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PILOT ISSUE

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He gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the weak.

Isaiah 40:29





Interview with an Olympian: Cara Heads Slaughter

The first time I met Cara was on TV. Well, I certainly wasn't on TV but she was. I watched her clean what seemed like an immeasurable amount of weight, stand and then squat jerk it over her head. Considering I was new to the sport at the time, the fact that she performed this seemingly impossible movement made me a Cara Heads fan right away.

Cara boasts an impressive resume of athletic achievements earning for herself 8 National Championship Titles, 2 American Records, 5 World Team Qualifications, and the highly coveted, athletic title of Olympian.

Having enjoyed a successful, 18 year career as an Olympic-style weightlifter, what's next for Cara? I was fortunate enough to grab some time with her as she made her way through San Francisco, CA visiting with some family just to find this out.

INTERVIEW WITH AN OLYMPIAN: CARA HEADS SLAUGHTER

DF: Tell us a bit about yourself. Where did you grow up and how did you develop an interest in Olympic weightlifting?

CH: I was born and raised in Orange County, Ca. I developed an interest in Olympic weightlifting through strength training for the shot put and discus. My shot put and discus coach, Tony Ciarelli, introduced my sister and me to the Olympic lifts and strength training, and trained us both to compete as throwers, as well as Olympic weightlifters.

DF: Did you play any other sports growing up?

CHS: I played basketball and threw the shot put and discus in high school. At the University of California, Berkeley, I competed in the hammer throw as well. I was actually in the first women's competition for the hammer throw in the PAC-10 Championships.

DF: How serious were you about training when you began? When you went on to a full time schedule, how many days per week did you train?

CHS: When I first started lifting, I lifted to throw farther, not necessarily to compete well in Olympic lifting. I lifted mostly every day in high school (Mon-Fri). I lifted 4-5 days a week while I was a student at UC Berkeley and throwing the hammer on the track team. When I left UC Berkeley in 1997 and moved to Savannah, Ga my lifting turned to training. I wanted to compete well and excel. I wanted to be the best weightlifter I could be. I trained 5 days a week in Savannah. Even though I had lifted 5 days a week in the past, I didn't realize the difference between lifting and training. I was clear, at that point, that I wanted to train to compete in weightlifting at the highest level possible (which was only the World Championships for women at that time) and lift big weights.

DF: Can you describe your

routine when you first started lifting?

CHS: Our workouts included some version of the Olympic lifts every day. Lots of squats, presses, pulls, etc. I don't remember doing a lot of maximum lifts, but I remember being uncomfortable, a lot (laughs). What I mean by that is that I was out of my element; the bar was giving me bruises, my hands hurt, and I had to learn to be aggressive. I was never really comfortable with the weight. I was never really sure I was going to be any good at it. I was kind of timid and very passive in my approach. I wasn't fast. I wasn't explosive. I was thinking all the time. And I just thought man, this is hard and this is uncomfortable. But, I would look around and see my sister just getting the work done. I would look around and see the football players getting the work done. And I just decided that it didn't matter that I was uncomfortable because everyone else was doing it too. I remember squats -- back squats, front squats, power cleans, snatches, full cleans.

DF: Who were/are your coaching influences?

CHS: 1. Tony Ciarelli – Newport Harbor High School in Newport Beach, Ca
2. Michael Cohen – Anderson Cohen Weightlifting Center in Savannah, Ga
3. Bob Morris from - Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, Co
4. Dr. Kyle Pierce – U.S. Olympic Weightlifting Developmental Center in Shreve-

port, La

DF: Do you think Olympic weightlifting is for everybody?

CHS: It depends on what your goals are. If someone walks in and says "I want to do this [Olympic weightlifting]," I'm going to find out what their goals are and assess how they move. I try to meet people where they are, keep it in their front yard, if you will. Not everyone can perform the full Olympic movements for various reasons, but many can do a power position power clean or a power position power snatch. Are they doing a version of the lift? Yes. Is it the classic lift? No. If an athlete is having trouble getting into a full squat, then we work on balance and mobility so they can get



down into the proper position, before we move to the act of lifting even moderate weight. I think that we all should strive to move as well as we possibly can. If the position isn't solid, we may just work with the bar until it is. It's like this, I'm eager to work with the person who is committed to getting better at the lifts. I think Olympic lifting is for that person.

DF: How would you describe your training philosophy? Methodology?

CHS: Get better, period. As an athlete, I never arrived at the more popular conclusions that lifting was either going "good" or "bad" (I don't recommend that by the way). It never occurred to me to categorize it like that. Personal records and missed lifts both create opportunity. When I missed a lift in training or in competition, I believed I was an adjustment away from making the lift. If you are training to compete, the idea of things going badly can never take root in your mind, so it can never take root in your day to day training. I struggled with other issues, but my goal for training was to get better every day. Sometimes that improvement manifested itself in ways other than a PR set for triples in the snatch or a front squat PR for 2; sometimes it was just getting to the gym and training and maintaining my focus when my heart was broken – real talk.

DF: What about your coaching philosophy?

CHS: Train the whole athlete and be positive. Making somebody strong doesn't make them a good competitor. I try to train and develop the whole athlete so that they learn how to train and how to compete. It is a process, most definitely, but I want to help athletes succeed. I've seen too many phenomenal athletes fall by the wayside, because their mental training never caught up to their physical training. A "good" training session isn't always measured by the amount of weight lifted. If an athlete is breaking down mentally or emotionally, it's a good time to build some emotional muscle and train them to be resilient. They'll need it in the months and years to come. That is something I can personally share with my athletes.

I think most of my training partners in

the past, as well as athletes that I coach currently, would agree that I strive to create and preserve a joyful training and competition experience. When I trained as an Olympian, I strived to find joy in the work of training whether it was an exciting afternoon of max attempts, or technique sessions to try and learn the split jerk, again (long live the squat jerk!).

DF: When did you decide to focus on coaching instead of just lifting?

CHS: I retired from elite-level Olympic weightlifting in 2008. I started coaching full-time in 2009.

DF: You were part of the 2000 Sydney Summer Olympics. This is the first time women had a platform at the Olympic Games. Can you describe the experience? How did it make you feel?

CHS: Excited! Surreal. Humbled. All of those things.

DF: On that note, what advice do you have for young weightlifters across America who dream of competing on the national and/or international scene one day?

CHS: Take your time to get strong and learn the technique correctly the first time around. That way you don't have to correct bad habits -- that's difficult.

Listen to your body. Listen to your body in terms of what it needs to warm-up and what it needs for recovery. Just pay attention. It will tell you what you need. There's a certain piece of that you have to train to understand recovery and what you do with it. But eventually, when you're trying to go to a national level, you'll have put in enough hours to have something to go on.

Keep a journal. Write stuff down. Write down the thoughts in your head -- thoughts about what you think about competing. What's your self talk? Write it down. Are you saying the right things to yourself? Do you even know what you're saying to yourself? Have you ever tried to just write that down, capture it, look at it and make sure you're telling yourself what you need to tell yourself to be successful.

Surround yourself with people who are trying to rise to the top too. That is what I always did. Whether it was Savannah, the Olympic training center, Shreveport, I had a knack for riding the talent wave and it carried me sometimes when I needed to be carried. That's the benefit of being around people who have similar goals and who are fully vested.

DF: What advice do you have for new lifters just coming into the sport? Experienced lifters?

CHS: Beginning weightlifters - Take your time at the beginning. If there are classes available, go to the classes and get information. Seek out qualified coaching just so you hear the important cues in the beginning and cut your learning curve. You're going to find out things when you're supposed to find things out. You can't really fast forward that -- (laughs) I know I just contradicted myself -- but a qualified coach can help you be efficient in the learning process.

Experienced weightlifters - Be coachable. Sometimes when people settle into their groove or settle into the idea that they can do this, they got this, they're rising up and they're making progress, they may start to think they know everything. But really, they're still at the intermediate level where they can still be shaped and molded. So be coachable.

And, I would say that I know a lot of athletes that worked with one coach their entire career. I respect it and I appreciate it. But also, hear and get feedback from other respectable coaches. It doesn't mean you have to go and be with another coach, but take advantage of that coaching eye and hear it. It doesn't mean you can't then take it back and bounce it off your personal coach.

DF: CrossFit is shining a big spot light on weightlifting. You work with Mid-Atlantic CrossFit Games Regionals first place winner Christy Phillips. How would you treat a weightlifter versus a cross-fitter in terms of training technique and programming?

CHS: Well, it depends on when somebody comes to me. So if someone comes to me during the qualifying stages of



the games, we wouldn't work on any type of strength stuff. It would all be technique based -- just a couple tweaks here and there because you don't want to damage confidence. You want that to be in tact going into intense competition. If there are a couple tweaks here and there that will allow an athlete to make gains technique-wise, then I'll provide the athlete with that.

If I have time in a crossfitter's off season, which is what I did with Christy, we got her on a strength program and it was a grinder. If you're allowed to solely focus on Olympic weightlifting, the difference is what's going on outside of that platform so you have to take that into consideration. You have pistols, you have muscle-ups, or something that's advanced. You have to make sure the athlete is capable of doing all those movements and listen and pay attention to see if you need to make adjustments in the training. The biggest thing with Christy is that we had a lot of communication. We were constantly checking in. An athlete

like Christy Phillips makes my job easy.

If it was strictly an Olympic weightlifter, there are proven programs that can get results but you still have to check in with the athlete to make sure they have the developed work capacity to handle it. So just because a program will work for Olympic weightlifter A doesn't mean it's going to work for Olympic weightlifter B. It could put Olympic weightlifter B under the bus compared to Olympic weightlifter A. A lot of it has to do with constant communication for me. I think that's where the art is. I mean, programs are a dime a dozen on the internet -- so then why can't people move forward? Why do they get stuck? Lots of reasons. The art is being able to look at an athlete and know when they're starting to look beat down, when they're rhythm in the movement is off, when their misses are due to lack of focus and they still can lift much more weight that day and how to get them to do that. You have to see them when they're up, when they're down, and when they're a little tired. When you literally see that they're about to go under the bus, call it and make the changes if you need to make the changes -- don't be afraid to make the changes.

DF: What's your opinion on technique vs. greater strength?

CHS: You need both. I think you need to be strong and I think you need to have great technique.

DF: What are your current endeavors?

CHS: I run an Olympic weightlifting

coaching business called CH Fitness and Performance in Arlington, Va. I coach private, semi-private and small group Olympic weightlifting sessions. I coach an Olympic Weightlifting Club called CHFP Weightlifting. I teach 6 Week Olympic Weightlifting Technique Classes, 6 Week Olympic Weightlifting Intermediate Classes, Olympic weightlifting clinics and I coach Olympic weightlifting camps. Lastly, I teach coaches how to coach the Olympic lifts through monthly coaching sessions as well as weekend seminars. www.chfitnessandperformance.com

DF: What are your future plans?

CHS: To continue to encourage people to try Olympic weightlifting and to have fun with it. I want to help grow the sport as other coaches are doing and strive to provide quality coaching.

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