

“Powerlifting Helped Me Love My Body Again”

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN NEARLY A DECADE, **JULIA SULLIVAN**'S WORKOUTS BRING HER MORE SATISFACTION THAN SHE EVER THOUGHT POSSIBLE. THE SECRET: PICKING UP REALLY HEAVY THINGS.



As a competitive soccer player in high school, I found my muscular 5'10" frame to be an asset that helped me sprint faster and tackle harder. While it would be a stretch to say I loved the way I looked (being big and strong felt like a burden rather than a bonus), the praise I received as an athlete made me appreciate my body. But when my soccer days ended, my build served no purpose. So when an ex told me in my early 20s that I should lose weight, I went along with it. For the next five years, I worked out on cardio machines, painfully bored. Then, almost two years ago, my sister took up powerlifting and used the word *accomplished* to describe how it made her feel. *Accomplished*. That word struck me. I hadn't felt that way in a while. Desperate for some workout intention, I signed up for a local class in fall 2019.

My first powerlifting session kicked off with deadlifts. I knew I was strong, but I'd never really tested or measured my strength before. To my amazement, I pulled 155 pounds off the floor with relative ease.

Despite being impressed by this feat, I wasn't immediately hooked. Powerlifting didn't offer the reward I typically sought from exercise—namely, burning an obscene number of calories. Since the sport is all about working toward lifting as much as humanly possible, an entire session might consist of just 16 squats. Still, there was a curiosity that I couldn't shake. I was interested to see what more I could do if I actually trained; I thrived on the early gratification.

Three months after I started, I overheard my fellow gymgoers talking about an upcoming meet. Intrigued, I scoured the Internet for a one-piece singlet (basically a black bathing suit with shorts) and signed up. When I walked up to the bar at the competition, adrenaline began coursing through me. I nailed my heaviest squat attempt (259 pounds!) and the raucous applause transported me right back to the soccer field. I was lit up. *Did I really just do that...in front of all these people?!*

From that moment, I was all in. I went on to survive

the bench press, crush my deadlifts (I pulled 300 pounds up off the floor), and place fifth out of six in my weight class—but my standing didn't matter. My body achieved something beyond looking a certain way; it *did* something again.

The pandemic shut everything down just weeks later, threatening to undo my newfound perspective shift. I tried to stay motivated by deadlifting suitcases filled with books at home, even when simply keeping my head above water seemed a monumental task. In my most challenging moments, though, I'd imagine I was back at that meet, pouring every ounce of my being into lifting the heaviest weight of my life. I harnessed the courage I'd funneled into lifting that barbell, and that grit is what kept me afloat.

Now, thankfully, as gyms begin to reopen, I'm back on my barbell game, searching for upcoming meets and working toward my goal of deadlifting 400 pounds—which, I'm happy to report, is the only numbers-focused mission I'm interested in these days. For so long, exercise was solely a way to punish my body and to burn calories. But now, finally, it's an acknowledgment and a commemoration of what's possible.

