

SUZANNE SCHWANKE

as told to Powerlifting USA by Mike Westerdal of Critical Bench



Suzanne Schwanke with her husband Mike



Tom Bodenbender, Ryan Carr, Suzanne Schwanke and Mike Westerdal at the APF Southern States

Hey Suzanne, where are you from, where do you live and what do you do for a living?

I am originally from Tarrytown, NY, which is where I grew up and spent the first eighteen years of my life. I moved to Tampa in 2002 to attend the University of Tampa. After I graduated with a bachelor's degree in biology I decided to stay in the area primarily because of the warm weather. Currently I am living in Tampa, FL, with my husband Mike, and I am back in school getting my bachelor's in nursing. In one year I hope to become a pediatric nurse.

Very cool. How old are you?

I am 25 years old and will be 26 in July.

What federations have you competed in?

For the most part I compete in APF because they allow double-ply equipment and the local competitions are run in that federation. I have done one competition in APA and I competed on amateur day at the PowerStation Pro-am this past August 2009. I would compete in any federation that uses a monolift and allows multi-ply equipment since that is what I have access to in training.

How did you first get started in powerlifting?

When I met my husband, Mike Schwanke, I was introduced to the sport. Up until meeting Mike three years ago, I knew very little about the sport. At the first opportunity that arose I went to watch Mike compete and thought to myself that looks like fun! I asked Mike if I could try it out and that week he took me to Tampa Barbell with him. I was introduced to a team of amazing lifters who were eager to teach me the technique and eventually how to properly use gear. After training for only three months, I did my first competition and got eight out of nine

lifts. I could not wait to begin training for the next meet and was hooked on powerlifting from that point on.

What is it like training at Tampa Barbell?

Tommy Fannon's Tampa Barbell is the best gym I have ever been to. Everyone is extremely helpful and I enjoy working out with people who have the similar goal of getting stronger. There are three monolifts, three competition benches, two deadlift platforms, chains, bands in many different tensions, and other machines for accessory work. We train in groups as a team. My favorite part is training with a group of strong guys; even though there is a lot of deloading of the bar, it is very motivating for me. It is also nice when someone is going for a single rep max—everyone in the gym stops what they are doing to cheer and watch to see if their teammate gets the lift. The team atmosphere is great and part of the reason I decided to stick with the sport.

I have to agree with you, it's a great atmosphere. What does your training schedule look like?

I train at Tampa Barbell Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturdays. Tuesdays I do back and biceps exercises. On Thursdays I bench in my shirt. I vary my bench workouts by doing singles, doubles, triples, bands, chains, and boards. After benching I do some raw chest and work my triceps. Saturdays I squat, deadlift, and train legs. I vary the deadlift by pulling both sumo and conventional, and add in some rack pulls. Mondays I train shoulders. I do 45 minutes of cardio 5 times a week along with abdominal exercises.

What's your favorite lift and why?

My favorite lift is the squat! It is the hardest,

most tiring lift requiring the most adrenaline and that's why I love it. I love the feeling of getting under the bar, un-racking the weight and then having that feeling that I am going to get crushed, yet managing to go all the way down and all the way up with it. Squatting gives me the most sense of accomplishment and it is also my best lift. I also like benching a lot, but I do not get the same feeling as when I am squatting.

That reminds me, congrats on hitting elite! What are your best numbers so far and what are your upcoming goals?

Thank you. My best numbers are as follows: 480 squat, 280 bench, 400 deadlift, 1155 total. Those were all done at 148 lb. My goal for my next meet is a 500 squat, 300 bench, 415 deadlift, and 1200 total. In the long term I would like to hit PRO for women in the 148 weight class. I still have a long ways to go before I can get there.

You have also competed in figure. Do you plan on doing that again?

I don't think I will do figure again. I did not place very well because I was too muscular. I do not plan on getting smaller and losing my muscle so next time I would compete in light weight bodybuilding. I would have a better chance to place and do well in that. I plan on doing another show in the next two years.

How did you like figure compared to powerlifting?

It does not compare to powerlifting. Powerlifting is so much more fun! The diet for a figure show is twelve weeks long, at least, and I was miserable the entire time. I had no energy to do the things I liked to do or spend time with friends and family. Also I enjoy competing and

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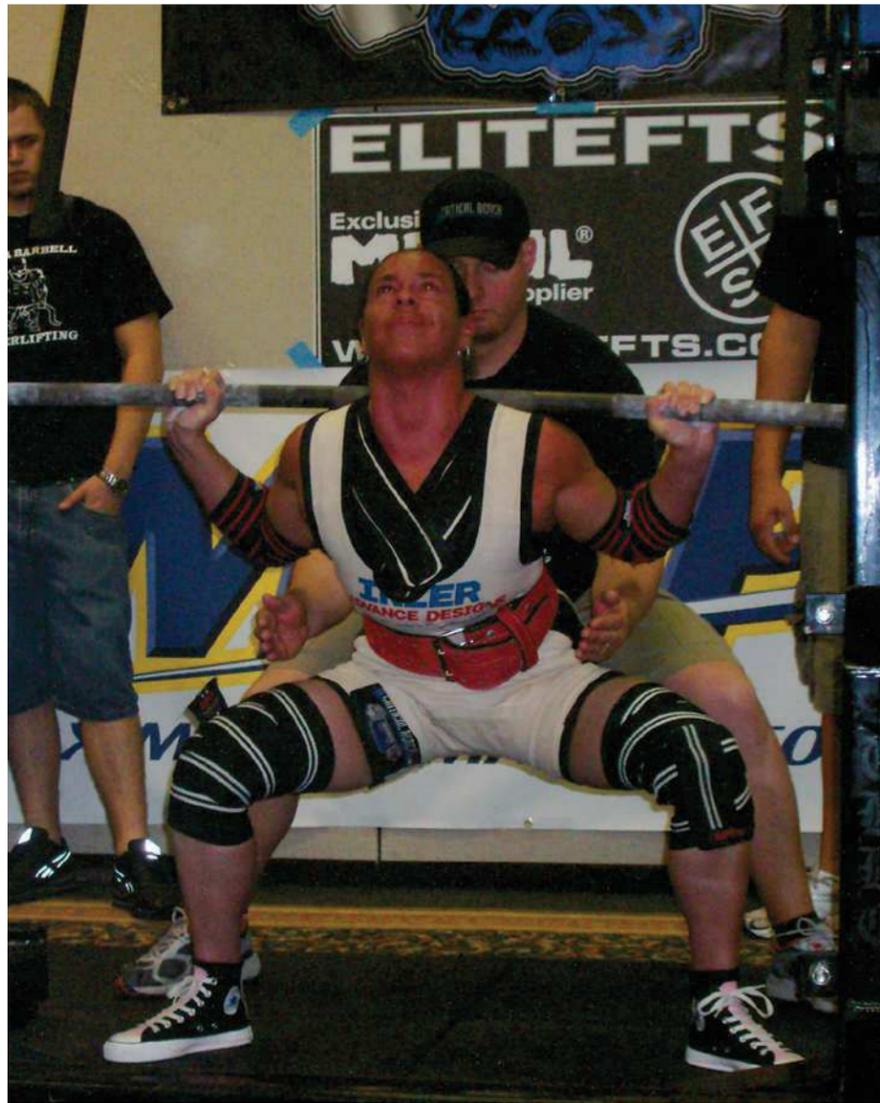
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Suzanne with an impressive squat at an Orlando Barbell Meet

having the adrenaline rush at meets. In figure you just walk out on stage and stand there smiling. There is not as much competition or fun as there is in powerlifting. I walked out on stage, stood there smiling and thought wow, this is it? All that work just to stand here. I would much rather be competing on the big day instead of just standing on a stage. I think bodybuilding would be a bit more exciting since there is a posing routine. I will stick to powerlifting and do a bodybuilding show just for fun. Also I trained for my figure competition alone and only had the help of a trainer. It is a lot more motivating to be in a gym full of friends that are there to encourage and push me, especially on the days I just don't have the usual energy. I enjoy individual sports, but like having a team to support and cheer me on.

What's your favorite thing to do away from the gym?

Well, the gym is pretty much my life, but I

would have to say spending time with my amazing husband. Even though a lot of our time together is spent in the gym or recovering from a workout. Outside of the gym we like to spend time at the pool, go to Busch Gardens, eat out, watch movies, and watch our old powerlifting meet videos. Mike makes me very happy and I enjoy spending time with him no matter what we are doing.

Tell us one thing about yourself, Suzanne, that not many people know about you.

Well, before I began powerlifting I was a competitive swimmer for fifteen years of my life. I learned to swim at age two and joined my first team at age six. I worked my way up to swimming for the University of Tampa, an NCAA division II school. In addition to studying for my degree, I swam 3 hours a day, double workouts, and did some weight training. My senior year I actually enjoyed the weight training workouts more than the swimming. I enjoyed swimming

and was obsessed with it just as much as I am obsessed with powerlifting now, but after 15 years I was ready to retire and be done. I missed competing though and having something to train for and got extremely lucky in more ways than one when I met my Mike and discovered powerlifting.

What do people at work or school say when you tell them that you can squat over 400 lb.?

I love seeing anyone's reaction when I tell them. Usually my squat is the most impressive number, although my 280 bench gets quite a reaction too. My favorite thing ever said was, "Remind me to never piss you off." Some people don't believe me and I either have to show them my video or a powerlifting magazine with my name in it. Regular gym guys are usually impressed as I can squat double what they can and bench the same amount. I am very proud of myself, but I lift for the pure fun of the sport and sense of accomplishment when I am able to hit a personal record in a meet.

Do you get nervous at meets? What goes through your head before an attempt?

I get extremely nervous at every meet and I even get nervous in practice on a max out day. I try to relax, but it's hard and I cannot help being nervous. Usually on my first squat attempt I am shaking, but relax a little after I hit my first attempt. The more nervous I am the better I do. I know that does not make sense since if you saw me right before a lift one would think my nerves would get the best of me, but somehow once my hands grab the bar all that energy gets transferred to my lift and turns into adrenaline. Before each lift I think of how much I want to get that particular number and how happy I would be if it was a good lift. I also take a few deep breaths right before I start the lift. When I am actually lifting I listen to my coach or handler and think about my form in my head. In order for me to be successful I need to make sure my form is correct.

Lots of lifters get nervous, sounds pretty normal. You mentioned you were a swimmer in high school and college. Did you ever think when you got older you'd get into powerlifting?

No, never, and the only sport I knew of was Olympic lifting and strongman that I had seen on television. I must admit I did not know powerlifting was a sport until April 2007. So, yeah, only three years. But I like to try new things especially when they involve competing. As I said earlier, my senior year in college I enjoyed weight training more than the swimming. My swimming background and eight years of weight training in a gym on my own definitely helped make my transition to powerlifting easier. I notice the carryover from swimming the most on the bench as that is all upper body.

What's your absolute favorite thing about the sport?

My favorite part of the sport is training with an amazing team. Everyone has each other's backs

and is always willing to help each other out. Every single team member at Tampa Barbell has helped me to become a better lifter in many different ways. I never have to worry about not having spotters, someone to call my depth, or watch my form. There are always people to help and everyone always seems more than willing. I also get excited and motivated seeing my teammates do well both in the gym and at meets. When one of my training partners hits a personal record then I feel like I am also going to do well. Also, it is awesome to be able to tell people your numbers and get the reactions you do.

If you could change something about the sport what would it be?

First things first, we need more females! There are usually only 1-3 females at any meet I go to. It would be nice for us to be able to compete in weight classes instead of coefficients like the men do. More strong females at the meets I attend would help push me to train even harder. Secondly, I do not like the way the sport is divided among federations. It is all the same sport whether you use a singlet or multi-ply. In the future I would like to see less federations and more consistency with the rules. For instance, below parallel means different things in different federations, making it harder for lifters to compete in a variety of different meets.

Maybe someone could come up with a formula that would equally compare raw lifters to those using multi-ply equipment. Our sport is not very big in the real world because of this division amongst federations. I do not understand why your average person would not want to watch a competition on television of men squatting 1000 lb. or more. I would love to see powerlifting become big!

True that. Do you have anyone you look up to in the sport or anyone you're chasing?

My biggest idol is Shannon Hartnett. She is an amazing lifter and in the same weight class as I am. I would love to hit a 600 pound squat someday in the future. As far as the bench goes, I look up to Kara Bohigian-Smith. In Florida, I look up to Margaret Kirkland and hope to one day have the privilege to train with her. I have seen her compete at several meets and love to watch her lift. Laura Phelps-Sweatt and Becca Swanson are also inspirational lifters with amazing achievements. It would be an honor to one day have my name mentioned along with these top female powerlifters.

Is there anyone you'd like to thank that has contributed to your success?

First and foremost I need to thank my husband, Mike Schwanke, for introducing me to the sport and being patient enough to teach me the lifts

and help me figure out how to use gear. Tommy Fannon has made an amazing team-orientated gym and is a great coach. Even when he is training for his own meet he will take time out to help me or anyone else in the gym that needs it. Next I need to thank Corey Hood. Corey is a great helper and handler in the gym. For the past year he has helped me out with my gear, spotting, handoffs, and coaching. I would not have been able to PR in my last meet if it was not for Corey's help. I also want to thank Trenton Nelson for all his help at the meets and in the gym with my gear, calling my meet attempts, and coaching. Gearman has helped me with my deadlift and finally being able to hit 400. Mike Westerdal, Tom Bodenbender, Richard McKeefer, Nelson Castellano, and Brandon Novatko have all helped with spotting, adjusting gear, and getting me motivated for heavy attempts. Finally, my training partners Sara Bodenbender and Richie Fiol for helping me get through my workouts. I hope I didn't leave anyone out and want to thank the entire team.

Congratulations on just getting married, by the way. I'm really happy for you. Thanks for the interview and best of luck with your lifting. See you at the gym!

Thank you very much, and thank you to Critical Bench and Powerlifting USA for taking the time to interview me! ☺

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