

Excelling at weight training lifts Baird's spirit

Back in the 1970s, when the Mr. Olympia bodybuilding contest was shown on "Wide World of Sports," Kate Baird, like a lot of other kids, watched in awe.

"I just sat there fascinated," said Baird, 46, of Lewes. "I thought, 'I want to do that, and someday I will.'"

The desire remained, even as she married, became a mother and pursued a career in real estate. She had spurts of jogging and gym-going, but it wasn't until 2004 that Baird got really serious about becoming really strong.

She started bodybuilding, racked up wins immediately, and took up powerlifting the next year. Now, Baird holds a number of state powerlifting records for masters females in her weight class, and open records, competing against all ages.

That includes bench-pressing 255 pounds and dead-lifting 430 pounds, raw (without assistive gear) – each a state and world record. In training, she has bench-pressed as much as 315 pounds, dead-lifted 440 pounds and squatted 465 pounds.

Baird is among a growing group of female powerlifters.

"I like that [the sport] is just a matter of strength and

challenging myself," she said.

Powerlifting consists of three events: dead lifts, squats and bench presses. Some people compete in one event; others do all three. Athletes compete according to age, gender and weight class. There are different divisions for lifting "raw" – without any assistive gear that can allow a person to lift hundreds pounds – and different divisions that are drug-tested.

The International Powerlifting Federation held the first Women's World Championships in 1980, according to Lawrence Maile, president of USA Powerlifting. It is the sport's largest governing body and has 1,050 female members, about one-third of its membership. The group launched a women's national competition in 1984. Maile and others say stereotypes about women's strength are fading.

"While there are those who are ideally suited to strength sports," he said, "the only real criteria for success in this is the desire to do this and persistence."



Courtesy of Kate Baird

Kate Baird, 46, of Lewes, dead-lifts 400 pounds during the 2006 First State Power Frenzy. Baird holds raw (without assistive gear) powerlifting world records in her class in the bench press and dead lift.

Broderick Chavez, chairman of the Delaware chapter of the American Powerlifting Federation, said he has seen interest from women grow on a local level, from teens to masters. Many of them have weight-trained for other sports, and powerlift in the offseason to maintain strength.

"If you even vaguely excel at it, the competitive aspect is good for anyone," Chavez said. With the weight, age and gender classes, "It's easy to make it a level playing field," he said. One hesitation many have, he said, is that the sport will compromise their femininity. That's a concern Baird is careful to address.

"You can look like a woman and act like a

woman and lift a heck of a lot of weight," she said. "I think a lot of women don't realize that they can be strong."

Joy Sleeman, 23, a Baltimore architect, did her first powerlifting competition last month, the APF's First State Power Frenzy meet.

"I'd always been really strong and could lift heavy things," said Sleeman, who started strength training as a high school swimmer. "I love competing at any level, and to challenge my body. It's an adrenaline rush. You get something you didn't expect from yourself in that moment that you push."

Jennifer Van Allen's *The Female Athlete* column appears biweekly in *The News Journal*. Contact her at jvanallen@msn.com.



JENNIFER
VAN ALLEN

THE FEMALE ATHLETE