

12 / Judy Gedney — Petite but Powerful

JUDY GEDNEY has a grace and gentleness of spirit that would seem to some to be as appropriate in a weight room as Dick Butkus would be in a ladies' dancercise class. She has a diminutive stature — an asset during her days as a gymnast — and the sort of quiet, sunny disposition found only among the self-confident and truly happy. At 4 feet 11 inches, she has a pixielike quality to go with her charming personality, and she is a very popular college professor of physical education at Western Illinois University in Macomb, Illinois. But her gentleness and small size most certainly do not denote weakness; she has a body stronger than almost anyone else her size and sex in the world. Though she had a full life, Judy decided, at age thirty-nine, to become a powerlifter — a competitive weightlifter — and, as she'll tell you, she's loved every minute of it.

"I've been a gymnastics coach for about eighteen years now, and my husband, Roger, has trained with weights for approximately that long, which is one reason I think he still looks as wonderful as he does. But I never touched a weight until 1980, when I began to think of ways to rehabilitate one of the gymnasts who had radical knee surgery. It was Roger's idea to get her to work with weights and it sounded okay to me until he suggested that I work out along with her. I was hesitant, to say the least, because I was afraid I'd build a lot of extra muscle mass, but how glad I am that we put this plan into action; you can't imagine the changes it has made in me.

"Roger devised a workout for us, and we started in April of 1980. Within six weeks we noticed great improvements; my legs felt more solid, and the girl with the leg-strength problem was not only higher in her tumbling runs but the extra arm strength gave her more control in her other routines. All of this was more than enough to sell me on the benefits of training, but we all also noticed a big difference in the appearance of my body. I guess I'd figured that at forty nothing was going to change except for



Judy Gedney built a strength base for the world records that followed by spending years as a gymnast. Here she supports her husband, Roger, as he performs a difficult planche.

the worse, but you could see a definite improvement in the way my legs and hips looked after just six weeks, and I lost some of the fat that I tended to carry there.”

Judy’s metamorphosis led to a resurgence of the sort of competitive spirit that had fired her youth. As a teenager, growing up in Chicago, she was active in both dance and tumbling. “I entered Iowa University in 1958



Today, at forty-two, Judy is still limber enough to do all the stunts she did as a gymnast, such as this tricky handstand.

and was encouraged to try out for the gymnastics team. With my natural size advantage, I did pretty well during college. I did a lot of gymnastics clinics during that time, including some in South America.

“As we trained during that first six weeks, I was pleased to see my strength go up so quickly. We’ve tried to find ways to account for my unusual upper-body strength and the only thing Roger and I can figure out is

that my early work in gymnastics plus the years of spotting and coaching that I've done must have been giving me more of a workout than I thought. Coaching gymnastics is *hard* work. Your main job is to serve as the spotter, which means you spend 95 percent of your time catching kids who come flying at you through the air, turning them over, and then putting them down safely. When you do that for two hours a day, five days a week, and when they all weigh ten to forty pounds more than you do, you get a pretty good workout plus a lot of bruises."

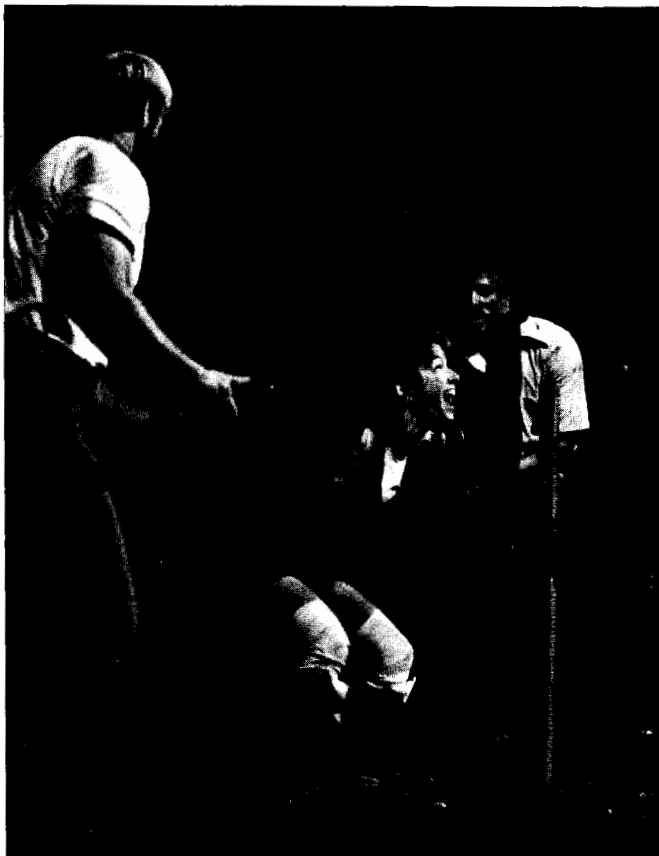
As Judy and her young friends trained, she discovered an extraordinary ability in the bench press. Masters lifting, for those over forty, was just getting organized for women at this time, and while Judy was far ahead of anyone else her age, she and Roger discovered that she was also ahead of most of the women *half* her age. "Neither of us were big followers of powerlifting," Judy recalls, "but when we realized where I stood in comparison to other women, I decided to enter a meet and see how I liked it."

So on May 25, 1980, Judy and Roger traveled to Lombard, Illinois; Judy weighed 96 $\frac{1}{4}$ pounds that day and after only six weeks of training she benched 115 pounds, squatted 180 pounds, and deadlifted 225. She won the first-place medal for her weight class and discovered how much she loved competing again.

Several weeks later, June 15, to be exact, Judy entered her second meet, squatting 170, benching 121, and deadlifting 236 pounds. She weighed 96 $\frac{3}{4}$ and again took home the first-place trophy. But this time her 121-pound bench had caused the powerlifting world to take notice. Though she didn't realize it at the time, she was within only a few pounds of the open-division world record. However, shortly after returning to Macomb, tragedy struck, and Judy had a wreck on her moped that left her with, among other injuries, a broken clavicle. While she recovered from her accident, she continued to train as much as she could, and in August took her women's team to a meet in Ames, Iowa. Did her performance suffer as one would imagine? Not much. She was successful with a 175-pound squat, a 120 bench, and a 230-pound deadlift. Her total was only 15 pounds less than her previous best.

As Judy's enthusiasm for competition grew, so did the ranks of her powerlifting team. Devout Christians, Judy and Roger decided to set up two different powerlifting teams, one to be called the Western Illinois Powerlifting Club and another, open to both students and nonstudents, called Athletes for Christ. "Roger and I have worked with students for years and know the pleasures that come from such coaching experiences. We've always wanted to find a way to combine our love of athletics with our love of God."

As coaches, one of the decisions Roger and Judy made was to take their teams to as many powerlifting meets as they could afford. In September of that same year, they traveled to Ottumwa, Iowa, to take the team to an open meet. Judy lifted in order to make sure the team scored well, then she, Roger, and several of the girls packed up, got in their cars, and traveled



Only 4'11" and 97 pounds, Judy seems dwarfed by the huge weights and the men who spot her as she drives up out of a heavy squat.

through the night to Purdue University, where the *very next day* she lifted again (weighing 94.5 pounds), setting her first official world record in the bench press with a 123.5-pound effort. Those not intimate with the psyches and bodies of powerlifters may not understand the rarity of this. Lifting in back-to-back powerlifting meets is akin to running the marathon or playing college or pro football two days in a row. You just don't do it. When you push the body to its maximum, you become not only physically exhausted but also emotionally drained. "I can't begin to tell you the joy I felt when that bench press left my chest and I knew I could lock it out. That world record was one of the most exciting moments of my life."

Since Judy's early example, highlighted by her historic world record, other Masters women (over forty) have shown that age is no barrier to the development of strength and health. Women from forty to seventy have entered competitions both on the Masters and open levels and there's no doubt that Judy's early example had a definite effect. More than one wife who'd lost her husband to the iron mistress found not only togetherness but also a

greatly improved appearance by joining her man in the gym. If someone so tiny and so pretty as Judy could be *that* strong, why couldn't they? It was a good question and more than a few women answered it by heading to the weight room with their husbands.

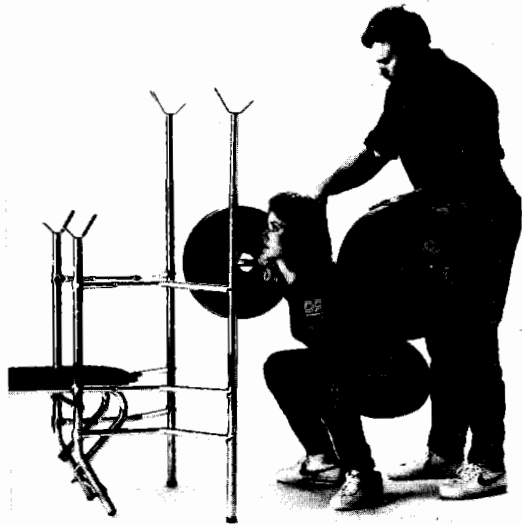
"I'm not a political person, and I'm certainly no crusader," Judy said recently at the National Masters Championships, "but if someone wants to use me as an example of what's possible through weight training, that's fine with me. I have never gotten into the real bodybuilding-type training that so many women do nowadays. I just stick to the basics. This is probably because I'm somewhat lazy, and short on time, and since I've started competing I've decided to train to maximize my strength, rather than to maximize *me* by building a lot of muscle. Roger is very thoughtful about our training programs, and for the past couple of meets we've been following a version of the periodization method Jan recommended to me." (See Chapter 13.)

The training has, of course, altered the appearance of Judy's body. When she started, she weighed around 102, but, as we mentioned earlier, the 102 was not the same quality as the 97 pounds she carries today. "I never let myself go, and even though I wasn't involved in any sort of regular exercise program since my years as a gymnast, I still tried to do a little something every day and to watch what I ate. I tried jogging several years back but it was so boring that it almost drove me crazy. One thing I do still work on is flexibility. I can still do full splits and backbends despite my 'muscles.' I don't spend a lot of time in front of mirrors and, as I said, I'm not training to create the 'feminine ideal'; but from what I can remember of the old days, my body looks far better than it did when I was a college gymnast. I have more gray in my hair than many women my age but I'm very satisfied with what the Lord has allowed me."

At age forty-two Judy has now lifted in thirty-eight meets and has broken the open-division world record several times in the bench press and once in the deadlift, with 309 pounds. The number of Masters records she has set is staggering. Thirty-eight meets within a three-year career is amazing, and Judy will be the first to admit that it's far too many for ideal gains. Most lifters generally limit themselves to three, possibly four meets a year, as the long training cycles used today work better with only occasional peak performances. Were Judy not the sort of loving, outgoing, compassionate woman she is, she would no doubt train as all the others do. But she has a greater plan. The same selflessness that has caused her to house a score of foster children through the years has also made her put the needs of her teammates first. If there's a meet, the team goes, even if it means, as it did that day in Iowa prior to her first world record, that it may disrupt Judy's own lifting. "Lifting is not my life," she says. "It's not some philosophy that I live by. It's a sport, and I do it because it's fun and because I think it helps people. I have a lot of other things in my life that are just as important to me and several that are *more* important. Sports are for fun. Like hobbies. I have

fun when I lift and the extra strength and fitness has brought me a lot of joy. But it isn't *everything* and it needs to be kept in perspective."

Jan: "When I recently stepped down as head of women's powerlifting in the United States, Judy took my place, and she plans to keep lifting, coaching, and serving as an administrator as long as possible. And with all the different Masters categories available now, it's possible that she could be setting records for the next thirty years." Says Judy, "I can see a day when I might retire, but it's hard for me to imagine not lifting for the sake of my health. I suppose that may come, but I plan on doing this for a long time yet."



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