle Beach*, 11.

healthier snack might buy fresh fruit or nuts from one of the Nature Boys.[76] The Nature Boys, a group of shabby-looking men focused on outdoor living and healthy eating, arrived on Muscle Beach in the 1940s. As well as selling snacks, they spread the word of their natural lifestyle to the beach crowds. They also told jokes and played music, bringing a sense of fun to the sands.[77] With the amenities of the pier, various food options, and several entertaining characters, Muscle Beach was the perfect weekend activity. But cafes and carnival rides did not make the beach special—that title belonged to its acrobats and bodybuilders.

Muscle Beach is famous for its gymnasts, acrobats, weightlifters, and bodybuilders. Although they coexisted, acrobats and gymnasts were most common in the earlier days of the beach; after the end of WWII, bodybuilders and weightlifters dominated.[78] Especially in the early days, performers entertained visitors by performing adagio, in which groups of acrobats performed various stunts to music. They lifted each other overhead, tossed petite female performers in the air, and formed human pyramids, demonstrating their impressive skill and flexibility (see figure 1.2).[79] The city even sponsored gymnastics performances in 1940 that featured balancing acts, adagio, tumbling, and ring and bar exercises.[80] Although the initial Muscle Beach gymnasts were amateurs, they quickly rose to the level of professionals.

Figure 1.2. (Photograph by George Tate, *Acrobats at Muscle Beach, c1950s,* circa 1950, Santa Monica History Museum, 2009.109.367.)

[76] Rose, *Muscle Beach*, 29.
[77] Rose, *Muscle Beach*, 96.
[78] Ozyurtcu and Todd, "Critical Mass," 1705.
[79] Todd, "The Halcyon Days of Muscle Beach," 246.
[80] Devienne, *Sand Rush*, 160.

The beach was free to attend, and visitors saw quality performances by professionals and skilled beach regulars. Beachgoers could even join in on the fun. With support from the athletes, regular people got the chance to practice a handstand or even stand on someone's shoulders.[81] Acrobats were the heart of Muscle Beach. They honed their skills in the Santa Monica sun, putting on a show for spectators and encouraging participation.

While acrobats remained a part of beach life, they began to fade to make way for the famous Muscle Beach weightlifters of the 1940s and 1950s. Part of the reason for this shift was that many of the founders of the beach, the gymnasts, had grown up and moved away from Santa Monica. Furthermore, magazines like Bob Hoffman's *Strength and Health* were growing in popularity and spreading interest in bodybuilding.[82] As Les Stockton spread the word about the benefits of weightlifting to the Muscle Beach crew, Vic and Armand Tanny drew increasing numbers of bodybuilders to the beach. As the new guard moved in, Muscle Beach was transformed into the show of strength we remember today.[83] A weightlifting pit was constructed near the wooden platform at the beach to facilitate lifting. A club for weightlifters was established in 1955, and by 1957 it was so popular that 1,000 people purchased memberships.[84] Like the acrobats, the weightlifters encouraged others to participate in their sport. People could take weekly fitness classes at Muscle Beach, like "Adult Body Building Instruction" and "Children Apparatus Instruction."[85] At the beach, athletes trained and tested their strength in the weightlifting pit, and visitors admired their muscles and gave lifting a chance themselves.

Bodybuilding became so popular that Muscle Beach started to host its own physique contests, which became significant events at the beach. In 1947, the first Mr. and Miss Muscle

[81] Rose, *Muscle Beach*, 29.
[82] Todd, "The Halcyon Days of Muscle Beach," 252.
[83] Todd, "The Halcyon Days of Muscle Beach," 250-251.
[84] Devienne, "The Life, Death, and Rebirth of Muscle Beach," 334.
[85] Devienne, *Sand Rush*, 163.

Beach contests were held. Created by DeForest Most, the supervisor of the playground department at the time, these contests were described in the local *San Pedro News Pilot* as a "civic celebration." The contests were special events at the beach.[86] They were held on Labor Day and the Fourth of July, along with weightlifting competitions, acrobatic performances, and volleyball tournaments.[87] In 1951, the *Whittier Star Review* advertised the "Santa Monica Beach Bay Festival," complete with "beach Olympics, water skiing, Muscle Beach performances, helicopter features, dory race (rowing), and colorful water carnival" at the pier and beach on Labor Day.[88] More than just bodybuilding shows, these were spectacular events. The contests were incredibly well received, and the beach was the most crowded during the event—up to 5,000 people surrounded the platform to watch the participants. Due to their massive popularity, the competitions were expanded to include a Mr. Muscle Beach Junior for younger beachgoers in 1951.[89] Spectators would whistle to show support for their favorite contestants, and the winners were awarded huge shiny trophies to celebrate their achievement.[90] The Mr. and Miss Muscle Beach contests and their associated festivals were a focal point of life at the beach. Athletes showed off their hard work in the pit to crowds of thousands, and spectators admired their physiques and enjoyed an exhilarating beach day. Furthermore, through the crowds of spectators and significant media attention, the American public became more exposed to the image of the muscular body due to these physique contests. This development will be explored more later.

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[86] "'Muscle Beach' to Name Queen," *San Pedro News Pilot*, August 28, 1947, https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=SPNP19470828.1.1.
[87] Todd, "The Halcyon Days of Muscle Beach," 251; Devienne, "The Life, Death, and Rebirth of Muscle Beach," 335.
[88] "Southern California Events of September," *Whittier Star Review*, August 13, 1951, https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=WSR19510816.2.69.
[89] Devienne, "The Life, Death, and Rebirth of Muscle Beach," 336.
[90] Rose, *Muscle Beach*, 11.

Figure 1.3. (Photograph by George Tate, *Adagio Routine, c 1953*, circa 1953, Santa Monica History Museum, 2009.109.46.)

Events like the Mr. and Miss Muscle Beach contests highlight another critical aspect of the beach: it had a flirtatious, sometimes sexually charged energy. The beach was the perfect place for attractive young people to mingle and date one another. Teens and young adults went to the beach in groups, offering the ideal chance to meet potential new suitors. Many young adults met their future partners at the beach.[91] This prospect and the beachgoers' minimal clothing created the beach's charged atmosphere. Men often went shirtless with only swim trunks, and women donned the newly acceptable two-piece bathing suits.[92] Historian Marla Matzer Rose describes the energy at Muscle Beach: "The atmosphere certainly had a sexual charge– these were young, extremely attractive (and nearly naked) people."[93] Furthermore, the athlete's performances of adagio required a lot of physical contact, often between men and women. One photograph from the Santa Monica History Museum archive captures this sexual energy perfectly. A fit, shirtless man and a woman in a two-piece swimsuit are photographed during an adagio performance in 1953. The man holds the woman close with his hand on her lower abdomen, her arms perched atop her chest. She looks at the viewer almost seductively.[94] The allure of the beach captured in this photo was likely especially exciting to its young-adult athletes and visitors.

The beach's sexually charged atmosphere and its female athletes were often depicted in terms of heterosexual relationships. In 1950, the *Los Angeles Mirror* ran an article called "A

[91] Devienne, *Sand Rush*, 143.
[92] Todd, "The Halcyon Days of Muscle Beach," 245.
[93] Rose, *Muscle Beach*, 50-51.
[94] George Tate, *Adagio Routine, c 1953, c*irca 1953, photograph, Santa Monica History Museum. https://santamonicahistory.catalogaccess.com/photos/13814.

Boy-and-Girl Story" about how professional football player Bob Waterfield met his wife Jane at Muscle Beach. Bob was described as "one of the best on the beach at doing feats of strength with his upper body," and Jane as "very beautiful," "that kind of girl, something a bit sextra special." Bob was a gymnast, and Jane often gave him advice while watching him train at the beach.[95] Both Bob and Jane were white. They were the perfect Muscle Beach couple—a strong man and a beautiful woman. The Waterfields perfectly depict the type of Muscle Beach couples celebrated in the media. They represented the ideal of the white, patriarchal nuclear family that was so central to American propaganda in this period. Because the Waterfields were both white and straight, the sexually charged nature of the beach and the fact that Jane was "a bit sextra special" was appropriate. Jane's sexual attractiveness was not threatening because she was in a relationship with Bob; in the context of a heterosexual relationship, her sexual attractiveness made her more feminine. Heterosexuality was a powerful shield that legitimized the behavior of female Muscle Beach athletes, a concept that will be explored further in Chapter Three.

While the Muscle Beach atmosphere was often flirtatious, it was also defined by a strong sense of community. The beach was home to countless athletes in addition to the acrobats and weightlifters, including wrestlers, boxers, and circus performers. These athletes came together as "physical culturists," carving the beach into a shared gathering spot—a third space.[96] As Armand Tanny recalled, "It was like a club, it was a community. We all had common interests. It was just very much a part of our lives. That was what made it a lot of fun. You knew everybody when you went down there. It was delightful."[97] The Muscle Beach athletes also fostered a thriving

[95] "A Boy-and-Girl Story," *Los Angeles Mirror,* July 28, 1950, https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=LAM19500728.1.71.
[96] Ozyurtcu and Todd, "Critical Mass," 1705-06.
[97] Ozyurtcu and Todd, "Critical Mass," 1707.

learning environment. They collaborated, offering advice and helping each other learn new tricks. The athletes at Muscle Beach cultivated a strong sense of camaraderie.[98]

Beach Demographics: Age, Gender, and Race

The Muscle Beach community included both men and women, a broad spectrum of ages, and a surprising number of families. Contrary to associations between weightlifting and masculinity, many women trained and performed at Muscle Beach, some displaying noticeably muscular physiques. The city of Santa Monica also tried at times to recruit the beach into its family-friendly image, encouraging both athletes and spectators to make their time at the shore a family affair.[99] As a result, kids and young teens often visited the beach and even performed with their families. In 1948, the *Whittier Reporter* publicized that a local YMCA club called Sun and Fun Club, composed of fifty boys aged twelve to fifteen, took a field trip to Muscle Beach.[100] Furthermore, kids are often pictured in beach photographs in the Santa Monica History Museum's digital collection. One photograph, Figure 1.4, shows a man supporting a standing baby above his head with one hand, all while balancing on a lifeguard's shoulders.[101] Even one-year-olds could perform at Muscle Beach. The beach was open to all ages and genders; kids visited the sands in club groups and even participated in the acrobatic performances.

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[98] Ozyurtcu and Todd, "Critical Mass," 1707-08.
[99] Devienne, "The Life, Death, and Rebirth of Muscle Beach," 343.
[100] "Sun and Fun Club Members Get Around," *Whittier Reporter*, August 9, 1948, https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=WSR19480809.1.2.
[101] George Tate, *Acrobats at Muscle Beach, c1953*, circa 1953, photograph, Santa Monica History Museum, https://santamonicahistory.catalogaccess.com/photos/13369.

Many of the beach regulars were teenagers. Jimmy Lawlor, the winner of Mr. Muscle Beach 1948, was an eighteen-year-old student at UCLA.[102] That year's winner of Miss Muscle Beach, Sarah Hirsch, was just seventeen years old and still a student at University High School.[103] It's easy for a modern viewer to look at photographs of girls in the physique shows with their done-up hair and makeup and assume they are young adults, but many were teens. Young people created Muscle Beach as a place to practice gymnastics, and it remained a popular destination for teens in the mid-century. Although the city of Santa Monica encouraged athletes to bring their children to the beach, the fact that people of all ages frequented the space likely contributed to tensions as time passed. The role of Muscle Beach as a place for teens and young adults to mingle and date was not the most conducive to the city's family-friendly image. Muscle Beach was a complex space with several groups with competing interests.

Figure 1.4. (Photograph by George Tate, *Acrobats at Muscle Beach, c1953*, circa 1953, Santa Monica History Museum, 2009.109.14.)

While representing a wide range of ages, how welcoming the Muscle Beach community was to people of color is debated by scholars. Two historians who have made significant contributions to scholarship about Muscle Beach, Elsa Devienne and Jan Todd, disagree about its demographics. They both recognize that some beaches in California were informally segregated into the mid-century.[104] Yet Todd and Devienne disagree about the racial

[102] "UCLA Students 'Mr. Muscle Beach,'" *San Pedro News Pilot*, July 5, 1948, https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=CCG19480506.1.9.
[103] "High School Girl Picked as 'Miss Muscle Beach,'" *Los Angeles Times*, September 7, 1948, https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/c-j-tauzer-senator-dies/docview/165902482/se-2.
[104] Devienne, *Sand Rush*, 144; Todd, "The Halcyon Days of Muscle Beach," 247.

diversity of the Muscle Beach scene itself. Todd argues that "participation on the platform at Muscle Beach was still a largely white phenomenon." She points to African American weightlifting champion John Davis and a handful of Black Mr. Muscle Beach participants as exceptions to a majority-white scene.[105] Devienne contests that "Muscle Beach crowds, as attested by photographs with Black and Asian spectators standing among other onlookers, were thus considerably diverse." She writes that people of color were participants at the beach, too, not just spectators. Like Todd, she mentions the male African American, Asian, and Hispanic competitors of the bodybuilding contests at the beach, including a photograph of eighteen-year-old Mr. Muscle Beach contestant Albert Ruiz. In contrast to Todd, she includes them as evidence of a racially tolerant beach culture that mirrored the inclusivity of the sports of weightlifting and bodybuilding, with the recognition that "racial tolerance was stretched by the athletes' revealing bathing suits and the presence of white female athletes alongside non-white men."[106]

While Devienne argues that Muscle Beach was diverse, she recognizes that it was re-written as a white space in the media. As California beach culture became associated with the aesthetic of "thin, tan, taut bodies with sun-bleached blond hair and pearly white teeth," it was equated with whiteness.[107] Teen movies of the period only pictured white beachgoers, and the press erased the non-white Muscle Beach performers.[108] Part of the allure of the Southern California beach to some was its perception as a place for white Americans to escape "racial tensions linked to the nascent civil rights movement."[109] The media did not reflect reality but shaped how we remember Muscle Beach today. While people of color participated as athletes

[105] Todd, "The Halcyon Days of Muscle Beach," 247-248.
[106] Devienne, "The Life, Death, and Rebirth of Muscle Beach," 340-341.
[107] Devienne, *Sand Rush*, 139.
[108] Devienne, *Sand Rush*, 144; Devienne, "The Life, Death, and Rebirth of Muscle Beach," 349.
[109] Devienne, *Sand Rush*, 138.

and onlookers at Muscle Beach, they were not featured prominently in the media like white beachgoers. As a result, the beach is memorialized mainly as a white, heterosexual phenomenon and space.

The Breaking Point: Homosexuality, Modernization, and the Closure of Muscle Beach

The conservative city of Santa Monica was only willing to accept Muscle Beach's challenge of traditional sexual norms and disruption of its "respectable" image for so long. The beach had its opponents from the beginning. Kate Giroux, the supervisor of the children's playground at the site of Muscle Beach's inception, was not happy when Paul Brewer and his friends chose her domain to start practicing gymnastics. The playground was for young children, and Giroux disapproved of the teen beachgoers' revealing swimsuits and frequent physical contact. As Relna Brewer McRae recollects, "I think she didn't like it when the men lifted us and touched our legs and bottoms. She actually told me once that she thought what we were doing was immoral."[110] This fundamental mismatch between Muscle Beach and the conservative city of Santa Monica was a problem that grew as the beach developed, culminating in its closure.

Several factors led city officials to close Muscle Beach in 1958. Since the late-nineteenth century, bodybuilders had to combat societal associations between muscularity and homosexuality, a stigma that only intensified with the Cold War emphasis on the white, heterosexual, patriarchal family.[111] In the late 1950s, two significant events confirmed the worries of Santa Monicans, who viewed Muscle Beach as a site of sexual impropriety. In 1956, a ten-year-old boy named Lawrence Rice was murdered by serial killer Stephen Nash under the Santa Monica Pier. Nash was known to engage in homosexual relations. An example of a

[110] Todd, "The Halcyon Days of Muscle Beach," 244-45.
[111] Devienne, "The Life, Death, and Rebirth of Muscle Beach," 338-339.

postwar "sex crime panic," this killing strengthened people's association between homosexuality and sexual violence, and city officials pinned the blame on Crystal Beach as a result.[112] Furthermore, on December 16, 1958, five Muscle Beach bodybuilders were arrested on charges of sexual misconduct against two young African American girls, aged twelve and fourteen.[113] Two of the men arrested were Isaac Berger and Dave Sheppard, Olympic weightlifting champions.[114] Using the arrests to justify their actions, the Santa Monica City Council promptly shut the beach down and filled the area with dirt to prevent the athletes from returning. The scandal gave an already existing anti-Muscle Beach coalition the fuel they needed to convince the council to shut the site down. The lobby worked tirelessly to spread their rhetoric, writing about the sexual perversion of the beach local newspapers. Ultimately, they were successful.[115] From its birth, the athletes at Muscle Beach had to fight associations between bodybuilding and homosexuality. The conflation of homosexuality and sexual violence as a result of the sex crime panic tied to these two crimes ensured this fight was a losing battle.

The shutdown of Muscle Beach is just one example of a more extensive "beach modernization" movement that took hold in the 1950s and 1960s that aimed to prioritize the white, heterosexual family. During this period, beaches in the Los Angeles area were "modernized" to attract members of the "respectable public" and push out "undesirables" like the Muscle Beach bodybuilders, members of the queer community, Black people, and young working-class folk. The "modernization" of beaches during this time had the same goal as the "urban renewal" of city neighborhoods: to keep the white middle-class population in place.[116] As a hub for all of these groups, Ocean Park became an obvious target of this gentrification

[112] Devienne, *Sand Rush*, 177.
[113] Devienne, *Sand Rush*, 176.
[114] Todd, "The Halcyon Days of Muscle Beach," 253.
[115] Devienne, *Sand Rush*, 179.
[116] Devienne, *Sand Rush*, 173.

movement. The conservative, wealthy Santa Monicans that composed the beach lobby and members of the "morality" movement worked together to dismantle Muscle Beach and the rest of Ocean Park as part of a larger "clean-up" project. In doing so, they made a successful stand to protect the period's dominant gender and sexual norms that valued the respectable nuclear family. The destruction of Ocean Park was just one example of this larger effort.[117]

Muscle Beach was replaced with the new Beach Park No. 4, a recreational area that fit the lobby's definition of a respectable space. The site still had exercise equipment, but there were no weights and no platform, and the "Muscle Beach" name was dropped.[118] The area was also under close supervision by three officials at a time. Furthermore, unlike Muscle Beach, this new site was a definitively white space, emphasized by the images of white children playing at the park published by the *LA Times*.[119] The city worked hard to ensure that Beach Park No. 4 was a site for white families and not a place for members of minority communities to gather as Ocean Park had been. As part of the "modernization" movement of Southern California beaches, the beach lobby destroyed Muscle Beach and Ocean Park to keep white nuclear families in and minority communities out.

Conclusion

In retrospect, the closure of Santa Monica's Muscle Beach by the Beach Lobby is unsurprising. Muscle Beach was a dynamic space where people of different races, genders, ages, and sexualities came together. Yet, it existed within a society that prioritized the white, patriarchal nuclear family while marginalizing those who fell outside this ideal. In particular, the conservative city of Santa Monica sought to brand itself as a family-friendly destination, a vision

[117] Devienne, *Sand Rush*, 173.
[118] Devienne, "The Life, Death, and Rebirth of Muscle Beach," 355.
[119] Devienne, *Sand Rush*, 180.

fundamentally at odds with the sexually charged atmosphere of Muscle Beach. For years, Muscle Beach regulars managed to navigate these societal constraints by promoting family-friendly activities and distancing themselves from associations with homosexuality. As a result, Muscle Beach is best understood as a liminal space where athletes and visitors subtly pushed societal boundaries, carving out a space for themselves within a culture resistant to such diversity. The beach was a microcosm of mid-twentieth-century American society, reflecting tensions between the country's diverse population and those promoted in Cold War California. Although conservative values ultimately won out in Santa Monica, after the beach was closed, its athletes moved just south to Venice Beach, where bodybuilding culture laid down its roots.[120]

The diversity of Muscle Beach was often lost in the media at the time. Teen beach movies depicted it as a white space, and newspaper articles and photographs overwhelmingly focused on white athletes. Beachgoers actively distanced themselves from homosexuality, and female athletes aligned with gender expectations to maintain an appropriate image. It is essential to highlight this erasure of non-white and queer athletes at Muscle Beach and recognize the critical role they played in the site's ongoing cultural significance. While the smiling faces of young white heterosexual couples are what gets remembered, in reality, Muscle Beach was home to a far more diverse group of people.

[120] Devienne, "The Life, Death, and Rebirth of Muscle Beach," 327.

Chapter 2

Stockton's New Model of Femininity on Paper: "Barbelles" in *Strength and Health*

Abbye Stockton's "Barbelles" column stands out from the rest of Bob Hoffman's *Strength and Health* magazine. Someone picking up a copy of the November 1947 issue would be greeted with an increasingly popular image on the cover: a flexing man. The cover of this particular issue featured the white bodybuilder René Leger, or "Mr. Canada," and his muscles spoke to the international reach of the magazine. Turning the page would reveal an image of Leger with a woman standing at his side. In the photograph, Leger had his arms wrapped around the woman's waist. She stood slightly facing him and was wearing a short swimsuit. While Leger was named on the magazine cover, this woman was not.[121]

Inside, the reader would then encounter a section outlining Hoffman's career and qualifications as editor of the magazine. Under "World's Greatest Physical Director," readers encountered ads on the merits of Hoffman's books, images of men demonstrating their strength through weightlifting exercises, and an article detailing Leger's prowess. Turning the page again would reveal the faces of ten smiling women standing on a stage above a crowd, wearing swimsuits and high-heeled shoes (Figure 2.1). This photograph was a notable change from the many men that filled *Strength & Health* and was featured in the column titled "Barbelles." This section was authored by Abbye Stockton, who wrote about the Miss Muscle Beach beauty

[121] *Strength and Health*, November 1947.

contest in November. Its top-ten finalists were the women in the picture.[122] Though Stockton's "Barbelles," a section dedicated to women weightlifters, stands out when looking at an individual issue, it appeared consistently in the *Strength and Health* magazine from 1944 to 1954. This chapter asks what we can learn about women weightlifters from the "Barbelles" column. How did it conceive ideas about femininity, bodies, and women with muscles?

Figure 2.1. Top-ten finalists of the Miss Muscle Beach beauty contest featured in the November, 1947 "Barbelles" article. (*Strength and Health*, November 1947, pg. 14).

For the ten years that Stockton wrote "Barbelles" for *Strength and Health*, she repeatedly featured women athletes, highlighting their strength and individual abilities and accomplishments. She also wrote about women and physical culture, encouraging other women to participate in the masculine and male-dominated sports of weightlifting and bodybuilding. However, as much as Stockton empowered women to take up strength training to improve their health and physical abilities and take control of their bodies, she also made clear through her advice in "Barbelles" that toned female bodies would enhance their physical and sexual attractiveness and capabilities as housewives. This chapter argues that although Stockton's columns reflected mid-century misogyny and Cold War gendered expectations for women, they nonetheless promoted an alternative version of womanhood that paired muscularity and femininity: the *barbelle*.

[122] *Strength and Health*, November 1947, 14-15.

This chapter begins by looking at the women featured in *Strength and Health* before Abbye Stockton to understand the space she stepped into when writing "Barbelles." It explores how *Strength and Health* promoted the message that women's appropriate role was as men's complements, both due to Hoffman's personal beliefs and societal norms. The chapter traces how, as a result, the magazine content that focused on women, including "Barbelles" and various advertisements, reinforced this message. It focuses on how Stockton's ideal of the barbelle fits into this picture. The women of *Strength and Health* could be muscular, but they also had to be sexually appealing and fulfill their roles as homemakers. The chapter nuances these claims by arguing that Stockton and Hoffman nonetheless strongly advocated for women's participation in strength training at a time when that was an unpopular message. Stockton's "Barbelles" walked a fine line in promoting strength training for women in a magazine that perpetuated misogynistic ideology—the following chapter explores this tension.

Before Stockton: The Women's Section in **Strength and Health**

When Stockton started writing *Strength and Health*'s women's section, she stepped into a role that several women had occupied before her. Four women, Rosetta Snell, Gracie Gertzetski, Dorcas Lehman, and Alda Ketterman, were each featured in the magazine. These women and their contributions to *Strength & Health,* and by extension, Hoffman's larger project, reveal the marginal role that the women and the women's section occupied in the magazine from the start. The readers of *Strength and Health* were a predominantly male audience.[123] Therefore, Hoffman's primary goal was to portray a version of women in his magazine that men would find appealing, catering to his male demographic.

[123] John D. Fair, "Fitness Innovation or Sexual Exploitation? Bob Hoffman and the Women Weightlifters of Muscletown USA," *Sport History Review* 30, no. 1 (1999): 51, https://doi.org/10.1123/shr.30.1.39.

Rosetta Snell, who married Hoffman on October 20, 1928, was the first woman to be featured consistently in his magazine.[124] While women's content was present in *Strength and Health* from the start, it rarely challenged mainstream notions of womanhood. Hoffman included images of Rosetta lifting weights and accompanied them with articles (attributed to Rosetta) that provided weight-lifting advice, recipes, and beauty tips for women and their men.[125] Rosetta's first article, "Men Prefer Plain Foods," included recipes women readers could make to satiate the male athletes in their lives: "favorite foods that make the STRONG MEN smack their lips for more!'"[126] As historian John Fair argues, Rosetta was included in *Strength & Health* as an "exemplar of youthful femininity" that drew in male readers and potentially encouraged women to train themselves. Fair explains that while these women's section articles were attributed to Rosetta, Hoffman actually wrote them. He characterizes these articles as "highly sexist and patronizing" due to their message that the women of *Strength and Health* should fulfill "traditional" domestic roles.[127] From the inception of *Strength and Health*, Hoffman primarily used the women's section to increase his readers by appealing to the dominant gender ideals at the time, emphasizing women's domesticity and their role as men's complements. While Rosetta was the first woman to appear in the women's section, her 1944 divorce from Hoffman meant *Strength and Health* needed to find a new woman to fill the role.[128]

Gracie Gerzetski, the next woman to feature repeatedly in *Strength and Health*, was a dancer and model who went by Gracie Bard. Images of Gerzetski began to appear alongside Rosetta's articles starting in March of 1938. Hoffman continued the trend of recruiting his sexual

[124]Fair, "Fitness Innovation or Sexual Exploitation?," 40.
[125] Fair, "Fitness Innovation or Sexual Exploitation?," 40; Shurley, Todd, and Todd. "Building the Barbell Athlete," 56.
[126] Fair, "Fitness Innovation or Sexual Exploitation?," 41.
[127] Fair, "Fitness Innovation or Sexual Exploitation?," 41.
[128] Fair, "Fitness Innovation or Sexual Exploitation?," 42-43.

partners for his magazine, and his and Gerzetski's relationship was more than professional. As Jan Todd has explained, a reader can easily "follow Hoffman's marital and extra-marital arrangements via the pages of *Strength and Health* in its first two decades." Gerzetski played an important role in advancing Hoffman's career. She traveled with his York team to weightlifting meets, modeled for product advertisements and exercise demonstrations in the pages of his magazine, and eventually took over the women's section.

For example, when the April 1940 edition of *Strength and Health* came out with a cover image of Gerzetski and famous bodybuilder John Grimek dancing, it became the magazine's most popular issue.[129] Gerzetski's image was a powerful marketing tool from which Hoffman made money.

Figure 2.2. Image of the cover of the *Strength and Health* April 1940 issue featuring Gracie Bard and John Grimek. (Amazon.com).

Gerzetski was primarily portrayed in the pages of *Strength and Health* as an image of femininity—a sex symbol. The April 1940 cover showed Gerzetski smiling in a cropped shirt and high-cut shorts facing Grimek with their hands joined.[130] While Grimek was also scantily clad, the fact that images of women in *Strength and Health* were less common makes the picture of Gerzetski in her cropped shirt stand out, highlighting the way that Hoffman promoted her as sexually alluring. Moreover, as he did with Rossetta's articles, Hoffman also ghost-wrote Gerzetski's, continuing to portray women's

[129] Fair, "Fitness Innovation or Sexual Exploitation?," 43-44.
[130] Image of the cover of the *Strength and Health* April 1940 issue featuring Gracie Bard and John Grimek, Amazon, accessed December 23, 2024, https://www.amazon.com/Strength-Health-Self-Improvement-Forgotten-Scharzberger/dp/B08Q33LVDX.

primary role as serving men. As Hoffman's partner, Gerzetski boosted his ego and represented a visual symbol of his masculinity and virility, just like Rosetta.[131] Despite the significance of Rosetta and Gerzetski's images in increasing the popularity of *Strength and Health* and advancing Hoffman's career, he portrayed women as subservient and complementary to men in the magazine's women's section. In 1941, Gerzetski left Hoffman after starting a relationship with another man. She eventually wrote to him after her departure, asking him to pay her to continue using her content in *Strength and Health*.[132] Even after she left, Hoffman profited from her image without fair compensation or proper recognition.

Just as Rosetta was replaced, Gerzetski would be, too; Hoffman had magazines to sell, and featuring images of attractive women helped him accomplish that. Hoffman's next two girlfriends, Dorcas Lehman and Alda Ketterman, also appeared in his magazine. Both were powerful women and were featured in *Strength and Health* as such. Their articles and pictures were commonly included in the magazine during World War II. Eventually, they were replaced by Abbye Stockton. In July 1944, Stockton started writing her women's column "Barbelles," which included a picture of Dorcas in the August edition.[133] As far as I can tell, Stockton was the first woman in Hoffman's magazine to fill the major female role that was not his wife or girlfriend.

As Fair argues, by recruiting Rosetta, Gerzetski, Lehman, and Ketterman to his magazine and promoting their strength to his readers, Hoffman was the most influential physical culturist to advocate for women's participation in strength training.[134] However, analyzing the way that these women, particularly Rosetta and Gerzetski, were portrayed in the magazine and viewed by

[131] Fair, "Fitness Innovation or Sexual Exploitation?," 43-44.
[132] Fair, "Fitness Innovation or Sexual Exploitation?," 45.
[133] Fair, "Fitness Innovation or Sexual Exploitation?," 45-46.
[134] Fair, "Fitness Innovation or Sexual Exploitation?," 46.

Hoffman as subservient sex symbols demonstrates that their participation in the world of weightlifting was limited and one-dimensional. It is because of Hoffman's misogynistic beliefs and his limited portrayal of women in his magazine that Fair argues that "neither Rosetta, Gracie, Dorcas, Alda, nor other women at York built lasting reputations as outstanding weightlifters or bodybuilders."[135] Hoffman encouraged women to participate in a male-dominated sport, but also upheld the period's traditional gender norms and view of women as subservient and complementary to men.

Hoffman's sexist views are also reflected in his magazine advertisements promoting weight lifting for women. For example, the issue from February 1946 included an ad for a barbell training set called "The Aristocrat," marketed as "ideal for the ladies." It read, "Have you tried to persuade your wife or sweetheart to be your training partner? Buy her one of these beautiful sets and no more persuasion will be required."[136] *Strength and Health* spoke directly to men, assuming male readership, and tried selling them a barbell to get their wives to exercise. The advertisement continued, claiming that "the adjustment of the weights is so easy, the training system so arranged that several persons of varying strength can train with the same barbell at the same time." The magazine envisioned female weightlifters as weaker and training exclusively alongside their male partners. Advertisements like the one for "The Aristocrat" conceived of the men of *Strength and Health* as heterosexual, emphasizing their masculinity and fighting the associations between weightlifting and homosexuality in this period. Advertisements in Hoffman's magazine encouraged women to lift weights to support their male partner's masculinity better, a message crafted for a majority male readership.

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[135] Fair, "Fitness Innovation or Sexual Exploitation?," 51.
[136] "The Aristocrat Weight Training Set," *Strength and Health*, February 1946, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/PRDLEZ517453093/AHSI?u=ucsantabarbara&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=3582fee8.

One prominent message in *Strength and Health* was that the primary role of women and female athletes was to support men. This is further exemplified by a Christmas-time advertisement in the December 1947 issue. The section urged readers to purchase the various products advertised in the magazine as Christmas gifts for their loved ones. The ad first briefly addressed wives and mothers, saying their male relatives could "make more" of themselves with a subscription to the magazine and the equipment it sells. It then addressed men: "And fellows, there are presents the little woman will appreciate, one of the special ladies' combinations of Polished Aluminum Health boots, a pair of dumbells… an abdominal board, a set of Aristocratic weights, a two years' subscription, a book or course."[137] The difference in the language the magazine used to advertise to men and women is evident. A man could "make more of himself" by weightlifting, and a "little woman" could "appreciate" the unique, polished women's equipment. Advertisements like these in *Strength and Health* that specifically marketed training equipment for women are significant. They speak to how Hoffman was one of the first physical culturists to promote women's participation in weightlifting. However, these advertisements were also patronizing and portrayed female athletes as needing special accommodations. They were expected to train alongside their husbands and other male relatives in a supporting role to complement men's masculinity. The message that women should participate in strength training was new, but the reason behind it—to better fulfill their role as men's complements—was not.

By the time Stockton started writing "Barbelles," the message of the women's section of the magazine had already been established: women should participate in strength training to better fulfill their roles as complements to men—as "sweethearts," wives, and mothers. She stepped into a space shaped by Hoffman and his view of women's role in sport and society.

[137] "Make this a Strength & Health Christmas," *Strength and Health*, December 1947, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/EAQFHG724336593/AHSI?u=ucsantabarbara&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=b97b0b69.

Therefore, the portrayal of women in her section reflected this expectation, contributing to her focus on weightlifting as a way for women to become more attractive and better fill their traditional role as housewives *as well as* for health and physical strength. This duality defines the new model of femininity that Stockton promoted in "Barbelles." Due to weightlifting's traditionally masculine associations, she and Hoffman were cautious when introducing women to the scene. They emphasized how Stockton matched the traditional image of femininity to ensure that she was palatable to a large audience. In this thesis, I am focused on how Stockton shaped the model of the muscular yet feminine woman because she is the most well-known of *Strength and Health*'s female features. Still, the women who came before her, including Rosetta, Gerzetski, Lehman, and Ketterman, did much of the same work. While all these women were strength trainers, Stockton achieved a new level of visible muscularity and popularity, making her an excellent case study to understand this new feminine ideal.

"Barbelles:" Strength Training for Aesthetic Appeal

A crucial feature of Stockton's feminine, muscular woman was beauty. She had to contend with associations between muscle and masculinity that had the potential to make muscular women undesirable. Therefore, Stockton convinced the public that weightlifting would not turn women into men, but instead would develop their bodies to heighten their feminine features and make them more beautiful in order to draw in readership. Beauty and sexual desirability were important elements of the new feminine ideal of the barbelle. Stockton and Hoffman laid much of the groundwork for this task in "Barbelles" and the rest of *Strength and Health*, and this was reflected in the media. Mirroring how she was conceptualized in *Strength and Health*, contemporary media emphasized Stockton's physical attractiveness and the role of resistance

training in improving the feminine figure. The most potent remedy to the issue of muscle's masculinity, the new "Barbelle," had to be sexy.

The name of Stockton's column, "Barbelles," references the two aspects of the muscular yet feminine woman. "Barbell"—of course—refers to the weightlifting equipment these women used to build muscle. "Belle," meaning a beautiful woman, indicated that this new cohort of muscular women were still physically attractive. Muscle did not make them look masculine, and Stockton and Hoffman needed to emphasize this with the name of *Strength and Health*'s women's column. This tension between femininity and muscularity is captured even in the simple name "Barbelles."

Stockton's body was a physical representation of her new model of womanhood. She knew the public would constantly see and evaluate her body and was careful to appear feminine and attractive. In an interview conducted later in her life, she recounted, "I was always pretty feminine. It was just that in anything you read it was always women shouldn't do this and women shouldn't do that, and naturally I was inoculated with those ideas to begin with."[138] She continued, spending much time in the interview recounting her worries about appearing masculine. She stated,

> I was always afraid to do too much that would develop my biceps. I had the feeling that, you know, that would be masculine. I didn't want to [seem masculine], especially after I went into the gym business. Even though there were women getting interested in exercise, you still didn't want to– because they didn't want to come in and build up big muscles. They wanted to make their bodies look better, just physically better.[139]

[138] Joanna Frueh, Laurie Fierstein, and Judith E. Stein, *Picturing the Modern Amazon* (Rizzoli, 2000), 153.
[139] Frueh, *Picturing the Modern Amazon*, 153.

Stockton thought she looked feminine but understood that muscularity and femininity were often seen as opposites. Therefore, she emphasized her femininity and attractiveness by shaping her body in a particular way to make it more palatable to the broader public.

Hoffman's magazine also emphasized Stockton's feminine beauty and physical appeal, establishing her as the perfect complement to men's masculinity. An article in the January 1948 edition of *Strength and Health*, written by Norbert Grueber and reprinted from another magazine called *The Body Builder*, emphasized Stockton's attractiveness. *Strength and Health* chose to include this article to introduce their female editor to their readers, and it is therefore helpful to understand how they wanted her to be perceived. The article began, "It is obvious that the nickname 'Pudgy' no longer applies. The writer knows of few more attractive women."[140] The article immediately established that Stockton was slim and attractive, setting the tone for the rest of the piece. Grueber continued, explaining in a narrative of Stockton's involvement with weight training that people started referring to her as "The Strong Girl of Santa Monica." He clarified, however, that this was "a title she did not particularly cherish!"[141] It was important for Grueber to communicate that Stockton's strength was secondary to, and not as crucial as, her physical appearance: beauty came first. According to Grueber, Stockton disliked being known for her strength.

The article then recounted Stockton's vital work as Women's Editor for *Strength and Health* in taming prejudices against women's weightlifting and helping more young girls perfect their figures. Grueber stated, "...the prejudices are considerably lessened and the magazines are full of stories and pictures of attractive girls and young women athletes who owe their lovely

[140] Norbert Grueber, "Abbye [Pudgy] Stockton: A Picture of Strength and Health," *Strength and Health*, January 1948, 14, link.gale.com/apps/doc/TQOLVK343699025/AHSI?u=ucsantabarbara&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=bbe1f794.
[141] Grueber, "Abbye [Pudgy] Stockton," 15.

figures and their abilities to weight training."[142] Emphasizing that these women were "attractive" with "lovely figures" as well as abilities, the magazine was careful to associate Stockton and its female weightlifters with beauty and attractiveness. The femininity of these women needed to be emphasized; their femininity allowed them to be desirable compliments to men rather than masculine threats. The Grueber article published in *Strength and Health* presented Stockton as a physically attractive, desirable, muscular woman, a crucial element of her new feminine ideal.

Stockton's "Barbelles" column in *Strength and Health* encouraged women to participate in resistance training to develop more aesthetically pleasing bodies like hers. In the May/June 1950 column, she stated, "We must remember the primary purpose of woman in exercising is to correct or overcome some particular figure problem (or problems)."[143] Stockton went so far as to claim that women's "primary purpose" in exercising should be to make themselves more physically attractive. This message is constantly repeated in "Barbelles" from the entire duration Stockton wrote the column. In another article, she wrote about the benefits of resistance training for women, saying it "builds the body to normal proportions, which give beauty and shape" and that it "corrects feminine figure faults that could not be overcome by any other activity." Weightlifting was a tool for women to perfect their bodies. Again, she emphasized how women could participate in weightlifting to emphasize their femininity: "The female body should be feminine with rounded pleasing curves, and unless there is muscular shape to the body it is impossible to achieve that goal."[144] In an earlier issue, Stockton provided details of the kinds of "figure faults" that could be resolved with strength training, including "protruding and fat

[142] Grueber, "Abbye [Pudgy] Stockton," 15.
[143] Abbye "Pudgy" Stockton, "Barbelles," *Strength and Health*, May-June 1950, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/HRKKRJ990803331/AHSI?u=ucsantabarbara&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=7212d26d.
[144] Abbye "Pudgy" Stockton, "Barbelles," *Strength and Health*, September 1951, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/KMPNXN074297278/AHSI?u=ucsantabarbara&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=e8e3a6b3.

abdomens, thin scrawny necks, sagging breasts, and underdeveloped chests, arms and legs."[145] Stockton opposed the notion that muscle makes women masculine-looking and argued that it helped build a curvy, feminine body. She contested the traditional association between muscle and masculinity and asserted that it could be used to emphasize women's femininity.

One of the tools Stockton used to convince women, or more likely to persuade men to encourage their female partners to participate in strength training, was to feature stories of other barbelles who achieved desirable results. In the column from April 1951, Stockton featured a woman named Marlene "Kitten" Shearer from Ottawa, Canada, who participated in competitive weightlifting, which Stockton detailed in her column. While "Barbelles" included information about Shearer's participation in these events, Stockton repeatedly emphasized that even competitive lifting improved women's physiques. She wrote of Shearer, "Her weight exercising has been almost entirely limited to competitive weightlifting training, and yet she has found that her upper body has filled out and developed to correct proportions– that her hips have become firm and shapely, and her abdomen strong and flat."[146] Even though Shearer was a competitive athlete, most of this article focused on the benefits of lifting to improve the appearance of her body.

Figure 2.3. Venus de Milo Burger in the December, 1947 "Barbelles" article. (*Strength and Health*, December 1947, pg. 15).

[145] Abbye "Pudgy" Stockton, "Barbelles," *Strength and Health*, December 1947, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/EAQFHG724336593/AHSI?u=ucsantabarbara&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=b97b0b69.
[146] Abbye "Pudgy" Stockton, "Barbelles," *Strength and Health*, April 1951, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/DTESDN642254132/AHSI?u=ucsantabarbara&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=e609eb4e.

In the December 1947 issue, Stockton featured the stories of several women who participated in weight training, including a white South African woman named Venus de Milo Burger. A photo of de Milo striking an alluring pose is captioned, "Through barbell training Venus de Milo Burger of South Africa was able to transform her plump figure into a trim symmetrical one" (Figure 2.3).[147] As demonstrated in these two articles, the most prominent underlying message in "Barbelles" was that women should participate in strength training to improve and perfect their physiques. This was the appropriate way for women to train to maintain their femininity.

Local newspapers matched how Stockton and *Strength and Health* represented her, emphasizing her physical attractiveness and role in helping other women achieve the same desirable results. An article from the *Daily News, Los Angeles,* published in October 1949, focused extensively on the developing weightlifting culture in Los Angeles and Stockton's role in inspiring women; it wrote about "young people by the tens of thousands" "striving to become perfect– physically," and achieve bodies like Adonis and Aphrodite. The author introduced Stockton, explaining, "But the gals don't want bulging muscles. And they don't get them– although Abbye (Pudgy) Stockton, who runs a body remodeling place next to Macy's, uses precisely the same exercises that build up the guys." As the article continued, it included Stockton's explanation that women's bodies respond to training differently than men's and that weight training made the body beautiful. Stockton was then quoted, "'Any girl with normal health can have beautiful, full formed and firm breasts in a very short while.'" The author confirmed that "a glance at Abbye gives one an emphatic impression she knows what she's talking about."[148] This article is a good example of how Stockton was represented in the media as

[147] Stockton, "Barbelles," December 1947.
[148] Pat O'Hara, "New L.A. Mass Production Industry Turning Out Adonis and Aphrodite," *Daily News, Los Angeles*, October 24, 1949, https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=DNLA19491024.1.3.

an attractive, beautiful woman, muscular yet feminine. The author focused on the benefits of weightlifting for improving women's physiques and Stockton's role in spreading this message. When answering interview questions for this article, Stockton was careful to emphasize how lifting could make women's bodies even more feminine, explicitly citing its use in shaping "full formed and firm breasts." This *Daily News* article portrayed Stockton as *Strength and Health* did, promoting the muscular yet feminine ideal of the barbelle.

Apart from full articles, numerous local papers often included Stockton's image with accompanying text that characterized her much like the columns of *Strength and Health* and *Daily News*. An *LA Times* article from December 1949 advertising "the sixth annual 'Showcase of Strength and Skill'" wrote, "Pudgy Stockton, Miss Physical Culture Venus of 1948, will add feminine beauty to the show and will demonstrate her exercises for keeping the figure trim."[149] In December 1947, the *Salinas Californian* featured a photo of a buff posing Stockton with the accompanying text, "Mrs. Abbye Stockton of New York attributes her curvesome figure to weightlifting. Known as Queen of Bar Belles, she lost 30 pounds since she has been handling the weights. Now she tips the scales at 116 pounds."[150] Newspapers like these often used language like "feminine beauty" and "curvesome figure" to emphasize Stockton's beauty and desirability. As these examples demonstrate, they also focused on training to lose weight, as it was far more appropriate for women to exercise to stay skinny than to build muscle mass. Stockton presented herself in a way that emphasized her attractiveness, beauty, femininity, and role in helping other women train for the same goals. *Strength and Health* portrayed her similarly, and it was well-received and replicated by local newspapers. Stockton and the barbelles maintained their

[149] "Weight Lifters Display Talent at Y Tonight," *Los Angeles Times*, December 9, 1949, https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/weight-lifters-display-talent-at-y-tonight/docview/166042016/se-2.
[150] *Salinas Californian*, December 15, 1947, 18, https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=CASAL19471215.1.18.

femininity while strength training by focusing on its role in perfecting their physiques and boosting their attractiveness.

"Barbelles:" Strength Training to be a Better Housewife

Stockton's barbelles had to be good housewives as well as physically attractive. To maintain their femininity, these female lifters aligned with the period's traditional gender roles and presented themselves as good wives and mothers. Therefore, "Barbelles" worked to convince women that strength training would not detract from their role as housewives but would make them more capable homemakers. Stockton captured this recurring message perfectly in the December 1947 issue, stating, "I believe if more young girls would establish similar habits of regular exercise, there would be many more healthy and successful homemakers in the future than we have in the world today."[151] In the article from April 1949, Stockton featured a woman named Betty Munerol from Indiana. She outlined Betty's weight-gaining program and then specified, "Despite the fact that Betty keeps house for her husband and herself and works five days a week in outside employment, she makes time for her regular weekly workout periods and lets nothing interfere."[152] Stockton ensured that the time commitment of weight training would not prevent women from fulfilling their jobs inside and outside the household.

In a similar October 1951 feature, Stockton highlighted Bobbie Delapoza, a barbelle who was also an "average wife and mother."[153] As well as emphasizing that her barbelles were wives and mothers, Stockton added that women like Bobbie trained "in the privacy of their homes or in

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[151] Stockton, "Barbelles," December 1947.
[152] Abbye "Pudgy" Stockton, "Barbelles," *Strength and Health*, April 1949, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/MMBOHW209867162/AHSI?u=ucsantabarbara&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=2051220a.
[153] Abbye "Pudgy" Stockton, "Barbelles," *Strength and Health*, October 1951, https://link-gale-com.proxy.library.ucsb.edu/apps/doc/BPLGQN633056281/AHSI?u=ucsantabarbara&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=58b08968.

a suitable gymnasium."[154] Even though Stockton herself trained in a very public setting, she made a point in "Barbelles" that women could train in their homes or a "suitable" gym. In doing so, she argued that resistance training could easily fit into the homemaker's life and that women did not need to leave their homes to participate. In "Barbelles," Stockton quieted readers' potential concerns that women's involvement in strength training would impede their ability to perform their role as homemakers, instead explaining how it would be enhanced. Female readers of the column could rest assured knowing they would not face judgment for abandoning their homes if they chose to train, and male readers were comforted in knowing they could still rely on the labor of their women as wives and mothers.

Figure 2.4. Abbye Stockton sewing. (*The Los Angeles Times*, August 9, 1942, pg. 93).

The media also portrayed Stockton and her barbelles as capable homemakers. An *LA Times* article published in August 1942 included images of Stockton and original Muscle Beach athlete Relna Brewer McRae that emphasized the women's domesticity. In one image, Stockton held a posing McRae above her head. The caption below this image read, "Mrs. Stockton hoists Mrs. McRae with the greatest of ease. Both girls are housewives. In addition to caring for her home, husband, and muscles, Mrs. Stockton works as a clerk." Another image depicted Stockton in a modest dress with her hair pinned up and her sewing project daintily positioned on her crossed legs. The caption stated, "In her home, Mrs. Stockton puts aside her barbells and sews a fine seam. She can

[154] Stockton, "Barbelles," October 1951.

cook, too."[155] The author ensured that Stockton and McRae were housewives and that Stockton even had a job outside the home. They were weightlifters, but they were also good domestic women fulfilling their roles as wives. A third image showed Stockton and McRae posing in two-piece bathing suits. The caption emphasized their physical attractiveness: "They are not only two of the strongest girls, pound for pound, but also two of the nicest looking."[156] In this article, Stockton and McRae were portrayed as the perfect models for the new feminine ideal of the barbell. They were weightlifters, but they were beautiful homemakers first.

"Barbelles:" Strength Training for Women's Health and Fitness

While Stockton worked to align with societal understandings of femininity, she also reflected the importance of women's training for health and fitness. In the interview conducted when she was older, Stockton asserted, "[Muscle] just makes a big change in the way you think about yourself and about what you're doing."[157] This quote reflects an empowering result of strength training and gaining muscle: feeling strong and powerful in one's skin. She continued, "I never felt that way [masculine] down at the beach. Because we had so much– to try things that were hard, that took your strength."[158] Muscle helped Stockton think of her body as more than just an aesthetic object but also a vehicle to perform impressive feats of strength. While she presented herself as feminine at Muscle Beach, she was also concerned with her strength and ability as an athlete—an act of resistance to the patriarchal demands that women be obsessed with their body's aesthetic value above all else.

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[155] "And No Spinach…" *Los Angeles Times*, August 9, 1942, 16, https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/no-spinach/docview/165349681/se-2.
[156] "And No Spinach…" *LA Times*, 16.
[157] Frueh, *Picturing the Modern Amazon*, 153.
[158] Frueh, *Picturing the Modern Amazon*, 153.

In "Barbelles," Stockton also focused on women as athletes. She urged women to lift weights for their well-being, and although to a lesser extent, focused on their bodies' strength beyond its aesthetic value. For example, the December 1947 column spotlighted Singaporean athlete, Lye Ying, including her weight lifting records: 90-pound press, 105-pound snatch, and 140-pound clean and jerk.[159] This inclusion celebrated Ying's strength as an athlete and communicated her body's abilities to the audience. However, to maintain her advocacy for an appropriate form of women's participation in the sport, Stockton included the statement, "Not only has Lye Ying progressed in lifting ability but she has also derived satisfactory physical gains through training with barbells and dumbbells."[160] Stockton anchored her discussion of Ying on what lifting did for her body's appearance, explaining that her participation in weightlifting was less threatening to masculinity than pursuing strength and power. Her word choice of "physical gains" is multilayered and likely alluded to both muscle mass and physique improvement, indicating the importance of both. Stockton's celebration of women's bodies as capable and strong certainly pushed appropriate gender boundaries, but was always qualified with a discussion of their appearance.

In addition to writing about women weightlifters in "Barbelles," Stockton was instrumental in pioneering women's participation in competitive weightlifting events. She organized the first competitive weightlifting meet for women in the United States, the "Pacific Coast Weightlifting Championships." The meet occurred on February 28, 1947, at the Southwest Arena in Los Angeles, California. Nine women competed at the event in three different divisions based on body weight. Jan Todd reports that according to existing records, Stockton's meet was the first Amateur Athletic Union certified weightlifting contest for women.[161] The meet even got

[159] Stockton, "Barbelles," December 1947.
[160] Stockton, "Barbelles," December 1947.
[161] Todd, "Legacy of Pudgy Stockton," 7.

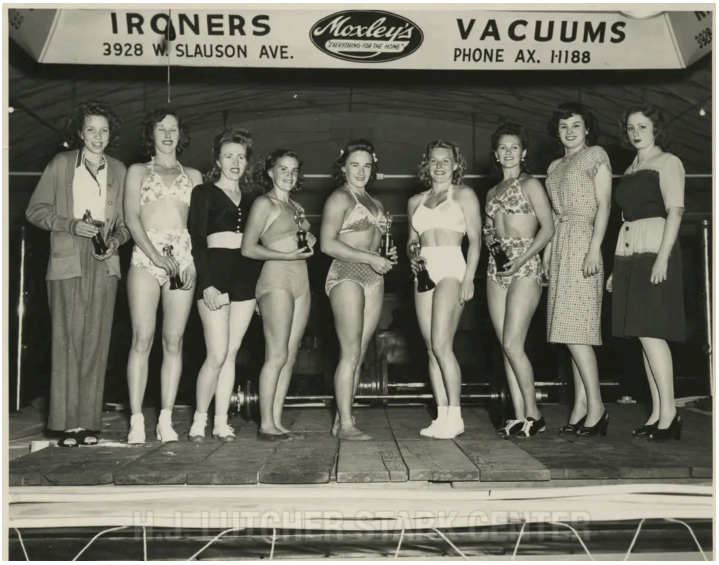

Figure 2.5. Contestants in the 1947 Pacific Coast Weightlifting Championships. From left: Winifred Reineke, Lisle De Lameter, Ruth McAlleece, Clair Bentley, Edna Rivers, Pudgy Stockton, Vera Fried, Jackie McCullah, Joan Trowbridge.[163] (*Trophy ceremony from women's weightlifting meet*, n.d., The Strongman Project-Stark Center).

some coverage in the Los Angeles media—it was featured in the *Wilmington Press Journal* on August 7, 1948. A section titled "Wanna Bet?" gave readers five pieces of sports trivia, one of which was: "There are no recognized women weightlifting champions?" Listed below, the answer stated, "First U.S. meet in 1947, Champs are– Edna Rivers, heavyweight class, Pudgy Stockton 122 pounds, Vera Fried 112 pound titleist."[162] Stockton's organization of the first women's weightlifting meet was a substantial accomplishment and broke some barriers to women's training, enough to be featured in this LA newspaper's sports trivia section. The inclusion of this piece of trivia reflects the state of women's weightlifting in this period: people had preconceived notions about women and lifting, but the landscape was evolving in part due to figures like Stockton.

Conclusion

The articles Abbye Stockton wrote for her "Barbelles" column in *Strength and Health* were instrumental in defining the new feminine ideal of the barbelle. Before Stockton, editor Bob

[162] "Wanna Bet?" *Wilmington Press Journal*, August 7, 1948, https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=WPJ19480807.1.5.
[163] *Trophy ceremony from women's weightlifting meet,* n.d., photograph, The Strongman Project, the H.J. Lutcher Stark Center for Physical Culture & Sports, the University of Texas at Austin, https://strongmanproject.com/browse(resource:9300)?q=pudgy%20stockton&from=144.

Hoffman included several women in his magazine: Rosetta Snell, Gracie Gertzetski, Dorcas Lehman, and Alda Ketterman, all of whom were his sexual partners. These women's images helped draw readership and sell Hoffman's products, increasing his profits and popularity. From the beginning, they were featured in the magazine in a minimal and marginal role. Both Rosetta and Gertzetski "wrote" articles in the magazine that Hoffman actually authored. Those articles were attributed to them, and they promoted the idea that a woman's job was to serve and complement her man, fulfilling traditional domestic roles. Hoffman defined their role in the magazine as alluring images of femininity that helped attract readership and emphasize the masculinity of him and his male readers.

When Abbye Stockton took over the women's section and started writing "Barbelles," she entered the very limited space that women in *Strength and Health* were provided. As a result, her column was shaped by both Hoffman's personal views about women's roles and American society's broader emphasis on traditional gender roles in the postwar period. She encouraged women to lift weights and build muscle—but to train first and foremost to make themselves more physically attractive to men and better fulfill their traditional domestic roles as "sweethearts," wives, and mothers. "Barbelles" conveyed that women could shape their busts and slim their waists through weight training, making themselves more sexually appealing while enhancing their abilities as housewives.

While "Barbelles" promoted the idea that women's proper role was as men's complements, Stockton and Hoffman nevertheless made significant strides in encouraging women to lift weights. Stockton wrote about competitive women weightlifters in her column and celebrated female athletes' achievements. She even organized and participated in the first-ever competitive weightlifting meet for women. This tension inherent in Stockton's column is what

defines the ideal of the barbelle. Women could lift weights and be strong, but they had to be sexually appealing and capable homemakers first.

Chapter 3

Embodying Stockton's New Femininity: Barbelles on the Beach, Miss Muscle Beach, and the Salon of Figure Development

The winner of the 1947 Miss Muscle Beach beauty contest was a woman named Vivian Crockett. Pictured three times in the article, Crockett perfectly embodied Stockton's barbelle. In her individual photo, she stood in a striped two-piece bikini with her hand on her hip, high-heeled shoes on her feet, curls in her hair, and a perfect smile. A quick glance at the photograph of the top ten finalists reveals that they all wore a version of this uniform. Eight women wore two-piece swimsuits decorated with stripes and flowers, and the other two wore short, shiny one-piece outfits. All of their hair was carefully curled, and they stood gracefully in high-heeled shoes like Crockett. All the women were thin, and several stood in a way that emphasized the slenderness of their waists. White women dominated the stage. The women's dress and poses exuded traditional femininity. Stockton's article provided additional information about Crockett; "Vivian is one of our ardent exercisers. Under the careful supervision of Wally Crockett, her husband, Vivian, follows a

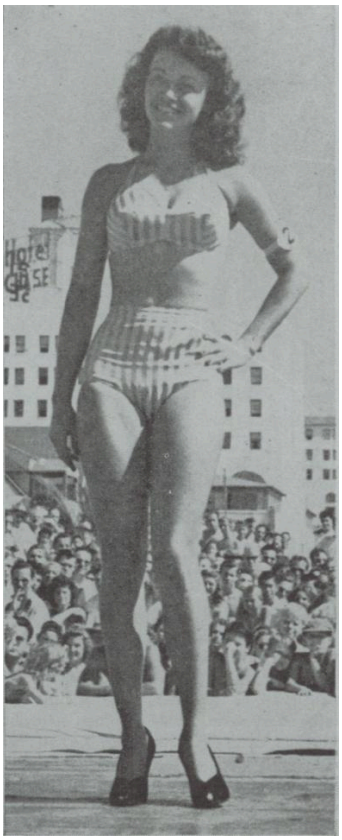

Figure 3.1. Vivian Crockett, "Miss Muscle Beach," featured in the November, 1947 "Barbelles" article. (*Strength and Health*, November 1947, pg. 15).

general body-building routine with weights. She can be found at Muscle Beach a part of every day–either taking a swim and sunbath or exercising on the weight platform."[164] Stockton ensured that she portrayed Crockett as a model wife who trained with her husband's supervision.

While Stockton's new ideal of femininity is fascinating to explore as an abstract concept, the barbelles were real women like Vivian Crockett. As women participating in a traditionally masculine sport, they made choices on a day-to-day basis in order to distance themselves from masculinity and deviance. One of the places they showcased this new identity was at Santa Monica's hub of fitness culture, Muscle Beach. The Miss Muscle Beach beauty contest is an excellent example of how some of these women dressed and behaved beyond the pages of *Strength and Health*. Stockton and other women bodybuilders embodied the new model of femininity of the barbelle when performing at Muscle Beach and participating in its physique competition. They curated their physical appearance and portrayed themselves as heterosexual, family-oriented women to distance themselves from masculinity.

This chapter will explore how the barbelles expressed their femininity. It will outline how women athletes dressed and posed strategically at Muscle Beach, their participation in the Miss Muscle Beach beauty pageant, and what Stockton's gyms designed for women looked like. It will argue that femininity and the ideal of the white, heterosexual, patriarchal family were deeply connected in this period and explore how male and female athletes at the beach posed with one another to align themselves with this ideal. It will also analyze photographs of barbelles posing with children, portraying themselves as caregivers to emphasize their femininity. Furthermore, this chapter will explore the Miss Muscle Beach beauty contest and assert that its participants represented the ideal of the barbelle. It will also argue that Miss Muscle Beach and the barbelle

[164] Abbye "Pudgy" Stockton, "Barbelles," *Strength and Health*, November 1947, https://link-gale-com.proxy.library.ucsb.edu/apps/doc/FQNRYS970796264/AHSI?u=ucsantabarbara&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=e932c9d4.

ideal were not accessible to everyone equally, and largely featured white women. Then, the chapter will turn to Stockton's early gyms for women and explore how they were decorated as domestic spaces to appear more accessible to women and less threatening to men. This chapter focuses on how women lived the discourses of female bodybuilders explored in Chapter 2.

Muscle Beach athletes occupied a potentially dangerous position in society. As historian Elsa Devienne explains, the activities at Muscle Beach were a potential risk to the Cold War period's emphasis on the nuclear family, with women as homemakers and men as breadwinners. Journalists believed that the men failed to work traditional jobs and avoided their responsibilities, while in reality, they might have been in school, employed in the entertainment or sports industry, or working at night or during the winter. In any case, the Muscle Beach men challenged the societal expectation that they should strive to be the main provider of a family unit.[165] Furthermore, male athletes had to navigate associations between bodybuilding and homosexuality and, as a result, emphasized the presence of women at the beach in interviews. Devienne argues that male athletes "walked a thin line between adhering to and challenging gender norms."[166] However, compared with female athletes, men's participation at Muscle Beach was within the scope of what was considered appropriate male behavior. Involvement at the beach threatened women's ability to carry out their duties as wives and mothers. Female athletes who performed feats of strength overtly challenged gender hierarchies when holding men up on their shoulders and sometimes faced criticism in the media.[167] While male and female athletes at the beach challenged gender expectations, the women of Muscle Beach had to navigate strict ties between muscularity and masculinity, which proved challenging.

[165] Devienne, "The Life, Death, and Rebirth of Muscle Beach," 339-40.
[166] Devienne, *Sand Rush*, 165.
[167] Devienne, "The Life, Death, and Rebirth of Muscle Beach," 340.

The Barbelles' Appearance at Muscle Beach

The first hurdle women athletes at the beach had to overcome was the belief that weightlifting would make them masculine and unattractive. Devienne explains that female athletes knew their participation at the beach was potentially dangerous and took intentional steps to make themselves appear less threatening. For example, the majority of women did their hair and dressed in a traditionally feminine way.[168] This is clearly evident when looking at photographs of Muscle Beach from the Santa Monica History Museum's website. One photograph from 1953 shows a woman, surrounded by men, bending down in preparation for lifting a barbell. She wore a polka-dotted one-piece swimsuit and had curled hair.[169] In another undated photo, two smiling women were pictured with shiny trophies behind them. The museum's description indicates that these two women were women's weightlifting champions. They stood with their arms at their sides in form-fitting one-piece swimsuits and heeled shoes, with loose curls grazing their shoulders. Although the photo is black and white, it is clear that they were wearing dark lipstick.[170] Even the women in these photographs, actively lifting weights and receiving awards for physical feats of strength, radiate femininity and grace. Their hair, makeup, and swimsuits make them appear feminine even if the activity they are participating in was not.

A photo of Stockton and McRae from the H.J. Lutcher Stark Center perfectly exemplifies the duality of the barbelle. The two women sat, perched on a loaded barbell on one of the beach's weightlifting platforms. Another barbell lay perpendicular to the one they were seated on, and weight plates and two large dumbbells were scattered across the ground. Perched on the barbell, the two women touched up their makeup. Stockton smiled into a compact mirror, her hand on the

[168] Devienne, "The Life, Death, and Rebirth of Muscle Beach," 344.
[169] George Tate, *Female Weightlifter with Barbell, c1953, c*irca 1953, photograph, Santa Monica History Museum, https://santamonicahistory.catalogaccess.com/photos/13358.
[170] *Women's Weight Lifting Champions*, Muscle Beach, n.d., photograph, Santa Monica History Museum, https://santamonicahistory.catalogaccess.com/photos/3823.

back of her head as she smoothed her hair. Next to her, McRae held her own compact and applied makeup to her chin. Both women had curled hair and wore shiny two-piece swimsuits.[171] Stockton and McRae sat on a loaded barbell surrounded by weightlifting equipment, considered a masculine sport. When they sat touching up their makeup together, the women performed femininity, distancing themselves from weightlifting's masculine associations and embodying the duality of the barbelle.

Figure 3.2 (*Pudgy and Relna Brewer McRae Fixing Their Makeup*, The Strongman Project-Stark Center.)

Many photographs of women at the beach depict them wearing two-piece swimsuits. A two-piece swimsuit, or a bikini, was Abbye Stockton's clothing article of choice at Muscle Beach. Two-piece swimsuits were not yet widely accepted and were largely unavailable when Stockton first sought one to train in, so she had to get creative. As Matzer Rose reported in a 1998 *LA Times* article, Stockton explained, "In those days, you couldn't buy a two-piece bathing suit. So my mother ripped apart an old brassiere of mine, and made a pattern from that."[172] Part of the reason Stockton wore these two-piece swimsuits was functionality. Popular one-piece suits were too constrictive, and Stockton needed to access her body's full range of motion to perform the acrobatic feats at Muscle Beach.[173] Presumably, however, Stockton also wore these suits simply because she liked how they looked and how her body looked in them. While the

[171] *Pudgy and Relna Brewer McRae Fixing Their Makeup,* n.d., photograph, the Strongman Project, the H.J. Lutcher Stark Center for Physical Culture & Sports, the University of Texas at Austin, https://strongmanproject.com/browse(resource:9327)?q=stockton&from=144.
[172] Matzer, "Venus Muscle Beach."
[173] Matzer, "Venus Muscle Beach."

barbelle's careful curation of their physical appearance, including wearing bikinis, helped to align them with femininity, it could quickly become risque. Emphasizing their attractiveness and sexual appeal was only one part of the equation to appear appropriately feminine, they also needed to be clearly heterosexual and family-oriented.

Heterosexuality & Family at Muscle Beach

Heterosexuality and family kept women weightlifters at Muscle Beach tethered to appropriate society. As Devienne explains, dressing according to traditional gender norms was only one way the barbelles emphasized their femininity. Without husbands and families to temper their muscularity, muscular women threatened appropriate heterosexual society. To prevent this, they also posed for photographs with their male partners and families, highlighting their heterosexuality and "domesticat[ing]" their muscularity. Building muscle the right way made women more attractive and helped them find husbands. With the barbelle's strategies in mind, Devienne concludes that "ultimately, the women of Muscle Beach conformed to most of the dominant expectations of their gender. If anything, working out at the open-air gymnasium made them *more* feminine."[174] Devienne makes an extreme yet convincing argument. The barbelles needed to portray an intense version of femininity to be perceived as *more* feminine despite their participation in strength training, and they did.

Countless photos in the SMHM's online archive depict female barbelles posing with men. In these photos, men and women posed together to emphasize their heterosexuality and combat associations between bodybuilding and homosexuality. One photograph from the 1950s shows five "bodybuilding contestants" posed with each other on the Muscle Beach lifting platform (Figure 3.3). Three men and two women were positioned with the men and women alternating.

[174] Devienne, "The Life, Death, and Rebirth of Muscle Beach," 344-46.

As expected, the women were thin and donned shapely one-piece swimsuits, curled hair, and high-heeled shoes. Although all five individuals, identified as Jerry Ross, Cynthia Young, Don Jileaoe, Barbara Thompson, and Ed Hal, were competing bodybuilders, the men and women demonstrated this differently. All three men assumed standard bodybuilding poses, emphasizing their bicep and pectoral muscles.[175] In contrast, the women stood slightly behind their male counterparts, and instead of striking typical bodybuilding poses like the men, Young and Thompson stood with their hands on the men's shoulders.[176] Standing behind the men and visually serving a supporting role emphasized their femininity. All five of the individuals associated themselves with heterosexuality by posing together. As a result, they underscored the barbelles' femininity and the male bodybuilder's masculinity. Ideas of masculinity and femininity in this period were closely linked to heterosexuality, so emphasizing one heightened the other.

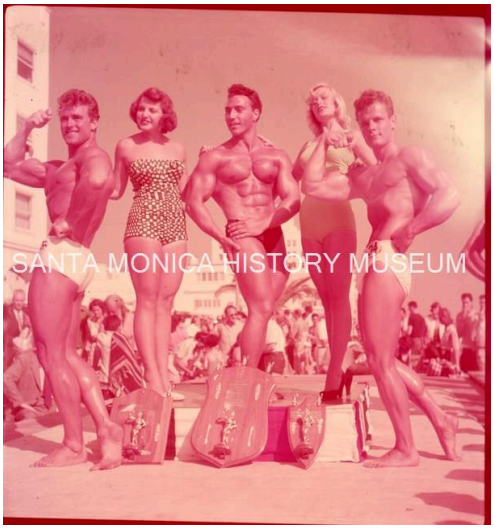

Figure 3.3. (Photograph by George Tate, *Bodybuilders at Muscle Beach, c1950s,* circa 1950, Santa Monica History Museum, 2009.109.364.)

Another photo from the SMHM collection shows beach athlete Russ Saunders performing a feat of strength with Stockton and original Muscle Beach founder Relna Brewer McRae. Saunders stood on a platform and supported one smiling woman on each shoulder. The women wore the standard barbelle uniform—Brewer wore a swimsuit bottom and a blouse, and Stockton sported her standard bikini and had short curled hair.[177] This pose provided a

[175] George Tate, *Bodybuilders at Muscle Beach, c1950s,* circa 1950, photograph, Santa Monica History Museum, https://santamonicahistory.catalogaccess.com/photos/16298.
[176] Tate, *Bodybuilders at Muscle Beach*, SMHM.
[177] *Russ Saunders, Relna Brewer and Pudgy Stockton at Muscle Beach,* circa 1940, photograph, Santa Monica History Museum, https://santamonicahistory.catalogaccess.com/photos/3644.

counterbalance to the photos of Stockton and Brewer posing which emphasizes their musculature and physical strength. In this pose, they filled a supporting role and highlighted Saunders' strength and masculinity, which in turn emphasized their own femininity. As is typical of these photos featuring men and women posing together, a strong undercurrent of heterosexuality is present.

Part of the barbelle's identity included being a caregiver. It was vital for both women and men at Muscle Beach to portray themselves as family-oriented to remain within the bounds of society. One iconic photo from the SMHM shows a woman (although not identified, this might be Relna Brewer McRae) supporting Russ Saunders on her shoulders, who supported an elementary school-aged girl on his shoulders, who held up a younger child on hers (Figure 3.3). All four of these individuals were white, and all of them had big smiles on their faces and outstretched arms.[178] Although, to my knowledge, this group was not an actual family, they looked like the perfect, white, all-American nuclear family, complete with a mother, father, and two children. While McRae demonstrated her strength in this image and physically held up a man, she also filled the role of the caregiver in this photo. She was, therefore, able to keep her femininity intact. Another image showed a smiling woman, Shirley Tanny, in a bikini, holding a dumbbell over her head, kneeling on the sands of the Santa Monica Pier right by

Figure 3.4. (*Gymnast Russ Saunders and children, Muscle Beach, Santa Monica, CA*, circa 1940, Santa Monica History Museum, 36.2.3175.)

[178] *Gymnast Russ Saunders and children, Muscle Beach, Santa Monica, CA,* mid 1900s, photograph, Santa Monica History Museum, https://santamonicahistory.catalogaccess.com/photos/3731.

Muscle Beach. Her toddler-aged daughter crouched next to her, inspecting the other dumbbell set on the sand.[179] This image clearly identified Tanny as a caregiver and effectively domesticated her muscularity. By posing for photographs like these, strong women at Muscle Beach like McRae and Tanny perfectly portrayed the identity of the family-oriented barbelle. They made themselves appear non-threatening by emphatically aligning with the period's ideal of women as caregivers and homemakers.

The Miss Muscle Beach Beauty Contest and Whiteness

Another valuable way to understand Stockton's new model of femininity in practice is to look at the Miss Muscle Beach Beauty Contests. The Mr. and Miss Muscle Beach contests began in 1947 and quickly became the main events of the annual Fourth of July and Labor Day celebrations at the beach.[180] Women and men displayed their physiques on the Muscle Beach stage, competing for trophies and cheers from excited onlookers. As a result, participants in the Muscle Beach physique competitions and their audience helped bring "the muscular body" into societal acceptance. As Devienne argues, "In a very real sense, the thousands of Angelenos who watched the annual Miss and Mister Muscle Beach contests were participating in the creation of new beauty standards, accelerating the process whereby the muscular body came to be not just acceptable, but desirable."[181] The women who participated in and won these contests shaped ideals of femininity.

[179] Devienne, "The Life, Death, and Rebirth of Muscle Beach," 345.
[180] Todd, "The Halcyon Days of Muscle Beach," 251.
[181] Devienne, *Sand Rush*, 167.

The Miss Muscle Beach winners were valued both for their beauty and muscularity. Some mid-century journalists and modern-day scholars stress that beauty was the defining factor in the competition, while others stress the importance of muscularity. Most make a point to emphasize both. For example, an article from the *Hollywood Citizen-News* published in August 1947 was titled "It'll Take Girl With Muscle to Win This Title" and claimed that with the contest, "The Santa Monica playground department intends to prove that gals can pour beauty and biceps into the same swimsuit." Furthermore, they reported that the director of the playground claimed that the trophy would be given to "the damsel best combining power and pulchritude."[182] With "beauty and biceps," this journalist emphasized that muscularity was a unique requirement for the Muscle Beach contest, but that beauty was essential too. Moreover, the director's choice of "damsel" also emphasized the participant's femininity by portraying them as women needing men's saving. They had "power and pulchritude," and they were also "damsel[s]." In contrast, an *LA Times* article from September 1948 describes Sarah Hirsch, the 1948 Miss Muscle Beach (Figure 3.5), as "anything but muscular in appearance,"[183] downplaying the importance of muscularity in claiming the title. Minimizing Hirsch's muscles can be viewed as an attempt to portray her as more feminine. While individual

Figure 3.5. Sarah Hirsch, "Miss Muscle Beach 1948," is presented her trophy by Abbye Stockton. (*The Los Angeles Times*, September 7, 1948, pg. 2).

[182] "It'll Take Girl With Muscle to Win This Title," *Hollywood Citizen-News*, August 28, 1947, https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=LAECN19470828-02.1.7.
[183] "High School Girl Picked as 'Miss Muscle Beach,'" *LA Times*.

journalists may have emphasized one over the other, Miss Muscle Beach contestants were generally viewed and portrayed as both strong and beautiful.

Similarly, historians agree that beauty and muscularity were requirements for winning the trophy but sometimes emphasize the requirements differently. Historian Jan Todd argues that while Miss Muscle Beach was called a beauty contest, winning the title "was predicated on the possession of a certain type of beauty," quoting a journalist that called it a "'beauty-muscle' contest."[184] Todd emphasizes women's muscularity, while Devienne, focused on how women domesticated their muscles, stresses the contestant's physical attractiveness and femininity. She points to the fact that many of the Miss Muscle Beach participants were "Hollywood models who collected beauty queen titles on the side, and all boasted ideal bust, waist, and hip measurements" and quotes a reporter emphasizing the women's beauty; "the winner had to 'combine beauty with muscle,' but there was a clear understanding that the 'emphasis [was] on the beauty."[185] Ultimately, historians and journalists alike reported that the winners of Miss Muscle Beach were conventionally attractive and sported shapely physiques.

When looking at pictures of the competitors in these mid-century physique competitions, it is important to resist viewing them through a modern lens. As Devienne explains, when analyzing the photographs of the Miss Muscle Beach contestants and their "moderately sized muscles," it is easy to write their critics off as "old-fashioned." However, it is crucial to remember that these athletes contested their period's ideals of beauty, femininity, and masculinity in a very serious way, similar to how current hypermuscular bodybuilders are viewed today.[186] The femininity of muscular female athletes was threatened, and they responded by embodying

[184] Todd, "The Halcyon Days of Muscle Beach," 251.
[185] Devienne, *Sand Rush*, 167.
[186] Devienne, "The Life, Death, and Rebirth of Muscle Beach," 367.

the ideal of the barbelle and emphatically conforming to other markers of femininity, like beauty and domesticity.

The winners of Miss Muscle Beach perfectly portrayed Stockton's new ideal of the muscular yet feminine and domestic barbelle. For example, the *San Pedro News-Pilot* reported that the 1947 competition between "gals with well-developed biceps, as well as the ordinary curves" resulted in Vivian Crocker (misspelling of Crockett), "a pretty young housewife," securing the title.[187] Newspapers of the time took care to emphasize Crockett's domesticity; the *Wilmington Press Journal*'s section on the contest was titled "Housewife Selected Miss Muscle Beach."[188] These muscular women needed to display specific characteristics to remain feminine. They lifted weights but were also young, slim, physically attractive, and fully made-up. The barbelles were also respectable, domestic women who filled their essential roles as housewives. Checking all of these boxes made their participation in strength training acceptable.

The Miss Muscle Beach stage was not accessible to everyone equally. It is a challenge to find evidence of women of color participating at Muscle Beach, let alone in its beauty pageant. Whiteness appears to be an unspoken characteristic of the vast majority of Miss Muscle Beach participants and winners. Media coverage and photographs of the beauty competition overwhelmingly picture white women. Patrizia Gentile's book, published in 2020, *Queen of the Maple Leaf*, sheds light on this reality. Gentile explores the centrality of whiteness in mid-century North American beauty pageants. Although she focuses primarily on Canada, Gentile's insights are relevant for understanding Western and North American society at large. She argues that cementing racial hierarchies is a primary function of beauty pageants; both local

[187] "Muscle Beach Selects Queen," *San Pedro News Pilot*, September 2, 1947, https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=SPNP19470902.1.7.
[188] "Housewife Selected Miss Muscle Beach," *Wilmington Press Journal*, September 2, 1947, https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=WPJ19470902.1.1.

and national beauty pageants, she explains, "uphold white, respectable, middle-class femininity, or settler femininity, as the marker of the desirable body in settler societies."[189] Miss Muscle Beach is no exception. The contest upheld racial hierarchies and perpetuated ideology that equated whiteness with beauty and femininity.

Ultimately, Stockton's barbelle was a new ideal of femininity that was predominantly accessible to white women who did not have to combat racist stereotypes. As scholar Carla Williams explains in her essay "The Radical Self-Portraiture of Black Female Bodybuilders," "The black female image has generally been polarized into stereotypes of the oversexed Jezebel and the asexual, castrating mammy…"[190] In addition, Williams explains the stereotype of the Black woman as "sexually aggressive;" "The wild, untameable black female is a stereotype that evokes jungle fantasies of the wantonly permissive, if not downright sexually aggressive, 'animalistic' African woman."[191] Williams also discusses the portrayal of the strong Black female body as "threatening," "one that must be either brought down or made invisible."[192] White women like Stockton did not have to deal with racist beliefs that their bodies were inherently threatening, and therefore, had more room to negotiate feminine ideals. Furthermore, the barbelles struck a delicate balance between portraying themselves as sexually appealing and still domestic and respectable. White society forced Black women's bodies into stereotypes of either hyper-sexual or asexual, as Williams explains, which made it impossible for them to strike this balance. Barbelle femininity was most accessible to white women who did not face racist stereotypes about their bodies.

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[189] Patrizia Gentile, *Queen of the Maple Leaf: Beauty Contests and Settler Femininity* (UBC Press, 2020), 6-8.
[190] Carla Williams, "The Radical Self-Portraiture of Black Female Bodybuilders," in *Picturing the Modern Amazon*, ed. Joanna Frueh, Laurie Fierstein, and Judith Stein (Rizzoli, 2000), 104.
[191] Williams, "The Radical Self-Portraiture," 108.
[192] Williams, "The Radical Self-Portraiture," 108.

Stockton's Gyms for Women

As the male pioneers of physical fitness culture at Muscle Beach opened gyms, Abbye Stockton did too. In 1948, Stockton opened her first gym, the Salon of Figure Development, on Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles.[193] Based on a flier for the Salon of Figure Development, it was the "Ladies Department" of a gym owned by Walter Marcyan called Marcy House of Health.[194] Historian Marla Matzer Rose posits that the Salon was "perhaps the first women's bodybuilding gym in the country."[195] A few years later in 1950, Stockton moved the gym to Beverly Hills and opened another location in Pasadena. Stockton's husband Les opened up men's gyms located right next to hers in both of these locations. This setup allowed women to work out separately from men. Stockton was not just a gym owner but also a trainer. She trained a wide range of clientele, from other female bodybuilders to housewives, and earned twenty dollars an hour.[196] Everything about Stockton's gyms for women, from their names and advertisements to their decor, radiated femininity. The name "Salon of Figure Development" spoke to this marketing strategy, framing women's training as "figure development" and calling itself a salon—men's gyms were not called salons. Even her gyms matched the ideal of the barbelle: feminine, beautiful, and domestic.

The advertisements Stockton included for her gyms in *Strength and Health* used intentionally feminine, soft language to convince women they could train and still maintain their femininity. As Devienne explains, in the mid-century, athletes and journalists sometimes cleverly

[193] Rose, *Muscle Beach*, 61.
[194] Salon of Figure Development to clients: Hot summer weather, Abbye Stockton, n.d., Box 6, Folder 135, Pudgy and Les Stockton Collection, the H.J. Lutcher Stark Center for Physical Culture & Sports, the University of Texas at Austin.
[195] Rose, *Muscle Beach*, 61.
[196] Rose, *Muscle Beach*, 61-62.

described women's strength training for muscularity as a "'reducing' method."[197] This softer term made training seem more approachable for women and less threatening for men. It repeatedly appears in "Barbelles" articles and advertisements for Stockton's gyms. An advertisement found at the end of the October 1948 issue of *Strength and Health* for Stockton's first gym on Sunset Boulevard read, "Abbye (Pudgy) Stockton Is Now Conducting a Ladies Salon Specializing In Bust Development– Figure Contouring– Reducing." The ad also included the heading, "For the Ladies…" and an image of Stockton posing in a bikini.[198] Stockton advertised strength training as bust development, figure contouring, and reducing to draw women in and make female muscularity seem less threatening.

A flier for Marcy House of Health advertising the Salon of Figure Development also used these same marketing strategies. It read,

> Our Ladies' department is well prepared to conquer all figure problems. Thru [sic] proven and successful methods we are able to correct many of the frequent and annoying faults common to women— shallow chest, thin shoulders and arms, thick waist and flabby hips and thighs… Why not take advantage of our unique service and resolve today to take this step to beautify your figure to its fullest possibilities… Ask for Abbye Stockton.[199]

By focusing on how women could "conquer all figure problems" and "beautify" their figures, Stockton and Marcyan made women's training about perfecting their physical appearance—a more feminine and appropriate goal.

An advertisement for the Stocktons' second gym, the side-by-side men's and women's gym called Stockton Studios, makes these advertising strategies even more apparent. The ad

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[197] Devienne, "The Life, Death, and Rebirth of Muscle Beach," 345.
[198] "For the Ladies," *Strength and Health*, October 1948, 37, https://link-gale-com.proxy.library.ucsb.edu/apps/doc/VOGCVY675395370/AHSI?u=ucsantabarbara&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=7dadcdd0.
[199] Salon of Figure Development to clients, Pudgy and Les Stockton Collection, Stark Center.

read, "Stockton Studios Specializing In, For Men: Weight Gaining, Conditioning, For Women: Bust Development, Figure Contouring, Home Courses."[200] The terms used to describe men's training were more raw and clear, focused on building muscle and strength. In contrast, women's training was described with a feminine lens focused on making women more physically attractive to men. This speaks to the power of men's heterosexual desires in shaping how some of these women trained and, as a result, how women's gyms were advertised. Furthermore, Stockton also advertised home courses for women. Women could work out without leaving the house, staying in their domestic sphere.

Figure 3.6. (The Inside Of Pudgy Stockton's Gym, About 1950, Circa 1950, included in *Muscle Beach* by Marla Matzer Rose, pg. 60).

The decoration of Stockton's women's gym at Stockton Studios also reflected the feminine, domestic ideal (Figure 3.6). Compared to early men's gyms, the decor was noticeably different. Photographs of a gym called "the Dungeon," founded by Vic Tanny, a Muscle Beach athlete, shortly after the end of World War II, exemplify this difference.[201] Although the crude gym equipment looked very similar to Stockton's gym, the walls were plain

[200] "Stockton Studios," *Strength and Health*, May 1951, 49, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/SSENIL450483940/AHSI?u=ucsantabarbara&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=ecc28c85.
[201] Ben Pollack and Jan Todd, "American Icarus: Vic Tanny and America's First Health Club Chain," *Iron Game History*, vol. 13 no. 4 & vol. 14 no. 1 (Dec 2016): 23, https://starkcenter.org/igh/igh-v13/igh-v13-n4-v14-n1/igh1304-1401p17.pdf.

and decorated with framed photographs of what appear to be drawings of men throughout history. It certainly looked different than a modern-day gym chain but had the same sterile, clean-looking atmosphere. Stockton's gym had a substantially different atmosphere. As Rose recounts, Stockton's gym had a particular look; "...the place had a living-room like atmosphere, with paneling and pictures on the walls."[202] Stockton's gym also had wallpaper decorated with flowers and wooden planks attached to some machines. In one photograph, there is even a bookshelf in the back of the gym and a large fabric chair.[203] Apart from the workout equipment, it looked like a domestic space. Stockton likely decorated her gym like this to align with societal expectations of women's appropriate sphere. Women may have felt less out of place in a space that resembled a home, and men may have felt less threatened by their wives working out in a room with flower wallpaper, away from the gaze of other men. Stockton's gym was the perfect place for the barbelles to work out, and it matched their feminine energy.

Conclusion

The women of Muscle Beach put Stockton's new feminine ideal into practice. With the knowledge that weightlifting and bodybuilding were associated with masculinity, the barbelles took measures to align themselves with femininity. They did their hair in big curls, wore dark lipstick, and dressed in sleek one-piece swimsuits and bikinis when they worked out at Muscle Beach. When participating in the Miss Muscle Beach beauty contest, they wore high heels and stood for photographs in dainty poses. They also posed with the muscular men of the beach, standing behind the men as they struck standard bodybuilding poses that showed off their sculpted biceps. Ideals of femininity and masculinity in this period were deeply connected with

[202] Rose, *Muscle Beach*, 61.
[203] Rose, *Muscle Beach*, 59-60.

the idea of the white, patriarchal nuclear family. When the male and female athletes posed with each other on the beach, they portrayed themselves as heterosexual and, therefore, appropriately feminine and masculine. Furthermore, when they posed with children, female athletes emphasized their domesticity, another crucial element of mid-century femininity.

Abbye Stockton's women's gym was the perfect setting for the barbelles to train. Advertised as a space for women to reduce and shape their figures, Stockton framed strength training as a way for women to make themselves more attractive. The gym was separated and only for female athletes, allowing women to train away from men and providing comfort to them and their husbands. With the gym itself decorated like a living room with flower-patterned wallpaper, the space was more approachable for women and less threatening to men. Stockton combated weightlifting's masculine associations through the careful marketing and design of her pioneering women's gyms.

At the beach, the Miss Muscle Beach beauty contest was the barbelles' perfect stage. Women participated in a pageant that awarded both beauty and muscularity. When twenty-two-year-old Vivian Crockett, the "pretty young housewife," won in 1947, the media made sure to emphasize her domestic nature. Not only was Crockett young, beautiful, and thin, but she was also a housewife. She portrayed the image of Muscle Beach's perfect female athlete, the perfect barbelle. Crockett was also a white woman and, therefore, played the part of the caregiver in the white, patriarchal nuclear family.

The barbelles were the women participants at Muscle Beach most captured in the media. However, women outside the image of ideal femininity still attended the beach. In fact, Devienne reports that a "young woman lifting heavy weights whose look–a large masculine-looking shirt and unkempt hair–was not unlike that of the 'butch' lesbian stereotype" was pictured in a 1948

documentary film called “Muscle Beach” by Joseph Strick. However, these women were excluded from the print media of the time.[204] Furthermore, although not addressed explicitly, whiteness was often an unspoken characteristic of the barbelle ideal and Miss Muscle Beach winner. The SMHM archive is full of photographs of white women athletes participating in weightlifting and acrobatics at the beach and in the beauty pageant. Women of color are largely absent in the records that remain. Ultimately, the media favored one representation of the female athlete and erased others. While Stockton’s barbelles negotiated women’s societal expectations by participating in strength training, they conformed to gender norms in almost all other areas. Furthermore, the Miss Muscle Beach contest reinforced the concept of the thin white woman as the feminine ideal. The barbelles were pioneers of women’s fitness, but for one type of woman.

[204] Devienne, “The Life, Death, and Rebirth of Muscle Beach,” 336 & 344.

Conclusion

Barebelle Feminity: Gender, Race, and Fitness at Muscle Beach

A new ideal of femininity emerged in mid-century American society from the sands of Muscle Beach. Abbye Stockton, a Santa Monica local who became one of the most famous female bodybuilders in America, embodied this new ideal. At the beach, athletes pushed societal norms of gender and sexuality in a relatively racially diverse space, which grated with the conservative city of Santa Monica during the postwar emphasis on reinforcing gender roles. In this liminal space, female bodybuilders like Stockton had some room to negotiate the norms of femininity within explicit constraints. They emphasized their femininity by portraying themselves as physically attractive, dressing in form-fitting swimsuits, styling their hair with curls, wearing makeup, and posing in high-heeled shoes to make their muscularity less threatening to men. They also posed for photographs with men and children, placing themselves in the role of the caregiver in the nuclear family. When they posed with other male bodybuilders, they emphasized their heterosexuality, a crucial tenet of femininity. Posing with women highlighted men's masculinity as well.

In "Barbelles," Stockton promoted this ideal of femininity to the broader public, encouraging other women to lift weights. As the women's editor of *Strength and Health,* she gave women weightlifting advice, featured other barbelles, and reported about weightlifting competitions for female athletes. She was a powerful force in promoting the benefits of resistance training for the everyday American woman. She even founded one of, if not the first,

bodybuilding gyms for women in the country. And yet, Stockton's version of the muscular yet feminine woman was deeply shaped by mid-century gender constructs. She wrote that weightlifting effectively made women's bodies more "trim" and "shapely," and that training would make them more capable housewives. Her gyms were decorated like domestic spaces with flower-patterned wallpaper to seem more accessible to women and, more importantly, less threatening to men. Stockton encouraged women to train in a way that maintained, and even heightened, their femininity.

The new ideal of the barbelle was not accessible to everyone equally. Undoubtedly, the fact that Stockton was a white woman was a major factor that allowed her to push the boundaries of femininity and still be portrayed positively in the media, or captured in the media at all. While women of color sometimes appeared in Stockton's "Barbelles" articles, like Lye Ying discussed in Chapter 2, white women were predominantly featured. This absence is even more apparent in the archive of photographs of Muscle Beach athletes and its beauty contestants. As demonstrated in Chapter 1, while a more racially diverse crowd was present at Muscle Beach, the media primarily celebrated a specific group of athletes. Newspapers of the time predominantly pictured thin, white bodies when reporting on women at the beach, and white women and men dominated the Miss Muscle Beach crowns and podiums. Contests like Miss Muscle Beach reinforced racial hierarchies and perpetuated the idea that femininity was equated with whiteness. Athletes who did not fit this particular image of the barbelle were largely erased from the narrative.

Importantly, I was able to find photographs in The Strongman Project's archive of Stockton posing with several Hawaiian women who participated in acrobatics and weightlifting. In one photograph, Stockton and five women athletes, two of whom are identified as Lillian

Chang and Judy Crabbe, pose together on a beach in two-piece swimsuits.[205] In another photograph, Abbye and Les Stockton and Steve Reeves pose with a large group of Hawaiian weightlifters, including Chang and Crabbe.[206] I believe these photographs were likely taken in Hawaii, and thus demonstrate the growth of weightlifting as a sport and the global influence of Muscle Beach. Furthermore, they are evidence that women of color pushed the boundaries of femininity by participating in sport in a similar way as Stockton, despite the fact that they were not recorded in the Muscle Beach archive itself. These photographs remind us that the archive does not always reflect reality, and that the media actively shaped how Muscle Beach is remembered by largely erasing non-white athletes. I hope that future historians will be able to find and analyze more evidence like these photographs, expanding our understanding of women at Muscle Beach.

Figure C.1 (*Pudgy Stockton with Lillian, Judy and Local Acrobatic Troupe*, The Strongman Project-Stark Center.)

This study adds to the extremely limited body of scholarship about historic women bodybuilders by examining one crucial figure, Abbye Stockton, and her impacts at Muscle Beach and American society. It synthesizes scholarship about Muscle Beach, Bob Hoffman, and

[205] *Pudgy Stockton with Lillian, Judy and Local Acrobatic Troupe,* n.d., photograph, the Strongman Project, the H.J. Lutcher Stark Center for Physical Culture & Sports, the University of Texas at Austin, https://strongmanproject.com/browse(resource:9260)?q=pudgy%20 stockton from=64.
[206] *Hawaiian Weightlifters with Pudgy Stockton, Les Stockton, Steve Reeves, George Eiferman, Lillian Chang and Judy Crabbe,* n.d., photograph, the Strongman Project, the H.J. Lutcher Stark Center for Physical Culture & Sports, the University of Texas at Austin, https://strongmanproject.com/browse(resource:9293)?q=pudgy%20stockton&from=80.

Strength and Health to provide relevant context to Stockton's life and better understand the emerging bodybuilding culture of mid-century Santa Monica. When studying pioneering women like Abbye Stockton, it is crucial to explore how she simultaneously challenged and upheld the period's dominant gender norms. While she stretched the boundaries of femininity by lifting weights and building muscle, she also aligned with the period's predominant beauty standard as a white woman. Devienne has produced a compelling analysis of how women at Muscle Beach "ultimately… conformed to most of the dominant expectations of their gender."[207] My research complements this previous scholarship, extending this understanding to the life of Abbye Stockton and her "Barbelles" column in *Strength and Health*. Building on how Devienne foregrounds the analysis of sexuality, race, and gender in her scholarship on Muscle Beach, I explore "Barbelles" and the specific ideal of femininity it promoted.

By focusing my research on the barbelle as an ideal of femininity, explore who was included in this ideal and who was not. By using the figure of Abbye Stockton as an embodiment of this ideal, I analyze how it functioned in different spheres of the fitness world by studying her participation at the beach, a column in the period's most popular fitness magazine, and early bodybuilding gyms for women. I also analyze a group of rich primary sources, Stockton's "Barbelles" articles, that have been understudied, exploring her message about women and weightlifting. These articles offer a rare opportunity to see how Stockton wrote about herself and other female bodybuilders. This research expands on an extremely limited base of historical scholarship about early female bodybuilders and provides a nuanced analysis of their particular place in Muscle Beach and society at large. In doing so, it complicates our understanding of gender in mid-century America.

[207] Devienne, "The Life, Death, and Rebirth of Muscle Beach," 346.

While I have taken care to consider a wide range of both secondary and primary sources to produce a complex analysis of Muscle Beach and its female bodybuilders, my study is not comprehensive. *Strength and Health* was published for decades and included content featuring women from the beginning. While my thesis analyzes the magazine and women's role in it, I have not read every single issue or article featuring women. And while I have read many, I do not have access to every single "Barbelles" article that Stockton wrote over almost a decade. Nonetheless, I feel confident that I have read enough of her articles to understand the themes of the column and the magazine as a whole.

Many questions remain unanswered with this research. Most importantly, my study is limited by what I have been able to access in the archive—largely evidence of white women. This is partially to be expected, as female athletes who did not fit the image of the white barbelle appear to have been frequently erased by the media. However, I hope that a historian with more time to devote to searching and greater access to materials can recover evidence that I have been unable to find. The stories and perspectives of women of color participating as athletes at the beach would significantly add to this research and expand our understanding of women at Muscle Beach.

Additionally, an analysis of the Muscle Beach scene and its athletes focused on socioeconomic status is a potential area for further study. As explored in this paper, many Muscle Beach athletes were students or those with jobs that were alternative to the standard nine-to-five, leaving them more time to spend at the beach. While participating at and visiting the beach was free, athletes needed free time to train and hone their skills. Furthermore, paying for a subscription to a magazine like *Strength and Health* was an added cost that filtered out readers who didn't have disposable income. Therefore, the ideal of the barbelle was inaccessible to those

of lower socioeconomic status in that way as well. Analyzing how class dynamics played out at Muscle Beach would contribute to our understanding of the site.

The era of female bodybuilders at Muscle Beach was unique. After the beach was closed in 1958, it would take a couple of decades before women bodybuilders returned to the stage. The sex crime panic surrounding the beach reemphasized negative associations with muscularity, and when athletes returned to the new Muscle Beach in Venice, the majority of women stayed behind.[208] Women's bodybuilding as a clearly defined sport was not official until the late 1970s, and Devienne argues it was really in the early 1980s that women bodybuilders came back into the spotlight.[209] This is a testament to how Stockton and the other female Muscle Beach athletes could bend gender norms in the mid-twentieth century. Furthermore, Stockton left a legacy in the world of women bodybuilders. As Jan Todd puts it, "Every woman bodybuilder who puts on a swimsuit and steps up on the posing dias, every woman weightlifter who strains under a clean and jerk, and every woman powerlifter who fights through the pull of a heavy deadlift owes a debt of gratitude to Abbye 'Pudgy' Stockton, who helped make these Modern sports possible."[210] While Stockton was certainly influential in encouraging the women of the American public to lift weights, *barbelle* femininity was not equally accessible to *every* woman. Instead, it perpetuated an ideal that valued whiteness as a central tenet of femininity.

[208] Devienne, "The Life, Death, and Rebirth of Muscle Beach," 366.
[209] Steve Wennerstrom, "Women's Bodybuilding: A Contemporary History," in *Picturing the Modern Amazon*, ed. Joanna Frueh, Laurie Fierstein, and Judith Stein, 64-70 (Rizzoli, 2000); Devienne, "The Life, Death, and Rebirth of Muscle Beach," 366.
[210] Todd, "Legacy of Pudgy Stockton," 7.

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