



# The Hunter High School *Experiment*

One BFS coach's approach to getting young women super strong

BY **KIM GOSS, MS**

**W**hen I moved to Salt Lake City in 2004 to work full-time as the editor of *BFS* magazine, I eventually realized that in order to write competently about working with high school athletes, I would need to do some fieldwork. In 2007 I found the perfect learning environment at Hunter High School.

Located on the west side of Salt

Lake Valley in Utah, this urban school serves approximately 2,100 students in grades 10-12. I had an "in" at the school because BFS founder/CEO Greg Shepard had coached the football coach, Wes Wilcken, in the '70s. As Coach Shepard was working with the football team, I decided to see if I could work with one of the girls weight training classes. Heather Sonne, the

women's basketball coach at the time and now the athletic director, said she would be happy to have me as a volunteer with the Wolverine athletes and students. And I could not have asked for a better mentor.

"Heather Sonne is a masterful teacher and attends to any task given to her with great determination and vigor," says Maile Loo, the principal at



In 2009 the girls started learning the squat style clean. Shanece Leausa has cleaned 155 pounds, and demonstrates good form in this lifting sequence.

Hunter. “She is an excellent instructor, coach and athletic director and works tirelessly to accomplish all tasks requested of her! Her skills and integrity lend to the success of our physical education program and Hunter High School.”

Understand that I was not new to coaching, having been a strength coach for eight years at the Air Force Academy. But there I was working with genetically gifted scholarship athletes; here I would be working with a mix of younger athletes and physical education students. It was a different world.

One of the first things I learned is that if you ask a high school coach when was the last time they worked 40 hours in a week, the response is generally laughter. With academic classes, practices, games and mass quantities of paperwork, a 60-hour work week is more the norm. And without the help of parents to help run the competitions and continual fundraising efforts, many programs would simply have to be cut. Now, more than ever, a high school coach must have a strong passion to help kids and must expect to sacrifice much of their free time.

At Hunter there were two weightrooms. One was a facility with resistance machines and cardio equipment that was used for the required physical education classes called *Fitness for Life*. The other was a weightroom with free weights – a training gym for athletes – that was more my style.

Because I had a background in Olympic-style lifting, I wanted to get the girls in this class into doing cleans. The problem was that the layout of the

room wasn’t conducive to having a lot of athletes cleaning, because to move around, an athlete would often have to walk over the areas used for these lifts. If a lot of athletes tried to perform



When the lifting program began, the weightroom had to be reorganized so that more women could perform BFS core lifts safely. Here is an early photo of the Hunter High School weightroom.

cleans and squats at the same time, it would simply not be safe.

As BFS does with its safety evaluations, I made a proposal to rearrange the weightroom to establish a traffic lane around the room so that an athlete could move around without interfering with the workout of another athlete. It also established three large areas that would be designated for cleans and deadlifts. But the adage “Build it and they will come” doesn’t necessarily apply in high schools.

In the spring when I started volunteering at Hunter, the athletes who signed up for the class were primarily Heather’s basketball players. Because there were fewer than 20 students, the class was at risk of being cancelled, as it was an elective. At the time, these athletes avoided heavy squats, and the words “power clean” and “pull-ups” were not in their vocabulary. So there was a lot of teaching that needed to

be done.

That summer Heather and I tried to kick-start some interest in the class for the next year by holding summer workouts; unfortunately, only a handful of girls showed up and we had to cancel the program. Drat!

### **Girl Power, Hunter Style!**

In the fall we started a new class and asked the volleyball coach, Pam Olson, to encourage her athletes to attend. As interest in the program grew, athletes from other sports such as softball started to sign up. We also added more extensive and intense plyometric and medicine ball training sessions to the workouts.

Now attendance was never below the 30s, and that summer 22 girls consistently showed up for the summer workout. And some of the older equipment was replaced with new BFS equipment. As for progress, I saw a few girls reach 135 pounds in the power clean, which is a great standard for a high school girl – plus, the weight is represented by a barbell with the big 45s on each side.

The following year the program really took off, and class enrollment was in the 50s. To help motivate the girls I brought in guest speakers, such as Team BFS weightlifter Maegan Snodgrass. Having a teenager such as Maegan clean and jerk 220 pounds really inspired a lot of girls to train harder. And Maegan showed up for one of the last days of our spring class to present softball player Desiree Hoffman with an award T-shirt for being the 10th athlete in





Lusía Angilau



Lusía Angilau and Clotile Harris



Jazmyn Davidson



Molina Phear spotted by Monique King



Andrea Hammond (top) and Lindly Fernandez



The young women of Hunter High School are helping to set a new standard for excellence in the weightroom in terms of strength, technique and discipline.

the class to power clean 135 pounds! We also saw volleyball standout Clotile Harris back squat 315 pounds to an 11-inch box.

That summer Heather allowed Maegan to help out with my teaching, and we also saw a lot of other athletes, especially from soccer, join the training sessions. In all, we had 92 athletes spend time in the weightroom to get a head start on the next year's athletic program. We even had a member of the dance team in the class.

In the fall I decided to encourage the girls to start squat cleaning, as I believe it helps develop more dynamic flexibility. We also set aside 10-15 minutes every class period for stretching. Helping in both areas was high school

junior Chloe Van Tussenbroek, a Team BFS member who not only competed in national weightlifting competitions but also was a Level 10 gymnast. Chloe, who devotes 30 hours a week to gymnastics training, was home-schooled at the time and thus was able to help out.

What's more, that fall the school found the money to purchase two BFS lifting platforms along with a half-dozen new Olympic bars – so, to change the popular expression from *Field of Dreams*, our motto might be "If they come, it will be built!"

As far as how these classes affected performance, consider what happened in volleyball after attendance increased in our training sessions. Volleyball is one of the most popular sports in

Salt Lake City, and the competition is fierce, with many girls playing on club teams in the off-season. This fall the volleyball team was co-Region champions, and Coach Sonne says that this was unquestionably the most athletic team of girls she has ever seen. In fact, we had nine girls vertical jump 23 inches, with an all-time Hunter High School best of 27.1 inches by Lusía Angilau, who also power cleaned 150 pounds and appeared on the Sep/Oct 2009 cover of *BFS*.

And with so many of the girls doing full cleans, I expect to see at least 15 girls clean 135 pounds by the end of the school year, with perhaps as many as 10 doing 150 – they really





Many coaches are responsible for the success of the Wolverines' lifting program. Shown are athletic director Heather Sonne testing the vertical jump, Chloe VanTussenbroek coaching the clean to Jordon Cedarstrom, and Maegan Snodgrass presenting a T-shirt to Desiree Hoffmann for being the 10th girl in the Spring class to clean 135 pounds.

are amazing. As for further incentive, I've raised money to send at least a half-dozen Hunter girls to the National High School Power Clean Championships in Las Vegas this May. We have several girls lifting nearly 200 pounds in this lift, so we should really be able to put on a show.

I would like to thank Coach Heather Sonne for giving me the opportunity to work with these great young women. I'm proud of them and happy about the progress they've made and will continue to make. It has been a terrific learning experience for me, and I believe it has made me a better writer.

As for what's next for Hunter, currently Principal Loo plans to raise money to build a new, much larger weightroom to accommodate the increased demand to be part of a great weight training program.

Here's to building it so they will come! **BFS**



Jazmyn Davidson (left) and Lusía Angilau

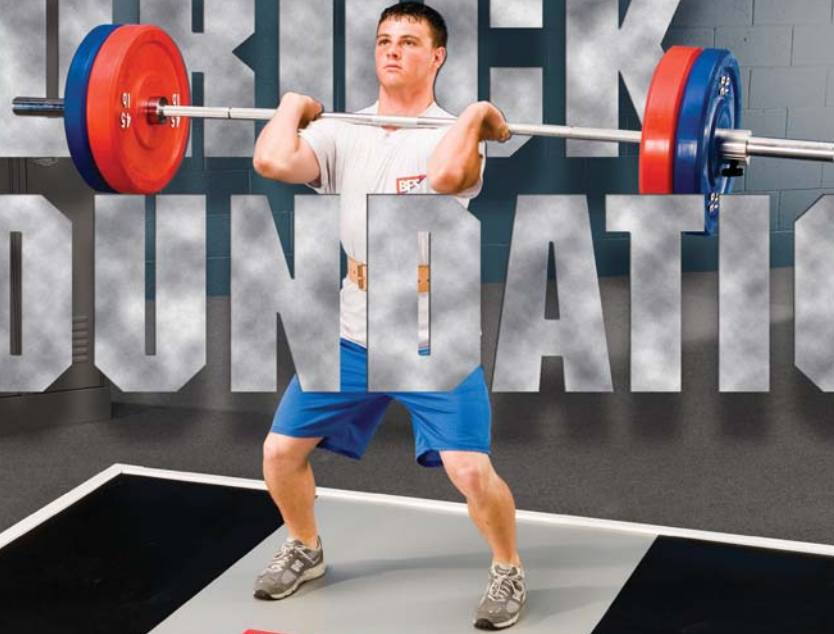
Faye Vaovasa

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A share of the regional title in volleyball was part of the payoff for hard work in the weightroom for the Wolverines.



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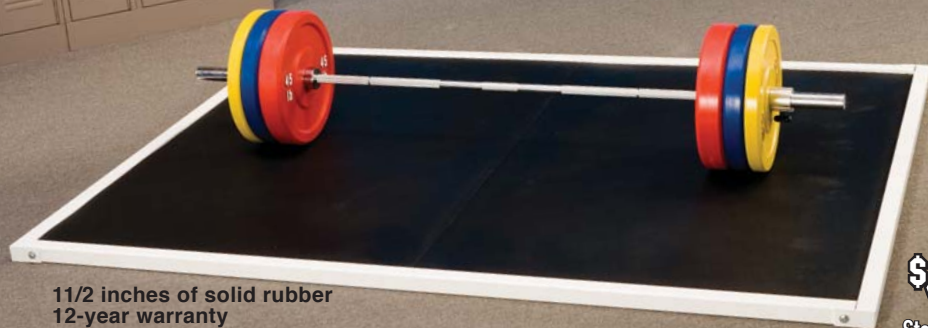
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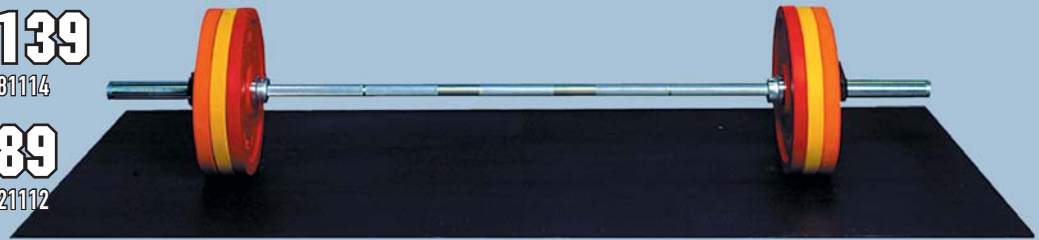
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