

Giving up Sexist Stereotypes in Powerlifting

Tom Pete

What an amazing thing it is to see women in powerlifting who have broken into a male-dominated sport and discarded outdated, unworkable notions of femininity — in the community, their families and in themselves.

As a female athlete competing in today's arena, you are a very special breed. In many ways, you are a pioneer, a groundbreaker, a leader. When you buck the trends and go against the status quo, you serve not only yourself but the entire powerlifting world.

But not everyone sees it this way. For example, several non-NorCal Powerlifting male lifters made sexist remarks to me regarding our “no singlet required rule” uniform in our competitions. A comment that stood out for me was “if the men feel comfortable in a singlet, so should the women.

I wanted to remind them that, in a continued effort to evolve the fairness of the sport of powerlifting for women, NorCal Powerlifting added the “no singlet-required rule” addressing the competition uniform. The rule, listed as Section 3A in the NorCal Powerlifting rule book, indicates an option to the one-piece singlet used during a powerlifting competition. Now female lifters in NorCal Powerlifting competitions have the option to wear biker shorts and a T-shirt.

The belief that a woman who refuses to compete over a uniform just needs to buck up and get over it is absurd. But it's never about just one rule or one thing. Sexism against women in sports is not just maintained through outward displays like a lifting uniform. Female athletes see the subtle equivalent of sexism in many such rules every day and often say nothing. Sexism is subtle and sticks around because we men (and women enablers) refuse to analyze our deeply-held values that benefit ourselves to the detriment of others who are different than us. Accepting old rules doesn't excuse the sexist outcomes, however subtle.

In addition, the lack of women members in powerlifting ruling bodies constitutes a significant obstacle to the achievement of equality between women and men in the sport. Notwithstanding the efforts made by women lifters today, women's participation in the sport's ruling bodies remains marginal in the powerlifting world. Throughout history, it was widely accepted as fact that the female species was much too frail and fragile to be able to physically tolerate such “manly” endeavors as running, jumping, throwing and lifting. Moreover, it was often considered unnatural, even sinful and immoral, for a woman to want to have a strong, fit, responsive body. As a result, well-bred women were forced to dress in tight corsets and long, unwieldy outfits that prevented them from moving at all. Those few entitled, wealthy ones were relegated to such strenuous activities as flower arranging, knitting, embroidering and cheering for their manly counterparts during sporting events while the majority of poor women died early deaths from grueling physical labor and childbirth.

Life began to get a little more equal between the sexes after the Industrial Revolution when machines were invented that dwarfed and took the place of the so-called superior strength of men. Brain, not brawn became the criteria for success. Thus, by the twentieth century, the female athlete was emerging out of the primordial ooze of male-dominated ignorance as an acceptable member of the human athletic race.

While the gender gap seems to be slowly closing, there are still some subtle and not-so-subtle inequities such as exemplified by the comments of the male lifters. All in all, however, things are certainly a whole lot better for the female athlete today than yesteryear.

Yes, the powerlifting women are making a statement that it is important for young women to be physically and mentally strong, aggressive, competitive and high achieving.

Don't just whisper this message to yourself. Shout it out, proudly! And when you compete, wear your T-shirt and shorts instead of the singlet if it suits you.