

David P. Webster

THE EUROPEAN CORNER

Monte Saldo

One of the most underestimated British performers of the Golden Age of Strength was Alfred Montague Woollaston, better known by his 'nom de theatre'—Monte Saldo. He was the leading half of the Ronco & Monte duo and was also one of the Montague Brothers, other partners being his brothers Frank and Dewin, sometimes billed as 'The Montes'. Pictures in *Health and Strength* circa 1902 showed Monte Senior and Monte Junior (Frank).

Monte Saldo was born 1879, son of a Methodist preacher and faith healer in Highgate, London. A severe looking Victorian, 5'2" in height, father Woollaston was also a shoe manufacturer. He was a great linguist as was his wife, who had been educated in a convent school. The Woollastons were from a greatly respected and noble family, one of their ancestors being Sir John Woollaston, a benefactor who bequeathed funds financing the almshouses in Highgate's Southwood Lane.

In the cellar of the Woolaston abode was a 56 pound weight which acted as a challenge to young Monte, and he first got this overhead with a mighty struggle when he was just ten years years of age. When Samson's act took London by storm the lad decided that he too would one day be a strongman.

Monte had an uncle who was a police inspector and as such wielded considerable influence. Amongst his contacts were many in the theatrical profession, and in 1897, with his uncle's help, Monte became apprenticed to Eugen Sandow. At Sandow's gym and rooms at 32 St. James Street, Monte joined well known personalities like Jim Pedley, Meredith Cleave, Jimmy Young, Wally Jones, Jim Collard and Ronco. With these men, Monte worked out with the excellent equipment there and studied exercise physiology and anatomy. Sandow, being a perfectionist, provided good training for his staff and in return demanded unstinted support.

Monte's first public appearance was at the Coliseum in Leeds as a demonstrator of the Sandow Exerciser, along with Jimmy Young (who later became leader of 'The Golden Athlones), and the Continental strongman Ronco, later Woolaston's partner in his first vaudeville act. For a time Jimmy, Ronco and Monte, dressed as Roman gladiators, assisted Sandow in his act. Monte said he thought they looked more like Turkish bath attendants about to give Sandow a shampoo!

Monte had a great sense of humor, and told many funny stories about the time spent with Sandow and life in the theatre.

Sandow's instructors had to do a lot of the gym cleaning, even scrubbing the floors, and while on tour they had to get a bath ready for Sandow after his performance, a tin lined trunk being transported with them for this purpose. On one occasion Woollaston forgot to put in the plug before turning on the hose and this led to some hilarity although a tenant downstairs was far from amused. The three assistants slept in the baggage van with Sandow's props and one night as they dismantled the set and loaded up the van in the rain

the red stage curtains got a bit wet. Even so, they made a comfortable bed for the lads, who spent the night sleeping on top of the curtains. Next morning on emerging from the dark exterior of the van they found that they had unwittingly transferred much of the crimson dye from the curtains to their persons. "Our appearance for some time would have made a beetroot-red Red Indian look like an anaemic snowball by contrast."

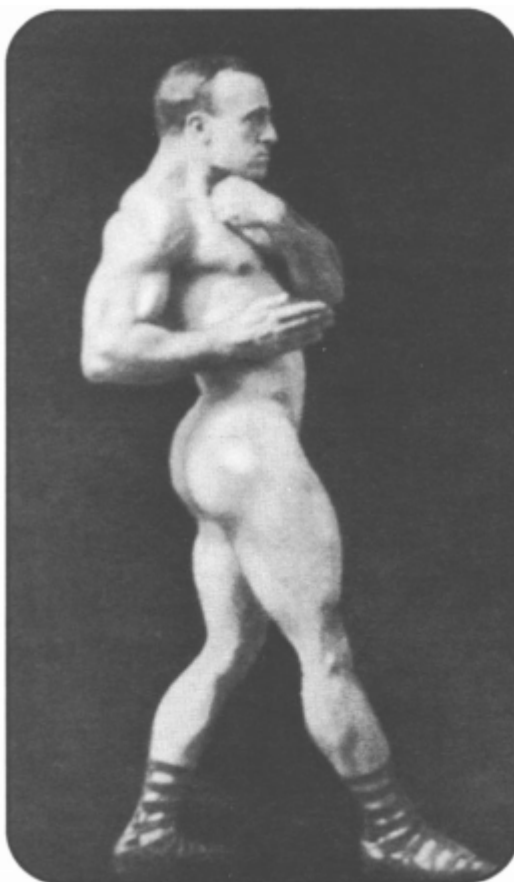
The tour gave them the stage experience they needed and soon after this Saldo (not yet known by that name) and Ronco formed their first act. Pictures show that in just three years using Sandow's training methods Monte Saldo built a wonderful physique and tremendous strength. He was a very stylish and talented weightlifter, an outstanding poseur and had mastered enough good strength feats to produce an act worthy of the professional stage. Before opening in Britain he spent a year in France and six months in Italy and confessed how impressed he had been with the sculptural art of these countries and the fine deportment of French artistes and strength athletes. He also gave credit to his colleagues for the part they played, "A great deal of our success was doubtless due to the beautiful physique of

my partner Ronco, an Italian, and the fact

that the poses and the act were produced entirely under the direction of the famous Italian, Santini, who afterwards staged 'The Sculptor's Dream,' in which my brother Frank so ably cooperated." The Italian influence was again very much in evidence.

'Ronco & Monte' opened at the Cafe Chantant, Crystal Palace in 1900 and as a result of the favorable reception they were accorded, bookings came fast and they were contracted for an overseas tour. While on the Continent they were seen by an English agent who offered them six months at the Royal Aquarium, Westminster, if they would present a totally genuine strength act with challenges to the public.

They could not resist the opportunity to play this theatre, the scene of many stirring strength episodes, and they appeared there



for six months. Sandow was a hard act to follow and, with the acknowledged master still active, no athlete had dared venture on the Royal Aquarium stage since Eugen's appearance there. Ronco and Monte's turn, however, continued into the next year and was a great success.

They had a large revolving pedestal for their statuary presentation and the whole stage was draped in black velvet. On one side of the stage was a nickel-plated Roman column with gun metal fittings and in the center was their well-sprung, shock-absorbing lifting platform on which they dropped their weights with loud thumps. Sundry strength equipment was spread around the remainder of the stage.

Ronco opened by lifting two 56 pound block weights, the bars being apart, making a grip of around 3", which required considerable gripping power. Using one hand only he lifted the weights to the shoulder and then pressed them slowly overhead. Next was some strandpulling with Ronco doing a front chest pull with a very strong set of strands, claiming this to be a record. Monte's single handed barbell lift, pressing 203 pounds, came next and L20 was offered to anybody of their bodyweight who could duplicate these feats. Their money remained intact although a lot of amateurs and lesser known strongmen made attempts. Mr. Ritchie, the manager of the Royal Aquarium, became very enthusiastic and confident, offering the money to any man of any weight who could accomplish any one of the feats. Woolaston warned him that a number of British athletes could press 203 pounds, but their performances continued to termination without anybody taking the money.

There was an amazing unwritten code of conduct amongst the elite professionals who, unless they were directly challenged or their own records broken, would seldom jump the stage of a genuine strongman. They were keen to unmask those claiming bogus records, and there were some personal rivalries; but Monte escaped such treatment. He said Caswell was often in the hall and would lead the applause; Pevier, Pedley and Bankier came on stage as a 'committee' on several occasions to inspect the apparatus and Apollo gave similar support. The only known lifters mentioned by name as going for the money were Slade Jones, the British 140 pound amateur champion of 1889, and Charles Russell, the champion of the day and *Health and Strength* coveman in 1901.

There was a much more civilized approach than stage jumping, and they had several sporting weightlifting matches in addition to the nightly challenges. Ronco and Monte won all but one of these competitions, being bettered by Russell who had twice been beaten in their stage challenges.

A match with Professor E. Quartermaine of Derby, Midland Counties Champion and Sandow medalist, was well reported in *The Standard* of February 18, 1901. In this contest, Quartermaine lifted a 147 1/2 pound man overhead with one hand. Ronco pulled a chest expander with 12 powerful strands, Monte did a one hand snatch of 125 pounds and both Woolaston and Quartermaine lifted two 100 pound dumbbells. There were other tests, but in the end the challenger admitted himself defeated. I was surprised to discover that Saldo weighed in at only 134; in his photographs he looks about double this weight! The competition was refereed by Launceston Elliot, the Olympic Gold Medalist.

There were at least two shows a day at the Royal Aquarium and Monte was proud of the fact that he lifted the 203 pound weight with one hand every time without a single failure being registered. He could do the lift with either arm and it remained a left hand record for a very long time, as he did this at very light bodyweights. During the run he was never above 147 pounds, and

throughout his whole life he was always under 154.

His athleticism was never better demonstrated when, at the Aquarium, one of Permane's bears escaped while Ronco and Monte were practising balancing one morning. "We scattered in all directions, the stately gladiatorial demeanor giving place to an exhibition of sprinting and hurdling indicative of great promise."

At the end of the season the pair split up on good terms, Ronco taking all but the heaviest weights, which he could not lift. Monte had spent most of his time working on new feats and saving to buy apparatus for a new show but Ronco swore he didn't have any money to invest on equipment, although he was certainly not a big spender. He did not want to invest time or money to develop the act so they parted company and he was not heard of again. Monte thought he went back to Italy to play the fairs. "He was not a man to rise, but the reverse, and as such had no affinity with myself."

With the assistance of his brother Frank, Saldo produced a brand new act and after three months of preparation they opened at a matinee performance in the London Hippodrome. A number of agents saw and liked the act and a number of good offers resulted.

Like the other Woolastons, Monte loved foreign languages, Italian being his favorite, but he became fluent in French and German and had a smattering of Latin and Greek. Lucrative overseas contracts lured him abroad, where he was given double the money he made at the Aquarium and double what he could get in Britain. Germany in particular welcomed good strongmen, and he spent most of 1902 in Germany and Austria.

The tour with his brother Frank actually opened at the Rembrandt Theater in Amsterdam, which was a very damp building and their clothing was soaked. Mr. Israels, a noted Dutch artist, was painting Saldo's picture and watched in amusement as the strongman tried to get into wet and shrunken tights, suggesting laughingly that bare legs would look much better. Saldo took the suggestion seriously, which was considered a very daring thing to do, but the press reported on his beautiful leg development and the fleshings were discarded.

The brothers also had some time in France and while in Paris they worked out twice weekly at the Gymnase Pascaud in Rue de Baugirard and once a week at Professor Desbonnet's gym, gaining a great deal of weight-lifting knowledge at these places. The pair also appeared in Prague (Bohemia in those days) and Dresden, Saxony.

While appearing in Hamburg, the pair was spotted by Frank Glenister of the London Pavilion who immediately booked the Montes for a season; the agent was amazed to find they were English.

Card tearing had now become part of Saldo's repertoire and he worked up to tearing three packs at the same time, claiming to be the only person taking size 7 3/4 gloves to accomplish such a feat. He used the same medium quality cards as Sandow did, but it was still a very costly feat and for this reason he did not always include it.

It was around this time that he devised his greatest feat, that of supporting a modern motor car while in the Tomb of Hercules position. This entailed getting lifting, loading and supporting gear so a leading engineer was brought in to construct the apparatus. They then purchased an open topped Darracq in which at least four people sat and Woolaston supported the lot on his torso.

It was at this stage that, on the suggestion of Pavilion manager Glenister, he changed his name to Monte Saldo, and it was under this name that he commenced another overseas tour. To make his car-supporting finale more thrilling, he introduced a high platform on which he performed the feat nearly eight feet above the stage; audiences were ecstatic when the little platform began to

revolve while Monte supported the car for a considerable time. The supporting platform and pads alone were very heavy but they were necessary to absorb the engine vibrations. At first they got the car into place without the engine running but it was decided to show that the car was perfectly normal and had an engine, so they had a rehearsal to try gunning the engine and revving up the car and Saldo almost lost his eyesight when the exhaust was blown directly into his face. His vision was impaired and the rest of the engagement was carried out in discomfort and sometimes pain.

Never one to let grass grow under his feet, Monte fully utilized his brothers Frank and Edwin, and along with the Italian producer they presented what was one of the most artistic acts of its genre. It broke completely new ground; for the first time athletes appeared in brief slips, instead of leotards, 'fleshings' or tights which had been deemed almost compulsory in Britain during super strict Victorian times. It was also the first time that complete body make-up was used in a theatrical act.[Ed. Note: Sandow is said to have used white powder in the 1890's to give his body the look of marble when he posed in a lighted cabinet.] These factors would have been enough to make them a box office attraction but better still they had a special presentation device to make their act totally different from those of other strength performers. It has often been copied since then but the Montague brothers originated what they called "A Sculptor's Dream."

In 1906 theatergoers watched the curtains rise to reveal a sculptor finishing off work on a gleaming white statue of a finely built athlete. He wiped his hands then lifted a glass of wine to toast his masterpiece, both sides of which could be seen because the work of art was on a platform behind which was mirror reflecting the muscular back of the statue. Muttering in French or English, depending on the audience, the sculptor contemplated his work and having drunk his wine, yawned and sunk to a chair falling asleep as the lights dimmed and curtains by the statue closed slowly and then opened again to reveal the statue in a new pose. It was a surprise to many in the stalls for they imagined it to be a real statue, few men possessing such heroic proportions. As the screens continued to close and open a succession fine poses was revealed, each being greeted by fresh applause from the audience.

The final pose was of a wrestler, when suddenly to the sound of breaking glass the 'reflection' pounced out of the mirror grabbing the statue and there developed a spectacular wrestling act. Most of the audience were taken by surprise for a second time, the timing being so perfect it was impossible to deduct that there were two men and not one and a reflection. Their wrestling merged into equally entertaining handbalancing and human lifting, demonstrating tremendous versatility. Then, as the sculptor stirred, Monte and Frank jumped back on their pedestals and were in their original pose when the artist, Edwin awoke.

When appearing in Scotland the wrestling climax in 'The Sculptor's Dream' was interrupted when an excited bull terrier ran on the stage and joined in the fray. Before the artistes' knew what was happening the animal had taken a huge chunk off the seat of Monte's brief trunks and as the embarrassed strongman later explained, "My efforts to hide behind a tuft of wool while the curtain was being rushed down were worthy of the highest praise but totally ineffectual."

Monte Saldo's artistry was recognized by a commission to write the first ever book on posing, and later he combined with Maxick to make further history by instructing in muscle control.

One Christmas, circa 1900, Saldo was topping the bill at the Ludwig Concert Hall, Hamburg. On the first night after donning his fleshings, as they called tights in those days, he pulled on his

trousers, slipped into his overcoat and wandered into the wings to quietly await his turn. There was something amiss backstage and the manager was ranting and raving. At the end of the turn preceding Monte's act, the manager announce that there had been a delay in the arrival of the strongman. And when Monte timidly approached the enraged manager and explained that he was quite ready, the manager said incredulously, "We have a baby at home as big as you." Hurriedly Monte divested himself of his outer garments and the impresario's mouth opened still more when he saw the muscular development of his star turn. The problem was quickly rectified and Saldo got his usual splendid ovation.

Monte loved a joke and on one occasion the cast of the show was being entertained privately by one of the world's best card manipulators. Monte offered to cut the cards in a way the conjurer could not duplicate and a wager was placed. The strongman then ripped the cards in two and before the rest got over their astonishment and amusement he had ordered drinks all round with the staked money,

After teaming up with William Bankier, the Apollo Saldo School was opened, and this gymnasium became a Mecca for international strength athletes including Hackenschmidt, Lemm, Gotch, Deriaz, Yukio Tani and all the other wrestlers promoted by Bankier. Arthur Saxon's greatest record was made in this building and the Bavarian 'Maxick' made his British debut here in 1909.

Monte Saldo and Max Sick also formed a long-lasting and successful association, producing a unique postal course first called MAXSALDO, combining their names, and later adapting to call it MAXALDING. It was largely based on muscle control, which had been developed to a tremendous degree by the little German. The pair between them published four fine books, now quite rare, which were very much before their time; they were almost certainly the first of their kind. Maxick's *Muscle Control* broke new ground, and his *Great Strength by Muscle Control* is probably the only one ever published on the subject. Saldo's posing book was quite unique and his *How to Excel at Games and Athletics* showed a commonsense approach to the subject.

Frank Woolaston died in 1939; his daughter, a doctor, married a Member of Parliament. Much, perhaps most, of Saldo's belongings were destroyed in the blitz and incendiary bombs burned an invaluable collection of photographs of his act, himself and contemporaries. Only a few were saved and most of these were badly water damaged by the hoses of the brave fireman who saved London from being burned to the ground. World War II took its toll on the Woollastons, Monte losing his wife in an air-raid which devastated their lives. Monte's daughter Theresa was seriously injured during one of the raids and Charles, a younger son, was killed in action on the Continent. When Monte Saldo passed away in 1949, aged 70, it was due less to his age than to back and internal injuries sustained during the blitzkrieg.

Maxalding and the name of Saldo lived on through his son F.H.C. Woolaston, Court (Courtland), a personal friend of the author for many years. Court had an excellent physique at 6' in height, He did his first muscle control act at the age of 16 in the Royal Horticultural Hall, London. Court kept the mail order business going until his death in Dover on March 13, 1983 at the age of 72. He was fat and well until shortly before he died.

(Monte Saldo profile: Height 5'5". A generous 5'6" was sometimes listed. Measurements at 147 pounds: chest, 45 1/2"; neck, 17"; upper Arm 16"; thigh 23"; calf 15". Lifting records: bent press, 230; one hand jerk, 200. His greatest official lift was a dumbbell swing with 150 pounds while only 143 pounds in bodyweight.)