



Episode 66 Transcript

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**Laura Phelps: "If you let me lift, I will break a world record"**

**Nick Collias:** Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. This feels a conversation.

**Laura Phelps:** Okay. Yeah, yeah.

**Kailan Kalina:** Yeah, I feel we are getting into the good stuff here.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Nick:** Come on now. If we are talking, we better get the camera rolling.

**Kailan:** All right.

**Nick:** Good afternoon everyone, or good morning, whatever it is to you. Welcome to *The Bodybuilding.com Podcast*. I'm Nick Collias, an editor and the host up here. Our co-host is not Heather this time, but Kailan Kalina, another editor here at Bodybuilding.com and a powerlifter with a few meets under your belt. How many?

**Kailan:** Uh, three and number four will be in May.

**Nick:** Excellent. we are trying to get her to Nationals and by we, I mean her. I have nothing to do with it, whatsoever. But I'll go, "Yeah, go do it!"

And our guest is none other than Laura Phelps, a true legend in [powerlifting](#) and a pioneer in

women's strength, in particular. She's broken and set more records than we can really list here. Otherwise it's just going to be not a podcast, going to be me just reading stuff...

**Kailan:** Reading.

**Nick:** But, you know, to give the big headline versions, you've squatted well over 700 pounds in competition a *number* of times.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, yep.

**Nick:** Benched 540?

**Laura Phelps:** 540, yep.

**Nick:** Pulled over 500...

**Laura Phelps:** 560.

**Nick:** 560, so, total... you add that up. That's 11 times bodyweight at 165 pounds, once upon a time.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah.

**Kailan:** That's crazy.

**Nick:** Just try to match that, world, that's 11. But also, Laura is one of the new Team Bodybuilding.com athletes. So, she's here hanging out with some Boise, which is really exciting. I can't think of anyone better on International Women's Day here to help [women](#) get strong the right way. So, Laura, welcome.

**Laura Phelps:** Thank you. Thanks for having me.

**Nick:** Now, I want to talk with you first about your progression to heavy lifting because, that's what people know you for, but you had a long athletic history leading up to that.

**Laura Phelps:** Right.

**Nick:** So, so tell us a little bit about, a little about where you came from.

**Laura Phelps:** Well, I grew up doing gymnastics. I remember getting into gymnastics when I was four.

**Nick:** Four.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah.

**Nick:** Okay. So, starting pretty early?

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, my mom got me into it when I was four and I think she got, I mean probably my, all my sisters, I have three younger sisters. We all got started in gymnastics, but I enjoyed it the most. They all kind of went into soccer, is what they all did. And I stayed stuck with gymnastics. I just

really enjoyed it. And I wasn't, like, I was, I never got to an elite level or anything. I mean I was good, but when I got older, like into junior high and high school, we had high school gymnastics. So, I did that because it was you could pick and choose. I enjoyed tumbling. I like the more explosive aspects of gymnastics. So, I like the vault and I liked... the floor exercise. I didn't really like so much the bars and beams.

**Nick:** So, you weren't one of those little girls who is dreaming of the Olympics?

**Laura Phelps:** Right.

**Nick:** Or looking at Nationals?

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah. I was just...

**Nick:** You were okay with your level?

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, this is good.

**Nick:** That's the key.

**Laura Phelps:** And I liked doing other things. So, I played soccer, as well, and I ran track. So, I liked being able to do other things and... but gymnastics was my main focus and I liked, in the high school setting, I was the team captain.

So, I just liked more of the community aspect of it and the leadership aspect of it, more so than trying to go on further than...

**Nick:** Conquer the world?

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, when I was growing up, I kind of felt I had that in me, where I wanted to be the best at something and you would think that I would have tried to do that with gymnastics, but I just knew that that wasn't the thing.

I knew there would be something, but I, I don't know, I just, I didn't know what it would be or when it would come along or if ever.

**Nick:** You knew there would be something...

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah. I kind of had that feeling, but I just, after high school it was kind, well, I mean, maybe, maybe I kind of skipped, maybe that's not going to happen. I'm just gonna be a regular person, which is great. You know what I mean? There wasn't gonna be something I was gonna be the greatest at or whatever.

**Nick:** But that's what happens...

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah.

**Nick:** With a lot of sports for women, in particular, there's a firm end where it's, like okay, this is really as high as you can go.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah.

**Nick:** Unless you're going to really aim for something...

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, exactly.

**Nick:** At the next level.

**Laura Phelps:** I was 18, so you think usually if you're gonna be the greatest at something, it's happens when you're young, you know. And you're kind of in, on that path at least.

I'm, okay, so it's not anything to do with sports. So, I went on to college and I remember coming home for Thanksgiving and, when I walk into my family's house, which are still living there, right when you walk in, there's a wall and it's just all mirrors. And I just remember looking at myself, oh my gosh, the freshmen, whatever. I don't even know how much weight I gained. It wasn't that much, but I was just, whoa.

**Nick:** I'm so jacked.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah. I was, wow, I didn't have organized sports anymore, where it was, I didn't realize how much I was working out by doing gymnastics or track or soccer. So, I had been doing nothing, so all of a sudden, I was, well, I need to figure out how to keep myself in shape.

So, I started running. I just, I just went to the rec center and I just would, ran a little bit on the treadmill and I would go over to the cable, some of the weights and I would, I had no clue. I mean, now that I think back now, I was, I remember I would do some lat pulldowns, I'd do some tricep pushdowns and yeah, it was really, that'd be, yeah, some sit-ups and that was it.

**Nick:** That and a little treadmill time. What else do you need?

**Laura Phelps:** This is good and I kind of got myself back on track, but I started, I would increase the treadmill a little bit more, a little bit more, until I could run a mile or two miles and three miles. And I was, well I'll do a 5K, so I did a couple 5Ks and then, just the competitive person in me.

I was, well maybe I can do a 10K and, so it just would increase my mileage and, I was able to do 10K's and I was, all right, what's, what's the pinnacle of running?

**Nick:** Let's do a marathon.

**Laura Phelps:** I'll do a marathon? Yeah.

**Kailan:** Oh gosh.

**Laura Phelps:** So, I looked up on [Runners World](#), "how to train for a marathon," printed out a program. It was a, I don't know, maybe 10 weeks, but maybe more than that. It was, it was a pretty long time. And I followed it to a 'T' and it worked. I mean, I ran a marathon. I wasn't fast by any means. I wasn't, like, a really, cause I'm not, the way I'm built, I'm short, I'm stocky, and so long distance is not going to be my thing.

I, when I was in high school, I was a sprinter. I would run the hundred-meter dash or the hundred-meter hurdles, anything. My coach would make me run the 400 and I, *I hated it*. I almost died. It was too long for me.

**Nick:** It's a burner. Right.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah. Yeah.

**Kailan:** Nope.

**Laura Phelps:** So, so yeah, I ran, ended up running two marathons. I did the Columbus Marathon when I was in school at Ohio State and then I transferred to Bowling Green and finished out there. And then after I graduated, I stayed there and I worked as a fitness, like managing a fitness center in Toledo at General Motors. And so, I ran the Toledo Marathon. So, this is, over the course of, from the time I started college and, we are talking about five years about.

**Nick:** So, there was something in that that you liked still.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, I enjoy...

**Nick:** Although I feel I know a lot of people who run marathons who sort of secretly hate it.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, I was, it was more of just a challenge for me. It was...

**Kailan:** Yeah.

**Laura Phelps:** It wasn't enjoyable. It wasn't I was, "Oh, this feels so good." It was just, it was just a challenge. I really liked pushing my limits and finding out how far I can go and, so I did, even between those two marathons, which were years apart, I did a lot of 5Ks, 10Ks, even half-marathons. I enjoyed the half-marathon distance.

But, this is purely just all running really no weight training at all, just running and, just trying to stay in shape.

I look back at it and I'm, now, doing the polar opposite with strength training. I look back and I'm just, I'm kind of sad for myself in a way, too, because yes, it was challenging, but I also was doing it to just try to stay thin.

**Kailan:** Right.

**Laura Phelps:** I just wanted to be as thin as possible. I remember putting on jeans and being, like, they feel tight on my thighs, "Oh, my gosh, I'm getting so fat," and I'm just that's, I can't believe that I, that I had that mentality and it's obviously very common, but thankfully I think that mentality has shifted a lot.

This is, we're talking 2003/2002, that's a long time ago. And the culture and the mindset has changed a lot. I don't think I would be feeling that way if it were times like now. I mean who knows. I dunno. I think back to it and I thought, I think, man, I would've probably gotten into CrossFit or something that. I think if you took me back then, but in this society, I think I would've probably got into CrossFit and, some strength training via CrossFit 'cause I really enjoy, I still to this day love cardio.

I love, not necessarily steady cardio, love conditioning and things like that. So, I think that would have been my thing and not necessarily powerlifting just because I would, I don't know that I would've maybe gotten introduced to powerlifting. I, my story's a little different in that, like, after that

second marathon that I did, I was really, I just remember being, like my knees hurt, my hips hurt, everything was killing me. I was, like, I just, I really need to take a second and, just take a little break and try to, I was, working in the fitness center at General Motors and I was, like while I'm here in this weight room and there's weights here.

**Nick:** Was it a decent weight room?

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah. I mean they had everything that you could need.

**Kailan:** Right.

**Nick:** Pretty early for the, I mean, corporate gyms are a big deal now, but yeah, a little ahead of its time.

**Laura Phelps:** Definitely. And this was like, not even at their, it wasn't like we were in Detroit at their office building, we are in a transmission plant, so these are, blue collar, which I loved. I loved working with that population. They were, cause they were dedicated. These were guys that and girls that would, they were really into strength training and they were dedicated. I saw the same faces all the time, so it was really awesome. I became really close with them and, I wasn't necessarily personal training, I was just there to kind of, just, kind of guide them around, show them how to use the machine and what not.

Yeah. Yeah. But it did, that kind of sparked my interest in personal training though just because I did see the same faces all the time and, started working with them and, they, even though I didn't have the knowledge even yet to build a program for someone, because I, I didn't even weight train myself, that's why I'm, man, it really takes life experience to really be able to train someone more so than any book or tests that I could've taken.

**Kailan:** Or a test, yeah.

**Laura Phelps:** I really would not have trusted myself even though I had a degree in health promotion and was working in a fitness center. I so was not anywhere near qualified enough to really get someone strong or in shape.

**Nick:** Hmm. Because... nothing you've said so far, tells me, all right, she's going to go way down into the weight training rabble. She's going to do a bodybuilding show. She's going to do a bunch of powerlifting shows. When...

**Laura Phelps:** I am.

**Nick:** When did you have...? 'Cause you did a powerlifting or a bodybuilding show first.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, yes.

**Nick:** Before you did any powerlifting?

**Laura Phelps:** Yes.

**Nick:** How did you transition into that? When did that, like, all right, I don't mind if my jeans are going to be tight. I'm going to grow some legs here. Yeah.

**Laura Phelps:** That happened that, so, after that second marathon when I was feeling really beat up and I was going to take a break was around the time that I had met my now ex-husband, that's okay, people say, oh sorry, it's okay.

We met at General Motors. He was working there and he, he's the one that he was into bodybuilding. He loved training like a body... He was really obsessed with bodybuilding and even growing up his mom loved bodybuilding. So, he just had a really great background and knowledge for bodybuilding. Really, really knowledgeable.

So, I was, well, I'll, we started dating and I was, I'll start lifting weights. At least someone will be showing me how to do it properly. And so, and so we did. And he was, and he just really did a good job of teaching me properly and also showing me that I had a lot of potential.

I mean, he really was, you've got a really great structure for... your joints are small, but your muscle bellies are full. He's like, you could really do something with this. And, and, he, me being competitive, I'm, really I could, I could be good at this? Okay.

**Nick:** Yeah, this is it.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah. This is it.

**Kailan:** This is what I've been waiting for.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah. And I love eating. So, it's just, I can eat a lot of food, a lot of protein and stuff that and, this is all about gaining muscle mass and then taking it off. So, he started training me for bodybuilding and so we would work out sometimes at the General Motors Gym, but we, I ended up getting a membership at [Powerhouse](#), this is in Toledo, Ohio. And so, I started, going with him all the time and I just became, all that focus I had into running, I just literally just immediately switched it.

I really never ran again after that. Once he was just, "You should really try to do this." I gave it 100%. I mean, I switched all my eating to eating like a bodybuilder. I'm eating six times a day, because prior to that I had no clue how to eat. I would just not eat and then I'll just eat really bad at night, it was just that mentality of trying to be thin. It was just how long can I go without eating? It was really crazy. So, I totally switched my mentality and started training like a bodybuilder and I did...

**Nick:** Following the split.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, totally. I mean he totally, he trained me so, I learned a lot from the way he trained me and the technique, he taught me perfect form on everything and so I did a bodybuilding show probably not even six months later.

**Kailan:** Wow.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, I did just a smaller show. I think it was in Columbus. Yeah. I did a show and I was the only person in my class. So, I won it, of course.

**Nick:** Oh, okay. I was like, "Wow, she won her first show!"

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, yeah, I won. I was one out of one. Yeah. But then I did another show I think two weeks later. It was one of those do this one...

**Nick:** Okay.

**Laura Phelps:** And then peak for the next one.

**Kailan:** Peak for the next one, yeah.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah. So, I did that one and won that one, as well. And I was, I love this, even though even though the dieting was so hard.

**Nick:** I was going to say...

**Laura Phelps:** It was so hard. Yeah.

**Nick:** We hear horror stories on the podcast all the time, someone's first prep for a show.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah.

**Nick:** And they either come out on the other side and they're like, "That wasn't so bad! I think I'm made for this!"

**Laura Phelps:** Great.

**Nick:** Or they come out and they say, "I will never do that again!"

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Nick:** In my entire life.

**Laura Phelps:** It was hard, but I loved it. I loved the discipline aspect of it.

**Kailan:** Regimented.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, the regimented discipline.

**Kailan:** I feel you're either the type of person that really loves that or really just can't hang with it.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, because that was part of the competition basically is, I mean, I have to be strict on this because I mean, I wouldn't even, I would bake stuff for him and make him eat it, and I wouldn't even lick the spoon, nothing. I was just, there's other people that are dieting that are gonna, that I'm going to be up against. So, I took that really serious so I didn't mind that part of it. It all paid off. Because I really, I loved being on stage.

I think it might've been from my gymnastics background, because I was used to being by myself on the floor exercise in a leotard, having people look at me. So, and then having to perform and be, not dancing but posey-ish. So, to me that it wasn't weird to me. It didn't feel uncomfortable to be on stage like that. So, I really enjoyed it. I loved the posing aspect of it. So, I did that one and then I waited until the following year to do my next show because I really want to take this one serious and try to put on size. 'Cause I was, I had kind of bigger legs for a girl, but my upper body was small. Like it was, I didn't have big arms or a big back.



**Nick:** She can only bench 540.

**Kailan:** Yeah.

**Laura Phelps:** Not at that time. I remember, I could not, I remember that. So, I was, I'm going to take some time and try to get some more size and then do the show. I picked out a big show. I picked out the GNC BodyRock in Virginia and I mean it was a legit show. It was, I remember Ronnie Coleman was the guest poser and it was, I mean it was awesome. It was a big show. And so, I went to that and there was a lot of competitors there. So, I was like, I remember sitting in the meeting or whatever, a briefing and, everybody's got warmup stuff on.

But I just was looking around thinking I have no business being here. This is crazy. And I weighed in at 121 so I was a lightweight, I was super tiny, but I won my class. And the overall at that one, it was, yeah, it was crazy. And there was a guy there, I can't remember his name, but he was, he's one of the directors for the bodybuilding show for the Arnold. And he was, I remember he gave me his card and he was like, if you stick with this, he's like, you're going to be at the Arnold. I just remember being, "Oh, my gosh, this, this will be awesome, to get a pro card and, to go there and do that." And so, still my mindset was, I'm going to be a pro bodybuilder. Like this is what I'm gonna do.

**Nick:** And the category that you were in, was being called what?

**Laura Phelps:** It was woman's bodybuilding.

**Nick:** It was women's bodybuilding.

**Laura Phelps:** So, they didn't have physique, which I would've been a better candidate for physique had they had that just because I wasn't very, I wasn't, I was only 120 pounds.

**Kailan:** What year was this?

**Laura Phelps:** 2004.

**Kailan:** Four.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, yeah. So, I would've probably been better for physique and, but at the time it was just women's bodybuilding and figure, there wasn't even bikini or anything that. So, I asked the judges, of course, everybody's told me you need to ask the judges what you need to improve on. And they were like, you need, still need more thickness in your back. So, I'm like, okay. So, we said we'll start adding some of the powerlifts into the training. Because I didn't [squat](#), I would, I would go real heavy, on leg presses and hack squats and movements that.

But I didn't squat or [deadlift](#) in my training. So...

**Nick:** And that's a turn of the century-style of training for sure.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, totally.

**Nick:** Carvin' it.

**Laura Phelps:** Right. So, I was like, okay, let's add some squats and deadlifts. And so, we started doing that, but I wouldn't max out. I would just be for reps and I really enjoyed the deadlifting. I loved

deadlifting then. It was like, this is so fun. And not so much the squatting. I was, "Ooh, I don't know about this." But there was a guy at the gym, at the Powerhouse Gym that was, "Oh man, you should do, they have these local non-sanctioned powerlifting meets." It's just bench and deadlift. It's just for fun, it's not even sanctioned, you don't have to wear a singlet, nothing like that. And so, I was, oh, I don't know.

**Laura Phelps:** But then I was, yeah, yeah.

**Kailan:** Weird.

**Nick:** It's like over here in the gymnasium. I talked to [Mark Bell](#) about that. He did a bunch of meets like that.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah.

**Nick:** Hey, bunch of dudes in a high school, here we go.

**Laura Phelps:** Get together and do this. Yeah, yeah. It was, it was fine. He kind of bugged me enough and I was, I'll do it. Especially 'cause it's just bench and deadlift. I was, that's, anytime you take the squat out of the equation, it's a lot less stressful, to not have to...

**Kailan:** Yeah.

**Laura Phelps:** I don't know what it is even to this day, but... So, I decided to do it and I remember it was in the local mall, in a department store that had nothing in it.

**Nick:** Wow, over by the Orange Julius, over there.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah. It was just this big empty department store.

**Nick:** Oh, cool.

**Kailan:** Yeah.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah. And there's a lot of people locally that did it, they'd just come out and do it, just bench and deadlift. And I remember I benched 180 and I think I pulled 350.

**Nick:** So, that's impressive.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. And so, there were, some, some of the other people were, that's really good. And I was, it is, I don't, I didn't know. I knew nothing about powerlifting, so they're like, that's really good. But still I was, I wasn't like, "Oh, I'm going to full on switch" or anything that. I just was kept doing my bodybuilding training.

**Kailan:** How many other women were there?

**Laura Phelps:** I think, I don't remember there being any other.

**Kailan:** Really?

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, I remember being the only one. But then there was another one coming up a little bit later. I did that one and I can't remember.

I remember I increased my lifts a lot but I can remember what they were. I just remember pulling a deadlift that was really slow and grindy and, the whole place was going nuts and I was just like, this is so cool. People are cheering for me.

**Kailan:** Right.

**Laura Phelps:** Bodybuilding is, not that it's cutthroat or anything that, but, it's every man for himself.

**Nick:** It's pretty isolated.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, it's very isolated. So, here I am in this room and there's, like, I'm watching other competitors just cheering for me. I'm just, this is so cool. This is crazy. But still I wasn't gonna, I still was not, I'm gonna switch to powerlifting.

**Kailan:** Yep.

**Laura Phelps:** So, I found about, I found out about one that was happening, another non-sanctioned meet that was happening down in my hometown in Cincinnati.

And I was, well, I'll go visit my parents, because again, I'm still in, I'm still in Toledo. And I was, I'll go visit my parents and do this meet while I'm down there. My dad can come watch 'cause my dad loves, I'm one of four girls. So, he was loving that I was getting into weight training and stuff cause it's, he's used to going to gymnastics meets and dance and stuff that. So, he thought this was really cool.

So, I was like, that'd be fun. So, I picked that one out and I think, I think I benched maybe 200 it might've been 190-something, but I remember deadlifting 450, or I think, it might've been less than whatever it was, I just remember the owners of the gym who were bodybuilders and powerlifters, they were like, you need to do this. You have a lot of potential, you really if you just knew how to do this properly, your form, 'cause I don't, we were bodybuilders, so you would kind of lift like bodybuilders. If you knew how to do powerlifting-type form on this on technique, you could actually, you could pull 500 today and I was sold. I was like, "That would be awesome!"

**Kailan:** Sign me up!

**Nick:** You set yourself up with a really interesting progression, because you start with gymnastics, which is body awareness.

**Laura Phelps:** Absolutely.

**Nick:** There's a great muscular base and my wife did gymnastics and it's she attributes a lot of what she's able to do as an adult 35, 40 years later. It really works.

**Laura Phelps:** It really does.

**Nick:** And then you go to running where you just build this massive aerobic engine that you can do tons of work and then what do you do next? You just pile a bunch of muscle onto it that sets you up pretty well for powerlifting.

**Laura Phelps:** It really did, I was just, I'm really lucky in the way that things just fell into place for me. But the gymnastics background was enormously helpful for, even, bodybuilding with posing but with powerlifting, with body awareness and learning how to like, that mind-muscle connection and, 'cause when I work with people now and I'm, okay, engage your lats or whatever and literally they can't do it and I'll be, okay, "Pretend you're, flaring your lats or doing a lat spread" and they don't know how to move their lats.

**Kailan:** They don't know.

**Laura Phelps:** And it's like, "Oh, my gosh, I can't..." I took that for granted that I could do little things that. And I think that was very helpful with my success, because I always tell people, I'm, I, not to downplay anything, but I don't think I was necessarily stronger than number two person or number three or number 10 person in the world.

I just knew I just had these little attention-to-detail-type things. These little things that kind of helped me with being an absolute perfectionist with form and technique and the flexibility that I had. Because with my style of powerlifting, I lifted in the equipped division, which is with the squat suits and things that. You have to go a lot wider in the squat, and that takes a lot of flexibility and I just naturally had that. It wasn't anything I had to work towards or anything. It was just there and, in the bench press, the setup that I would use, tucking my feet way behind me and getting this big arch, that was easy for me, it wasn't a big deal.

And then I pulled sumo stance in the deadlift and it was just, that just was completely natural to me. It felt natural. So, yeah, gymnastics, it was huge for my success in powerlifting, for sure.

**Nick:** And you got really strong just by basically doing bodybuilding training, it sounds like.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah. I had...

**Nick:** How much...

**Laura Phelps:** I went directly into powerlifting. After that meet that I did down in Cincinnati, I decided I was going to be serious and do a powerlifting meet. So, that meet was in January that I did. And I picked out a meet to do in June and I was like, "Okay, I'm gonna do this for real." And at that time, and this is 2005, powerlifting was all equipped. Everybody lifted and ventured squat suits.

**Kailan:** Yeah, raw wasn't a thing.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, no. So, it wasn't like I was, "I'm gonna do this meet raw and then get...", it was immediately... I ordered a bench shirt, I ordered squat briefs, a squat suit, and a deadlift suit.

**Nick:** What was it getting into that squat suit for the first time?

**Laura Phelps:** It was hard. It was really hard, and it took a lot of people to help me get it off. But I mean, I really, I just think back to that and I went directly into the most hardcore gear you could wear, and thank God I did have that gymnastics background and that tendon strength because, you're overloading your body with hundreds of more pounds, across three lifts than you can do without. So, it's like, that's a lot. I remember feeling my arms are just, and I would be benching the shirt and I would just feel my arms were just like broken. You know what I mean? It's just took a long time for my bones and my tendons to kind of thicken up and them be able to handle that.

But they did. But I mean, I think that I had the tendon strength that I gained from gymnastics was very helpful into kind of being able to move directly into that type of gear.

**Nick:** The grip strength, too, I would imagine...

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, right.

**Nick:** Not only for pulling off the ground, but...

**Laura Phelps:** Right.

**Nick:** I'm thinking about what 500 pounds must feel on your hands. I never had 500 pounds on my hands and you got to have some tough-ass hands to do that.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, it was. I just can't believe it. I was still working at General Motors at the time and since I decided to do a powerlifting meet, I was talking to a guy, one of the men that worked there and I was telling him about how I wanted to do this. And he's, wow, my son or my nephew has a gym up in Detroit. Detroit was only 40 minutes up the road.

He has a powerlifting gym there. He's a powerlifter. He has a powerlifting gym. There's a lot of really good powerlifters there. And so, me and a couple of the other guys that I had met at Powerhouse, the three of us decided to do this meet together. So, this guy connected us with his nephew. And so, we decided to go up there on a weekend to meet them. And, I mean these, I can't believe these were guys that were ex-world champions. They were retired but still training together and it was just the most, I look back now, I didn't know then, but I look back now and I'm, that was the most ideal situation I could have ever been in. These guys were done competing themselves. So, they, here I was, I come in and they just, just kind of brought life back to the group.

They were, "Oh, she's got a lot of potential." And they just took me under their wing and they just helped me. They gave me the one of the guys gave me his squat suit, which fit perfectly. They just...

**Nick:** I'm going to try to borrow her singlet coming up.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, there you go, it might work. But yeah, so I mean I started training with these guys and it was, it was so fun. I would spend every Saturday there, we would squat for hours. I mean, it wasn't, oh, we would take our time.

**Kailan:** Yeah.

**Laura Phelps:** It wasn't nonstop squatting. But they helped me and every week it was just I think back and I had no plan at that time. It was, no training system. We were just squat heavy all the time.

**Kailan:** That's cool.

**Laura Phelps:** And we were just work up heavy every weekend. And since I was new to it, it was fine cause it was just beginner gains.

I was just, every week my squat's going up and they're just, "Oh, my gosh!" So, the meet comes, the June meet that we signed up for. And I remember I just had to basically skip dinner the night before. Weigh-ins to make weight 'cause I was 165.9 or something that. So, I was, well, I remember looking

up I looked online to try to figure out how to cut weight and it just said don't eat your last two meals or whatever. The day before. And it worked. I made weight but it was only a few ounces so it should have been fine anyway. But I made weight, 165 and I squatted 551 and I benched 303 and I pulled for around 450 at that time. Yeah. So, it was, I mean that was big, 'cause the world record at that time in my weight class in the squat was 611 so it's just my first meet.

I'm just, that's how confident I was. I was, I was literally 65 pounds to make a world record? No problem. I was like, literally, that's going to happen soon because, I could just tell by the way my training was going with them and going up every week, I just, I don't know, I just had this crazy confidence. It wasn't an arrogance at all. I just was, I was, became obsessed. I was, this is the thing, I found this is the thing that I'm going to be the best in the world at.

**Nick:** But you weren't just, you weren't just squatting one day a week.

**Laura Phelps:** No.

**Nick:** Like the rest of their week, were you...

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah.

**Nick:** ...really, I don't know. What did the training feel to you at that point? It was definitely different than what you had been doing. Did it just, was it an odd feeling to be really diving into the world of strength more?

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, it was. Here I was doing more of squat, bench, and deadlift and less of all that those bodybuilding movements, which is funny because once I learned how to actually properly train, it kind of went back to more of the accessory movements and less of the squat, bench, and deadlift.

**Nick:** So, it was pretty minimalist training at this point?

**Kailan:** Yeah, at that point it was just I was learning the gear in our training sessions would take so long that if I done benching or squatting, it was just a couple, leg curls or reverse hypers and then go home.

But then you have your other, you have four days of training, basically. You have your heavy days. And then on the other two lighter days, that I would do a lot of accessory work, a lot of tricep movements and a lot of upper back, hamstring movements, things that to try to stay well-rounded and, and have no lagging weaknesses or anything like that. So, yeah, it was, it was just a weird shift but it didn't feel completely, I don't know, I just became obsessed. I was, I loved it.

I loved, I looked for, I lived for Saturdays. I'm going up there and training. I mean I trained throughout the rest of the week, too, but to squat became my favorite thing, deadlift, it was deadlift before, and then all of a sudden, squat became my obsession because I think that was the lift I was the most, the closest at breaking a world record at. So, it was just, that became my focus at the time. And so, I would go up there and I would squat heavy on Saturday. I'd go back up there on Sunday and I would bench heavy with them and I would do my training back in Toledo throughout the rest of the week.

**Nick:** That's a lot of travel.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah. Yeah. It was crazy.

**Nick:** Drive up there and squat heavy.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah.

**Nick:** It's interesting when people think about [Westside-style training](#), you think about sort of training around the goal, constantly.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah.

**Nick:** And you're, it sounds you were just training, right at it.

**Laura Phelps:** I was literally, 'cause I didn't really, I knew of Westside Barbell. I'm, but I didn't really know how to train that way. We bought at the time they were VHS tapes. I, we still have those.

**Nick:** You still have them? Awesome.

**Laura Phelps:** But yeah, I still have the full set. So, we'd watch them and we'd see the things they were doing, but we didn't know how to put it all together. You know what I mean? I met Louie once, we went and listened to him talk at a two-hour seminar, so we were learning about these little things. So, it's still trying to figure out how to put it all together.

**Nick:** Yeah, that's the ultimate challenge, everybody's always doing that.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, exactly right. So, we still didn't know, and I signed up for a meet two months later after that June meet.

It was just to do a squat. I just wanted to practice a squat and I went there and I squatted 580 so I increased about 30 pounds. And here I am, I'm still, yes, that 611 is going down and at the time, the pinnacle of powerlifting at the time, because powerlifting, it was still a pretty divided but it was a lot more united than it is now. Like I said, everybody lifted equipped and then everybody, a lot of people lifted in the APF federation. That was the most popular federation. They were, all about the equipped lifting and they, you had to go through the APF to qualify for the WPO, which was this, they were at the Arnold, now there's a couple of different meets going on at the Arnold and it's not the WPO, but at the time the Arnold was the WPO and they had the biggest ballroom, they're right across from the expo, they'd fill it with 2000 or 3000 spectators, which is unheard of for powerlifting, you know, but it was, it was incredible.

And they had the lights and the stage and, it was like a rock concert in there and all the smoke and everything. So, everybody, everybody wanted to be there. And so, I'm learning about this is, this is a pinnacle of, of everything. And I actually had seen it, even though I had gone to the Arnold the year before in 2004 as a bodybuilder, just spectating and saw that, I saw the powerlifting going on. And I was, that is really cool. And I remember I saw Tina Reinhardt, this girl, she benched 402 at 132 and my mind was blown because I, again, I'm not powerlifting it, so I have no concept of the numbers or anything. And I just, my mind was blown. I literally was, I was, that's insane.

I could never do that. And I said that also about Amy Weisberger, she squatted, she was up there squatting 523, I think she did. And I remember Shane telling me, he said, he's like, you could be here next year if you wanted to. And I was, you're insane because I'm not a powerlifter. And sure enough, I was there the next year, which, I mean, I kind of skipped ahead a little bit because prior to the Arnold, you have to do the semifinals, which are in the fall. So, backtrack a little bit.

The fall of 2005, they had the semifinals for the WPO, and women at the time were only guest lifters,

you had to be invited. They would only invite three or four girls to lift. And so, I had no way of qualifying to get there. You had to be invited and here I am, who am I? I had only done this local meet before, so I wasn't on the map yet. So, I wrote the president of the WPO and I was like, what can I do to be there at the semifinals? Here's what I've done, here's what I plan to do, I basically, it was just like...

**Kailan:** A case.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, I told him, I was like, I will break a world record if you let me lift there. And so, coincidentally, a girl who's now a friend of mine who was lifting in the WPO, she was supposed to lift at that meet and she ended up hurting her knee, so she had to pull out of it. So, here's this opening, and he gets this email from me saying that I'll break a world record. I mean, luckily, he took a chance and he was like, okay, you can take her spot, and so I was in. I was in for this for the semifinals, which was only... that was in September. So, it was only about a month and a half after that meet that I went to just do the squat and I squatted 580. I was like, okay, I've got a month and a half to train for this and break the world record. So, I get ready for...

**Nick:** A month and a half.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, I know. I was like, oh my gosh. So...

**Kailan:** That's such a small...

**Nick:** Equipped or no, these numbers boggle the mind, right?

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah.

**Nick:** In this point in history. But then it's hard to even imagine that you could conceptualize like, all right, I'm just going to squat 6...

**Laura Phelps:** I know. People ask me if I ever had fear of getting hurt or anything, that never ever once in competition crossed my mind that, like... Because I've witnessed in my 10 years competing and even at beyond that now, a lot of really catastrophic accidents happening. I remember being in my bench shirt, sitting and watching a girl break her forearm in half right before me and I still wasn't freaked out that that was going to happen to me. I was so confident in my form and I was like, "Oh, it's just because she had her wrist bent backwards like this. I don't do that, so I'm not worried about it."

**Nick:** It's really her own fault. It's not the weight.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah. I'm not going to do that, and so it's not going to happen to me. So, I never had...

**Nick:** True.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah.

**Kailan:** True. Yeah.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah. I go to the WPO semifinals. I'm warming up in the back room where every top powerlifter is. I mean [Louie Simmons](#) is back there who's the founder of Westside Barbell, the



greatest strength coach ever to live. He's back there coaching his Westside athletes and Chuck Vogelpohl's back there, all these people that I had not been following for a long time because I just got into powerlifting. But I'm reading, I'm reading Powerlifting USA, I'm starting to learn who everyone is and I'm warming up and here I go to take my last warm up attempt.

You time out your warmup attempts so that you do your last one and then you're ready to go sit down and find your seat and be ready. So, I'm taking my last one, and my last warmup was five, somewhere around 550. And, I pick it up and I go to go down and I hear Louie say, he said, "Come on, new girl." And all of a sudden, my legs just gave out and I just came down and I couldn't come back up and they picked me up. It wasn't like I fell to the ground, but I missed the weight.

I have my knees wrapped and everything. I don't have time to rack it and do it again. We did not have time for them to wrap me back up and take this next warm up weight. So, here I am, I missed the first weight that I've ever missed in my whole powerlifting training. I never missed a weight in training, never. And here I am right before I'm about to go on stage, I miss a weight and I'm just like, that's great. I suddenly became incredibly nervous. I was so nervous, I was sick. I was just like, "Oh, my gosh." And people were like, calm down, calm down, you're going to be fine. And I was like, I don't know here. On the biggest stage, I'm about to just make a fool of myself, basically.

But, I don't know, just something about once I got up there and I saw the people and it just became like just what I enjoy from gymnastics or from bodybuilding. I thrive off of people watching me, it's...

**Kailan:** Performing.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, performing. Exactly. Even though I'm lifting weights, I'm trying to perform and I try to take it as like, these people are here to watch me. They're not judging me, they're here to watch something really spectacular. So, I'm like, I need to show them something really spectacular. So, my first weight, which is, I mean, I can't believe I did this, but I opened up my first weight was 617, which the world record was 611. So, it's not like I opened conservatively, which I would tell someone else. I would never let someone do that. I would never let someone do that, you're crazy.

So, I opened up with 617 and I made that no problem. And, all of a sudden, the nerves just went away, and I was just like, this is incredible. So, it's not like I made a little jump. I jumped to 661.

**Nick:** Oh, my gosh.

**Laura Phelps:** I know.

**Nick:** What was the heaviest you had done in your training?

**Laura Phelps:** I don't know, maybe 600.

**Kailan:** Wow.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah.

**Nick:** Huh. I mean, I want you to get back to the story, but I'm wondering about just the minutes leading up to a big lift like that, did you have that...

**Kailan:** Yeah, I want to know, too.

**Nick:** Obviously you were nervous, but did you have that process, that ritual dialed in at that point?

**Kailan:** What goes through your head before...?

**Laura Phelps:** No, I didn't have any ritual or anything yet because I just had no idea what to expect. I had never really been on such a competitive stage like that before. And I remember my dad and my sister, Leah, who I'm really close with, they came and I remember hearing them cheer for me and it was just like I could pick them out of everyone. You know what I mean? It just became, I don't know, just calming a little bit. So, I didn't really have any rituals yet. I just thought it was just like this is what I do every weekend. This is no different. I've never...

Yeah, I had a little thing back in the warm up room, but I've never missed a weight. This is the thing that I've been searching for. You know what I mean? That I would be the best at, this is it. And, I knew that, I knew it. I was like, this is the thing right here. And so, I called for 661, and I got that, no problem. Then we went to 683 and the third one I got that one. So, then we're like, you can take a fourth attempt in powerlifting if it's for a world record.

**Nick:** Because nobody's gone where you are. We'll just let you keep going.

**Kailan:** Just let her keep going, don't stop her now.

**Laura Phelps:** Great, just keep going, fifth attempt, sixth attempt.

But since it was a world record, they'll let you take a fourth attempt. So, we did 700 and maybe 705, I think it was 705. And, I squatted it up at the top, I just lost my balance. I lost it to the side a little, but I didn't care because I was like, I already broke the world record by 70 pounds. And I was like, and I basically just did the 705. It didn't matter to me because I have confidence that I will do that in the next one. And so, it was just like, people were... I love that feeling that people were just mind-blown that no girl's ever done this before.

There was one other girl that had lifted heavier than that, and a higher weight class, and she's a super heavyweight. So, they're looking at the 165 person. They're just like, what just happened? So, it was such a cool feeling and...

**Nick:** You stole the show.

**Laura Phelps:** Right, yeah. I loved that feeling. And right after that... At the time, and still, [Inzer](#) is like they make all the squat suits and everything and they even make stuff for raw lifters, knee wraps and things like that. They had a representative there and they offered me a sponsorship right on the spot and I was like, "Yes, I'll take that." And yeah, it was crazy. I did well on the bench and deadlift, but not world record level. My bench at the time, I think I benched 319 and I pulled around 480, I think I pulled. But which made for a world record total as well.

Even though those weren't world record lifts, the squat was so high that the combined of all three attempts made for a world record total, as well. So, two world records that day and meeting Louie and getting Louie's attention.

**Nick:** When you met him again, did you tell him, "You're the guy who ruined my warm up."

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, I don't think I ever told him that. I was like, you just scared me to death. Shortly after that, I went to visit Westside because I had a friend who lived in the Toledo area, and he was a Westside lifter. He would travel back and forth, and so he's like Louie wants you to come with me

down there to train one day. And so, I went down there and I benched down there on a Sunday. And Louie asked me to be a part of Westside.

And I didn't say yes right off the bat, which I think back, I'm like, wow, I can't believe I told... If Louie Simmons is asking you to be basically on the team, and I was like, "Let me get back to you on that," because I don't know, I was just like, really, the guys that I trained with, I was loyal to them and I just didn't want to leave them. But they were like, you've got to go.

These guys were like, you've got to go, this is all we can do for you. We've done everything. You're going to get to a point now where you have to be really smart about your training, because like I said, those were all beginner gains. You're going to get to the point where you have to be really... And that's the best place in the world, you've got to do it. So, I did it.

I didn't move there and train, I would travel there on the weekends and train and then do my training. I would still do some of my training throughout the week with those guys in Detroit. So, I got the best of both worlds, so being able to train with them and then going to Westside on the weekends, because I couldn't just move there. I didn't have a job there, I needed to keep my job and so yeah, that was it.

**Laura Phelps:** And after that, it was just meet after meet after meet for 10 years.

**Nick:** For 10 years.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah. It's really crazy because at that meet, squatting 683, that was 2005, it took all these years... I think it took about five, five or no, maybe it was more than that. It took a long, several, several years to put 70 pounds on my squat. My best squat to this date is 775. So, to think that, the patience of that, I work with people all the time now and then they get really frustrated if they get into powerlifting and, of course, meet after meet they're making hundred-pound gains on their total and then they get to a point where they're making 20-pound gains on their total and they start to get frustrated. And I'm like, you are making gains. You've never even bombed out of the meet.

10 years of competing. I have bombed out of meets more times than I can count, than I can remember. People don't, they don't...

**Nick:** Those don't make it on the bio.

**Kailan:** Oh, no, they don't talk about that.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, exactly, people don't know that. Nobody...

**Nick:** Don't see those ones on the...

**Kailan:** I was going to say, I didn't see that!

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah. People that are in my own gym don't even know that until I tell them when they get frustrated because we don't have a lot of people. We try to coach our people now to be smart about their attempts, attempts selection and peaking properly so that it doesn't happen. So, it really rarely ever happens with our lifters. But if for some reason it does, it's like when I tell them that I've bombed out at least 10 times they're like, are you serious? And I'm like, yeah, I literally, it got to the point if it happened, you give yourself five minutes to be upset about it and then it's over. There's nothing you can change about it, you just have to figure out what went wrong.

**Nick:** What do you think did go wrong when you would bomb out usually?

**Laura Phelps:** I mean, I think once you're getting to weights like that, any little thing can go wrong. Once you're trying to push the limits of putting... I attempted 800 in competition several times, once you're just putting that weight on your back or 550 pounds in your hands to bench press, is just like one wrong move of your elbow and it's just like, it's over. Everything has to be perfect.

And then, just in time and training, I gained more muscle mass and started getting over my weight class to the point where I would start training. My body would just stick around 173 to 175 and then I got to do this 8 to 10-pound weight cut, which is a large percentage of body weight at that weight. So, you do a weight cut. I would do the same exact weight cut for meet to meet, and one meet it would be perfect. Let's say the time I total 11-time body weight, the 1800-pound total, that was the same weight cut that I did for some other meet and I bombed out. You know what I mean? And I just felt like garbage that day, where this other day I just felt amazing. You don't know why, it just happens.

So, it's just when it comes to powerlifting and equipped powerlifting like that where you have all these added factors like weight cuts and squat suits and bench shirts, because you might not rehydrate properly. And then I remember I would always know if I didn't rehydrate properly, because I would go to put my squat brace on, and they'd be like loose, and I'd be like, oh no. You don't want your gear to be loose, it needs to be tight.

So, it's just little things like that, that happen. I remember one time bombing out and not realizing until that night when I came down with a fever that I had the flu. Basically, I'm coming down with the flu, and I'm like, why does everything feel so heavy today? Why? And it's like, oh, okay. I basically had the flu coming on and didn't happen 'til that night. But, yeah, little things like that, but I did so many more meets that weren't good then people just literally forget about those unsuccessful ones.

**Nick:** Sure. I mean that idea of whether to cut weight or not or whether to move up a weight class, whether to go down a weight class, it's a really fascinating quandary that a lot of women find themselves in. Kailan has actually written about this for us as well. It just, yeah, should I stay up? Should I go down? Is the price worth it?

**Laura Phelps:** And I always advise people, don't cut weight especially if you're a beginner, to have that added factor, that's crazy. And it's for what? If you're, if you get to the point where you've got a lot of time in training and everything's consistent and you've got some meets under your belt and you're maybe going for an elite total or a pro total or something's on the line, then you can think about it like a small weight cut. But I mean to just like... Because I've had lifters do that where they're going to do their first meet. And, okay, now I need to cut this weight. And I'm like, no, we are not doing that. Because what if you don't do as well as you wanted. And then it's like, was it because of the weight cut? Was it because of the training? You don't even know. There's just literally no point in it. So, I would always suggest to people just to wait and do it if there's something that really important on the line.

**Nick:** Peaking...

**Kailan:** Take that... Oh, no, I was just going to say like that's the one thing that I've learned, too, I've only been doing this for a couple of years, but really allowing yourself to build that foundation of strength, which means, yeah, you might have to carry a little bit more body fat, but like you said, you have to earn that point where okay now I can cut weight and I actually have a shot at winning a title or whatever.

**Laura Phelps:** Exactly.

**Kailan:** Yeah.

**Laura Phelps:** Because I mean even the best of weight cuts are going to take a little edge off. So, I mean if you're a new to powerlifting, I'd rather go in fully strong with nothing keeping you back from that.

**Nick:** And peaking in any sport even if you are not cutting an ounce is difficult. Did you feel like you became a master of peaking to a certain degree? I'm wondering before the great meets later in your career, what did the week beforehand look like?

**Laura Phelps:** I didn't do a whole lot the week before. That's because once I started training with Westside and learning how to properly train and learning about the delayed-transformation phase, which is like a three-week... 21 days leading into meet, basically your training would go down a little bit as far as deloading and then up to your pinnacle week of heaviest squats, everything that you're going to do. And we overloaded a lot with bands or chains, and then tapering down for those three weeks. So, that final week you cannot do anything to get stronger. The only thing you could do is do something detrimental to make yourself.

**Kailan:** Screw it up.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, to screw it up by doing too much. So, sometimes I look back and I think I should've done a little bit more that week. There were a lot of times I literally did nothing. I just rested. I look back and I'm like, I wish I would've moved around more, done some squats, bench and dead... I think people should move on because it's weird to train, train, train, train and then sit around for a week, your body, I think, just stiffens up a lot. I think you just need to keep it moving.

So, I tell people, if people say like, "Is there anything you would've done differently?" That's one thing. Then another thing would have been doing more GPP, which is my own fault. That is purely my own fault.

Louie preached, the Westside system, you're supposed to be doing a lot of [GPP](#) (general physical preparedness). And I would be like, "Oh, I can't do that. It's going to make me weaker." I went from that mindset of like cardio, cardio, cardio to no I can't do any of that, it's going to take away from my strength. And it's like I learned after when I was done competing when I started adding a lot more conditioning back in my training, that like, "Wow, I can totally still be strong and do a lot of conditioning." I don't mean like cardio, I just mean sled drags and short air, assault bike sprints, things like that just to build up your conditioning. Because powerlifting meets are long.

**Kailan:** Exhausting.

**Laura Phelps:** They can go 12 hours sometimes, and you've all these hours between your list, and all you want to do is fall asleep. By the time I would get to deadlift, I would just be exhausted. I'd be so just like, I just want to go to bed. I don't really want to deadlift. You know?

**Nick:** Well, that's one thing that came to me is looking at your competitive history. I think after those first two lifts, what's left? I mean, I want to go to bed.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, it's like that a lot, especially with the longer meets where there's a lot of competitors you can be just exhausted. That's why it's the conditioning would come into play where it's like you're able to just be able to... It's CrossFit-ish, where you can be able to do this workout,

come down from it, do another workout, come down from it and do another one and still be equally strong or be able to perform equally for each lift. So, I think the more conditioned athletes do the best on the deadlift.

**Nick:** So, the night before a big meet, would you sleep like a baby?

**Laura Phelps:** No, I couldn't sleep very well. I could sleep, but it was interrupted. It'd be like, I'm just thinking about it and can't fall asleep. And then once I fall asleep, it was just very interrupted sleep. So, I would always try to, and I tell people now like, you're probably not going to get really good sleep the night before. So, the night before that, so basically two nights before, get the most sleep you can, store up on sleep, basically. Because I mean, I think it's true anytime, that's why sometimes when you... When I got in here on Monday night, my flight got delayed, I got here super late, I didn't get to the hotel 'til about one and I had to be up at 5:15 or something, which is just way less sleep than I'm used to. I felt fine the next day, I felt fine. But it was the next day that I was like, "Oh, my gosh."

So, I mean, I don't know if there's any science behind that. I have no clue. But I always tell people, the sleep that you get on Thursday night is going to dictate how you feel on Saturday, so focus on that night because the next night is not really going to... Obviously it would affect you if you got an hour of sleep, but if you get crappy sleep that night, you're going to be okay because...

**Nick:** And I've heard that from a lot of different people in different sports. And I don't know if there's any science behind it or not, but I've heard it enough times and I feel like I've experienced it enough times that I respect it.

**Laura Phelps:** Right. Yeah, and it holds true. Right.

**Kailan:** It's like the anxiety and the excitement and your mind races.

**Nick:** So, after that 12-hour meet, you just collapse?

**Laura Phelps:** Totally. It's like, you wouldn't think because it's just I'm just doing nine lifts, but just the mental exhaustion, it's unbelievable. I just feel like literally just so tired and now I'm like a firm believer to getting back to the gym somewhat quickly. Not like Monday morning necessarily. You could come in Monday and do some reverse hypers, just blood flow stuff, but you have some people that get real excited and they go right back to the gym and they feel great on Monday. They might feel okay on Wednesday and then all of a sudden it hits them. It's like your central nervous system is not recovered to do heavy lifts again, so that whole week should be just like move around, do some blood flow stuff, some bamboo bar benching, some reverse hypers, things like that just to move and then get back to the actual lifting the week after.

I know some people that, especially the bigger guys, they'll take a couple of weeks of just blood flow stuff before they'll even think about putting heavy weight.

**Nick:** I like that. So, blood flow stuff. We're not talking about initially like blood flow restriction training, we're just talking about moving blood around. That's a missing element maybe in a lot of people's strength training, it seems like. What would another missing element... I feel like when I look at your Instagram, I see low-rep strength work on there and I think maybe that might be one of them. What do you see as some of the other missing elements?

**Laura Phelps:** I mean there's so many training styles now. It's unbelievable. How much powerlifting has changed since I started, it's unbelievable. But, I'm still just a firm believer in the 20/80, the

conjugate system, which is Louie Simmons' conjugate system.

20% of your trainings should be the main compound lifts, the squat, bench deadlift, different variations of those lifts, or percentage of work if you're doing dynamic effort. And then the other 80% should be accessory work. So, that's like the special exercises to help build... When we focus on posterior chain, we do a ton of triceps, traps, spinal erectors, glutes, hamstrings, calves, everything on your backside just because, I mean, especially with equipped lifting, it's very different than raw lifting. So, it's like a lot of it's wide-stance, utilizing more of your hips and hamstrings.

So, a lot of our special exercises are... We don't neglect quads, either. I mean, I do lunges and things like that. But even the technique requires, the technique that I use requires mostly posterior chain. If I'm bench pressing, I'm putting myself into an upper back position basically that forces me to use, or allows me to use my lats and triceps more in the bench press than my... When I hear people are talking about tearing their pecs, I'm like, you should never tear your pec on a bench. That means that you're...

**Kailan:** Not using your lats.

**Laura Phelps:** I don't want to use my pecs on the bench press, I want to use my back and I use my triceps. And that's all in the way you set up on the bench to do that.

So, it's little things like that that's like, okay, if that's the way I train, and that's the muscle groups I want use, those are the muscle groups I'm going to train the most for.

**Nick:** Even calves.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, I mean, really, we might do some calf raises, but it's like that's why I don't even do biceps. I've never done biceps stuff since bodybuilding.

**Nick:** Not even in the Bodybuilding.com gym?

**Laura Phelps:** I did have to do that the other day, so. Yeah. It was funny. It was like, I better not be sore from this, but yeah, it's mostly just triceps, rear delts, upper back, spinal erectors.

**Kailan:** Very intentional.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah. So, all those exercises are built towards that. And the way I like to set up my workout is, the main movement, which is 20% of the workout, 80% of the stuff I usually start with something heavy like eight-rep heavy, meaning, three sets of eight heavy. And usually you should pick something that is your weakness. So, if you have figured out for yourself that when you fail a deadlift, it's your low back that's... you can't move the weight off the ground, low back and abs. So, my first accessory movement is going to focus on my weaknesses. I'm going to be good mornings, so let's say heavy good mornings to try to build up my spinal erectors.

Then, my next accessory movement, because I'm going to do probably three accessory movements then abs and then a finisher. My other two accessory movements are going to focus on maybe on hamstrings. Then the next one would be glutes, high-rep glutes, ab work every training session. But, I rotate the ab work so that some days it's going to be heavy, low-rep ab work because I mean, the first muscle to contract on a deadlift is your abs.

So, if you have a hard time moving weight off the ground, spinal erectors, abs, so you need stronger

abs and you're not going to really get stronger abs by doing a bunch of unweighted sit-ups. You need to do a weighted ab work that's heavy, low-rep.

**Nick:** On your Instagram there's some heavy, low-rep ab work, and it's tough. I mean, the couple that I've seen recently were Decline Zercher Sit-ups.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah. That's my favorite.

**Nick:** Oh, man. Okay. That looks incredibly different.

**Laura Phelps:** Right. Right.

**Nick:** It looks like I might need somebody to put the weight into position.

**Laura Phelps:** No, yeah, definitely. Usually you have a partner and they put it on you.

**Nick:** And then on the [GHD](#) (glute hamstring developer), you were doing some side bends, you were having a woman do some side bends with a kettlebell. Those are really difficult moves, in and of themselves.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah. Definitely.

**Nick:** Pretty tough to imagine you can do much more than four or five.

**Laura Phelps:** So, when she was doing the side bends, that would be obliques. So, I would have a day for heavy, like the Zercher, Decline Zercher, then a day for oblique work. And then a day for, I mean, not a whole day, but I mean, like during that work...

**Kailan:** Training session.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, training session, during that training session, I would do oblique work. And then a day for static ab work, planks, different variation of planks, cable, static holds, anything static.

Then, I do have a day for higher-rep stuff, like weighted V-ups or hanging leg raises, things like that that are higher-rep, that way you cover all the bases every week. I just really like to have organized training, you know what I mean?

It's like, this day's for that, that day is for that, so that nothing gets neglected because think that's a common problem with some training programs maybe. Is that like there's so much work in the squat bench and deadlift and very little work in special exercises. So, you therefore you're neglecting certain weaknesses and that's how people will get hurt.

**Kailan:** Yeah. That's a big thing with injury prevention.

**Laura Phelps:** Right.

**Nick:** But at the same time, the world of those specialized exercises is so vast. It's so intimidating for people. And, it can be really difficult to look at and be like, well I'd much rather just have three things that I'm doing, just because I'm going to remember them.



**Laura Phelps:** I know. Exactly. They'd rather just have a program written that's like squat at this percent, percent, percent, and do a bunch of squats, do some leg curls, do some sit-ups and then go home. That's a lot easier to manage that type of program. You know what I mean?

It's like as someone doing it, as an athlete and because it's like you said, you don't have to remember all these things or know what this exercise or that exercise is. So, that's what makes my job harder, is that, I don't do programs like that. I do programs where it is like, it takes a lot more effort for me to write a program where there's all these exercises that are just so unique. And then having to either explain it to people or I make all these training videos so that at least I have a video to send them or link to them so they can see how to do it.

So, that's helpful, because I mean, when I go and I teach seminars, what I found is that people are like, we need to go over squat, bench, and deadlift. They're interested and they pick up on little things about technique. But when I go over accessory work, they're so interested. They love it, especially CrossFitters because that's one thing that a lot of CrossFitters are missing is these special exercises, so they love it. They eat it up, they're writing it down, they're taking videos, they're like... A lot of people want to add this stuff and like you said, they don't know how or how to do it.

**Kailan:** There are so many options.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah. What should I do for my workouts?

**Nick:** So, after powerlifting, you got pretty seriously into CrossFit with a Westside emphasis.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah. Because...

**Nick:** Tell us about when you stopped competing and why and then how you made that?

**Laura Phelps:** Well, even during my powerlifting career, we had been helping Louie teach a CrossFit powerlifting course. So, CrossFit, they have these specialty courses, they've got powerlifting, gymnastics, weightlifting, all these specialty courses.

At the time there were just a handful, though. Powerlifting is just one of like few, so they brought Louie on to be the subject matter expert for powerlifting. So, for a while they, all those courses were held at Westside and they were happening pretty frequently. And so, people that wanted to sign up for it had to come to Columbus, Ohio and take it at Westside. And so, we would go, and we would help him teach these courses.

And Louie, I mean, if you've ever heard him talk, I mean, he's so scientific, he's so smart that it just goes over people's heads sometimes, they're just like, what did he just say? So, we'd help translate what he said. And then, after a while, CrossFit wanted the course to start moving around to different other host locations, but still led by Louie. And, Louie didn't really want to travel, he likes to be in the gym, you know what I mean? He doesn't want to be out traveling around. He likes to be in the gym, working with his people.

So, he had us go around and start teaching the course. And so, this was back in like 2010, I think, or no, that's when we were at Westside. It was 2011, I think, or 2012 that we started traveling all the time to start teaching these courses at different CrossFit gyms.

So, here we're teaching people how to incorporate the conjugate system into CrossFit, and showing them how the conjugate system is very similar to CrossFit. You have all this variation, all these rotation of exercises and how perfectly married they could be. And so, it was going so well. I mean,

people were taking the course, and they're incorporating it, they're getting stronger, their CrossFit's getting better.

So, our gym that we have in Cincinnati, back in 2013, the space right next to us, on the other side of the wall opened up. So, we're like, let's do it. Let's open a CrossFit gym and put everything we're preaching into practice, and actually run these CrossFit classes that, where we actually use the conjugate system and show people how we really do it.

Because we're telling them and we're leaving it up to them how to figure out how to incorporate in the classes and stuff.

**Nick:** This is your lab now.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, yeah, exactly. It's like basically, yeah, it's our lab. So, we hired a great CrossFit coach, and coached her while we were getting the gym ready, we got her up to speed on everything. And, yeah, they won. It was like, no matter if you were a competitive athlete or someone just right off the street, everybody's doing the conjugate system.

Monday is max-effort lower. We're all rotating between this deadlift variation or a squat variation. Because some gym owners would be like, I don't know, I feel like my people are not going to... They want to [WOD](#), they want to get sweaty, they don't really want to throw chains on the bar and do weird stuff like that.

So, here we had this like blank slate. It was like this is what you're going to do from day one, not like we're going to change it up on you. We've already been opened for a long time, so we started doing it and people started loving it. Everybody loved it, everybody loved looking forward to max-effort days and getting stronger. And, this is also around the time... This is 2013, this is also around the time where it is starting to get more popular for women to be stronger, and it's not weird to be muscular anymore. It's slowly now starting to become cool. So, we got in right at the perfect time, so we'd have soccer moms coming in and loving.

They couldn't wait to deadlift and everybody starting to log their progress because with the conjugate system, we were doing so much variation, you might not do that same variation. Let's say it's like deadlift against chains, you're probably not going to do that same... conventional deadlift against chains. You're probably not going to do that same variation for months because the next time we come around to deadlift with chains, we probably do it sumo because we have them switching between sumo and conventional. There's so much variation. So, people are starting to log their stuff and then they're like, when it comes time to do it again, they're getting big PRs and they're posting it on the Instagram, they're so excited about it.

**Nick:** Somebody's like, what's your specialty plan? But then you're like, no, I haven't done that in months.

**Laura Phelps:** Right. Right. Yeah. And I mean, so it was really fun actually just to watch it all come together and watch people enjoy it. Incorporating the entire two dynamic-effort days, two max-effort days into normal classes.

And really training our coaches to be good at it because it takes... I mean it takes a lot of organization, they have to do a fast, but effective, warmup and I mean, they have to be already ready with set up with... because some of the setups are like so intricate, like safety squat bar, hanging chains, all these things that you can't set up in just a minute or two, so the coaches have to be prepared with everything kind of set up already. Start a time clock to get everybody through the max-effort in enough time, but not rush them through it. And then we do one accessory movement,

so you know, that accessory movement compliments... if we did a deadlift that day, we might do hamstring, you know, glute-ham raises or something.

Then, usually the WOD, we try to have that WOD be more leg-dominant. If it's max-effort lower day, it's typically a shorter, sprint-type WOD. We try to be really thoughtful in the way everything's put together, so that... since they only have an hour with us, and they're not going to be able to do all the accessory work that a normal conjugate program would have, we try to make that WOD, then, include something that would be complimentary to that day. So, the finisher if they have time to do it during class, like if the WOD's over and they've got five minutes to do a hundred band good mornings, they do.

But what we've found is even if they didn't have time the next class started, those people would go to the corner, they would do their good mornings. They want to do the whole thing. Which then led us to, since we have the Sweatt Shop, which is our personal training and powerlifting gym next door, what we found is that people want to do more. They want more accessory work.

They're like, "I love this. Now I want..." But I know that the conjugate system involves a lot more accessory work, so we started adding on kind of an add-on to your membership you can have access to the rest of the programming like all the other accessory work, you can go next door and do it at the Sweatt Shop. And a lot of people do that to this day. I mean, it's six years later and people are still doing all the programming.

It's evolved a lot. We've learned how to evolve with it and properly keep overhead working. Because it's CrossFit you need a lot of overhead strength, so we've adapted it and grown it and evolved it, and it's been awesome.

**Nick:** It makes me wonder what your training has looked like through this time, as well. I imagine it's grown as well.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, I kind of got away from that.

**Laura Phelps:** So, since I stopped, I... just kind of peer pressure, not peer pressure, but you know, like the CrossFit coaches, I love them, and when I would be powerlifting, they'd always be like, "Come on, do a WOD with us." I can't do that, I'm a powerlifter. I can't do that.

So finally, I never really intended to retire from powerlifting after that last meet that I did in late 2014, I just was like, "I'm going to take a little break." And that break turned into a longer break, turned into a longer break. My training group started growing with all these girls that, you know, were moving to Cincinnati to train in this group, and I just found myself more focused on coaching them. I was like, "I really enjoying coaching them." You know, they started getting really strong, and it was just like "Wow, I can train. I can get you to a world record." And then it's just like all of a sudden, I'm more interested in what they're doing during the workout than what I am. You know what I mean?

So, there was never... after that meet I was like "I'm retired," nothing like that. It just kind of organically happened. During that time, like I said, the coaches would always be like, "Do a workout." And I'd be like, "Okay, maybe I will." Because, actually, the last two meets that I did were at 148. I'd gone down a weight class. I've gone up and then down. So, 165 was my, that was where my body wanted to be, but I did some meets where I didn't cut weight and stayed in the mid-170s. That's why I have the squat world record and the bench press world record in the 181 weight class because those were just meets that I did without cutting weight. If you look at it, I only did 770 at 181.

**Kailan:** "That's it?" [Chuckles.]

**Laura Phelps:** It wasn't like having the extra weight helped me, you know? You know what I mean? I actually did better at a lower weight class.

There was a competition I did a couple of years before retiring. My body weight was really up. It was like into the upper 170s and then 180. And so, I was like, "Well, if I just gained a couple pounds I can be in the 198 weight class." You know? Because you just have to be over 181.2, I think, to technically be classified as 198. So, I decided to just keep my weight up there like that and do a meet at 198 and I was miserable. I was just like bigger than I've ever been and just like uncomfortable and whatnot. But I was like, "If I do this..." Because I already had the world record in the bench press in three weight classes. "If I do this, I'll have it in four weight classes, which no woman has ever done." Maybe not even in three weight classes. I'm not sure. But for sure in four weight classes.

I always like to do things where it's like, I want to set this to where... because records are borrowed, they're not owned. So, it's just like, I want to set it so high so though that I can hold onto it for a little while. Yeah. Exactly. I was like, if I do four that should stick for a while. So, I did.

I got the world record in the bench press in the 198 weight class. Then after that meet was when I was I was like, "Okay, I'm going back down and I'm going down. Like I want to do down to 148 and see what I can do there."

So, the last couple meets that I did were at 148 and that was a struggle to get there. That's why those meets were not my best meets because those were the meets I felt horrible. I didn't make it through the first meet because I got sick that day. Kind of a long story, but I got sick that day and I didn't make it through that meet. The next meet that I did, which was the last meet I've ever done, I cut to 148 and I just remember feeling just terrible, you know? Because I cut from 162. So, that was a huge weight cut. That was one I was just like this was too much of a weight cut.

I made it through this and I broke the world record bench but not by enough, you know? It still stands at 440 but it should have been 500. That's what I was doing in training, you know? When people ask me if I have any regrets or anything, that's kind of one of them. I wish I would have just... and that was kind of what my thought process was after that meet.

I was like, okay, I'm going take some time and try to get my body weight down. So, that's why I let myself do some CrossFit workouts because I was like, I'll do short, 21-15-9-5-minute workouts and to try and get in better condition to try to get my body weight down so that I'm cutting from 153, instead of 162, and I would really want to do meets at 148. That's what I really wanted to do. Like I said, I just ended up being more focused on coaching other people and just kind of tired of competing, you know what I mean?

**Nick:** I can imagine.

**Kailan:** That's a long time.

**Laura Phelps:** It really just consumed my life for so long and affected a lot of things, just being very... you have to be somewhat selfish... at that level, or when you're trying to compete like that, so I just was like... it felt good to be focused on other people and not be selfish.

So, it just ended up being like I just never got the desire to go back to that. So, I just was like doing CrossFit workouts. This was 2015, yep, 2015. Did more and more, I still wasn't serious about CrossFit but we still have these coaches at the gym that just love having me do workouts with them.

It's so funny. To this day, they're still like, are you coming tomorrow morning? I'm like, "Yes!"

**Nick:** One of the perils of owning your own facility, I imagine. Because you can't really say no.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, I know. It's like I can't get away. I can't be like, "No, I'm not going to be there." I'm like, "I'm there."

**Nick:** You get to have fun, though, to a certain...

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, absolutely. It's very fun. That was kind of different for me. It was like people would ask... Louie couldn't understand that. He still doesn't understand why people would, if you've been the best at something, why you would do something else that you're not the best at. I was not the best at CrossFit. Never would have been the best but I kind of enjoyed that. It was kind of a nice break. It was like, I'm not the best at this. But I'm working out really hard to try to be better. It was kind of a different kind of approach. I really liked it.

I liked the community aspect of it. It was fun. Because I would mostly do team competitions so there's tons of local competition where we're at, and so I would get asked to do team competitions. It was just really fun because I could be the strong person on the team. That's what I enjoyed about team competitions with CrossFit is that, especially the competitions where it's like, you do this, I'll do this, you know. So, it became really fun...

**Nick:** You're the ringer.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, yeah. I ended up getting more serious about it later, 2015 and 2016. Started working out a lot again, like, all the other competitors and coaches are like, "Come on, come on, come on!", you know, but it just got to be too... I ended up hurting my shoulder which I never went and got it really checked... I mean, the physical therapist was like, you probably tore your labrum doing pull-ups. I just rehabbed it and was just like, I've got a knee that hurts, and all these things and I just was like, I want to be able to walk when I'm older.

I'm not blaming CrossFit at all. It's an incredible way to train at all. It wasn't the CrossFit's fault or whatever. It was just 10 years of putting my body to the test like that and then like, I just like I can't keep pushing my body like it. I just want to work out and stay healthy. Because I never was injured in powerlifting. Not once. Not once did I have an injury. I don't even remember having any aches and pains. It was incredible. I would just be like, I was just invincible.

Once I started feeling *not invincible*, I didn't like that feeling. I was just like, I like to work out and now when I do CrossFit, I just pick and choose movements that I... I won't do muscle-ups anymore. I won't overhead squat anymore. Things like that, you know? It's... no pistols for me. But I still enjoy... to do CrossFit every day. I train every morning with...

**Nick:** Every day. Okay. Interesting.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, every day. I love it. I start my morning at 7:00 with either, there's a Game's competitor at our gym, she's 62. I train with her. She's a total bad ass. She's incredible. Her name's Marsha. So, I train with her in the mornings and then also with Amanda Hardeman. She's a regional competitor. Trying to make her way to the Games with the new system that's really crazy. It's really, I don't understand it, but, and she's amazing. So, like the two of them push me really hard, still. I enjoy training with them so I start my morning with conditioning, or different, like I usually do like a WOD in the morning and then my powerlifting girls come in at 9:30 and I lift with them.

**Nick:** Okay, so...

**Laura Phelps:** It's kind of weird. It's kind of flip-flopped. Oh, yeah, I still do everything like that. Obviously, ideally, I would tell someone to do their strength first and then their conditioning after.

**Nick:** Vaguely blasphemous. I wasn't going say anything.

**Laura Phelps:** Yes, it's totally wrong but, for me, with my schedule, that's just what works for me right now. If I were trying to be serious about something, or like compete in something, I would never do it that way. I would do it the opposite way. But, for me, me just trying to be in shape and whatnot, it's totally fine. So, I do that.

And then I train with the girls at 9:30. The girl's group that I train with, like over the years, you know, because our gym is called The Sweatt Shop, so, for some reason, I don't even know how it happened, but the girl's group, the team name became Sweat Girls. We even have tattoos together that say that.

They just became this, kind of like, famous group of girls that trained together because this group of girls were just like pushing like crazy numbers. I'm training with them and I'm not trying to push crazy numbers anymore but I'm there and then we had two other all-time world record holders that we built at the gym. We had one that, I worked with her and trained her, I was like, you're going to be stronger than me someday. She's a lower weight class, she's 132, but I literally was like, I saw her and I was like, she's the person that's going to you know, break, not break my records because it's not in the same weight class, but the 11-time body weight total, I was like...I don't ever want that to be broken, but if it is I want it to be by somebody that I'm coaching, you know what I mean?

She did and now she's at like 11.45, I think 11.45, times body weight.

**Nick:** So, equipped then still.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, yeah. Obviously, I have these moments that I remember, you know, breaking world records and stuff but that's another pivotal moment that I remember is when she totaled 11.3, I think, when she broke that total it was something I'll never forget because it was, you know, like a really proud accomplishment for me, too. Not just her. Obviously thrilled for her, but I'm like, that's kind of when I was like, I know what I'm doing. I can coach other people.

So, that was one of my favorite moments, too, was when she did that. We've got another girl, Janine, who is a raw lifter and she has broken the squat world record at 620 raw. Which is absolutely monstrous you know, and she's got a 320 bench, and a 580 deadlift which was an all-time world record. That was huge for us because all-time deadlift world records are really hard to break. Those are records that stand for a long time and whatnot.

And Heidi, the 132, she also broke a deadlift record... and now we've got another girl, Andi, who just broke the 165 deadlift world record which I tried multiple times in meets and never got. It was at 584 and my best was 560 so in several meets I tried 585 and it just wasn't there, you know? And she just broke it. So, now we've got three girls at the gym that have all-time deadlift world records and it's just... that's huge. To have one at your gym is a lot for a deadlift, but now we've got three. So, that's pretty cool.

**Nick:** So, you represent this interesting turning point in powerlifting history, right. You were the only one when you started at the events you were at and now there are huge women's only events.

**Laura Phelps:** Right.

**Nick:** Right? I mean hundreds and hundreds of women just going to events. Records falling all over the place but just more and more people involved in this sport than ever. What do you want your legacy to be for this sport moving forward and where do you see this sport moving forward for women?

**Laura Phelps:** When I competed, there were a lot of meets I was the only girl. Or there might be one or two others. I remember telling someone, I was like women's powerlifting is dying. I totally remember that. I literally felt like I was the only woman in powerlifting. I was like, it's just me. Where's everyone gone?

I can't really pinpoint the year that would have been but probably 2011-ish, probably. Then, CrossFit, meanwhile, is gaining popularity, it's getting more popular. Then you're starting to see women doing CrossFit and enjoying the strength part of the class and, I don't really like doing the WODs. I really like getting stronger so you're seeing women cross over from CrossFit into powerlifting.

**Nick:** That's what Meg Squats told us. There's the CrossFit gym but then there was the powerlifting gym. I found myself upstairs more often.

**Laura Phelps:** Yep. Exactly. I totally, I mean, that's the only thing I can think of that really kind of brought women's powerlifting back was CrossFit. You know, people transferring over from CrossFit to powerlifting and then also [CrossFit](#) making it cool to be strong. You know, people are like, I love CrossFit. If you love CrossFit, you better love lifting heavy because that's part of it. You're going to max out at some point on something.

So, if you want to be better at CrossFit you have to be stronger. So now it's like, you know, you got women that, and the girls are getting more muscular and people are like, I want to be like so and so and she's jacked, you know.

CrossFit training is funny. The high-rep stuff like that is making women... that form of training is just, like, these women are like super jacked and so it's awesome because now it's cool. Now people are like, that's so attractive.

**Nick:** Right. It's totally redefined the amount of muscle that a woman can carry and be considered athletic. Exactly.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah. And not be looking like, look like a man, you know. I love that because I, unfortunately, a lot of my powerlifting career was during a time when it was not attractive. People thought it was gross and so, you know, I built some thick skin because I would read, back then we didn't have Instagram or anything. We had like forums and then YouTube.

So, you'd upload your videos to YouTube and you're all excited and then you'd read these comments from people that were like, "She looks like a dude." All that stuff. "Is that a man?" Like, only men can do... horrible comments. So, that's another thing too. When I see girls get upset about Instagram comments, just delete it, who cares.

You have to learn how to just be like, that person, who is that person? Who cares, you know what I mean? Focus on the tons of other people that think that what you're doing is awesome. The people around you that you really care about think it's awesome so who cares about some person you don't even know. That's what I had to start thinking because I would read these comments and I would just be like... it could really, I could see, I mean, you have to have a good support system around you. People that are building you up because you could read that stuff and it could really get to people. But thankfully, it's not that way so much anymore. People are really...

**Nick:** Thick skin. Good support system. Any other lessons for Kailan here?

**Kailan:** Yeah!

**Laura Phelps:** I know, yeah, really just having people around you that support what you're doing. You're just in it at a really good time because it's so fun and there's so many women in it and women that are getting into it. I was just over at the gym today and I picked a random, because I was doing the Instagram Takeover, and I picked a random woman out and asked her if she had any kids because I wanted her to talk about... if she had a daughter, like talking about International Women's Day, what example are you trying to set?

It turns out she does powerlifting. Her daughter, who's 11, does powerlifting. And I just picked a random woman out. It's just like, there's so many women now that are like... I mean she does it for fun so it's not like she's, she's not trying to be like a, I don't think she's trying to be like a serious powerlifter but it's to the point now where people are doing it for fun now. Let me just do this because I'm already in the gym training and I want to 1-rep max this and get stronger and see my lifts go up and set a good example for younger people or my daughter or this or that.

So, I thought that was pretty amazing and now, like I said, I would be the only person, like I thought in a dying sport for women, and now, I was like what can I do to try to like help bring it back a little bit so in 2012, I was like I'll try to have a women's powerlifting meet because in California, a friend of mine, she was having women's powerlifting meets and it was a little more popular out there.

She was getting like 20 to 30 women that would come out for a meet and I was like, that's crazy. Midwest, there's just like really nothing anymore and I would go out there to a couple of her competitions and I did it twice and kind of went out and just helped her with one of them and I was like I'm going to try to have one. I was like nobody's going to come and 40 people signed up. Day one, I would have the meet and day two I would have like a little seminar about women's powerlifting. We got a lot of people. I couldn't believe it.

Forty people did the meet and another 30 stayed for the seminar. So, I was like that's awesome. Maybe I'll have it next year. Had it again, it grew a little bit. Next thing you know, a few years ago we created a computer program where people could online register because before it was just paper registration. You send in your paper registration. So, we had online registration. We opened it up. I remember I would announce it, it's going to open up on Sunday at 5:00 p.m. and it sold out in a couple hours and we were like, whoa. Like 75 spots in a couple hours. The next year it sold out in two minutes.

The next year it sold out. Something happened with the computer program and it oversold.

**Kailan:** Oh, no.

**Laura Phelps:** It sold out to like 120. So, I was like "Oh, no, I can't have 120 lifters in one day!" So, I was like, okay, what should I do? Let's ditch the seminar on day two and let's have a two-day competition. We'll separate it from amateurs on day one, pros on day two. And so, we did that a couple years ago. It went really well, so we did it last year also. And now this year, the competition's coming up next month, April 13 and 14. I have 83 on day one and 60 pros on day two. That blows my mind that we could have a two-day competition full of women. It's a testament to a couple things.

The growth of women's powerlifting but also just our team of people that we have at The Sweatt Shop, the effort we put in to hosting these competitions and the reputation we've built to put on a good, fair competition with good atmosphere because people, when they come to do this competition, they're just like mind blown.



The energy is crazy because we host a couple other meets during the year, it's like men and women... I'm not dogging men or anything like that but when there's men involved it's just a little more intense. You put a bunch of girls together and they're screaming, they're cheering for each other. The energy is so outrageous. The room is full and people love it. People come out and they'll do their first meet there and they're just like, you know I love to give them an awesome first meet experience because if you give them a great first meet experience and they're like, if this is what powerlifting is like then I want to do this. I want to get serious about this. The energy is everything. We have it in the CrossFit gym so it's like, you know, awesome set up, loud music and we've got food trucks outside. Just little things like that, that it's like...

**Nick:** Great community.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, it's such an awesome community. It's what I look forward to all year is that competition. I mean, it stresses me out but it's one of those things I'm like stress out, stress out and once it's over I'm just like "Oh, that was so awesome!" It's really cool so we've got that coming up.

**Kailan:** That was one of the things that really surprised me when I first did powerlifting was the community aspect of it and how encouraging everybody was and outside of that, girls are kind of catty and other sports are super competitive but I've felt like, why are these people being so nice to me? We're in the same weight class, like you're trying to beat me and I'm trying to beat you but, and I think that was a big reason that I kept doing it, too, was just the fact that, like you said, the prep can be stressful but the day of it's just that meet day, there's something about it that's...

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, yeah. Because usually even if there's someone in your weight class and they're not as strong as you, they're, you know, they're happy for you because they're inspired by you. You're inspiring someone and they want to be as strong as you and it's healthy competition. They're like I want to beat her someday. In a good way, not like because I hate her or anything like that. You're motivating that person so it's a totally different thought process you know. And culture in powerlifting.

**Nick:** It's come about so quickly, too. I feel like it's just been in the last few years that it's exploded exponentially. Makes me think that there was just a massive need there that was being unmet. Just, all right, there it is. We've been waiting. Just like you were saying, you were waiting. My activity will find me.

**Laura Phelps:** I think for a long time it was "old school" powerlifters and those people weren't really used to the computer or Internet or being active on that. Sometimes, I get frustrated because sometimes I'll be like, "Gosh, put your freaking phone away and focus on your training. You don't need to film everything." You know what I mean? I'll like refer back, it makes me feel old, but I'll be like back in the day, we did not have phones and cameras, videotaping everything, we actually trained and trained hard. But it also has kind of helped, some people can take that too far but it has helped bring exposure to powerlifting.

I'm not really the greatest at social media but I do try to put out content and stuff just to help perpetuate that, keep bringing awareness to it. I talk to people all the time now that are like, "I think I might do a meet." They don't really necessarily want to be a powerlifter but they're like I just want to do that. So, more people are getting involved. If they're kind of done with another sport they're like getting interested in powerlifting.

Powerlifting is something you can do forever. It's literally, you know at Westside, Chuck Vogelpohl and Amy Weisberger both broke all-time world records in their mid-40s. You know what I mean?

They got their strongest... these two had been training at Westside, you know, 20 years prior to that. Twenty-plus years prior to that so it's not like they were just getting into powerlifting and their bodies are fresh. They've put their bodies through a ton for like 20 years and still broke world records in their 40s.

So, it's a sport you can do later in life so sometimes if people are young, it's like focus, you know, do powerlifting but focus on, if they're in high school or something, focus on sports. You've got your whole life to powerlift, you know, like let your body mature. But still do it because it's going to help your sports.

Do other things that you want to do first as far as your actual main focus.

**Nick:** Build that base.

**Laura Phelps:** You're going to get actually your strongest later.

**Nick:** Yeah, and that's the concern that we have sometimes with just the immediate popularity of powerlifting is that people aren't coming to it after having grown into it necessarily. They're finding it and making...

**Laura Phelps:** Later. Yeah, exactly. I know people that find powerlifting in their 30s, you know, mid-30s even and still have plenty of time to get strong and breaking all-time world records. I see it all the time. This is not a sport that you have to start when you're little.

**Nick:** Right. Do you feel like somebody who, you know, they're wrapped up in the mystique of powerlifting right now, a woman in particular, could benefit from spending some time really focusing on building that muscular base like you did? Or not necessarily, "Hey, I'm going to do a bodybuilding show," but, you know what, just kind of be a bodybuilder. Don't worry about it.

**Laura Phelps:** Yeah, no, for sure. There's nothing wrong with that. Building a solid foundation, you know, doing bodybuilding-type exercises just to build a good foundation before really getting into competitive powerlifting but there's also, depending on the program you do, there are programs where you can kind of simultaneously do that together. That's why I love the conjugate system because so much of it is special exercises so you're doing it and your dynamic effort work is based on percentages so it's like no one's asking you to squat or pull or bench super crazy heavy. It's all based off percentages and a lot of your training is accessory work and special exercises so you're kind of getting the best of both worlds. You're practicing your technique and whatnot.

Basically, it's adaptable. You could literally take the conjugate system for a beginner, adjust their main exercises like their main movements, into maybe not necessarily hitting one-rep max variations, kind of adjusting those type movements, but focusing on accessory work. It's a program that's built for longevity. That's what I try to explain to people.

There's probably programs where you're going to get stronger, faster. Like super fast-track but I was like, there's not a guarantee, but there's a good chance you'll probably end up getting hurt. You're not going to be in it very long. I'd rather be able to do this... I still do it even though I don't compete, I still do all the exact training with my group. Those girls are all trying. They're getting ready for the pro-am that we're having next month. They're trying to get ready for the WPO meet in October. They're serious but I'm still able to train with them even though I don't compete.

Even though my goals are completely different, it's a style of training that I will do forever.

**Nick:** Great to have you on the team. I think it's a really interesting partnership.

**Laura Phelps:** I'm really excited. I just want to share this knowledge with people and try to get more people where, not just powerlifting, but the conjugate system and doing it right.

**Nick:** Yeah, doing it right. Exactly. Well, Laura Phelps, thank you so much for meeting with us. How do people find you online?

**Laura Phelps:** Thank you. Basically, on Instagram [@queenbeepower](#). I'm working on a website. I'm always checking my DMs and stuff. If anybody has questions, I try to answer everything. [Lauraphelpstraining@gmail.com](mailto:Lauraphelpstraining@gmail.com), if people have questions. I put out training on [WODfollow.com](#). My actual training programs are on there. If you search "conjugate," you know, that's a subscription that people can subscribe to and I do personal coaching as well, individual coaching, as well.

**Nick Collias:** Wonderful. It was great to have you here.

**Laura Phelps:** Thank you, I appreciate it.

**Kailan Kalina:** Awesome!



## [12 EXERCISES FOR BIGGER POWERLIFTS](#)

The options are endless when it comes to choosing accessory movements and variations in training for competitive powerlifting. We turned to Team Bodybuilding.com members and veterans in the sport to find out what they think we should be doing for building a bigger total.