DID MY BICEPS BRUISE YOUR EGO?

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Prologue: 1884, Southeastern Germany

A circus family in Bavaria (the largest federal state in southeastern Germany) had fourteen children, including a girl named Katie Brumbach. With a father who stood at 6 '6, little Katie was no stranger to a health-and-fitness-focused childhood. Delicate was not a word you would use to describe Katie. In the 1900s, when she moved to New York, she too - like her father - stood over six feet tall, weighed about 85 kilos, and could bench press (a compound weight training exercise where you lie on a bench and press a weight upward using a barbell or dumbbells) over 130 kilos on a dull day.

Of course, America had no idea what to do with a woman who didn't fit in, so it did what it knew best - resorted to insults. Katie was called a freak, mannish and unnatural. She was considered a "genetic mistake", and newspapers described her, without a touch of irony, that she ought to be a carnival exhibit rather than an athlete. Funny how she was crushing her day job in a travelling circus, but for reasons very different from what the media wrote about.

Fast forward to an impromptu contest that had Eugen Sandow - the man nicknamed "the father of bodybuilding" - participating in it. Sandow, whose physical appearance was deemed a template for masculine aspirational perfection at the time. While Katie hoisted 300 pounds overhead, Sandow could barely go as far as his chest and dropped. The crowd was so gobsmacked that in the silence you could have heard a pin drop.

Ever the woman of wit, she took the name Sandwina- a funny taunt aimed at Sandow - and spent the next forty years touring with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, juggling cannonballs, lifting her husband one-handed over her head. With her accomplishments, she gently proved that "strong" and "women" never had to be in conflict, even if the men writing the headlines continued to claim they were.

"Lifting heavy is dangerous for women"

For almost all of the 20th century, the medical world touted the "dangers" of women lifting weights. Not at all backed by evidence, but with utter confidence. They came for women's reproductive organs, claiming it would displace the uterus or turn her into a man due to the proximity of so much iron from the weights. As absurd as it sounds, it was propagated with calm authority by people who were never asked to prove their findings.

So women's "fitness" got sent into a tunnel of aerobics in leotards, dance movements as cardio, workouts specially designed for the "looks" rather than the actual benefits. Women were allowed to sweat, but were forced to be pretty while doing it. We could move, but only in a coordinated dance movement, creepily smiling the whole time. The goal was not muscle building; it was to achieve a body shaped like a coat hanger, perfect for decorative display.

And when thinness became more and more in vogue, a devastating number of women (fuelled by pre-existing trauma, thanks to patriarchy) took it to a fatal extreme. Anorexia, an eating disorder disproportionately affecting women, flourished in a society rewarding smallness as a desirable female virtue. If we are brainwashed into believing that our worth is as good as how little room we occupy, the first site of punishment or change becomes our own body. A set of punishing "values" turned inward with a vengeance, ensuring you never get stronger while you are busy disappearing.

Women said NO!

Katie Sandwina was not the only one defying this ridiculous myth. Vulcana (Kate Williams), born in 1874 in Wales, lifted 181 pounds with one arm. She put it to good use by dragging a thief to the police station - what a great way to flaunt a deadlift (a weight training exercise where you lift a loaded barbell or other weight from the floor to your hips, then lower it back down) Personal Record. Ivy Russel spent most of the 1930s deadlifting more than 400 pounds and touring to prove that women could compete in sports we didn't even have a category in. Abbye "Pudgy" Stockton, in all her five-foot glory, benched 100 pounds and opened one of the first women-only gymnasiums in Beverly Hills. She spent most of her life trying to convince American women that muscles were not a design flaw, but the crowning jewel.

Of course, these women were slandered, mocked and medicalised. Treated as a curiosity to be poked, prodded and gawked at. While history remembered Sandow, it forgot Sandwina, the significantly stronger and better athlete.

As things change gradually, we still have smelly, sweaty men grunting at mirrors; but some of them are now conducting women's powerlifting meets. PRs of presses and deadlifts are celebrated rather than looked down upon. The "before and after" trend is ever-so-slowly turning into a better, "muscular after". From a generation of women raised with a full spectrum of forcefully aspirational, pornified bodies, girls as young as age ten being told how to be "fuckable" are choosing, instead, to measure their worth in kilograms on a barbell.

Alongside shunning these inane practices, something else is shifting: a growing number of women are entirely losing interest in the whole idea of being desirable. Women are choosing not to let their entire life be about being desired by a suitor. Choosing themselves, be it through training, the progress made, or a weekend of meal prep with tofu and tempeh. Put a strong woman who is not seeking anyone's approval in front of a patriarchal system, and watch it crumble in utter confusion.

Why are men afraid of strong women?

Is it that her PR is better than men's? How aghast must men be when women don't go running to them with a stubborn pickle jar that won't open, or to a self-made woman who doesn't shy away from taking up space in any room she walks into? What's making men uncomfortable about a woman refusing to shrink? Could it be that said woman becomes harder to out-argue, out-run, out-lift or out-last?

We don't have to look very deep for answers, as these men have built entire media empires screaming about their insecurities themselves. An army of self-styled and tediously self-absorbed "podcast bros" has made a living out of spewing hatred and publicly resenting women who don't need them. In the "Fresh and Fit" podcast hosted by Myron Gaines and Walter Weekes, a woman is invited on air specifically to demean and degrade her. Gaines is also a co-author of a book titled "Why Women Deserve Less" - a title that could only originate from the basement-dwelling genius of incels - in which he argues that women have made themselves "worth less" by having opinions, among other things. The roster is long, and includes anything a woman does: working, dating, being uncaring about male approval, just existing as an independent, thinking, breathing individual. The kind of thesis women like Sandwina would stomp on as she enters a room full of gym bros.

Considering they've spent centuries cultivating restrictions among women - making her doubt herself, small, slow, soft and easy to attack - to the point that even lawyers hold up an abuse victim's tight skirt to a jury as if forced restrictions were confessions. Society was never interested in accountability; it wanted to ask women: how dare she come unbounded after everything we did to keep her gaslit into being small?

Epilogue: Katie Sandwina will always have the last word

Somewhere in a parallel universe that accommodates the six-foot former circus strongwoman who once outlifted the most famous bodybuilder, Katie Sandwina is watching TikTok gym videos. A century ago, she was called a genetic mistake for bench pressing 300 pounds. Today, women do it to warm up while listening to music on their headphones. Sandwina spent her whole life being told she was an aberration; it just so happened that she needed just a few more decades and a good wifi connection to receive five million views for her efforts.

If she could see women walking into a gym today, chalking their hands and deadlifting twice their bodyweight - while men have a hard time pulling their jaw back from the floor - she would not be surprised. She would just wonder why the hell it took us so long to catch up.