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CULTURE IN PLAY



Stories Of Strength

We speak to author and athlete Haley Shapley: “Often, women see their bodies as form more than function. Strength training helped to shift my perspective.”

By Renee Brincks

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Seattle-based journalist Haley Shapley registered for her first bodybuilding competition in 2016, ready to tackle the rigorous physical and mental training central to success. She didn’t anticipate, however, the reactions generated by her participation. “Some people were really excited, and they wanted to know about my routine, my eating plan and what the experience entailed,” Haley said. “On the other hand, a lot of people said things like, ‘Don’t get too big, because men don’t like that,’ or, ‘Don’t hurt yourself,’ or, ‘Don’t change your body in a way that’s not appealing.’”

Haley wondered how others navigated the pushback faced by women in strength-training sports. While exploring the topic, she found that most books focused on men. That coverage gap sparked the idea for her 2020 nonfiction release, ‘Strong Like Her: A Celebration of Rule Breakers, History Makers and Unstoppable Athletes.’ The book chronicles women in sport, explores cultural factors that work against female athletes and documents the challenges that adventurous women have faced while breaking barriers.



Girls receive implicit and direct messages about qualities like strength, speed, power and competitiveness starting at a young age. Haley, for example, grew up playing basketball, doing ballet, gymnastics, and dabbling in soccer, swimming, track and tennis. At the time, she recalled society encouraged women to be this — but not necessarily



Haley at the charity climb of Mount Rainier, 2018.

recalled, society encouraged women to be thin—but not necessarily strong. “I remember wanting to be faster and more agile, and I wanted to build endurance. I never really wanted to be stronger. It wasn’t something that occurred to me to pursue in order to improve as an athlete,” Haley said.

In adulthood, she found herself missing the routine and camaraderie of sport. She decided to train for a marathon and that experience inspired her to aim higher. After successfully summiting Mount Rainier, a 4,392m (14,410ft) peak located south of Seattle, Haley completed the annual Seattle to Portland cycling event. The ride covers more than 321,870m (200 miles) of rugged terrain in America’s Pacific Northwest. “Once I’d pursued those goals, I wanted to do something that scared me more. That turned out to be bodybuilding,” Haley said. “I was not excited about walking on stage in five-inch heels and posing in a tiny, sparkly bikini. Bodybuilding takes an incredible amount of dedication. You can’t just show up on the day and grit your way through, the way you can with other athletic pursuits.”



Haley: “Bodybuilding takes an incredible amount of dedication.”

Training for competition transformed her perception of what strength can mean. While she’d previously believed that she couldn’t handle certain physical tasks, Haley suddenly found herself easily carrying heavy boxes and helping friends move furniture. “My own opinions about my body and how it looked changed. I started to see it more holistically; more as this vessel that carries me through life and does amazing things, instead of viewing it as a showpiece,” she said. “Often, women see their bodies as form more than function. Strength

Haley also shared the story of Sandwina, a Vienna-born circus performer popular in the early 1900s. She was doing handstands aged two and started lifting weights a few years later. In her teens, Sandwina’s father offered a cash prize to any man who could beat her in a wrestling match. No one ever did. “She’s one of the first women we see who is incredibly strong, and her strength isn’t seen as something strange, it’s inspirational,” Haley said. “Sandwina became a circus star, instead of being a sideshow act. People really admired her.”

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Haley’s book features dozens of athletes who shifted perceptions and opened opportunities for women. Australian Annette Kellermann, for instance, made waves for her swimming skills and moved women’s swimwear from impractical skirts to sleek bodysuits in the early 1900s. American Abbye ‘Pudgy’ Stockton showed up male weightlifters on Santa Monica’s Muscle Beach in the 1940s. She later penned a magazine column called ‘Barbelles,’ which shared practical advice and celebrated women in strength training. Icelandic athlete Katrín Davíðsdóttir grew up feeling too big to succeed as a gymnast, but has since jumped, lifted and sprinted her way to two CrossFit Games championships.

Though Sandwina worked within the confines of traditional femininity at that time—she was considered to be beautiful, and she often spoke in interviews about being a wife and mother—she proved that women could tackle great physical feats. Sandwina and her contemporaries, from fellow circus performers to long-distance walkers, to women who took up cycling at the turn of the century, drove women’s suffrage and wider cultural change. “Once those cyclists got that taste of freedom from being able to ride, and they started to wear less constrictive clothing and they took an interest in road conditions and other community matters, they started to realise that women deserved more in all aspects of their lives. There’s more to pursuing strength than just lifting more or running faster,” Haley said.



L-R: Martial artist Stephanie Pham, weight lifter Camille Brown, fencer Nzingha Prescod. Photography by Sophy Holland.

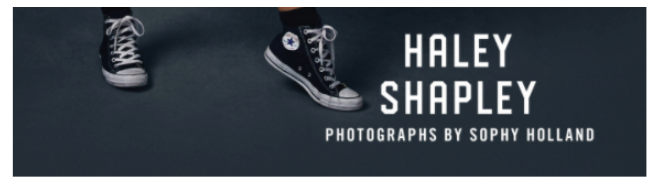
“INSPIRATIONAL”

‘Strong Like Her’ also explores modern-day matters of gender inequality in sport, including sponsorship disparities, compensation differences and equitable access. Two-time Olympic fencer Nzingha Prescod, one of 23 contemporary athletes profiled in the book, was the first Black woman to win an individual medal at the Senior World Fencing Championships. Today, she introduces underrepresented youngsters to the sport through her New York based organisation, Fencing in the Park. In addition to teaching fencing techniques, club leaders share lessons in civic engagement, work ethic and the opportunities available to both competitive and recreational fencers.

“Fencing is an interesting and well-rounded sport. There are intellectual components, with the strategy and tactics, and there are technical components where you have to be very precise. It helps you learn to work with others and interact socially. It’s really powerful,” said Prescod, who also advocates for broader community investment in youth athletics. “Sport should be offered universally, not just to



in youth athletics. Sport should be offered universally, not just to those who can afford it. Athletics are an important vehicle for personal development, and they're especially formative for children."



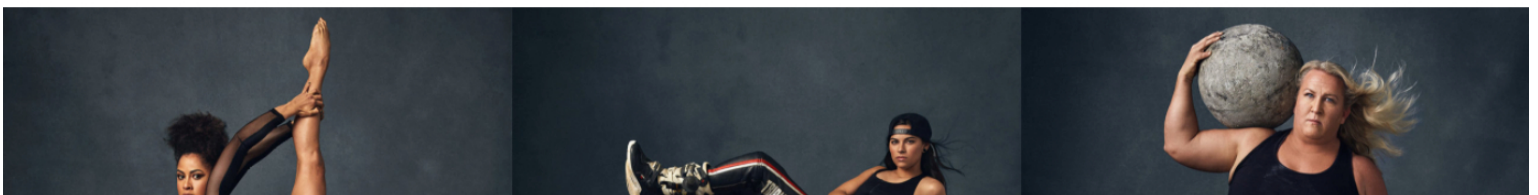
The cover of 'Strong Like Her.' Photography by Sophy Holland.



'American Ninja Warrior' Maggi Thorne with her daughter, Fiona. Photography by Sophy Holland.

Five-time 'American Ninja Warrior' competitor Maggi Thorne was photographed for Haley's book together with her daughter, Fiona. Maggi has seen her children draw discipline, determination and confidence from their athletic endeavours. She encourages mothers – and all women – to get active and experience similar benefits. "I don't believe in breaking glass ceilings. I think women need to build our own buildings," Maggi said. "Think about what you are doing to build yourself, so that you can make an impact. Embrace, celebrate and challenge other women to rise up with you." Though 'Strong Like Her' highlights many elite competitors, it's not just about accomplished athletes. "I feature a woman who's in her 80s, and she's gotten so many benefits from weightlifting. She's just a regular lady who picked up strength training in her late 70s so that she could lift a bucket of cat litter off the shelf without asking for help," Haley said.

Writing the book underscored how physical strength influences an individual's mental, emotional and spiritual health. And, the author added, her research clarified that societal values change over time. Runner Kathrine Switzer was the first woman to complete the Boston Marathon as an official entrant, despite a race official's attempt to remove her from the course in 1967. Today, she is an author, activist and advocate for women. Kathrine told Haley that sports may look different in the future. "They might emphasize skills like endurance and flexibility, for example, instead of strength and speed. If we see an emphasis put on athletic qualities that women, on average, are more likely to excel at, then we might have a completely different idea of who we consider to be an athlete," Haley said. "Hopefully our ideas of athleticism will evolve because there are lots of dimensions to athleticism. They're all important and worth pursuing."

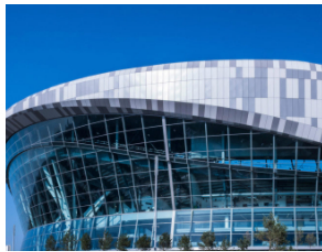




L-R: Fitness pro Alicia Archer, flat-track motorcycle racer Sandriana Shipman, strongwoman Kristin Rhodes. Photography by Sophy Holland.

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