

WORTH THE WEIGHT

Ashley Ross takes us inside the complex world of women's weight lifting—the pressure, the bizarre practices, the eating disorders



When my cousin told me she wanted to drop 3 pounds before her wedding, I told her the first weight-loss trick that popped into my head: “Three pounds? You could spit that out, easy.”

I wasn't your typical eating-disordered athlete whose dexterity relied on maintaining a whisper-weight frame. In high school, I was a competitive weight lifter who was seen as strong and solid as a rock—little did people know what was really going on.

I was a study in contrasts—dressing up for class, but at practice, throwing chalk on my hands and thrusting at least 100 pounds over my head. But look at George Clooney's girlfriend, Stacy Keibler, who used to wrestle for World Wrestling Entertainment and now rocks her toned legs on the red carpet. Heavy-lifters can be ladylike, too. And judging from all the females getting involved in lifting—in 2010 the National Sporting Goods Association found that more than 10 million women worked with weights of some sort compared with just about 6 million who played tennis—it's not as rare as you'd think.

I joined the varsity weight-lifting team when my older sister brought me along to her practice my freshman year. As a gymnast since age 4, I had natural strength and a small frame—the perfect combination for winning meets. When competing, my teammates and I lifted in weight classes broken down by 10-pound increments. If two girls in the same class lifted the same amount but one weighed just 2 ounces

less, the lighter one would win.

This encouraged my coach to push me into a lighter-weight division. Sure, I thought, I could drop 6 pounds in a week, and then I'd win the meet. His advice? Sleep with the AC on low to shiver overnight and burn extra calories. But I didn't realize that my 115-pound, size-2 body had no extra weight to lose.

It started with a diet: only celery and grilled chicken, limited salt, and very little water. When that didn't work, I moved on to sticking my finger down my throat (with little results, since I had hardly any food in my stomach); jogging in heavy layers; sitting in saunas for hours despite a school regulation against it; and popping green-tea pills to speed up my metabolism. I'd stick Skittles gum in my cheek (my teammates and I endlessly experimented with tart-flavored gum and candy to find which would make us salivate the most), then spit into water bottles to lose 3 pounds in just a few hours. I even skipped school to chug Phospho soda, a laxative used on colonoscopy patients, that I'd mix with Mountain Dew to cut its horrible taste.

The coaches gave me three chances to weigh in under 110 pounds before a meet or I'd be disqualified. If I didn't hit that target weight the first time, I'd get naked, take my hair out of its French-braid pigtails, fluff up my curls to air out the density of my hair, and do a headstand for a minute

to shift my water weight around so I could come in a few ounces less. Our instructors were aware—they joked about the saunas and the spitting—but they turned a blind eye. And though I felt weak from deprivation, I managed to lift more than my body weight above my head at every meet.

In college I gave up lifting and could barely set foot in a gym, afraid I'd fall back into my old ways. I'd tell my doctor not to read my weight on the scale out loud and trigger my old anxieties about making my weight class. After graduation, my waistline stretched and I bought a scale. Soon enough, the habits returned. I binged and purged, counted calories, and finally realized I had a serious problem. This was no longer something I did for a high school sport; it was real and it wasn't going away.

Over a tear-filled brunch and many mimosas, I confided in two friends. They advised me to find a therapist, admitting that they each had seen counselors for family issues and broken hearts. When I finally got to therapy, it felt liberating to vent in a judge-free space. Thanks to food

diaries and weekly therapy sessions, I came out on the other side, trimmed down, and found my jeans slipping on easily. When I get on a scale, my heart still beats with anxiety before the number pops up, but now I can eat a doughnut without worrying that each bite will make or break me. **mc**

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