

# The Strong Lady in America: Professional Athletes and the Police Gazette

Jan Todd

The University of Texas at Austin

*The National Police Gazette* began publication in 1845 but it was not until Richard K. Fox took it over in 1877, that the sensationalistic tabloid began seriously covering sport as well as crime. Interestingly, a significant percentage of the athletes featured by Fox were female professionals who made their living by giving exhibitions of the “masculine” sports of boxing, wrestling and weightlifting in the saloons and vaudeville houses of the late nineteenth century.

These women were not simply entertainers as the first women’s boxing article (October 12, 1878), amply demonstrates: “Miss Burke’s nose was red and spreading over her face while her left jaw and forehead showed the effects of the hard blows of her opponents. . . Miss Wells, too, showed that she had been pretty roughly handled; her lip was bleeding and her nose was also damaged.” Other reports in the *Gazette* indicate that women boxers utilized regular training regimens to improve their pugilistic skills and physical fitness. Annie Lewis, one of the most famous boxers of the 1880s, for instance, hired a male trainer and used dumbbells, Indian clubs and sandbags to improve her strength and hitting power. Professional strongwomen such as Minerva (Josephine Blatt), regularly tested their physical capabilities in competitions with other strongwomen and in public exhibitions where they attempted to set new lifting records.

As it did for male athletes, the *Police Gazette* not only gave coverage to female athletes, it also assisted in setting up matches between women, carried their challenges in its “Pugilistic News” column and even offered championship belts to women. Minerva was given, on separate occasions, both a championship belt and a loving cup to commemorate her physical achievements.

There is no question that Richard K. Fox and *The National Police Gazette* were an integral part of the development of the professional women boxers and strongwomen of the 1880s and 1890s. Though many upperclass Victorians may have viewed these athletic activities as unfeminine and even demeaning, in the *Gazette*, the official organ of their world, these female athletes were seen as competent, professionals and, in many ways, the equal of their male peers. It is important when looking at these women, however, to keep in mind how limited their professional options truly were. The fifteen to twenty-five dollars a week women boxers earned at places such as Harry Hill's Saloon in New York City, no doubt proved a powerful incentive for women whose primary employment options were back-breaking factory work or prostitution. Furthermore, these women knew that if they became good enough, as Minerva did, that there was a realistic chance that they could earn even greater sums by defying the traditional ideals of Victorian womanhood.