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Get Ready: This Trans Powerlifter Is About to Be the Strength Industry's Next 'It' Girl

Recently spotlighted on Netflix's *Queer Eye*, Angel Flores is shattering records and inspiring countless trans and queer athletes across the globe.

By [Julia Sullivan](#) | Published on January 24, 2022



PHOTO: ILANA PANICH-LINSMAN/NETFLIX © 2021

Entering your first powerlifting competition (or any athletic competition, for that matter) is a nerve-wracking, stressful experience. From the sea of eyes waiting on your every movement to the bright overhead lights pounding down on your forehead as you face a steel, loaded barbell, the aesthetics alone are enough to make any novice lifter's stomach churn.

Throw in the fact that this particular meet will be your first time competing as your true self — a woman — and the butterflies grow exponentially.

That's exactly what happened to (now) 22-year-old trans Olympic weightlifting coach and powerlifting competitor, Angel Flores, when she participated in the 2021 USAPL Iron Triathlon this past May in the MX Division, a brand-new division for the USA Powerlifting as of January 1, 2021. (FYI: MX means that both genders compete in the same category. Traditionally, powerlifting meets are categorized into male and female divisions, then subsequently divided based on weight class, and age. Transgender, intersex, and non-binary powerlifters are currently only allowed to compete in the MX division for USAPL meets.)

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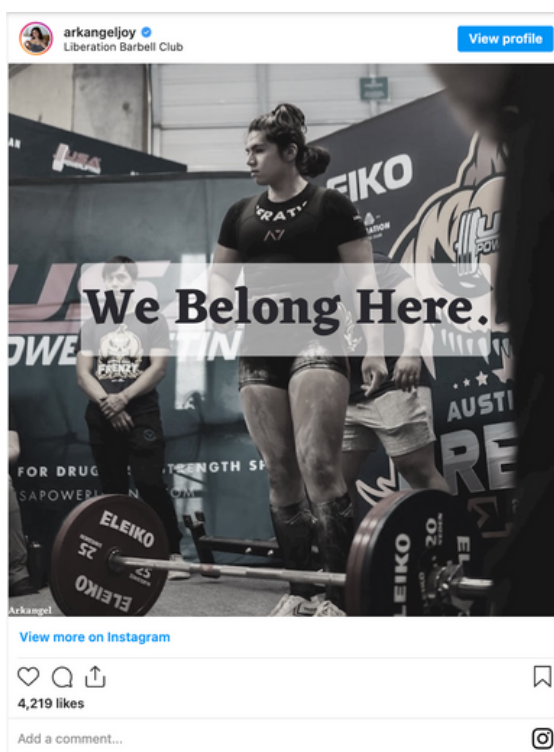
"My nerves were at an all-time high that day," recalls Flores, noting that those butterflies were particularly stoked by a surge of caffeine (a step many powerlifters take in the moments leading up to their lifts to help produce the biggest loads).

Granted, the sentiment from several folks in the audience didn't necessarily help, says Flores. "I saw a lot of grimaces, scowls, and dirty looks being pointed my way," she recalls. "A lot of people at the meet were confused. There were plenty of male lifters wondering who I was."

"It's not the best feeling in the world when all eyes are on you," adds Flores. "Every trans person's worst nightmare is being put on a stage and being pointed at."

Still, as Flores recalls, she had an enormous team of supporters behind her on competition day. One of those advocates was her best friend, who asked to engage in one of those pre-competition rituals many long-haired folks who've ever played a sport know well: braiding.

"The best feeling is having one of your best friends braiding your hair before a competition," says Flores. "I'm not sure if other trans athletes can relate, but it was one of the most affirming moments of my life. It made me cry."



Blame it on the pre-lifting braiding ritual and enthusiastic support from her team or the fact that Flores was able to stand on-stage as her true, authentic self, but she showed up to play. She took first place in her division with a 172.5 kilogram (380.3 pounds) squat, 105 kilogram (231.5 pounds) bench, and 182.5 kilogram (402.3) deadlift. (FYI: Powerlifting consists of those three separate lifts, with three chances for each to achieve the highest load total.)

But if you ask Flores, that success (and future success — she's gone on to compete and win gold at the 2021 USAPL Austin Fall Frenzy with even higher numbers) came down to two overarching reasons: perfection and pure grit.

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"Throughout the competition, I had one or two people comment on my form," she recalls. "They saw that I never let my form falter. That's because I have to make everything perfect. You can comment on my gender identity, my look, or who I am as a person — but if I'm perfect in my technique, and work my ass off, that's something you can never take away from me."

The Process of Transitioning: Finding Perfection and Grit Despite Setbacks in Strength

Earlier this month, Flores' story was featured on season 6 episode 2 ("Angel Gets Her Wings") of the wildly popular Netflix show, *Queer Eye*. On the slim chance, you haven't seen the show, "The Fab Five" (including Jonathan Van Ness, Antoni Porowski, Karamo Brown, Tan France, and Bobby Berk) help individuals "makeover" their lives in areas such as fashion, hair and makeup, and relationships.

In addition to giving Flores a head-to-toe glam-up, viewers are introduced to Flores' mending relationship with her family — particularly her father, who pushed for Flores to compete in sports from a young age.

"I wasn't necessarily the largest or strongest kid growing up, but I was the quickest," recalls Flores. And while she mainly participated in football in high school, coming into college at the University of Texas in 2019, she jumped into strength training, competing on her school's weightlifting team. From the surge of adrenaline and confidence that heavy lifting provided, to the camaraderie among fellow lifters and teammates, Flores knew she found her home.

But when she began transitioning in July 2020 and was told by U.S. weightlifting officials she'd need to take an 8-month gap to complete her hormone regimen, Flores felt defeated. "It's something every trans woman athlete has to go through, that period," says Flores. "During that time I missed every second of competing. Training for gold was my life."

And when Flores was able to lift again, she experienced her second setback as a result of her hormone replacement therapy (HRT): a significant slash in strength.

"Prior to taking hormones, I could power clean 125 [kilograms]. The second day of my treatment, I couldn't do 100," explains Flores. "And as each week passed, my strength kept dropping. It was one of the most humbling experiences of my life."



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Instead of allowing those losses in strength to diminish her spirits, Flores used hormone therapy to fuel her motivation. "If I wanted to put on any strength, I'd have to train double the amount that other women in the gym trained, and eat more than what I was capable of eating," she notes. "Think of it as me taking anti-steroids!"

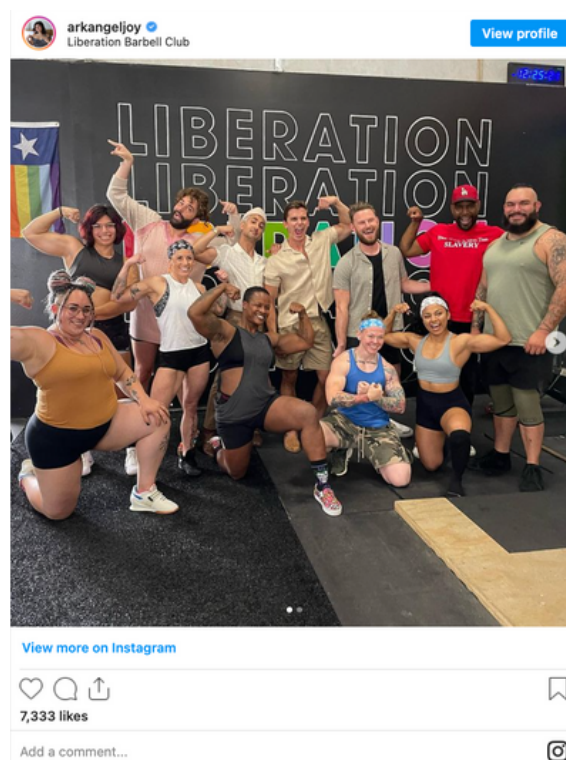
Granted, while numbers are important in a sport like powerlifting, that's not what drew Flores to compete. "Powerlifting has an enormously empowering community," she says. "It's hard work, too. The grit really drew me in."

And while Flores wasn't thrilled (as many trans athletes are, she adds) to compete in the MX class, her coach knew that the categorization wasn't as much of a factor as the need to compete throughout her transition. "He said, 'You're a competitive athlete. You need that push to thrive. This isn't necessarily your favorite route, but I know you can affect real change.'"

Plus, as Flores reiterates, while she may have lost strength during her transition, her form never faltered. "I strove every day to make every single one of the lifts look absolutely perfect," she says. "My hormone regimen put me at a disadvantage. All I knew was that I needed to train my ass off and make everything look perfect. If they question anything, it wouldn't be the work I put in."

"You Won't Forget About Me — and You Won't Forget About Every Trans Athlete to Follow."

Since being featured on *Queer Eye*, Flores' athletic pursuits continue to stay in full swing. She currently holds the state record for deadlifting at 407.8 pounds and teaches Olympic weightlifting classes at Liberation Barbell Club, a queer-owned strength gym in Austin, Texas.



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"The goals of the gym are two-fold: Promote strength sports as a standard for training around the world, and also provide a safe space for communities that don't normally have safe spaces in the strength training world," Flores explains. "So many trans athletes feel safe here and call it home."

She says she wants Liberation Barbell Club to be a mecca for trans athletes. "I see so many other lifters who have clout on social media, but they're never trans or queer lifters," she explains. "The idea of having a community of queer and trans lifters who make pilgrimages to Liberation, who want to post their workouts and champion other lifters, would be an inclusive dream of mine."

Speaking of other trans athletes, as someone who says she didn't have any real athletic role models growing up (she had a difficult time identifying with the pro football players, for example, that her father hoped she would look up to), she's set on being trans lifting's first "cover girl."

"Trans athletes need someone at the forefront to push boundaries of what people are used to — and I want that to be me," says Flores. "You won't forget about me, nor will you push me into a hole — and you won't forget about every trans athlete to follow me."

Flores adds that sports have a frustrating history when it comes to trans and queer inclusiveness, with USA Powerlifting's MX category not allowing lifters to compete as their true gender as a prime example. "Sport is a human right. We've been playing sports longer than we've called each other man and woman. We need to find a way to protect sports throughout the world, to protect trans youth, to help trans masters athletes realize a newfound passion," she shares