

A Legacy of Strength: The Cultural Phenomenon of the Professional Strongwoman

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The circus strongman, dressed in tights and Roman sandals, is a familiar figure in Western consciousness. What is not so well remembered is that throughout the *fin de siècle* period a not insignificant number of women also had careers as professional strength athletes, even though their calling would appear to have been diametrically opposed to the prevailing Victorian notions of femininity.

Although there are earlier references to women of unusual strength, it was in the 1890's that reports of strongwomen began to appear with regularity in sporting publications such as the *Police Gazette*, a magazine which was a major influence in the development of the professional strongwomen in America. Not only did the *Gazette* provide a good deal of textural and photographic space for these women; it also conferred titles and trophies on outstanding performers and served as a forum for the issuing of challenges.

One woman who became a star through the pages of the *Police Gazette* was the thickly built Josephine Schauer, known as "Minerva". Schauer's natural strength was well known in her hometown of Hoboken, New Jersey, and it brought her to the attention of Paul Blatt, known professionally as the "Hoboken Hercules". She married Blatt in 1899 and they began a joint strength act which continued through 1910. In 1893 Minerva received widespread national attention following her victory over another professional strongwo-

man, “Victorine”, and her acceptance of a belt – donated by the *Police Gazette* – recognizing her as the “world’s strongest woman.”

In Europe, also, dozens of women hoisted iron for money in the period between 1885 and 1920. Many of the European women who turned to strength acts were the daughters of circus performers; The Belgian, “Athleta”, for instance, was both the daughter and granddaughter of circus athletes as well as mother to three daughters who followed her onto the gaslit stage. Similarly, both parents of Austria’s Katie Brumbach, known as “Sandwina” were successful strength performers as were several of her sisters.

It also seems apparent that the definition of “beauty” changed on both continents following the Chicago World’s Fair of 1893, and that this change contributed to the public’s acceptance of the larger, more muscular women who appeared as professional strength performers. By the latter part of the 1890’s, in fact, the stereotypically slender and frail Victorian woman was becoming passe. Inspired by the robust beauty of the classical statuary which adorned the White City of Chicago, the public’s taste turned to larger, more competent examples of womanhood. Sandwina and Athleta, each of whom was lionized by the press for looks as well as strength, not only rode the crest of this sea-change, but contributed their potent beauty to the change.