

MUSCLE

The New Femininity



Renita Harris. This is what pumping iron does for a woman.

Muscle, The New Femininity

by Charles Peebles. Photos courtesy of The Valkyries

She stood before the squat-rack, a petite Filipino beauty, focusing on a steel bar inches before her face. Then, oblivious to the rest of the crowded base gym at Hurlburt Field, Florida, she began squatting for dozens of rock-bottom repetitions... with 250 pounds.

I don't remember her name — let's call her Rachel. What I do recall is that this was 10 years ago, before fitness competitions, before women so exquisite consorted with barbells. This tiny sergeant was handling more weight than any fitness competitor today uses, in fact, more weight than used by most men. I asked her if she competed in bodybuilding. "No," she replied, "powerlifting."



Left photo, “believe it or not,” Renita before bodybuilding. But she was doing all that other stuff women do in health clubs. Right photo, the end result.

Powerlifting? That’s about grunting up a single maximum lift... powerlifters don’t look like this! Enlightened as I thought I was about female muscle, my mental images of blocky, chalk-covered “she-males” now had to yield to new possibilities. With the bodybuilding magazines now filled with dumbbell-wielding fitness beauties (athletic versions of the Sports Illustrated swimsuit models), I think of Rachel, so far ahead of her time. Even now the question of muscle and femininity continues to arise with monotonous predictability: Will a woman “look like a man” if she lifts weights?

I’d defy anyone looking at Rachel (or her tens of thousands of successors) to prove it. Muscle has no gender. An anatomy chart will confirm that skeletal muscle is the same for both men and women. But society, ever male-dominated through the ages, has discouraged women from having or displaying it. Regardless of changes in female fashion ideals, from the fleshy excesses of Ruben’s beauties and Marilyn’s doughy-ness to the clinically atrophied wisps of Twiggy and Kate Moss, the she-hulk fear (fueled by gender-confusion fright) has not faded. Some of the more extreme magazine images of hyper-muscular women bodybuilders and weightlifters have fed this fear. But the fright goes deeper. Modern woman, having overcome barriers to her social, professional and civic advancement in the last century, threatens to violate a final male bastion — physical equality. Or (gasp!) superiority.

Unless you’ve been living under a rock these past few years, you can’t help but notice the “wall” is crumbling. On-screen heroines from Xena to Charlie’s Angels have made toughness fashionably female. In the sports world, women are finally realizing the promise of 1972’s Title IX legislation of athletic equality, a point driven home when billions watched and cheered Brandi Chastain’s triumphant Nike-sports-bra-baring double biceps pose at the 1999 World Cup victory. Women are playing pro basketball. They’re even boxing. Best of all, they’re hitting the weights.



**All this and two teenaged kids, and a 405-pound squat.
No surgery. No drugs. Just hard work.**

To a society obsessed with body image, and increasingly concerned with health, it couldn't be a better time. As muscle is metabolically active, it burns calories 24 hours a day, even during sleep. Thus the more muscle you have, the more calories you burn. Unlike with running (which, in excess, can break down muscle tissue), in weight training you can only hurt yourself by being careless. Pumping iron strengthens bones, joints and ligaments as well as muscle, increases growth hormone production (the real fountain of youth) and can be done at any age, which means that senior citizens now have a route to renewed vigor that will allow many of them to discard the canes and walkers. Don't laugh; it's already happening!

But getting back to the femininity issue, if we can accept that the essence of female form is curves (rather than the straight lines of the stick-thin fashion models), we're left with two choices for the substance of those curves: fat or muscle. For most of us the choice is a no-brainer. Consider this: why do women wear high-heels? To look taller? No, to make their calves look shapelier. And their calves look shapelier because they're muscles being flexed.

But what is "enough?" Or "too much?" I must stifle a grimace or a laugh when someone expresses a fear of becoming "too muscular" to me. Right, and you'd better stop taking piano lessons because you can't afford the dress you'll need to perform at Carnegie Hall. Unless a woman has unusual genetics and is taking boatloads of illegal pharmaceuticals to boost her testosterone, she's not going to add much size. In fact, since muscle is so much denser than fat, she'll be smaller, even if she weighs more. Thus my clients can ignore the bathroom scale, relying instead on the mirror, skin-fold measurements and their improved performance in the gym.



“Masculine?” Is that why she causes whiplash in public?

Most women training with weights are still using only a fraction of their capability. Take calves: women will train them with 50 pounds on a machine, unmindful of the fact that in a two-mile run they’re subjecting them to thousands of repetitions at bodyweight multiplied by G-force. One of my clients, Leslie, an overweight mother of two, in her 40s with no athletic background, had already been training at her YMCA when I began with her. But she’d been training like the rest of the women there: cardio and light reps on the machines. Initially she could barely squat with an unloaded Olympic bar (45 pounds) for 10 repetitions. Less than a year later she was squatting with 185 pounds for 15 repetitions, doing full sets of seated overhead presses with 40-pound dumbbells and triceps dips with 100 pounds strapped to her. Her face changed, the cheekbones emerging, the age vanishing. Her outlook’s changed too, no doubt in part to the new-found male attention she’s getting. “Too much?” Her YMCA cohorts are still huffing on the Stairmasters and treadmills, looking the same as always and staring at Leslie when she’s not down in the weight room out-lifting many of the men. And while she initially was looking to lose fat and get “toned” (I still don’t know what “toned” means), now she even looks at the fitness stars with some disdain: “I want real muscle! Like the bodybuilders.”

Just as dramatic is my friend Renita Harris, also a mother of two, formerly overweight. To escape an abusive (former) husband, Renita found solace in the rhythms and challenges of the weight room. Years later she was competing in bodybuilding and fitness championships on a national level and winning. In addition to her regular personal training clients, she was training pro athletes like the NBA’s Kendall Gill and appearing in numerous magazines. She’d transformed herself into what Art Carey, an editor and columnist for *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, described as “a head-turning goddess... a walking aphrodisiac... a caricature of female form like the femme fatale in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*” Yet this tiny-waisted “walking aphrodisiac” has squatted with 405 for repetitions. She’s now a Chicago cop. And, like Rachel, our powerlifting noncom at Hurlburt Field, as feminine as ever.

How many more potential Renitas, Leslies and Rachels are out there? Millions. They just don’t know it. Some of them are at your gym. Maybe you’re one of them. There’s one way to find out.

Renita Harris, a former fitness and bodybuilding champion, is a law-enforcement officer and personal trainer in Chicago. To see more photos, including posters and photos for sale, visit <http://www.thevalkyries.com/> and Renita's own site, <http://www.renitaharris.com/>. Renita is available for one-on-one training and nutrition consultation, as well as personal appearances.



The author, whose articles have appeared in numerous bodybuilding magazines, is a long-time activist for what he calls “The Physically Advanced Woman.” He’s worked with THE VALKYRIES (“A Hard Woman is Good to Find”) to promote worldwide acceptance of female muscle since 1990 (see www.thevalkyries.com). A certified personal trainer (NSCA, ACE), Charles trains future Valkyries at a private facility in Chester Springs.
