

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

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Form rather than function succeeds in today's world.<sup>1</sup>

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

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

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weightlifters in that era, though most of those featured “were professional strongwomen, not sportswomen.”<sup>2</sup> The most frequent coverage was devoted to Katie Sandwina, a New Jersey “amazon” who in her prime hoisted a 600-pound cannon, jerked 265 pounds overhead, and supported a merry-go-round on her chest while six adults spun around.<sup>3</sup> Even at age 64 she entertained customers in her tavern by bending bars and breaking chains. Sandwina set a standard during the so-called strongman era that many strongmen were hard-put to match.

While Katie Sandwina was not the only strongwoman to grace the pages of strength and fitness magazines at the beginning of the century, it was only with the advent of Bob Hoffman’s *Strength & Health* in the early 1930s that women’s weightlifting received serious and sustained attention. Hoffman himself was born in Tifton, Georgia in 1898, raised in Pittsburgh, and decorated for valor in World War I. Afterwards he moved to York and cofounded an oil burner company that eventually enjoyed spectacular success in the 1930s. While installing an oil burner in a grocery store, Hoffman met and fell in love with the store owner’s daughter, Rosetta Snell. But his desire for money and his devotion to Rosetta never exceeded his love for sport. After taking her to the altar on October 20, 1928, Bob whisked her away to the Carnegie Tech football game. “I was crazy about athletics, but my wife never forgave me for going to a football game on our wedding day.”<sup>4</sup> Rosetta recalls that during their early years of marriage Bob “wanted to do barbell and weightlifting more than anything. Bob wanted it bad.”<sup>5</sup> The newlyweds first lived in a one-bedroom bungalow along the Susquehanna River. Here Bob recruited his earliest lifters, devised his barbell courses, and engaged in his first serious weight training. In 1929 Hoffman and his partner, Ed Kraber, acquired a permanent building at 51 N. Broad St. in York to manufacture oil burners and barbells. He also purchased some land in north York where he built a bungalow to accommodate his lifting club and in 1931 started constructing the multistory “House on the Hill,” designed to be Bob and Rosetta’s dream home.

Hoffman began making barbells as early as 1929 from the same facilities used to manufacture home heaters, but 1932 marks the real beginning of the operation. In that year he also began publishing *Strength & Health* magazine—publicizing his products and glorifying his ideas and exploits in the iron game. From its outset, Hoffman projected the feminine allure of his wife in the magazine to attract male customers and recruit lifters for his teams. Her image served also as a possible source of inspiration for prospective women athletes and trainees. Rosetta was portrayed as an exemplar of youthful femininity. In January 1934, *Strength & Health* featured pictures of a trim-looking Rosetta hoisting a set of chrome barbells on the clubhouse grounds. She was “the true glorified version of beautiful womanhood . . . pulsating with vigorous health and spontaneous youth.”<sup>6</sup> Later Rosetta authored the magazine’s women’s section. Ghostwritten by Bob,