

## "Strong Like Her" Women, Strength, and Empowerment



Episode 58: "Strong Like Her"  
Women, Strength, and Empowerment  
with Haley Shapley

**Gregory Anne:** Today, we're going to talk about being strong in all areas of life, but especially in the arena of the body. My guest, Haley Shapley is a freelance author, a weight trainer, kettlebell lover, and she is the author of a book called "Strong Like Her".

Why don't you describe the book for me?

**Haley Shapley:** "Strong Like Her" is a cultural history about women and physical strength. I start in ancient times and go through today, looking at women and the many ways they've contributed to society throughout history that are related to physical strength.

So some of the stops along the way include the Olympics in ancient Greece. The circus rings of the early 19 hundreds. The sands of muscle beach in the 1930s, the marathon races of the sixties when women were competing for the first time, the weight rooms of the seventies, and then the running tracks and soccer fields and gymnasiums of today, where all kinds of women from all walks of life are pursuing physical strength.

**Gregory Anne:** You're talking about empowerment, how empowering it feels to be strong.

**Haley Shapley:** Yeah, absolutely. I think exercise is wonderful for many reasons related to health and our wellbeing,

but I think there's something specific about strength training that is really empowering, particularly for women who have never thought of themselves as physically strong. So I was working on this book and I had an opportunity to go to Iceland, to run in the Spartan ultra world championship.

**Gregory Anne:** What is that, the Ultra World?

**Haley Shapley:** It is a 24 hour obstacle course race where some of the best obstacle course racers in the world were there. It was December in Iceland, so it was extremely cold and dark. And the obstacles were challenging. You're carrying these heavy sandbags, big Atlas stones The terrain was incredibly steep.

There's a javelin throw and nets to climb and it was pretty intense. So I was there as a journalist, not necessarily as a competitor, but as part of covering the story, I had the opportunity to do one lap of this race because I found that I was going three days beforehand, so going for 24 hours would have been probably outside of my wheelhouse at that time.

But even just one lap was seven miles. It was definitely a challenge, but it felt amazing to be out there to be around all of these strong people and to be participating in this activity. While I was on my way back from Iceland, I had a layover in Chicago and I struck up a conversation with a man sitting near me and he was like, you know what?

You should meet my wife. She's very strong. And a few minutes later she wheels up with her luggage. Her name is Edie and she was in her eighties at the time. And she started to tell me about how, when she was 75, she was standing in the grocery store looking at this 25 pound bucket of kitty litter. And she could not figure out how to get it in her cart.

And she remembers she had to ask another customer to take it down and she thought ,this is ridiculous. I can't depend on other people to do these simple things for me. I'm going to do something about this. Around the same time she won a one month membership to a local CrossFit.

And they started her off with an assessment of what she could do. And she remembers she couldn't do a single sit-up. She couldn't get off the floor without using something to pull herself up. But she started a program of lifting lightweights and within a couple of weeks, she really could feel the difference in her body.

She could do sit ups and. She just kept going and she was able to get that kitty litter in the store. So once she got to 25 pounds, she set a goal for 35. Then she set a goal for 50. And I remember her telling me that on her 81st birthday, she dead lifted 121 pounds. And it just lit up her face to share this with me.

I could just feel her pride. I could feel that empowerment. And what I thought was especially cool. I interviewed a lot of elite athletes for this book and they're super inspirational, but what I loved about Edie is that she was talking about how great it was to be able to go out and get the mail, you know, to be able to stand and cook for longer periods of time, to be able to go grocery shopping and not have to worry about what you're buying.

And I said, That is where the magic of strength training really comes in is that it does bring an ease to your life.

**Gregory Anne:** Yeah. It's especially easy to not notice how less strong we are, how the muscles are weakening until we have to lift 25 pounds of cat litter. Or in my case, it's a 42 pound

bag ish thing. And all of a sudden I realized I could not get that 42 pounds. I could get it into the shopping cart, but once it's down there getting it out dammit, I'm going to beat this. And so of course I did what sounds like she did. I, I never really thought of even dead lifting anything, but I can now lift the kitty litter again.

And also you can speak to this, our stability. Falling and catching ourselves. If you're stronger your muscles are going to react in a way that might keep you upright versus somebody that doesn't have that strength right?

**Haley Shapley:** Absolutely balance is one of those things that just does tend to decline for everyone.

There's not a whole lot we can do about it except working on our strengths. This is actually something I've been working on with my grandfather, because there are

good studies showing that if you can stand on one leg for longer than five seconds, you radically decrease your chances of having a fall that is catastrophic because you do have that strength in your leg to be able to withstand any kind of shakes in your balance.

So strength training really can stave off a lot of those aging related issues that people run into.

**Gregory Anne:** And for the people listening, who can't imagine strength training, that woman, Edie I think her name was, she started small, right?

They gave her a program of what she could manage. So I would say to anybody listening, it feels like how the heck would I ever do. Don't try to do it on your own. Find somebody in your local, JCC or Y a health club tell them what you want to do. I want to get stronger. Can you help me?

And they will get an assessment going and so that you don't hurt yourself. Cause that's the danger trying to do it on your own. Trying to lift more than you should too fast, not great form, them. You can end up injuring yourself.

**Haley Shapley:** Definitely. And I think a lot of people are afraid of strength training for that reason that it seems quite dangerous to them.

And this applies across age groups. And actually strength training is safer than so many other activities we do, particularly sports that we play. If it's done in a safe and controlled manner and you have good form. So I always recommend for anyone who's starting out to. Consult with a professional first and just make sure that you understand those basics about form.

When you're doing a dead lift, you want to make sure that you're hinging at the hips correctly. If you do that it is going to make picking up a bucket of kitty litter or anything else off the ground so much easier because you're not going to use your back anymore to lift. You're going to actually use your glute muscles, the back body and all of that.

It will make things easier, but you've just got to learn those functional cues first.

**Gregory Anne:** Now you mentioned a CrossFit gym. CrossFit is one of those things that I love the idea of it, but whenever I've seen videos or Instagram posts, it seems really high intensity all the time.

Like I'm scared. Are there levels of within CrossFit? Can you always stay at a sort of modified level or do you have to progress into those high levels?

**Haley Shapley:** Definitely. And you know, CrossFit is a methodology for working out, but every gym does it a little bit differently.

So it kind of depends on where you go, but the whole basis behind it is. The programming is targeted at the person and there are modifications available. So if you can't do a burpee, which is, you know, getting onto the ground, laying down and jumping back up, you can stand and put your legs back and bring them back up and lift your arms over your head.

There are all kinds of like different ways to progress that until you get to the full burpees or maybe you never do. And that's okay. That's where you're at. So I think lots of crossFit gyms and just other general strength training programs have those modifications baked in. And, you know, Edie kept going to that gym and she said she loved it.

She loves working out around the younger people and they were always very respectful of her and really cheered her on a lot. So she got a lot of social benefits from it. In addition to the physical benefits that she was getting, because she was getting this interaction that was energizing her.

**Gregory Anne:** That's another good point about the idea of connection and committee.

Now that we are coming out of COVID gyms are starting to open up again. And for people that never really thought of themselves as wanting to go to a gym for anything, it could be yoga. It could be a dance class, could be weightlifting. that social interaction is super important as we age, especially coming off of a two year period where we've mostly not been socializing face to face.

**Haley Shapley:** Absolutely. I just think exercising with other people around at least is so much more fun. And I know during the pandemic, a lot of people have found success with creating home programs and, and gyms of their own. So I think everyone's different, but I am definitely somebody who loves to have other people around.

It creates a community, a bond. I talk a lot about muscle beach or I have a chapter about it in "Strong Like Her" and part of the magic of muscle beach in the thirties and forties, which is where physical culture in the U S really developed was that community aspect that they had, the fact that they all were out there every day, giving it their all, and that they trusted each other to do these kind of crazy tricks that they were doing.

They remained friends for their entire lives. And so I think that's just a great example of the power of having a community around you.

**Gregory Anne:** Yeah, you work out, obviously. You are a fitness minded person. It's like a part of the core of who you are. Right. Can you ever see yourself not doing.

**Haley Shapley:** I mean, I've had periods of my life where I have worked out less than, than I do now.

And more than I do now. I think part of what inspired this book originally is that when I first became an adult. And I was out in the working world. I found I didn't have those organized sports that I played growing up. I didn't have a team or practices to go to. And so I kind of was floundering a bit with figuring out what I wanted my fitness life to look like.

And so I started to give myself a challenge. So I ran a marathon. I trained for a triathlon. I summited Mount Rainier, which is a 14,400 foot mountain in Washington state. And then I signed up for a bodybuilding show, which requires a whole lifestyle change and a lot of working out. And that is when I got the idea for "Strong Like Her" just because people were saying a lot of interesting things to me, like, don't get too big because men won't like that, or don't hurt yourself or don't change your body in a way that would be unattractive.

And I was curious where we get these ideas about what women should look like and how much muscle is too much muscle. And who the trailblazers were, who really were pushing their athletic potential before it was a popular thing to do. So that kind of set in motion, the research for this book.

**Gregory Anne:** It's so interesting. I was asked to read a book that is in pre-publication. It's a dating book from a man's perspective. He's super well-known, does relationship, coaching, huge groups of people. But when he would describe somebody in his audience, he would often say she was so attractive.

She was thin, she was athletic. She was bright . The reason I was reading it is to make comments and this and that. And I thought, just like you said, what is athletic, what does thin have to do with. Was she a woman in her thirties who had a question would have been enough, but it's just ingrained in our society that women have a certain look .

And I love that you mentioned don't get too big because I used to think this, we're so used to seeing bodybuilder women who have very defined muscles that look

huge in comparison to what are other muscles that don't work out that much might look like.

And think it's unattractive. Why do we think it's unattractive? May not appeal to us, but it certainly attractive to some people and to the women that are competing. Generally, they like their bodies.

**Haley Shapley:** Exactly. And I went through that same, all those same questions myself. When I first started strength training, I had this idea in my mind that I didn't even really know was there that I didn't want to be big.

I didn't want to look muscular. Didn't want a wide back, that wasn't for me. But as I started to strength train, I cared less about that. I really was more focused on other things. I broadened my idea about what my own body could look like and what I was capable of. And so I think it's totally fine for people to want to look a certain way.

And if you strength train, you're not going to immediately change your body in a way that you don't like. And if you start to do that, you can always change your plan. So I think the fear of being bulky might stop some women from pursuing this, but I think that once you get into it, usually those fears subside.

And I find that women aren't as concerned about that once they kind of get those empowering benefits from strength training. even if you still don't want to look a certain way, you do have some control over that.

**Gregory Anne:** I didn't even know that there were women athletes back in Greece.

I'm thinking the Coliseum and lions and gladiators, but was there a through line in the women that you could talk to of why they did it? Many women, men exercise for health or for fitness, and then there are people that just really like to compete.

Did you find that there was an equal distribution or all of those elite athletes obviously want to compete, but you spoke to regular people as well. Why do they do it?

**Haley Shapley:** Yeah, I think honestly, everyone has different reasons and that is part of why I wanted to profile so many different women. In addition to the historical athletes who I chatted with when possible or profiled when not. I also feature 23 modern day athletes in the book who all have a beautiful portrait and they all

come from different backgrounds, they all have different body types. There are a wide range of ages, and that's just a show that strength doesn't look one way and there are a lot of reasons why you might find your way to strength and it does funnel from a different place, but kind of ends up at the same point I think.

**Gregory Anne:** Talk a little bit about osteoporosis and strength training.

**Haley Shapley:** Yeah. That's a huge concern for women as they age and there's great research showing that strength training can help. Another thing I wanted to mention, you talked earlier about like, oh, maybe I'm, I'm not interested in this particular type of strength training.

So we should probably talk about what strength training means.

It can mean working out with a barbell or dumbbells or kettlebells. It could be the weight machines. It could even be elastic bands or just your own body weight. Doing a pushup is a strength training exercise. If there's one of those things that doesn't appeal to you that's okay.

There are different ways to to get some resistance training in. So when you do some type of resistance training you know, your spine and your hips are quite vulnerable to osteoporosis as you age. But squats, leg presses, lat pull downs, seated, rows, back extensions. Those are all great ways to counteract that.

And there are also issues related to incontinence as we age due to estrogen levels decreasing. And that can also be helped with strength training, squats and glute bridges are a great way to address that. Anyone who's experiencing hot flashes. There's new research showing that vigorous exercise can actually make a difference in both the number of hot flashes, a woman experiences and how intense they are, which kind of feels counterintuitive to people.

You would think, oh, I should probably stick to calm exercise, but by pushing your blood to the skin surface, it helps your brain more efficiently deal with heat in times of stress, the fitter you are. So having some kind of intense exercise, like more intense than a walk, which can be great for other reasons, but doing something a little more intense than that can help with that.

**Gregory Anne:** Absolutely and, in fact, it benefits your heart. If you're doing weight-bearing exercises or weight training exercises in a way that pushes you to that place of not really hurting, but slightly uncomfortable. A lot like cardio.

**Haley Shapley:** Yeah. I think a lot of people think that the only way to help your heart is through cardio exercises, but strength is also working your heart and can feel a lot like cardio when you're doing it a certain way.

So I definitely feel like I've gone for a run after some lifting sessions and my heart is absolutely benefiting from it.

**Gregory Anne:** I had an opportunity when I lived in North Carolina briefly to have the Mr. North Carolina, as my trainer at the gym. I would have done anything he asked me to do. Anyway, that was the best.

Because he took me through a series of eight, 10 exercises, two times, three times, you know, I build up the repetitions and stuff, but I was always wiped out. By the time I got to the place where I was proficient at the exercises, I knew I had exercised. I figure if I'm exercising, I'm sweating, endorphins are happening, I'm feeling good, no matter what kind of exercise it is.

**Haley Shapley:** Yeah, absolutely. And like we've said before, exercise just in general is great. But it is good to make sure you do have some of that weight bearing exercise in there for the bone density for the balance for, for some of these other things we've talked about.

**Gregory Anne:** And we lose muscle at an alarming rate after like 45 or 50 when we lose our estrogen. The body wants to store fat as a woman starts to lose estrogen because fat produces estrogen so that we still have some cause it's so good for our bodies.

So then we have the double whammy of we're losing muscle, we might be a little tired because of all this hormone stuff. We're getting a little chubby in the belly because of this estrogen problem. So it really is in our best interests to find a fitness routine and add some weight bearing in there because of the reasons you said.

But also because I didn't know about the hot flash thing, but that's great for people, especially that don't want to take any bioidenticals or other kinds of things to stave those.

**Haley Shapley:** You know, the best strategy that we know of right now to counteract that sarcopenia or losing muscle mass is to have more lean muscle tissue, because this is going to not only burn more calories when you're at rest, so it can kind of counteract some of that weight gain that happens for all those reasons you just mentioned.

But when you have more muscle mass then losing some doesn't make as big of a difference. You have a little bit more of a buffer there. And so people who do have a lot of lean muscle mass while they're going into the age when it starts to disappear a bit, don't have nearly as big of a drop-off in it.

I should also point out it's never too late to start. So if you don't have a lot of muscle mass and you've already lost what you did have, you can still build some. And in fact, beginners build it way faster than anyone else. No matter what age you are, you'll get a lot of benefit at the beginning. So it's definitely worth incorporating no matter what point you're at.

**Gregory Anne:** And that would motivate me if I felt like I can barely lift this one pound weight. And my arm doesn't have any definition. If I'm going to put it on fast. Say a month later, I might see my muscle slightly defined in my arm. That would be super motivating for me.

**Haley Shapley:** Absolutely. I look back on the time I was a beginner to this all really fondly because I just got a PR basically every time I tried something and now that I am several years into it, that doesn't happen anymore.

There's still, of course, a lot of benefits to continuing on and maintaining what I have and working hard toward those incremental changes. But yeah, I think if you're a beginner, you have so much to gain early on and it's great to see those results really quickly

**Gregory Anne:** PR/PB. Yours is PB.

What is a PR?

**Haley Shapley:** Oh sorry personal record, so same as a PB, which is a personal best. Yes.

**Gregory Anne:** Any other one story you want to leave us with from your "Strong Like Her" book or people that you've interviewed that maybe might not have made the cut?

**Haley Shapley:** Ooh, that's a great question. One of my favorite interviews was with Catherine Switzer, who was the first woman run in the Boston marathon as an official entrant.

And I think her story is, she is a woman in her seventies now, and she continues to help women around the world gain access to sports, especially in places where they

don't have it so readily accessible. But she never set out to be a trailblazer. She just wanted to run and just wanted to prove to herself that she could do it.

But there's an iconic series of photos of a race director, trying to pull her off the course when they noticed that she was running, because at the time people did not think women could run 26 miles and they certainly didn't think it was safe. And that she heard all kinds of things like her uterus would fall out.

That she would start to grow facial hair, she'd have a mustache. All of these things and this really wasn't that long ago, this was in the sixties. So chatting with her, I tell her story in the book was just a real joy because she took that experience. She ended up finishing, even though she was completely scared because this giant man was lunging at her.

And then her boyfriend at the time kind of body checked him and he went flying off the course. And then she's worried about this guy, but also worried about her own safety and, and she still has 22 miles to go. But she did it and she became an elite runner and then she helps get the marathon added to the 1984 Olympics for women for the first time.

And has continued to do this work today and I'm just so grateful that we had women in the past who were willing to take these risks and push their physical potential because it gives us the opportunity today. Even when it doesn't feel fun to go to the gym. And even when I'd rather lay on the couch and watch Netflix or whatever it is, I have the opportunity.

I have the privilege of being able to move my body. Mostly. In a way that's not judged too harshly by society, although there are limits to that. And you know, for that, I am grateful.

**Gregory Anne:** Yeah. I agree. I remember back in high school, which was probably 300 years ago, Title 9 after we got out of high school, but playing sports, getting money for sports.

I went to private school, so we had the funding, but I remember hearing about the public schools didn't have this and that. And then suddenly Title 9 came along. Thanks to women trailblazers that wanted girls to have an opportunity, to have a gym to go, to, be able to race track if that was what they wanted, to play basketball.

So I love that you mentioned that the women that were trailblazers really made it so easy for us to complain on our way to the gym, but go there.

**Haley Shapley:** Exactly. And Title 9 is, of everything that's happened in history, probably the biggest turning point in terms of women's access to athletics in the U S at least.

And so that is when we start to see women actually being able to get into a weight room and to lift for the first time. And at first it was at the invitation of a man. Usually they had a boyfriend who lifted and kind of got them in the gym, but the seventies, Title 9 was in 1972, really was when all of this started to accelerate.

**Gregory Anne:** And for people that are listening, that don't know what title Title 9 is, it was a, it was a bill that was passed...

**Haley Shapley:** Yeah, it was legislation passed that required institutions that receive federal funding, AKA schools to have equal access to activities and programming and other things. Lots of things. Boys and girls or men and women.

But what it primarily came to be known for was leveling the playing field for sports because now schools had to give girls the same amount of opportunities and funding and all of that to play sports that they gave to the boys. And that was very radical for a lot of schools that didn't offer girls' programs or that puts so much money into their football programs.

For instance, football's a very expensive sport, especially at the collegiate level. And so these schools had to then have comparable offerings for women. And so we see just the rise in girls at the high school level who played sports just completely skyrocketed in within like six years. Because they suddenly could play and it just hadn't been an option before that.

**Gregory Anne:** I love that you did the history to trace, what started, who started it and then how it continued. And now here we are today. So you can, people can buy your books "Strong Like Her" on major booksellers websites?

**Haley Shapley:** Yes. It's available online and at indie bookstores as well.

**Gregory Anne:** Yay for the indies!

**Haley Shapley:** Yes, always like to support the indies especially during this time. And if ever, they don't have a book on their shelf, any kind of books, you can always order a book through an indie bookseller and they'll get it to you. So that's something I like to recommend.

**Gregory Anne:** And that is the beauty of an indie bookseller.

Well, Haley, thank you so much for being with us and giving us great information, especially about the science about weights and women's bodies and aging, really super important for the listeners to take that in.

So let's all be strong women.

**Haley Shapley:** Thank you so much for having me.

**Gregory Anne:** My pleasure. Peeps, I'll be back next week with another great interview. Be well till next time.