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I Hid My 'Scary-Big' Shoulders for 29 Years. Here's Why I Finally Embraced Them—And My Own Strength

Two words: "warrior genes."

By **Julia Sullivan** | Updated February 10, 2020

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"Woah there," he said. "Your shoulders are looking kinda scary-big there."

The comment—one of those sly criticisms disguised as poking fun—came from a 20-something guy I'd been on three dates with at the time. Now, years later, it's the only thing I really remember from the summer fling—not a name, but a single, slicing sentiment from someone I so desperately wanted to like me: I was too big.

Of course, at 5'10" and 175 pounds, it wasn't the first time I'd ever heard a comment about my size: A former youth soccer coach benched me until I "lost a little weight." Boys in elementary school snickered when I passed by. One ex-boyfriend told me, while holding my tummy, that he loved it when girls did crunches and squats, as opposed to shoulder and chest presses.

Basically, I take up a lot of space—I always have—and I've spent the better part of my past 29 years on earth trying to fight the frame that nature designed me to have.

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My body didn't necessarily "grow into a woman" during puberty—it was catapulted into adulthood.

I got my first period at age 12, and the welcoming of my new hormones was bittersweet: I was immediately athletic, towering over teammates and my opponents in school and in soccer, and was considered an asset on the field. But as soon as I stepped foot out of the gym, I was teased for looking "like a dude." To make matters worse, I sprouted dozens of large cystic pimples—a case so severe that my dermatologist couldn't treat me with topical medications, and I had to go on a drug called Accutane.

Of course, my hormones were to blame for all of this, but, as a 12-year-old, that was the first time I'd heard that word: hormones. I immediately associated them with some kind of poison—a vile liquid responsible for making me look the way I did.

While Accutane cleared my face, it only did so temporarily. By my early twenties, the pimples resurged. My dermatologist recommended I see an endocrinologist, or a doctor who specializes in hormones, to see if she could better tailor her prescription for my recurring acne.

When the endocrinologist called with my results, her voice was grave—she told me I had "abnormally high" levels of androgens, (or male hormones, like testosterone) for a woman, and immediately put me on a high-estrogen birth control pill to counter the side effects. (Just FYI: All women's and men's bodies produce androgens—and women's bodies make those androgens to be converted into estrogen, the primary female hormone.)

That birth control prescription was only the first in a long line of solutions to change my body—and I spent the next decade battling the "monster" inside of me.

I'd spend large chunks of my morning routine glued to a high-definition mirror, plucking every last stray hair on my chin or neck in sight—only to get it lasered off permanently later on. I also became especially adept at makeup, learning to cover my acne and former scars with immaculate results.

But those things didn't bother me nearly as much as my big, bulky body—the one exes and magazine articles suggested I try to make smaller and more feminine. I tried my best to listen; I traded sports and heavy lifting—two things I loved, but made me look bigger, bulkier—for hours chained to cardio equipment and off-and-on dieting, but nothing resulted in the hourglass-shaped body I so desperately wanted.

My new exercise routine also made me miserable: I'd run aimlessly for twenty minutes, teetering off out of pure boredom and tired legs. The time spent on these machines felt monotonous and like a chore, and I never felt powerful, like I used to when I was younger and involved in sports. I also attempted to change my eating, attempting to restrict my intake as much as possible and leaning on salads for as many meals as possible. Meat, cheese and bread—basically any food of sustenance—was an enemy.

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I kept this up until I moved to New York City from Arizona in my mid-twenties—and even then, it was only because I had to make a change.

Moving took an emotional toll on me, and I felt like I had to explore my new city in a way that would help me be social and active, so I signed up for workout class apps like ClassPass and MINDBODY.

The strength-based classes I took in particular gave me an outlet for my pent-up energy and competitive nature. For the first time since my years playing soccer growing up, exercise began to feel less like a means to achieve a certain body type, and more like a way to compete—through more reps, heavier weights, and faster sprints—both against myself and those around me.

But when I started lifting weights, it was as though my body bloomed—and not necessarily in a good way. My shoulders, arms, back, legs; everything just grew—but, surprisingly, so did my energy and confidence levels. It was a stark contrast from when I spent hours on the elliptical and limited my food intake. I felt like I was finally coming to terms with the fact that I may never be the skinniest girl—but I can damn well be one of the strongest.

Even in the process of embracing my strength, I was still confused: What exactly about my body makes it react this way?

Turns out, there's a pretty simple answer: It all goes back to my high levels of androgens, says Anna M. Cabeca, DO, FACOG, former ob-gyn and women's health expert. She also has a slightly less menacing name for them: "warrior genes"—and they're not the problem I grew up to believe.

"When I speak to girls and women with higher androgens, I want them to know that these aren't 'fat' or 'ugly' genes. That's a label and a myth," she says. "You have amazing genetic potential," she told me, noting that women with higher androgens are often likely to have a stronger ability to gain muscle. There's also research to back this up: A 2015 study in the journal *Gynecological Endocrinology* found that women with polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS—a hormonal condition linked to having larger amounts of androgens), had greater muscle strength, possibly in relation to their higher androgen levels.

Of course, higher androgen levels in women can negatively impact the body, too. (Exhibit A: my acne issues and unwanted hair growth as a kid). But, according to Dr. Cabeca, higher androgen levels can contribute to a higher likeliness of obesity or being overweight. One 2019 review article from the journal *Frontiers of Hormone Research*, presented that "androgen excess is often associated with obesity states, at any age of life," adding that androgen excess is most associated with visceral fat, or fat that develops and is stored in the abdomen, and is closely related to a heightened risk of metabolic diseases like diabetes.

Dr. Cabeca's suggestion to keep my body strong and reaping as many of the positives (and as few of the negatives) of my high androgen levels? To keep working out—and yes, that means lifting weights—to avoid being sedentary and possibly gaining more visceral fat than I should.

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In accepting my own strength, I've also learned to accept that the ideal body image I grew up with isn't necessarily a universal standard to strive for.

Deep down, I may always yearn for a slender, hourglass frame—but my strength has helped me understand that my body's designed for a different purpose, one that doesn't rely on aesthetics alone.

It also helps to realize how far I've come from my teenage years, when my body made me feel monstrous. Now, when I'm testing out my five-rep maxes at my powerlifting gym (aka, lifting as much as I possibly can for five repetitions), I don't feel bulky—I feel like a superhero.

As for the men in my past who have made comments about my physique? Good riddance. For as many men who told me my shoulders looked “scary big” or that I should do more crunches, I've found even more who appreciate (and compliment!) my strength just as much as (if not more than) how I look. And if I can find someone I'm attracted to and who's a formidable push-up challenge opponent, maybe I'll even remember their name this time.