

ENGL 120: Reading and Writing the Modern Essay  
Professor Andrew Ehrgood

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. —Chelsea Savit

### Why I Powerlift

by Chelsea Savit

When I bench press, I follow a disciplined regimen: feet positioned symmetrically, heels planted, toes pressed into the ground for support. I arch my back over the bench, making sure only my butt and shoulder blades touch the padded surface. Pecs under the bar, I feel the support of my core. Glancing at my wrists to make sure they are properly positioned, I inhale and press the weight upward, strength rippling through the fibers of my arms. I feel it move through my core, down my legs, and into my planted feet. I pause, every muscle of my body focused on keeping the load from crushing my chest. I lower the weight. Exhale. Push upward. Repeat.

Rising from the bench, I mentally pat myself on the back. I rest, add another iron plate, and remind myself not to forget about form.

This is how I perform a bench press, and at this point I think it is fair to say that my readers might be harboring a false assumption—that I am a man, probably large, possibly bearded, and undoubtedly scary looking. And this would be a statistically valid assumption: within my club powerlifting team of fifteen members, I am the only woman. At most meets, the sum of all competing women is less than in a single men's weight class, and I often come close to winning by lack of competition. At any given gym, peering into the weight and cardio rooms, a division is clear: men pack the weight room, women the cardio room.

But why?

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I didn't always powerlift. I was first a competitive gymnast. Though I competed in every event, I excelled at the floor and vault. My judges celebrated my elegant choreography, choice accompanying music, and explosive acrobatics, so I usually scored high on the floor. But while the floor was just a routine, I fell in love with the simple, muscle-intensive vault.

My love for the vault, however, proved perplexing to some. Once, when asked about my favorite event in front of my coach, I did not hesitate to praise the vault, but my coach gasped in disbelief: "How could the vault be your *favorite*? What about the beam, or the floor? The vault is no one's favorite event!" She expected me, like most of her students, to prefer music, dance, leaps and jumps to brute simplicity. On the floor exercise, female gymnasts must embellish their tumbling passes (in which they sprint, hurdle, and throw their bodies more than twenty feet in the air) with pretty, elegant leaps and turns and flicks of the wrist. We must land lightly and throw our arms up, with a girly smile. The tumbling passes, massive displays of strength, begin and end with reassuring femininity. The vault eschews these embellishments. Sprinting down the runway, pounding the springboard, pushing off the platform, thrusting my body high in the air, landing hard—I am free. And the judges never expect me to smile.

My coach and probably the world at large would have me prefer the floor exercise—the ultimate triumph of feminine beauty, grace, and elegance over the masculine elements of strength, power, and brute force. When gymnastics asked me to choose between the two, I chose the vault, just as I would later choose powerlifting.

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I was nineteen years old when I ended my gymnastics career, after a year on Yale's varsity gymnastics team. I resigned not in protest against gymnastics, nor was I injured or too busy. I quit because of an eating disorder I had developed in middle school, which had begun to

intrude on my academic life. In my heart, I knew the source of the poison: my abusive gymnastics coaches had pestered me incessantly from an early age to “lose five pounds.” And for years, they had glared when I ordered burgers instead of salads. When I joined Yale’s team with its encouraging coaches, I expected my problem to disappear. It did not.

It must be the entire sport of gymnastics, I thought. After all, I had done my research: in a 1992 NCAA survey, 51% of the women’s gymnastics programs that responded reported eating disorders among team members, “a far greater percentage than in any other sport.”<sup>1</sup> I loved my sport, but these numbers confirmed a dangerous suspicion of mine—that gymnastics would continue to destroy me. So after months of self-doubt, I quit.

One year later, slowly making my way toward recovery, I sought a new activity to fill the void left by gymnastics. At the casual suggestion of my bodybuilding aunt (it seems insanity is genetic), I decided to try powerlifting. Though I doubted myself at first, after years of dancing and leaping in shiny skin-tight leotards with perfect hair, I fell in love with the iron plates and barbells of my new sport. Again turning to research, I found out that my two worlds were closely connected: before the 2012 Olympics, *TIME* Magazine produced a graphic on the athletic similarities of different Olympic sports (Fig. 1).<sup>2</sup> On the graph, much to my surprise, the dots for gymnastics and weightlifting occupied the same space between strength and technique. Indeed, my experience with powerlifting verified the similarities that *TIME* had found. After one practice, I committed myself. For the first time in years, I felt the rush of the vault return to my body.

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<sup>1</sup> Noden, Merrell. “Dying to Win.” *Sports Illustrated*. 08 August 1994. *Sportsillustrated.com*. 18 Nov. 2012. <<http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1005481/index.htm>>.

<sup>2</sup> Springs, C. and Saporito, B. “Who is the Fittest Olympic Athlete of Them All?” *TIME*. 19 Jul. 2012. *Time.com*. Web. 18 Nov. 2012. <<http://olympics.time.com/2012/07/19/olympic-athletes-survival-of-the-fittest/>>.

A few months after my first powerlifting practice, I stopped avoiding dining halls. I felt a new sense of focus as my obsession with food and my body receded. I felt happy about myself, my trips to the gym, and my academic work. Powerlifting was doing more than just satisfying my appetite for strength: it was transforming me.

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Maybe I love powerlifting the same way I loved the vault. Maybe I prefer a sport that does not condemn me to aching necks from sleeping with curlers in my hair. Maybe I like how no one pays attention to my waistline, my uniform, or my smile, or makes passive-aggressive comments about how my technique would improve if only I lost “just five pounds.” When I was a gymnast, a half-hearted smile, or curl out of place could invalidate hundreds of hours of sweat and conditioning. Gabby Douglas, who won the prestigious all-around gold at the 2012 Olympics, still came under scrutiny for her “imperfect” hair, an “embarrassment,” according to many Twitter users.

Powerlifting, like my vaults and tumbling passes, grants me entry to a masculine world in which aesthetics, glamour and decorum are unimportant, and I am encouraged to push, pull, press, lift, and drop as much weight as I can. In this world, I do not need to curb my appetite for strength.

When I prepare to squat, I place the barbell just behind my neck. I check myself in the mirror and give a mental nod—I know I am about to temporarily enter a world in which I will be praised for the amount of iron I heave, and not for how pretty I look doing it. I squeeze my entire body to commit to the 300 pounds I just placed on my upper back. I suck in air to increase the pressure within my chest. I bend at the knees and hips, butt almost touching the floor. I straighten out. Grunt. Breathe. Rack the weight.

When I finish my workout, my oversized t-shirt sags with the weight of sweat, chalk, and on a good day, tears. I shower, change, and strut out of the double doors of the gym, reentering the so-called real world, careful not to let the soreness in my inner thighs keep me from walking and sitting like a lady.

### References

- Noden, Merrell. "Dying to Win." *Sports Illustrated*. 08 August 1994. *Sportsillustrated.com*. 18 Nov. 2012. <<http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1005481/index.htm>>.
- Springs, C. and Saporito, B. "Who is the Fittest Olympic Athlete of Them All?" *TIME*. 19 Jul. 2012. *Time.com*. Web. 18 Nov. 2012. <<http://olympics.time.com/2012/07/19/olympic-athletes-survival-of-the-fittest/>>.

### Figures



**Figure 1.** "The Fitness Matrix." A graph of the Olympic sports of the 2012 Olympic Games based on four fitness criteria, with technique (efficiency) and lung power (VO<sub>2</sub> max) on the x-axis, and pain tolerance (lactate threshold) and strength (maximum sustained effort) on the y-axis. Circled in red are weightlifting and gymnastics, which both occupy the top left quadrant. Adapted and modified from "Who is the Fittest Olympic Athlete of Them All?" 2012.