

The Cardinal Rules of Athletic Success



Great support from family and friends has launched Sarah Cardinal's countdown to greatness

It's exceptional to be one of the most promising high school athletes in the country in one sport, and it's even more rare to excel in five. To excel in five sports while also taking honors classes and earning a 3.92 grade average is almost unheard of. But Sarah Cardinal is a rare bird indeed, and that's why she has been selected as the 2004 BFS Female Athlete of the Year.

Sarah is an Olympic weightlifter and track

Sarah Cardinal is the 2004 BFS Female Athlete of the Year. Here she is shown with the medals she won in a recent weight lifting competition in Santiago, Chile.

athlete, competing in the discus, shot put, hammer throw and twenty-pound weight throw. Sarah

definitely inherited her weightlifting talent from her father. As a super heavyweight, Marc Cardinal has



snatched 369 pounds and clean and jerked 485 pounds and was a member of the 1980 Canadian Olympic Team. Unfortunately, due to the 1980 Olympic boycott, Marc wasn't allowed to compete in the Games. Then family responsibilities, plus intensive studies to become a doctor, eventually forced Marc to give up serious lifting. Sarah,

however, has a legitimate shot at fulfilling her father's Olympic dream.

As a 16-year-old lifting in the 165-pound bodyweight class, Sarah snatched 171 pounds and clean and jerked 222 pounds to capture the School Age National Records in the clean and jerk and total. On September 28, Sarah's 17th birthday, she competed in Santiago, Chile at the Junior Pan American Championships and tied her personal bests to win the bronze medal.

This year Sarah also earned a place on the Junior World Team, reserved for only the best of the best teenage lifters, but she passed on that meet in order to compete in the Idaho 4A State Track and Field Championships. At that competition she won the discus and shot put, breaking both records in the 4A school classification.

Idaho or Bust!

Marc Cardinal finished his residency in 1986



BFS 2004 FEMALE ATHLETE OF THE YEAR



and became a radiologist, but he quickly became frustrated with the health care system in Canada. “One day my wife saw a bunch of ads for radiologists in the US in one of my medical journals, and the next thing you know I had some job offers.” Marc settled on a job at a hospital in Blackfoot, Idaho, a small community of about 10,000 residents that Sarah calls “The Potato Capital of the World!”

Sarah comes from a large family that includes four older sisters and one younger brother. Sarah says her sisters were interested primarily in the arts, particularly music and dance, and even ventured into the world of beauty pageants—two sisters won the Junior Miss Idaho while another placed second. Sarah says that although she loved doing musical activities with her sisters (and could do well in beauty pageants herself—she bears a striking resemblance to the attractive teen celebrity Lindsay Lohan), she had other priorities. For one, in grade school she became obsessed with intramural sports. “I wanted to play every single sport, and I always wanted to beat the boys!”

Eventually Sarah and her father decided that Sarah needed to lift weights, especially when she started taking softball seriously. She says, “I wanted to lift so I would have better speed and more control and would be a more valuable player to the softball team.” Adds Marc, “I started Sarah on a basic weight training program when she was 12. I had her do benches, squats, curls and overhead presses—very light stuff, then later a few power snatches and power cleans.” Soon Sarah was bitten by the weightlifting bug. Her father continues, “After about a year and a half, when she was in the eighth grade, Sarah asked me if she could enter a meet. I had never planned on my kids being Olympic lifters because it’s so hard, but I gave in and entered her in a meet in Boston.”

That competition took place on September 29, 2001. Despite her lack of experience, Sarah made personal records with 93 pounds in the snatch and 137 pounds in the clean and jerk. She weighed only 123 pounds—how many female lifters can say they

clean and jerked more than their bodyweight in their first competition? “After that meet Sarah’s lifting really took off,” says Marc, “and I started coaching her on an Olympic lifting program.”

When asked if he was concerned about Sarah lifting heavy weights at a young age, Marc replied, “As a radiologist doing MRIs all the time I see a ton of kids coming in with significant permanent injuries, and I just didn’t want my kids getting into sports with permanent injuries. I told her we were going to ‘lift safe’—we were not going to use a Bulgarian system and lift bloody heavy weights every



Shown here jerking 220 pounds when she was 16 years old, Sarah is one of America’s brightest lifting stars and has the potential to qualify for the 2008 Olympic Team.

day until you blow up. We’d lift until control—stuff she could handle—and progress gradually.” This strategy is

working, and so far in her athletic career Sarah has never been injured.

Sarah’s track experience started in middle school, where she ran the 200 meters, high jumped and started throwing. “My dad helped me with the throws because he had thrown in high school.” Currently Sarah’s best throws are 41’ 4” in the shot put, 143’ 1” in the discus, and 145’ 4” in the hammer and 49’ 7” in the 20-pound weight throw. “I try to throw year-round, competing in indoor meets in the winter, and we put up a net in our garage to work on technique.” When asked what her favorite event was, Sarah replied, “I really like the discus because it was the first event that I really started to excel in, but the hammer throw is the most challenging and I like to take on challenges.”

★ BFS 2004 FEMALE ATHLETE OF THE YEAR ★



Marc Cardinal, shown here spotting, has always been Sarah's primary coach. He has set up a great home gym that enables Sarah to train year-round.

With a Little Help from Her Friends

Although Marc was a good thrower, he realized he had limitations as a coach and sought out help from others. Says Sarah of her dad, "When we hear things or we get suggestions, he'll ask about it and find out through different coaches what they think about it—we're always open to new ideas." One coach who has worked with Sarah with her throwing events is former world record holder and four-time Olympian John Powell. "I've trained with him a few times, and he's helped me out a lot," says Sarah. "John Powell is my role model for my throwing."

In lifting, Sarah uses her father's old training programs because she and her father have similar body types. "I have all the strengths and weaknesses my father had, and so it's easy for him to coach me because he knows exactly what I need to improve." Specifically, Sarah says her main weakness is leg strength and her main strengths are her flexibility and her jerk. "My father had an amazing jerk—he only missed one jerk in competition in his entire career."

As with Sarah's throwing, Marc actively seeks the help of other lifting coaches, and for the past three years he has encouraged Sarah to attend the National training camps in Colorado Springs. Says Sarah, "It's a great atmosphere, because you have a bunch of kids together who are all striving for the same goal—so we all kind of cheer for each other—and the coaches who've worked with me, especially Mike Burgener, Stephanie Ciarelli and Chris Leroux.

We eventually get tested on a platform that shows our bar trajectory and how much force we're putting out, so it's a really good learning environment." Although the camps have been valuable, there is one coach who has made the most dramatic improvement in Sarah's lifting: Urik Vardanian, an Olympic champion and world record holder who is considered by many the greatest lifter of his time.



Sarah receives throwing tips from John Powell, a four-time Olympian.

"Urik was a huge idol of mine.

My dad has all these old weightlifting magazines from when he was a lifter, so I knew who he was when I first saw him coaching his son at the School Age Nationals. When I saw him and his son at the National training camp that summer, he said if I came to his house and worked with him for a week, he could change everything that was wrong with my technique." Sarah accepted Urik's invitation for her and her parents to visit at his home in Moore Park, California.

When asked what Urik changed, Sarah replied, "There wasn't just one main thing; it was a lot of smaller things, such as starting with the bar out over



BFS 2004 FEMALE ATHLETE OF THE YEAR



the base of my big toe, and holding the bar looser so that I can get more speed.” Recalls Marc, “When we got to his home Urik told me, “I don’t like her technique—it’s terrible.” I didn’t think it looked that bad, but he made a couple of changes and it looked a lot better and she felt more stable. Plus Urik’s a great motivator and very calm, and he’s helped me coach Sarah at a few meets.”

Setting Priorities

Along with her brawn, Sarah is also a brain. In her first three years of high school she received only one B, earning a 3.92 grade average while taking several honors classes. “I don’t study a lot because I have a good memory,” says Sarah. “I study maybe an hour a day and that’s only when I have math classes because my math homework takes a while, but everything else is kind of easy.” And like her father, Sarah wants to work in the medical field. “I’ve always wanted to be a nurse, and my dad says [here, Sarah begins speaking in a low, commanding voice], ‘It’s the type of job that has really good job security!’”

Although Sarah hasn’t yet decided on a college, she does not believe she has to focus on just one sport when she graduates from high school. “My throwing events and my lifting really go well

Sarah maintains a 3.92 grade average and intends to pursue a career in the medical field.

together. I’ve noticed that the stronger I get in my lifts, the farther my throws.”

When pressed to predict Sarah’s future accomplishments, Marc says he wants Sarah to peak

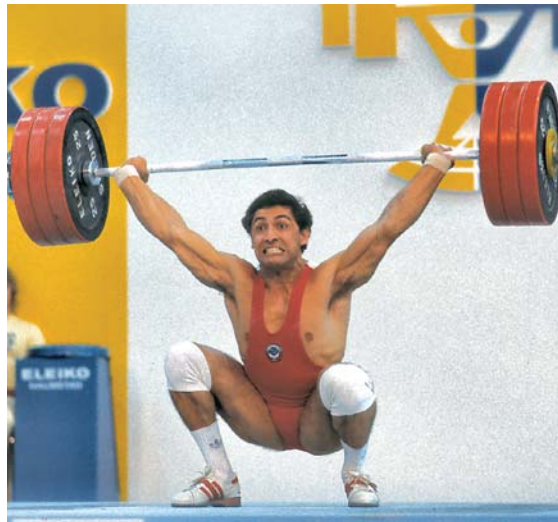


Photo: Bruce Klemens

Urik Vardanian, one of the greatest lifters in history winning seven world championships and the Olympics, has worked with Sarah on several occasions. Vardanian snatched 402 and clean and jerked 493 pounds weighing only 181 pounds.

four times a year in lifting, trying to add 2 ½ kilos (about five pounds) to each lift in every major meet. Now that she’s 17 and has dominated the School Age records, she has her sights set on breaking the junior records, which are currently 187 in the snatch and 237.5 in the clean and jerk. In throwing, she wants to win the state championships again and break the overall state record in the discus, which is 154 feet.

With all her activities, Sarah doesn’t have much free time but says her friends know the sacrifices she’s had to make. “The best thing about my friends is that they understand that I don’t have a lot of time. We talk on the phone and we hang out on the weekends, but they think what I do is really cool and they’re proud of me. When they see me in the newspaper they say stuff like, ‘I can’t wait until you go to the Olympics! You’re sooooo going make it!’ And I’m supportive of their activities—I’m there for them, and they’re there for me.”

Sarah will be participating in many competitions in the future, and she understands that there is a responsibility associated with athletic success. “When I’m representing my school or my country I want to set the best example that I can,” says Sarah. “I’m also grateful for the support of my family and want to show how much pride I have in them.”

Marty Schnorf, one of America’s most respected Olympic lifting coaches, had this to say about Sarah. “Sarah is one of the more talented all-around athletes we have, and with her maturity she is an excellent ambassador for our sport. We need more athletes like Sarah Cardinal both on and off the platform.” 