

AN ATYPICAL ATHLETE

ELAINE NEAL

I have never considered myself athletic. I never participated in sports in high school or college. My favorite pastime today is gardening. So imagine how strange it felt to find myself, at the age of 56, competing in my first ever national Powerlifting meet.

Powerlifting – huge muscle-bound men hefting impossibly heavy weights in smelly, dark gyms – that’s what comes to mind to most. It’s actually a real sport (totally different from bodybuilding and Olympic lifting, by the way), this meet sanctioned by the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) and the 100% RAW Powerlifting Federation. Powerlifting is a strength event consisting of three events: the squat, the bench press, and the deadlift. You compete against others in your own weight and age class – but mostly you compete against yourself.

Clearly this was a journey for me, and not one I made alone. It started months and months ago when I signed up with trainer Benjamin Dearman. I was well on my way to a middle age that seemed inevitable and unfortunately all too common for women my age – fat, sedentary, unhealthy. My personal and professional life was in good shape. I needed to get my physical life under control.

So Ben trained me up. When we started I could barely pick up the 45 lb. bar. We tackled my weight with Precision Nutrition. I got stronger and leaner (almost 40 lbs. leaner now). We never did the machines. We never did cardio. Ben used his background in applied functional science coupled with conjugated periodization in the Westside Barbell template (he made it my business to understand the lingo) to create an ever-evolving weight training program that ultimately improved my general physical preparedness to a point where it was safe for me to get under the bar – to tackle the big three. It wasn’t without some trepidation on his part and mine, however. Neither of us was sure how a 56 year old post menopausal body would respond to this type of training. We decided the safest course was slow, steady progress and strict attention to good form.

About four months ago Ben suggested we needed a goal to work towards – The Granite City Iron Wars V Powerlifting Competition in Barre, Vermont. He was planning to compete along with two other trainers, Scott and Bonnie. He asked me and another atypical athlete, Nancy to join them. Our training sessions took on a whole new intensity. We were training for an event. We were training to compete. We were training like athletes.

And so here I was, sitting in the back seat of Ben’s car on my way to the Granite City Iron Wars. All our stuff was crammed in the trunk – foam rollers, powerlifting belts, Chuck Taylors, the dreaded singlets (a required one piece spandex suit that is flattering to no one!). I was surrounded by a mountain of partially used water bottles, copies of training articles, a cardboard box erupting with new t-shirts with our powerlifting team logo – THC (Too Hot to Control). There was Ben and Nancy calmly talking in the front seat. It was quite possibly one of

the most surreal moments of my life. What was I doing here? Would I survive the Granite City Iron Wars?

Well, survive I did, and as it turned out, the competition was a blast. The meet directors (powerlifters themselves) were very welcoming and helpful. Our little band stuck close together, supporting one another as team members do. Ben made sure we all warmed up properly. The meet director went over the rules. We all got caught up in the minutia of getting ready until suddenly, it was time to start. It occurred to me at that moment that this would be the very first time in my life that I would compete in an actual athletic event. To you typical athletes that doesn't seem very unusual since most of you have been competing since childhood. For me it was a momentous occasion.

The squat was first. Each of us would have three attempts, with each successive attempt at a heavier weight. The director announced that the bar was loaded. I had one minute to complete my lift. I became very calm. As I got positioned under the bar I could feel Ben watching me, something I'm quite used to, but I could also feel the attention of everyone else in the room – the other lifters, the judges, the audience, all the people who are special to me in my real world who had come to show their support. The moment I started my lift, however, they all disappeared. It was just me and the bar. My training took over. I successfully completed my opening attempt at 140 lbs. It was an incredible high and an incredible relief all at the same time. My confidence soared and I easily scored my second attempt at 165 lbs. My third and final attempt was a personal record (PR) for me at 176 lbs.

The bench was next – my weakest event. Ben just barely taught us how to bench four months ago, and the lift still feels quite awkward to me. I started with a very conservative opener – 65 lbs, easily accomplished. My second attempt (80 lbs) just flew up. No one was more surprised than I! Ben and I agreed that I should go for 100 lbs for my third attempt which would be a PR for me. The second he passed the bar off to me I knew I was in trouble. I managed to get the bar lowered to my chest for the “Press” command, but it got stuck half way back up. The director called it and I officially failed the attempt.

The deadlift was last. I've read that serious powerlifters don't consider the competition to really begin until the metal hits the floor. The deadlift is my favorite event, to me the purest show of strength. It's also my strongest event. I opened at 230 lbs, progressed to 250 lbs in my second and finished at 260 lbs.

And that's how the day went. I successfully completed all but one lift. Ben was ever-present with his usual mix of praise, condemnation and re-education. My team members and my own personal peanut gallery were a constant source of comfort. The other lifters were embracing and encouraging, displaying what I believe to be the true spirit of competition.

In the end we all came away with trophies. In fact I am now the number one ranking powerlifter in my age and weight group not only in New England, but in the nation. But you know, that's not what's important. All those months of preparing and learning and working hard, that's what's important. The strong bond with someone like Ben who is as committed to my success as I am, as well as the development of relationships with others who are on the same

path, that's what's important. But, the truly personal achievement, both physical and mental, of becoming an athlete, atypical or otherwise, that's the most important of all.

What's next? Twisted Fitness in Claremont, NH in June!