

Strong Woman in a Man's World

Real women do lift weights. By KARA MANN, BE'06

AS A STRONGWOMAN I'VE achieved some pretty unreal things I never thought I could do. I've pulled an A-4 jet that weighed more than 14,000 pounds. I've flipped a 700-pound tire on NBC's *Today* show. I've lifted a stone weighing 245 pounds, and I've pulled several SUVs and trucks. I've had my own documentary on ESPN2, part of a series called *Timeless*. As the 2004 national champion professional strongwoman in the sport of strongman, I've met the most amazing and dedicated people—but most of all, I am constantly challenged in different ways.

"Strongman" is the name of a sport that requires feats of strength, speed and stamina. Competitions involve multiple events that test an athlete's endurance. Every competition is different, but they usually include five or six timed maximum-distance and maximum-weight events. Strongman is *not* simple weightlifting or pumping iron at a gym in a static position.

Competitors and promoters of competitions are always challenging strongman athletes to lift strange, heavy objects faster and for longer distances. Events can range from lifting a series of atlas stones or pulling a jet to dead-lifting a trailer with a cheerleader in tow. I once had to run a timed medley grip-



AP PHOTO/MIKE HUMPHREY

ping full beer kegs. I love competing in strongman and have been motivated to train continually during the past four and a half years.

During my senior year of high school, my then-boyfriend introduced me to the sport. I am always up for a challenge and so, with some hesitation, I agreed to try it. Like most young women I was reluctant to "get big" or become a stereotypical power lifter with masculine-looking muscles. Although I was a three-sport varsity athlete during all four years of high school, I had no real

weightlifting experience. I had run cross country, played basketball, and participated in multi-track events in spring track.

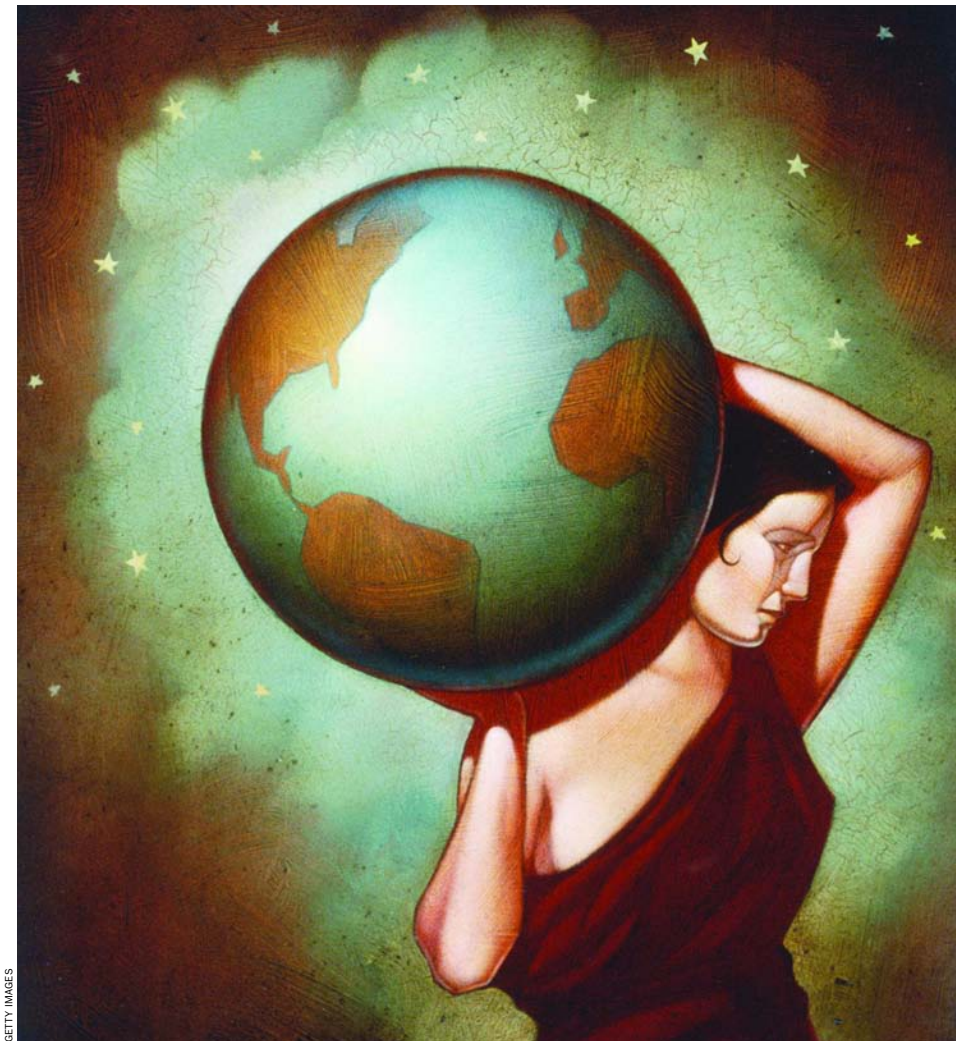
If you were to ask my parents if they ever would have imagined their daughter competing in strongman, I think they would say no, but they have always been encouraging about any endeavor I tackled. Once they were assured I was in good hands with my training partners, they started enjoying the sport almost as much as I do. My mom and dad have made it to nearly all my competitions—a huge sacrifice because both of them work, and traveling across the country to competitions gets costly. But they also know who can help them shovel the driveway or help move the car when it's stuck in the snow.

I soon figured out that weight training

benefited my health. My muscles have taken a healthy, fit shape. I never would take steroids or illegal supplements, which plague many competitive sports. Doing so would be incongruent to my core value of being a woman. I have done very well in this sport without taking potentially damaging male steroids. I feel strong—I *am* strong—and I look feminine, which is important to me.

Initially, the lifting aspect of strongman was extremely tough for me. I started off with light weights and mastered the movements under much scrutiny from training partners. When I increased the weights, I no longer could rely on my athletic capabilities. I had to focus on technique. I discovered that a background in physics helped me understand and implement an effective technique for successfully lifting and moving crazy objects with maximum speed.

Many men and women strongman competitors have emphasized to me the importance of understanding techniques to help me improve—and more important, they helped keep me safe and reduced my risk of being injured. I was not allowed to touch the implements (tires, stones, etc.) until I had safety and technique under my belt. Art McDermott, a coach and mentor for me since I started, has helped me constantly rework and attempt to perfect my technique. He owns a personal training center in Wilmington, Mass., that is known in the strongman community as the "strongman heaven." All of the implements used—large tractor tires, logs, yokes, etc.—are in his huge facil-



GETTY IMAGES

ity, so during bitter New England winters, we can train anytime. I also cross-train with running, cycling and climbing to stay active and give muscle groups some rest. I've had bruises from stones and scratches from the tire, but those come with the sport and some say they are like battle wounds.

Some women have asked me if I was ever concerned that a potential boyfriend might be uncomfortable with the idea of my being stronger, or if boyfriends had problems with my competing. I can honestly say it hasn't been an issue entering a new relationship. Strongman doesn't define who I am. But if a man can't cope with my interests, then he's not a man who would interest me! Some guys I've dated are strongman competitors. Sharing a healthy passion for something can be tremendous.

Women need to know that when lifting safe, you don't get huge all of a sudden just because you added an extra 45-pound plate. If you lift "smart and safe," the benefits of

lifting outweigh any concerns about injury. Thanks to my genetic thumbprint, I know I have to watch my weight like millions of other women. Strongman training not only has been a spectacular exercise program, but it's an awesome stress reliever that helps build more bone mass, often a problem for women.

The idea of competing in strongman was perfect for the new phase of life I was embarking on when I arrived at Vanderbilt in 2002. I entered the School of Engineering as a chemical engineering major and prepared myself for another challenge. Chemistry and math never came easily to me; I have worked hard for every grade I received. I relied on the discipline and determination I apply to my strongman training and thrived in chemical engineering. In May, I graduated cum laude with a bachelor's degree in engineering. Being a woman in a male-dominated sport can be hard sometimes, but my lessons learned there can be applied

I have done very well in this sport without male steroids or illegal supplements. My muscles have taken a healthy, fit shape. I am strong and I look feminine.

to being a woman in a male-dominated science career: Ask lots of questions in class, sit up front in Thermodynamics, and definitely chalk up in the gym.

I've just been invited to the 27th annual Salute to Women in Sports Awards dinner, an all-expense-paid event at the Waldorf-Astoria in New York City that celebrates all women in sports and thanks teams and individuals who have helped advance women in sports. Celebrities from film and television and even members of the 2006 Winter Olympics team will be there. And I'm excited to be starting with the Edison Engineering Development Program at General Electric in Cleveland at the end of the summer.

As I take on this new challenge in my career, I've already networked into the closely knit strongman family and found people to train with in Cleveland. It'll be great to have my best stress relief during this new phase of my life. I live a healthy lifestyle that includes good eating habits, and my strongman workouts are part of this. I try to look at the big picture and choose activities that support my goal of feeling and looking good. I hope others learn from reading about my experience.