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# **SPORTS LEISURE; So You Want to Be a Tough Gal?**

By NATALIE Angier

Lifting weights is my best bad habit. I say bad habit not because I'm clinically addicted to the sport, the way marathoners can be to running although there have been times in my life when going to the gym has taken priority over finishing a story, doing my taxes, getting enough sleep or even talking civilly to a friend.

Nor is it simply that bodybuilding can stoke one's vanity, although I admit I like the way I look when my back is at its broadest and my pectoral muscles are defined enough that people think I have great cleavage.

No, I consider weight lifting to be a minor vice because I do it for a quaintly foolish reason: to prove that, hey, guys, I'm tough! I'm really, really tough! Don't Judge a Book . . .

To look at me, you wouldn't think I was particularly strong. I'm just over 5 feet 3 inches and I weigh 115 pounds. But at my best, I'm not bad. I can bench press about 150 pounds, for example, and do 50 to 60 solid, straight, ground-skimming push-ups. Over the years, I've been a member of practically every health club in the city, and I'm often among the strongest women on the floor.

That's not a terrible surprise, because most women don't realize how strong they could be, and they'd rather take aerobics classes anyway. But sometimes -- here's the part I like best -- I'm stronger than quite a few of the men around, too.

It's through watching the way men respond to my strength, and the way I respond back, that I've come to learn just how messy, contradictory, serious and silly the notion of physical strength is.

First let me say that I think bodybuilders of either sex are a bit peculiar: a little surlier than the average person, and a lot more insecure. The sport itself requires scant command of any interpersonal skills, or even of the human language. And the nature of the activity, with its repetitive, restricted motions, encourages a sense of introversion and detachment.

We weight lifters may sometimes describe our sport in dreamy psychospiritual terms, talking about the Zen of weight lifting, finding our center, focusing our energy, energizing our focus and centering our Zen. But the truth is that weight lifting attracts a lot of people whose basic take on life is, Don't mess with me, buddy. And I, alas, being a little person and a female, have often taken that take to extremes.

The kinds of reactions I've engendered over the years fall into three categories, and so, too, do my responses. Most of the time, after watching me do one exercise or another, people will say in evident shock, "You're so STRONG." I'm never quite sure if that's a compliment, an observation or even an accusation. So usually I sort of shrug, smile wanly and mumble, "Thanks," although once, when a man said, "You're STRONG for a little LADY!" it took all my self-restraint not to drop the 45-pound plate I was carrying on his BIG gentleman's FOOT.

At other times, people will be less astonished and more admiring, saying things like, "You really work hard at this, don't you?" or "You've got terrific form." Needless to say, I love this sort of praise, and will preen obnoxiously and offer much more gracious thanks upon hearing it. The most splendid praise comes when a man asks me if I would "spot" him: stand over him while he's doing his set in case he should need a hand toward the end.

By trusting that I'm strong and skilled enough not to let 200 pounds of iron shatter his rib cage during a bench press, a man is accepting me as a dedicated athlete and as his equal. Admittedly, the men who ask are the pros who know their own limits. They'd never try to lift something so ridiculously heavy that I would be the sole buffer between them and paraplegia. But still, I like the request, and I am a good spotter.

Finally, there are the responses that, for lack of a better word or any word at all, I classify as "hmmph!" These are the men who watch me do a set, and then stomp over to do the exact same thing. But first, they must add weight to whatever it is. A lot of weight. Whether they can handle it or not.

Now, I was trained by competitive bodybuilders who were compulsive about good form, and I recognize lousy form when I see it (or do it). So the moment I spy a spinal cord whipping back and forth like a flag in the breeze, or a lower back raising up from a bench like a drawbridge, I sense a case of threatened virility, not to mention an impending slipped disk.

One man who worked out in the gym where I used to be a member seemed so put off by me and my training partner -- a girlfriend who is also pretty strong -- that no matter what exercise we were doing, he could not help himself. He would have to interrupt. "Excuse me," he'd say, pointing at the weights we had momentarily put down. "Do you mind if I use these now?"

For a while we tried to accommodate him. But after a few times of what we thought of as rude and excessive requests, I hesitated. "Well. . . ." I said, standing guard by the dumbbells in question.

"Well WHAT?" he demanded. "Do you have a problem with that?" I glowered at him, struggling to squelch my temper. "Well, do you?" he repeated, glowering back.

"Take the weights," I muttered. "I'm going home."

But if the truth be known, I understand how these guys feel. After all, my philosophy is that women could be stronger than they are. If they trusted in themselves, trained harder, lifted heavier, they could gain self-confidence and self-empowerment. I really believe that.

Yet when I see women who are stronger than I am, I get a little mad and a little jealous. And when my training partner, Rita, whom I had taught to use weights in the first place, began to catch up to me and in some exercises threatened to surpass me, well, I

couldn't help myself. I piled on the weights and let my spine undulate where it would. Good form be damned. I have my pride, and I'm tough. Really.

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