

DOING WHAT SHE LOVES

An Interview With #1 Ranked Super Heavyweight Samantha Coleman

BY JOHN GREAVES III

In our culture, female strength is growing in popularity. Amanda Bingson recently graced the cover of ESPN's Body Issue. Wonder Woman is set to hit the big screen next year for the first time. The time when women were expected to sit quietly as men dared mighty feats seems long gone. Thanks to a sometimes much maligned sport that starts with a C and rhymes with ossfit, women are discovering that strong and feminine aren't necessarily polar opposites. Enter Samantha Coleman - a humble, funny woman born in the same Georgia foothills that spawned the legendary Paul Anderson. While she can't claim legendary status just yet, Samantha is making her mark as only the second woman to total over 1400 lbs. raw in competition.

I interviewed Samantha in between watching the squat, bench, and deadlift portions of the SPF [Southern Powerlifting Federation] Gritmas Classic where she was running the live feed.

Samantha, how are you doing?

I'm doing good.

I appreciate you letting me do this interview with you.

It's my pleasure.

Let's begin with the most important question...you have an amazing number of pictures of yourself on the toilet. Why?

Well, it's my office! No, when



I was growing up and even now, I've always loved bathrooms. I don't know why; it's my sanctuary.

Well, you're probably not going to get bothered in there.

When I'm at work, I call it my office. It's kind of one of those off limit places, but I like to make it open. Not in a distasteful way but...

Well it's where everybody goes . . .

Yeah, it's like I'm about to take a picture in the bathroom. Plus, that's where I have

time to post stuff.

What do you really do for living?

Right now, I'm a collector. I hate saying "bill collector" because it has a negative connotation but...

I was hoping that you would say something like bounty hunter. That would have been awesome!

Well, I did do something like that but, no, it turns out that I'm really good at helping people come up with solutions to their problems.

Is it that the job gives you some flex-

ibility for your powerlifting career?

Right. I've learned that it might not be exactly what I want to do, but it may provide me with the opportunities that I want later on down the road.

You have a background in law enforcement, right?

Yes. The guy who hired me for my very first job said that he hired me for my size. Not that he knew I was strong, but he noticed the way I carried myself - you could tell that I was strong. So, that was why he hired me.

Ok well, enough fun. It's time for me to get to work. How old are you, and how long have you been training for strength sports and competing in powerlifting?

I'm thirty-five, and I've been strength training since I was about thirty-two.

What weight classes and federations do you compete in?

I compete in the super heavyweight class which is anything over 198 lbs.

What are your best lifts? Competition and in the gym?

Competition

- Squat w/wraps - 578.5 lbs.
- Squat w/sleeves - 535 lbs.
- Bench - 356.5 lbs.
- Deadlift - 527 lbs.
- Total - 1420.5 lbs.

Gym

- Squat - 585 lbs.
- Bench - 356.5 lbs.
- Deadlift - 540 lbs.

You grew up in the gym with your dad who was a football coach and personal trainer. Who did he coach for? Did he coach at the high school or college level?

He coached at the high school level. He coached football, but I'm sure he coached more sports than this - he also coached track.

You were a track athlete. Is that



how you got into it [having a dad who coached track]?

Yes, that is how I got into track. I did discus and shot put, and in college, I added the hammer to it.

What were some of your numbers in track?

In discus, in high school, I think it was 131 or 132 feet or something like that - I was a state champion during my senior year. In regards to shot put, I got up to 36 or 37 feet. It wasn't really something I enjoyed doing too much. I was built to shot put, but I loved the discus. I didn't pick up the hammer until I was in college at the University of Georgia. I don't remem-

ber my numbers - everything was in meters back then. It might've been close to forty meters, or it could've been a little more, give or take. I know that I'm still on their website in the Top Ten. I don't even know how I'm still there, but I am. That was something I just picked up like, "Oh, this is fun". My coach there was Don Babbitt - he's a world renowned Olympic throws coach, and he's extremely meticulous. He wanted me to be exclusively hammer throw. He saw the potential in me, but I was stubborn. I didn't really flourish that much in college. I tried to, but I ended up transferring to Clayton State University. They were just starting a track program, and



it was fun to be part of a program that was just beginning. I like being a part of new things, and I kind of get the chance to help build it. So, I did the hammer, discus, and shot put for them, and up until recently, I held their records until another remarkable young lady took them. Then I went through what I like to call my twenties and didn't return to any kind of athletics until recently.

Hammer thrower, Amanda Bingson, was selected as one of the ESPN cover models for the 2015 Body Issue. I realize that we're still talking about a naked picture of a woman. However, given that she's not the stereotypical size two fitness model, do you think this indicates greater acceptance of female athletes based upon accomplishments rather than how much skin they show on Instagram?

I think this demonstrates that popular media sources are starting to understand the power they have to influence the world around them. With that power comes a responsibility to showcase a more accurate representation of an athlete's form as it pertains to their sport. In other words, strength female athletes who are strong will look strong. I told

someone the other day that I want to leave a legacy, not a good butt picture, but I definitely wouldn't mind both if I could swing it! I'm a big fan of Amanda!

Piggybacking off of that, in powerlifting, some have been critical of the fact that oftentimes, less accomplished female powerlifters get more recognition because they may look good in a bikini, or they may post certain pictures on Instagram. On the other hand, some of the less aesthetic counterparts, who may have accomplished more, are ignored. Do you care to comment on that?

In general, female powerlifters who are accepted as attractive get more attention than a female powerlifter who is my size. However, that is not to say that they don't have a right to use that to their advantage, nor does it detract from their accomplishments as a female powerlifter, if they have any [accomplishments] to speak of. Shana Miller (formerly Ratcliff), Hannah Johnson, and Gillian Ward are all absolutely beautiful women who work hard, give back to their community, and have earned every single sponsorship or powerlifting achievement they have! If a woman

can push her image to overshadow her accomplishments as a lifter, then that's what she should do if it makes her happy.

With your track and field background, have you ever tried the Highland Games?

Yes, I have. I did very well. I was late for my very first Highland Game. I was doing the heavyweight throw for distance, and I almost broke the world record!

That seems like a pretty good way to start!

I think it's been expanded since then because that was almost a decade ago, but that allowed me to take three more attempts. That's how it worked, at least back then. They let you take more attempts if you win your event. So I've only competed in three [Highland Games], and I won all of the Games I've competed in.

So, you had a chance to turn pro in that, right? It's not like powerlifting - I mean, they pay for you to travel and everything.

I don't know if that's available for women. It might be now, but back then, it was kind of hard to get women to do it. It's a lot more prominent on the West Coast. It's something I would love to do again though.

You're friends with Becca Swanson. Who are some other powerlifters from the seventies and eighties, arguably powerlifting's Golden Era that you've met and interacted with?

Well, when I got into powerlifting, I went as far back as Becca Swanson and Laura Phelps. I mean, Laura Phelps is young, but she was one [Golden Era powerlifter]. Jill Mills - she's probably the one I looked to for correct advice. I just wanted to emulate her - she's well-rounded, very real, and she has a great work ethic. Again, I didn't start learning names in powerlifting until recently. I'd just see somebody and admire them without a name.

One man in your life, your husband and coach, Kyle, is also a pretty strong powerlifter. Do you all have a

friendly competition to see who will total more in meets?

Oh! All of the time!

Who's winning so far?

Well, he is. We're evenly matched on the bench. He has quite a few joint issues, so I take advantage of that [laughter].

Let's talk about how your training is structured. Kyle does your programming and Nathan King, owner of GritHouse Gym, handles nutrition for you both. Is that right?

Yes.

How do the two of them work together? Do you all pick a goal together, and then they put together a training and nutrition plan for the month? For instance, currently, you're trying to lose fat, so are you making your strength training work around the nutrition?

Nathan gives me a meal plan that he thinks will work for me. We found I can handle less calories when I follow a nutrition plan that includes more protein and less carbs. However, I do better with more protein, more fat. He will add things or take things away as he thinks I need it. If my weight loss is slowing down, we might take something away. Lately, I've been tired before lifting, especially when it comes to squats and deadlifts. So, we've added in something like a banana, for example. We adjust it as we go along.

How's the weight loss going? I know that you had what seemed to be some unscientific information posted on Facebook about using farting to burn fat. I hope that experiment is over, or that you'll at least on hold for the duration of this interview.

I'll refrain [laughter].

I mean, I'm not trying to hold you back...but I'm trying to hold you back.

It's going pretty well [the weight loss]. Since my APC [American Powerlifting Committee] meet, which was about two months ago, I've lost thirty-two pounds to be exact. I haven't weighed myself in about a week, but my measurements



are the least they've been since I started training at the Grit House. That's more or less what we're going by. The hardest adjustment hasn't been strength - it's been leverages. In regards to the squat, I have a much narrower stance now [due to the weight loss]. As for the bench, I have a much higher arch - I touch at a different spot. Deadlifting just feels better altogether. So, deadlifts are just coming into place nicely, but regarding the other two lifts, I have to make adjustments. Nothing that's impossible to overcome though.

Strength athletes don't normally try to lose weight unless they're about to retire, or they want to compete in a different weight class. So, which is it for you?

I want to be healthier, and I'm definitely not trying to go to a different weight class. I plan to always be super heavyweight. The weight loss is really just to improve the quality of my day-to-day life. During my last meet, I could really see how I didn't have the conditioning for the end of the meet - I just wasn't in good shape. As long as I can get my conditioning and nutrition in line, then the weight loss is just a plus. Yes, it makes the fat come off, however, it's really just to improve my athletic performance.

It seems now that raw lifting is becoming more popular. A lot of powerlifters are starting to use body-

building in the off-season. Is this the approach you guys are taking?

That's what we did this time. Last year, I finished school and my goal was just to compete. I think we threw one or two extra meets in, and that kind of slowed down the conditioning work that I wanted to get in. We learned a lot from that, and we now know the importance of conditioning for me. It's just that I want to be a more well-rounded athlete. I used to play softball and basketball in addition to track, and not that I'll ever get to that again, but I would like to do strongman, which does require a lot of conditioning.

Well, you recently did your first strongman competition. You're planning on doing another one in March. Do you plan to become a multi-sport athlete, or is it just a way for you to get a break from powerlifting?

For one thing, it's just good conditioning. It makes me move more - I feel more like a well-rounded athlete by doing multiple sports. In a way, the training for strength sports is primarily powerlifting-based, so it allows me to do both [powerlifting and strongman], but it also allows me to change it up, and to see what I can do.

That makes sense. What are your favorite assistance exercises for the competition lifts? Let's start with the squat.

I recently discovered pause squatting

because I like to pause squat anyway in competition.

What a show off!

It's not a great habit in competition, but it's a wonderful tool to use whenever you're training. I just like doing it. I feel like I could take a break at the bottom of a squat.

So, it makes you feel more explosive coming out of the hole?

Exactly.

What about the bench?

I love playing around with dumbbells. They're kind of fun, and they help me work on my weaknesses. For example, my left side was really weak. There were some other issues – for instance, I wasn't keeping my elbows tucked in, but doing dumbbell work brought these weaknesses to the surface. It's all about stability.

What about upper back work? Do you like doing that?

Well, actually, I've done a little bit with Nathan, and that's kind of new. I've never really done anything other than deadlifts to do upper back work.

I know that you recently started pulling sumo. Is that to support your conventional deadlift, or are you making a permanent switch?

Actually, I started out lifting conventional. Then when I started competing, I switched to sumo because I thought it would take some pressure off of my back. Now, I'm switching back to conventional, but I've never really pulled heavy with it. I do plan on sticking with conventional because it feels more natural.

So, you're still trying to figure out what's best for you. What assistance exercises are you doing as you work through this process?

It's harder for me, but it's easier for Kyle [to coach] because he pulls conventional so he knows exactly what to do. We've been doing deficit pulls, which I do very well. Since I pull rather high hip, I do stiff-legged deficit pulls. We have thought about getting some help from Steve Goggins because he's a great deadlifter, and I think there's a lot that I can learn from him. Last night, we did rack pulls below the knees. This is my

weak point when it comes to conventional deadlifting.

Do you deload after meets, or are you one of those people who has to get right back into the gym?

Oh no! I have taken a week off.

Completely from the gym?

Yes and no. We've played around with taking a break. Usually I'm so busy that I don't have a whole lot of time, but I still try to stay busy. I'll try to do a lot of stretching – I'll try to get massages during that time because it makes it worse going back to the gym if I don't do anything.

What about during training? What things do you like to do to improve recovery between sessions?

Massages have helped me a lot. I have a lot of pinched nerves. I always have one in my left leg – I have a few in my upper back, which can make it difficult to lift. I find that it hurts the most in the bench press, but chiropractic helps a little bit. I find that deep tissue massage is just better. It helps me recover more quickly.

Where is the one place that you want to compete in geographically?

I'd love to compete in Australia. It looks beautiful. I don't know if I would do well, but I'd love to make the trip.

You and your husband do some online coaching. Is this something you both want to do full-time?

That would be awesome. I've always wanted to coach high school athletes in softball, basketball, and track. Basically, I'd love to coach the sports that I did.

The last two questions are a little more personal. I saw you get really emotional when you found out that a little girl was inspired by seeing you in your strongman competition. Is being a role model part of your motivation for competing?

It's probably ninety-nine percent of it. When I say ninety-nine, of course, one percent of it is my husband and I. More or less, it's because I picture myself as being that little girl and wanting to have [a strong female role model] when I was younger. I didn't always have that, so the fact that I can be that for someone, especially a young girl, it's the reason

why I do it.

For Thanksgiving, you smashed three pumpkins during a Facebook video in order to bring awareness to the problems of drug addiction and mental illness. Do you care to elaborate on why those issues mean so much to you?

Those are things that I've been through. December 24, 2009 was the last time I used drugs, and from about 2005 to 2009, I just didn't celebrate holidays. I just couldn't tell you what days the holidays were on. Even thereafter, I really didn't [celebrate] because my life seemed to be one tragedy after another. Even after I got clean, it just seemed to be a far-fetched dream to be normal and want to celebrate. The other day, I was asked at work, "If you could do anything in the world, what would you do?" and I said, "I'm doing it". Before, I never would have answered that question in that way. We didn't get to carve the pumpkin, but we got to be together. We got to buy the pumpkin, and even though my husband was very ill, we were together. So, it didn't matter if I got to carve them like I nagged him about doing – it didn't matter. What mattered was that we were there, and so I decided to smash them.

Sam, you're an amazing role model and athlete. It has been a pleasure talking to you. Where can people follow your training or go to learn more about you?

We can be found on Facebook as Samantha Joelle DiBois Coleman or Kyle Coleman. I also have a fan page where people can follow my training: <https://www.facebook.com/SamanthaDiBois-Coleman/>

We just created a Facebook group designed to have more interaction with the public. We are training several athletes in a private group and have found this to be the best platform to do so: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1666377610280019/>

Instagram: @colemanstrong

YouTube: Samantha Dibois Coleman

Periscope/Twitter account: @SamKyleColeman