

Starting Strength

A New Perspective

by

Gillian Mounsey

I recently spent 10 days in Wichita Falls, Texas training with Mark Rippetoe at the Wichita Falls Athletic Club (WFAC). My husband and I made the 1,400 mile trek on our motorcycle seeking a higher level of proficiency in Olympic weightlifting (Snatch and Clean & Jerk), the slow lifts (Squat, Deadlift, Bench Press, and Press), and expert coaching. My goal was two-fold: first, to improve my own knowledge and technique of the lifts to better myself as an athlete, and second, to improve my knowledge in order to share with clients, friends, and family. What I got was a whole lot more. The most important things I learned were intangible – they cannot be quantified, and have little to do with technique.

I learned to respect myself as an athlete. I learned to appreciate the gifts that I have been given and the abilities I worked very hard for, rather than to dwell on the things I do not have. *I learned to train with purpose rather than for atonement.* It was the perfect vacation – training is my favorite pastime – eat, train, rest, eat, hot-tub/pool, nap, train, eat, socialize, and maybe eat again before going to bed for the night. What made it special was that my time spent at WFAC was filled with purposeful training, recovery, and education. I met inspiring people that cared about two things: self-improvement and helping those they came in contact with to be better through expert knowledge, unparalleled generosity, and attention to detail. I spent the week as part of a team, even though weightlifting is often regarded as an individual sport.

During my week of training, focus was on my performance and the *effort* I put forth. At some point I realized that aesthetics was not the focus – my appearance was never discussed, and as a result my comfort level soared. I was reacquainted with a fact I already knew: what we look like is a result of genetics, consistent hard training, and eating *enough* to perform at your *best*. When I wasn't training I spent my time with Stef, Juli, and Shelley. These women are strong and beautiful and seemed not to worry about the size of their jeans or if they weighed more than the 100lb cover girls seen on the pages of fashion magazines. These women are proud of their hard earned muscle and strength, and they sport it with a confidence that I envy. They are smart, healthy, and incredibly capable. To me, those are traits of real beauty.

As a result, I came to realize that my self-image was not as evolved as Stef's, Juli's, Shelley's, and several other very impressive females I had the pleasure of meeting. I still worry about fitting into size 2 jeans and I panic when the scale climbs over 140 (I am 5'4" on a tall day when my hair is big). I am my own worst enemy when it comes to being the athlete that I could be. I know the amazing things of which I am capable, and now I have to stop standing in my own way. Unfortunately, being a CrossFitter for 3 ½ years (until 3 months ago) only further contributed to my skewed body image.

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I spent my childhood as a competitive athlete – primarily a gymnast from the age of two. In high school I continued gymnastics, but my focus moved toward track and field after multiple injuries. As a result of these injuries I was skittish and developed a fear. This ultimately led to a degradation of physical performance and the mental willingness to do dangerous routines. My track coach encouraged me to be an 800-meter sprinter. He believed the anaerobic time domain would improve our performance on other events. And at local meets there was little competition in the 800 meter event. At 16 years old, I ran a 2:07 800m, was a decent hurdler (100m and 400m), and threw the discus. Javelin was illegal in NYC, and the hammer throw was not done at the high school level (though I learned to throw at an outing to St. John's University and was good at with the hammer as well). For whatever reason I didn't identify with shot put; if I am honest, the big girls scared me.

I was accustomed to training and practicing 20-30 hours a week. My identity was largely related to my athletic success and physical capabilities. During and after college I yearned for competition – training was the pastime I knew and it kept me balanced. I fell into bodybuilding and the life of a gym rat in my 20s. Bodybuilding came easy, my muscle was already there and I needed only to learn the diet. I won every competition I entered, but it was unrewarding and felt empty. At the time I didn't realize what was missing. It was a paradox to me: when I stepped on stage in contest condition I was weaker and unhealthier than I had ever been. My entire life I took pride in being an exceptional athlete with strength and physical capabilities that were rarely – if ever – matched. At the time I supposedly looked my best, I had about 10% of my normal capacity. In short, I had starved myself to the point of destruction.

The training designed for bodybuilding didn't make much sense to me, but I followed along and did what I read in the magazines and saw others do in then gym. The concept of training a bodypart versus training movements was foreign at first, but in time became my norm. Instinctively I knew that many of the bodybuilding exercises which involved machines put me in odd, non-functional positions on equipment designed for somebody much larger than me.

Today, I try not to giggle when I hear someone say, “I am going to the gym to train bi's and tri's” and then complain that their arms never grow. Somewhere along the way I determined the best way to grow muscle was by creating the biggest systemic response, and this occurred when recruiting the most muscle tissue around multiple joints at once. If it didn't feel like hard work and render you incapable of talking during your set, it probably wasn't doing much for you. My very large, developed arms are often a topic of conversation and teasing. Please refrain from calling me Smith and Wesson – I hate it! I wear stretch lycra and tank tops because my arms and back do not fit in women's blouses unless I pre tear the seams or buy a size big enough to be a tent. No laughing matter – this causes me major distress when shopping for business and formal wear. To the surprise of many, I have not done a stitch of direct arm training in about 12 years – not a single dumbbell curl, concentration curl, hammer curl, tricep kick back, cable tricep extension, or skull-crusher. I could feel that I was working harder when I did pull-ups, dips, barbell rows, bench presses, and handstand push-ups.

I never understood why other bodybuilders would split their upper bodies into three or four days and then devote only one day to “legs”. I knew from Anatomy 101 and Physiology 101 that at least 60% of your muscle mass is located below the waist – so give it at least 60% of your training time. Some of the best advice I got was from the film “Pumping Iron”. Schwarzenegger said that you have to squat to grow. I listened and (while I was not squatting correctly at the time) squatting was the exercise that had the greatest impact on me). I performed my favorite workout on Saturdays, which was 10 sets of 10 squats on the minute with as much weight as I could handle – then I would go off and do abs. Another of my favorite ridiculous leg workouts was a mile of walking lunges on the track

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without stopping. In those days I gauged effectiveness by delayed onset muscle soreness: if I couldn't walk, I was golden.

At the age of 25, I had a gifted boss I thank to this day for causing me to question bodybuilding. He was unhappy that clients were commending me on what was actually a very unhealthy, dieted-down condition. He believed that as the top-dog trainer I was the ultimate role model to the clients, and he questioned the example I was setting. Consequently, I chose my career over competitive bodybuilding. I stopped the crazy diet but continued to train as a bodybuilder, dabbled with distance running (don't ask what possessed me), ballroom dance, and submission grappling over the next 5 years.

Three and a half years ago at the age of 30, I found CrossFit because I was looking for competition. In February of 2008 I was rejected from the syndicated television show *American Gladiator* after being told that I was a shoe-in during auditions (my name was to be "Chaos"). In the end, I was too short and the gladiators are supposed to be bigger than the contestants – this is still a sore spot with me. A fellow trainer at the gym told me that the CrossFit Games were coming up and that I should go and win. Believing it might make me feel better, I agreed. That was the first day I visited CrossFit.com.

I started my CrossFit career in March of 2008 with a 300lb deadlift, 200lb bench press, and an unknown squat; unfortunately I can't give you numbers on a squat or press because I previously trained with less than full range squats and seated dumbbell presses. I was capable of stringing together 30 dead-hang pull-ups with ease, 100 plus push-ups, and walking long distances on my hands. I found myself in the top 1% of any physical challenge put forth (other than distance running, swimming, or cycling). In the *first weeks* of CrossFit I had a sub-3-minute "Fran" (21 65lb thrusters (front squat-to-press) and 21 pull-ups, 15 thrusters and 15 pull-ups, 9 thrusters and 9 pull-ups) and 25 rounds of "Cindy" (as many rounds as possible in 20 minutes of 5 pull-ups, 10 push-ups, 15 squats). I could handle most of the workout at the men's prescribed weights despite the fact that many of the movements were new to me.

The interesting part is that I was told I was "too big", that I carried "excessive muscle", and that I was at a bodyweight that would "slow me down" and interfere with "range of motion" (did I mention that I was a gymnast?). I was also told to learn kipping pull-ups because my dead-hangs weren't fast enough to get the best times possible. At the time, I weighed 146lbs at 13% body fat (almost exactly where I am now). No matter how good I was as a CrossFitter, I didn't fit the "ideal" body type. I was instructed to "Zone" diet on 13 blocks – approximately 1,300 calories a day. Previously, I consumed roughly 3,000 calories a day and had maintained the same bodyweight for more than five years. As a result I lost 28 lbs, had 6% body fat and got weak, but I looked like the "ideal" CrossFitter.

I competed in the 2008 CrossFit Games in July underweight and undernourished, and to my dismay several of the workouts were short and heavy. I still managed to place third after falling from first place on the final event. The final event was 30 reps for time of a heavy (at the time) clean and jerk with the requirement of passing through the full squat. I can't help but to think that had I not lost nearly a fifth of my body mass over the previous three months, I would have won the games. I probably didn't need to be counting my almonds that day, or avoiding the pancakes at breakfast that were served in the hotel.

Society rewarded me for this very unhealthy body – photographers wanted to shoot me, manufacturers wanted me to wear their clothes, and supplement companies wanted me to push their products. Once again the paradox: looking "great" while performing poorly. Fortunately my husband (then friend) was able to see through the silliness and helped me understand that I was most beautiful

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in the state that my body longed to be in – HEALTHY! When I met Mac, he commented that I appeared to be in a “funk”. That “funk” had to do with several factors, one of them being starvation. Within 6 months, I gained 20 lbs but still had an upper limit of around 138lbs that I refused to go over.

The journey to WFAC began this past April when we became frustrated with recent injuries, stagnant results, and overall lack of any direction or clearly defined goals. At the time, I was questioning how I could train for the unknown – particularly in the context of training for competition. Would I ever go to a gymnastics meet without knowing my routine? When I objectively evaluated my performance, I discovered that I had not made any significant gains since my first six months of CrossFitting. I realized CrossFit had become another means of maintaining an aesthetic appearance for me. Additionally, I had suffered a catastrophic injury 16 months prior, herniation of 5 cervical and thoracic discs from a combination of excessive volume muscle-ups and a very high rep, heavy barbell workout performed for time with extreme fatigue and faulty mechanics. I’m guessing now that one should never do 50 bodyweight push presses at the end of a workout already preceded by 200 reps – 50 each of 1.5x bodyweight deadlifts, bodyweight back squats, bodyweight bench presses, and bodyweight cleans. Mac tried getting me to quit when I lost feeling in my right arm and the time on the clock started to approach the hour mark, but I insisted on finishing the challenge – I yelled at him through my mess of snot, sweat, and tears. During the recovery from this injury I decided that it was best not to compete in the CrossFit Games again because I did not have enough sense to stop when I should. I would sooner die than quit, and I lacked perspective when it came to competition. I decided it was more important to live. I am also happy to say that I made a full recovery – the facial paralysis was temporary.

I have always been intrigued by the barbell lifts, but never spent serious time learning to perform them correctly. I half-followed *Starting Strength* with my training partner Staci in the weeks that followed my certification, but I refused to stop CrossFitting. As a result my strength gains were stunted, particularly regarding the Olympic Lifts. In my experience, CrossFit places emphasis on initial instruction that included some rudimentary advice on the barbell lifts. However, form is later sacrificed in the pursuit of a better time. Consequently, I performed the Olympic Lifts with little to no coaching in the “ground to overhead, get it there anyway you can” method. All that mattered was how fast I could do lots of them. My form was an abomination, but my fast Grace time (30 Clean and Jerks, 95lbs for women) was celebrated, and the loss of form due to exertional fatigue was equally celebrated. After all, I could move 95lbs from ground to overhead 30 times in under two minutes!

That does not make me an *athlete*; it makes me a very fit *exerciser* with total disregard for the potential for injury and a lack of respect for the sport of weightlifting.

I mentioned that I was taught to respect myself as an athlete at WFAC. During CrossFit workouts my intention was to crush myself to a point of physical illness everyday, hardly a means of respect. I based the effectiveness of my workouts on the length of time I had the shakes after a workout. As a result of programming intended to prepare me for the “unknown and unknowable,” progress was unclear – weeks or even months would pass before repeating a workout. Oddly, this style of training was addictive. I struggled internally as the result of subjecting myself to this craziness, and I refused to train my clients with this methodology. I wanted my clients to work toward goals with quantifiable progress and milestones.

The first agreement that I made with Rip when we set up the summer training trip was to stop beating myself up, recover from the high volume/low intensity abuse, and get strong. He put

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me on the Starting Strength training model, which I followed for six weeks with spectacular results. I learned several things. Getting under the barbell three days a week for heavy sets of five across was a lot harder – mentally and physically – than performing a CrossFit style workout. In CrossFit, when things got tough, I slowed down. When I had the barbell on my back, what were my options? Punk out and quit? No way! I learned that I was capable of more than I had imagined. Finally, I developed an understanding that I was an athlete again. I performed technical movements with increasing proficiency *and* intensity every time I trained. To continue to progress, I ate a substantial number of calories and got quality rest and sleep.

This was hard. I was afraid, but I came off my calorie-restricted diet and ate lots of protein, lots of fat, and enough carbohydrate for recovery. Yes, I gained weight – 14 lbs to be exact between April 9th and July 4th, but I did not get fat. The weight I was before this change required energy deprivation and left me functioning in a less than optimal state. As a result, I got strong and gained a new confidence. I was *training* and making *tangible* progress. Others could tell a positive change had occurred in my life.

About a month before our trip Rip changed my program to focus on the Olympic Lifts while still squatting, deadlifting, pressing, and benching with higher intensity and less volume. His challenge was tough, he attempted to provide me technical coaching on the snatch and clean and jerk from 1,400 miles away. My horrible technique had been ingrained by the thousands of reps that I had done during my time CrossFitting. Old patterns are hard to break, and at times I was in tears, my feet stomping in my garage where I train with my husband. Bless my husband Mac for being patient and not giving up on me. I was accustomed to being the best when it came to CrossFit – I could walk into any gym and crush everyone in it. Now, I couldn't figure out why I couldn't keep the bar close to me or ever get full extension during the second pull of the snatch.

The plan was to continue this program until we arrived in Texas but I blew it. I accompanied Mac on a trip to San Diego for two weeks. He was there to work and I was there to hang out. Too much free time is not good for anybody. I strayed from the program – the itch to punish myself with random exercise crept in and I started to worry about what I looked like in my bikini. One morning while Mac was in meetings, I decided to go for a ten mile run – insane, because I never run. Later in the day we tried to follow our lifting program but my snatches were awful and my back was hurting. Instead of understanding that I had made a mistake and there was no way that I could lift effectively that day, I decided to temporarily quit lifting and just go back to CrossFitting for a few days until my frustration with snatching wore off.

The next day I jumped into a CrossFit workout that contained 150 burpees and 150 pull-ups for time. Guess what? To my surprise I hadn't lost any fitness, and was in fact stronger and even more capable of obliterating myself. I finished first ... wait, I may have been one of only a handful of people stupid enough to finish at all. I ruined the rest of the day by being physically ill and unable to eat our fancy sushi dinner at Nobu, or enjoy the Padres game that followed. The real pain started 30 hours later. I was unable to straighten my arms for 5 days and was rendered essentially immobile.

When my arms recovered I went back to my prescribed lifting program, but things were not completely right. My back was also injured due to other stupid things I did while off the program in California – not good. Our trip to Texas was only two weeks away and this was to be the highlight of my summer.

The hardest thing to do was to call Rip and tell him what I had done to myself. He put me on a program of the slow lifts, guided by a tolerance of my injuries and the need to get recovered – increase the weights when I wasn't in pain but do the movements, as it would be therapeutic. I had

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to give him my word that I would quit cold-turkey my addiction to mindless exercise. He asked me if I wanted to be a weightlifter or an exerciser. It was then that I realized that being an exerciser is different from being an athlete. I did exactly as instructed for the next two weeks until we got on the motorcycle bound for Texas.

I arrived at WFAC 6 days before the 2011 Liberty Open Weightlifting Meet that was to be my first competition. We did two-a-day lifting sessions from Monday through Friday, primarily working on technique, and got me ready for the meet. The initial decision to split snatch was largely based on the fact that I was still dealing with a low-back injury. As a result of the pain, I was subconsciously protecting my lower back. Through coaching and trial and error, we decided to split snatch – I was more aggressive and capable of moving at speed pain-free. The injury impeded some of my ability to do heavy strength work – we were not going to take any unnecessary risks with heavy loads just days before the meet. Luckily, I had developed a sound strength base in the months leading up to the trip.

Training was very methodical. As a result, I couldn't wait to get back in the gym each session, learn more, and do just a little better than I had done the day prior. I was excited to be a weightlifter, and I never once thought about what I looked like over those ten days. Instead my mind was occupied with learning and working towards a goal. I had the time of my life. Rip even fed me "full fat" chocolate milk (note to self – ask him what brand it was, it was delicious) (*note to Gillian - it was Braum's*) during my long sessions. Previously, I had never thought to eat during a workout. Wow, what a difference it made when I was starting to peter out.

All of my feelings of self doubt and vanity were replaced by an overwhelming desire to perform at my best. On July 9th, I placed first in the 69kg class of the 2011 Liberty Open North Texas Weightlifting Competition. I still have lots of room for improvement and will continue to give it my all. The sense of satisfaction from being challenged, stepping outside my comfort zone, and rising to that challenge is like nothing else.



Weightlifters at the 2011 Liberty Open. Left to right. Top to bottom. Shelley Hancock, Juli Peterson, Stef Bradford, and Gillian Mounsey.

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I wish I could take my female clients and 19 year old step-daughter to WFAC for a day. I want to show them that satisfaction, happiness, and sense of achievement is derived from dedication and effort put forth toward a tangible, performance-oriented goal. Most of us will never be completely pleased with the way we look – when vanity is the goal, we are often left feeling empty.

I set foot into WFAC on July 3, 2011 a little scared, still injured, self-conscious, and slightly embarrassed about the 147lb physique that I carried as a result of dedicated strength training for the previous 3 months while eating to support performance. I learned to embrace who I am and to not care about fitting into meaningless cultural ideals. I learned that beauty comes in all packages, and that I should stop trying to fit into a box that is too small for me.

I developed a passion for the sport of weightlifting. Once again I am an athlete, and as silly as it sounds, it leaves me feeling complete. If I could put the same passion, dedication, and effort that I give to training to the many other aspects of my life – I would be unstoppable. Something for me to work on....

Being a trainer is a constant struggle. In order to make a living I need my clients to continue coming back. But I must also provide them with safe, effective programs without pandering to their whims. Most of my clients want thinner thighs, a tight butt, a flat stomach, and jiggle-free arms, and they care little about their deadlifts. They have a hard time understanding how one relates to the other, especially after all the popular media brainwashing that they have endured. Some very educated women still believe they can “spot” reduce, turn fat into muscle, and vice versa. They also believe that they have to do excessive “cardio” and lose weight before they weight train so they don’t get bulky. I have been blamed for their inability to lose weight, even when they only spend 3 hours a week with me. My futile explanation of their lack of control during the other 165 hours a week as the real culprit is not well received.

So the question becomes, how am I going to change my clients’ ways of thinking? I vow to take what I have learned and share it with my clients and anyone that is interested in really improving. I will teach the lesson that hard work, focus, self-respect, and sticking to a program bring far greater rewards than absentmindedly working on one’s appearance.

I will implement what I have learned through leadership and example. I must show them that I do as I tell them to do. My clients will train with focus on function and progression. I recognize that specific needs due to particular goals, such as figure competitions, will determine slight variations in programming. However, the foundations remain the same: large multi-joint barbell movements performed at an intensity that produces physiological changes, adequate rest, and nutrition are the basis of any successful training program.

I will make it a point to teach the barbell movements with diligence and require my clients to perform them with the same high standards that were expected of me. I will teach them the Olympic lifts because they are fun, and when well executed leave me feeling like I can conquer the world. After strength days during my boot camp classes, my girls feel the need to run off and do machines or additional cardio or group exercise classes, where they “sweat a lot and burn calories.” I will not let this happen anymore – I will explain to them that if they feel this way, they didn’t work hard enough and are wasting their money in my class. I will not tolerate skipping breakfast, the lack of energy from being under-nourished, or praise for extreme thinness. Whether or not any of them ever intend to be competitive weightlifters is irrelevant. They will all benefit from the learning and growth that occurs under the bar.

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In Mark Rippetoe's words, "Your appearance when fit is almost entirely a result of your genetics, which are expressed at your best only when your training level is at its highest, and this level is only obtainable from a program based on an improvement in your performance, in the gym or on the field. And the best improvements in the gym occur when participating in a program that looks more like performance athletics – the kind of training done by competitive athletes – than one that looks like waving your arms and legs around on a machine or slowly rolling around on the floor" (*Strong Enough?*, p118).

My most sincere thanks to my husband Mac for always being there to support me and hauling my butt all the way to Texas. Thanks to Rip for the exceptional coaching and demonstration of true integrity and character. Stef, Juli, Shelley, Josh, Becca, and Paulie – you were all an enormous part of my best summer vacation ever!



Gillian Mounsey, 33, was born and raised in New York City. She currently resides in Stafford, VA with her husband Mac, stepdaughter Mikayla and their two dogs. She has a B.S in Exercise Science from Hofstra University and has been a personal trainer for over 15 years. Gillian is dedicated to improving the quality of people's lives through exercise, education and community building.

When she is not training, coaching or conducting workshops Gillian devotes her time to raising funds and awareness for Hope for the Warriors. The mission of [Hope for the Warriors™](#) is to enhance the quality of life for US Service Members and their families nationwide who have been adversely affected by injuries or death in the line of duty.

Additionally, Gillian runs her own non-profit initiative, Live Fit America. Live Fit America seeks to combat the growing epidemic of obesity and related illnesses by bringing the culture of physical activity back to the American lifestyle.

Gillian's numerous athletic accomplishments include being recognized in the publication *Who's Who of High School Sports* (outstanding achievement in Women's 100 m hurdles and discus), winning first place in the nation in the 1995 United States Marine Corps National Youth Physical Fitness Championship (a battery of events including max push-ups, max pull-ups, max sit-ups in 2 minutes, 300 yard shuttle run and broad jump), taking 3rd place in the 2008 CrossFit Games and most recently (7/9/11) taking 1st place in the 69kg weight class of the 2011 Liberty open North Texas Weightlifting Meet.

For more information please visit www.gillianmounsey.com or contact her at info@gillianmounsey.com.

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