



THE **CrossFit** JOURNAL

FRAILTY, THY NAME IS WOMAN?

BY HILARY ACHAUER

In CrossFit gyms around the world, women deconstruct the longstanding myth of “the weaker sex” and continue the march toward true equality.

In 1973, 55-year-old Bobby Riggs—the 1939 Wimbledon champion—challenged 29-year-old Billie Jean King to a tennis match. Riggs said he could beat any female player even though he was in his 50s.

King refused at first, so Riggs began baiting King, daring her to play him. In July of '73, King finally agreed to a US\$100,000 winner-take-all match, with an additional \$75,000 for each player in ancillary money. The tennis match, dubbed “The Battle of the Sexes,” took place in front of a crowd of 30,492; an estimated 90 million people watched it on TV.

“I’ll tell you why I’ll win,” Riggs said. “She’s a woman, and they don’t have the emotional stability. Women play about 25 percent as good as men, so they should get about 25 percent of the money men get.”

Although the odds favored Riggs going into the match, King dominated from the beginning. She won all three sets—6-4, 6-3, 6-3—and threw her racket in the air when the match ended.

“I thought it would set us back 50 years if I didn’t win that match,” she said afterward. “It would ruin the women’s tour and affect all women’s self-esteem.”

Women’s equality had a long way to go in 1973. Most women could not obtain a credit card, and if they did, it was because of a man’s signature. Second-wave feminism was just gathering steam, with the goal of changing the commonly held belief that women’s biological differences from men made them intellectually inferior, more emotional and best suited for domestic life.

Throughout history, people have used the argument that women are weaker than men to hold them back from physically demanding jobs in the military, police forces or firefighting departments. That’s changing.

In August 2015, two women graduated from U.S. Army Ranger School, one of the most grueling training programs in the military. These women met the same tough physical standards as the men and were the first females to complete the program.

The realization that strength is a social construct might be the hallmark of feminism in the 2000s. The worldwide influence of CrossFit—from the affiliate level to the CrossFit Games—has played a role in this shift, helping to destroy the idea that women are the weaker sex.



Equality in CrossFit: Male and female CrossFit Games champions receive the exact same prize money.



Tai Randa/CrossFit Journal

Men generally carry more muscle mass and post greater lifting numbers, but pound-for-pound comparisons reveal women are not actually “weaker” in terms of physiology.

The Socialization of Strength

For much of its history, the feminist movement has focused on institutional, social and cultural equality.

“Most feminists have not encouraged the development of physical power in women,” Amanda Roth and Susan Basow wrote in a 2004 article titled “Femininity, Sports, and Feminism: Developing a Theory of Physical Liberation,” published in the *Journal of Sport & Social Issues* (3).

Still, Roth and Basow point out that “the strongest women are stronger than the weakest men in the same way that the tallest women are taller than the shortest men in terms of percentages.”

But in CrossFit gyms in which women are encouraged to lift heavy just like the men, the percentages might be even higher. On whiteboards in affiliates all over the world, women regularly post impressive strength numbers that put them ahead of many male members.

In affiliates all over the world, women regularly post impressive strength numbers that put them ahead of many male members.

In her 2000 book “The Frailty Myth: Women Approaching Physical Equality,” Colette Dowling attempted to dispel the myth that women are substantially weaker than men.

Dowling wrote that the myth of female frailty has roots in 19th-century medicine, and it’s had lasting, damaging effects on the perception of women’s strength (2). But are women actually weaker in terms of physiology or have they just stayed out of the weight room because lifting heavy “isn’t ladylike”?

Patty Freedson wrote a chapter titled “Muscle Strength and Endurance” in the 1994 book “Women and Sport: Interdisciplinary Perspectives” edited by D. Margaret Costa and Sharon Guthrie. In it, Freedson compared the relative strength of men and women.

In absolute numbers, men are stronger than women, particularly in the upper body. However, men’s superior strength comes from their body mass. Pound for pound, women’s legs are actually stronger than men’s, and the difference in upper-body strength isn’t as great as it initially appears.

“When leg press strength is expressed relative to lean body mass, female strength is slightly greater than male strength,” Freedson wrote (1). Women leg-pressed 110 percent of what men could leg-press per kilogram of lean body mass.

Freedson cited a multiple-regression analysis that found 97 percent of the gender difference in strength is a result of muscle mass.

“The findings strongly suggest that if training status is similar for each sex, muscle mass differences account for nearly all of the gender differences in strength,” Freedson reports (1).

With that in mind, much of the perceived strength difference between men and women is likely sociocultural. Traditionally, women have used less of their upper body than men, and as a result those muscles are underdeveloped. Women and girls are perceived as weaker than men, so they are not asked to use and develop their muscles. It’s a cyclical pattern, reinforcing a status quo that isn’t supported by physiology.

The statistics of the 2015 female CrossFit Games competitors show numbers that are beyond most men. Brooke Ence and Kara Webb both report their max snatch as 205 lb. Lindsey Valenzuela reports a 255-lb. clean and jerk. All weigh about 150 lb.

Women also compare favorably with men in other aspects of fitness beyond just strength.

“When the 7.5-inch height difference between Florence Griffith Joyner and Carl Lewis (is) factored into their running speeds, it turns out that she runs at a relative velocity of 0.28 heights per second faster than he does,” Roth and Basow wrote in “Femininity, Sports, and Feminism” of the Olympic sprint champions from the ’80s (3).

In an article on [Active.com](#), Steven Munatones reported that women perform better than men in open-water swimming competitions, especially as the distances increase.

“In particular, the average time of women in the Catalina Channel is seven minutes faster than the average time for men. What is notable is that the overall records in both directions are held by women,” Munatones wrote. The Catalina Channel swim is a 20.1-mile swim between Catalina Island and the Southern California mainland.

At the 2013 Reebok CrossFit Games regional competitions, men and women used the same weight for the first event, Jackie: 1,000-m row, 50 thrusters with a 45-lb. bar and 30 pull-ups.

“I had the fastest women’s time in the whole world,” said five-time CrossFit Games competitor Elisabeth Akinwale, whose score of 5:59 would have bested 17 of 48 men in the Europe Regional. She can also clean and jerk 240 lb., snatch 200 lb. and deadlift 425 lb.

Many coaches to elite-level athletes have said women are better at high-skill movements, Akinwale said.

“Recent studies suggest that estrogen buffers women against muscle soreness after exercise,” Dowling wrote on her website.

She continued: “Estrogen protection may help explain why women can endure longer exercise sessions than men.”

Akinwale noted women can work closer to their one-rep max than men can.

“I did a 20-rep back squat at 250 lb. I put that in the (one-rep-max) calculator, and it put my one-rep max at 450 lb.,” which she said is not accurate. “That’s because (the calculator is) based on men.”

While the gap between men’s and women’s athletic performance might not be as great as it seems, the focus of our culture is on male athletics. In almost all sports, male professional athletes get more airtime, more money and more sponsorships.

“Like education, work, religion, and family, the cultural institution of sports has the power to affect women’s status in society, and not necessarily in a positive manner,” Roth and Basow wrote. They argue that although women participate in sports as much as men, most mainstream sports reinforce the idea of male dominance (3).

Are Muscles Manly?

The CrossFit Games are an exception to the rule. At the Games, women earn the same as men and get equal airtime and media attention. Inside a CrossFit gym, women are taught to focus on what their bodies can do and to appreciate strength and athleticism.

This doesn't mean everyone is accustomed to seeing a woman with defined muscles.

Azadeh Boroumand finished 18th at the CrossFit Games in 2012. Formerly a college volleyball player, she had started doing CrossFit in 2009. She said it wasn't until CrossFit that she saw definition in her biceps, triceps and lats. As her body changed and became more muscular, Boroumand said she began noticing how people reacted to her athletic physique.

"A lot of people have this idea of what a woman should look like and what a man should look like," she said.

Boroumand said she'd get Facebook messages that said, "I like you as CrossFitter because you aren't too bulky and you don't look masculine."

"What does that mean?" Boroumand said she wondered. "I started becoming very aware of it. I started noticing how men are very intimidated by a woman who has muscles."

"In my last relationship ... I was constantly told that I looked too manly. So when I put on a dress I started seeing that myself. It took me about a year to stop caring about how I looked and to be more concerned about my performance again," she said.

Boroumand said she thinks CrossFit has had a role in changing traditional standards of male and female appearance and ability.

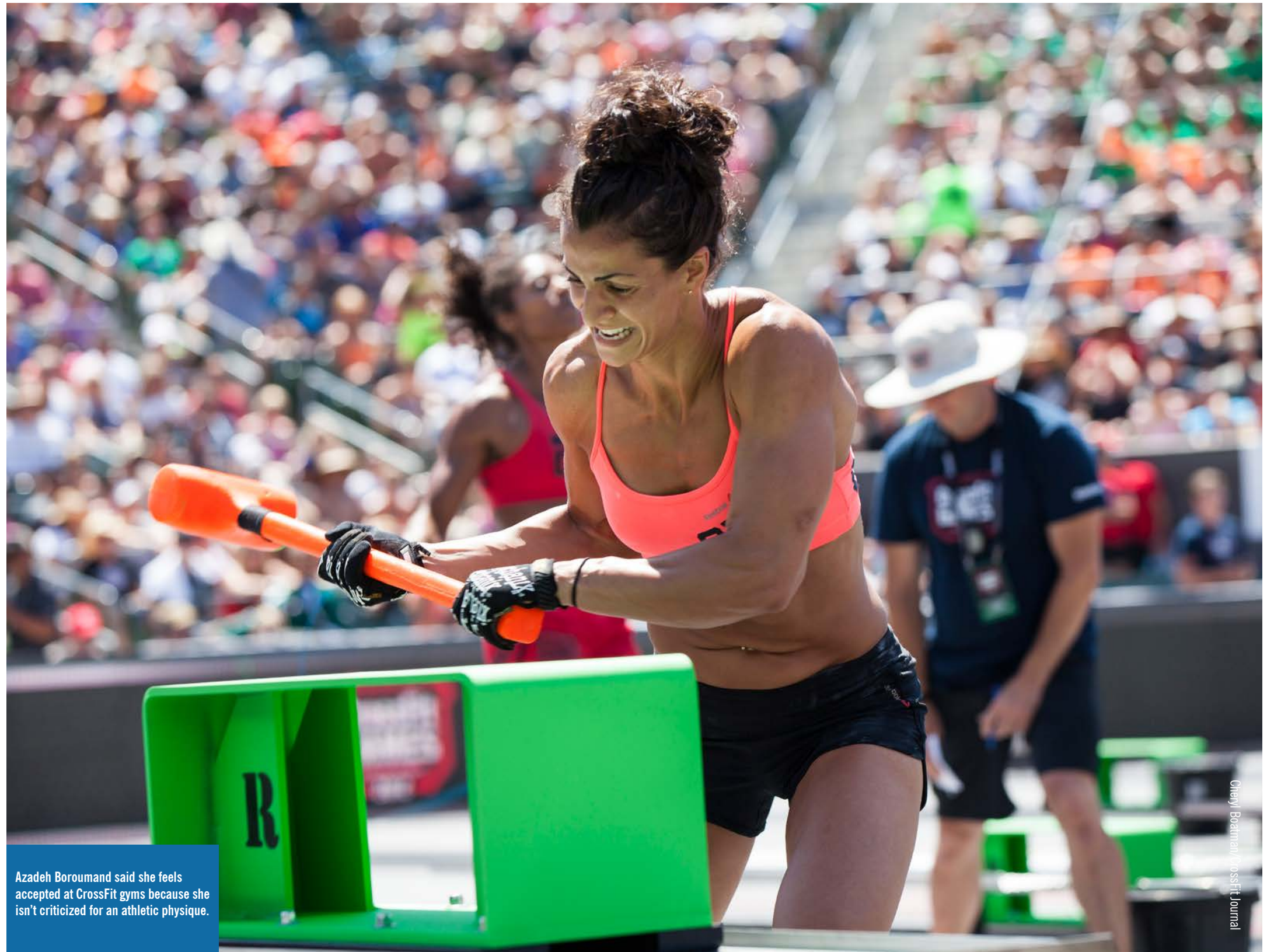
"I can honestly say that one of the only places I feel socially accepted is within the CrossFit community because I walk into a CrossFit box and I don't hear, 'Well, she's too muscular,'" Boroumand said.

Women in other sports aren't so lucky. In the summer of 2015 Serena Williams dominated the news. While most of the coverage was about her performance on the tennis court, the peanut gallery of social media [chattered about her body](#), debating the "manliness" of her 5-foot-9-inch, 150-lb. frame.

Then The New York Times entered the fray.

In July 2015, Ben Rothenberg wrote an article titled "[Tennis's Top Women Balance Body Image With Ambition.](#)"

A more accurate title might have been, "Serena Williams' Rivals Talk About Why They Don't Want to Look Like Her." The piece started off by describing Serena Williams' "large biceps" and "mold-breaking muscular frame" and then stated, "Her rivals could try to emulate her physique, but most of them choose not to."



Azadeh Boroumand said she feels accepted at CrossFit gyms because she isn't criticized for an athletic physique.

Cheryl Boatman/CrossFit Journal



Elisabeth Akinwale said she grew up around strong women and always tries to influence female CrossFit athletes in a similarly positive manner.

Thomas Campitelli/CrossFit Journal

Then followed a series of quotes from female professional tennis players and their coaches about their fear of becoming too muscular, equating muscles with manliness.

Agnieszka Radwanska is a 5-foot-8, 123-lb. Polish professional tennis player. Tomasz Wiktorowski, her coach, said she tries to stay as small as possible.

“It’s our decision to keep her as the smallest player in the top 10. Because, first of all she’s a woman, and she wants to be a woman,” Wiktorowski told Rothenberg.

German player Andrea Petkovic said she hated seeing photos of herself hitting a two-handed backhand because of her prominent arm muscles.

“I just feel unfeminine,” she said. “I don’t know—it’s probably that I’m self-conscious about what people might say.”

In response to the overwhelming negative reaction to the piece, the Times released a [follow-up article](#) detailing the shortcomings of the original article.

It’s tempting to dismiss the fears of these athletes, especially when Maria Sharapova said in the New York Times article, “I can’t handle lifting more than five pounds. ... It’s just annoying, and it’s just too much hard work.”

However, for a female athlete, staying small might in fact be a smart business decision. Six-foot-2-inch, 130-lb. Sharapova is ranked below Williams but [earns \\$23 million in endorsements to Williams’ \\$13 million](#).

Our culture’s emphasis on a woman’s appearance—even when she is competing as an elite athlete—is insidious.

Like many CrossFit Games athletes, Akinwale relies on sponsorships for part of her income. And like Williams, Akinwale finds sponsorship is not always tied to athletic performance.

“I share sponsors with some women who have never done anything athletically. They train ... and they post a lot of videos of their cleavage and stuff, and the camera angle going up toward their butt, but they are not successful athletes,” Akinwale said.

She added: “So, while I understand it, it’s sort of frustrating. ... Are there any men (in CrossFit) who are sponsored who are just basically hot? I can’t think of any.

Akinwale is aware of what is popular in the world of social media, so she said she often treads the line as far as sharing photos of herself.

“I want to be marketable, and I know these are the things that get likes, and I know that sponsors want that,” she said.

But she said she also wants to stay true to her core values. Akinwale knows she is influential within the CrossFit community, and she said she thinks about how she can shape what’s expected of female CrossFit athletes.

Akinwale said the idea of the frail female was not part of her experience growing up as a woman of color.

“(It’s) a very white-middle-class-feminist ideology,” Akinwale said. “That’s not the reality for working-class women or women of color. Those women have always been working, those women have always been doing physical labor, so I think it’s a little bit of a different paradigm. So, my mother worked very physical jobs, lots of jobs, my whole life. I never saw the image of a weak woman, ever.”

This doesn’t mean she’s always felt completely accepted in the gym.

“I started out in a weight-room environment in the late ‘90s,” Akinwale said. It used to be I’d walk in the weight room and it was all men, and everyone would (have their) eyes on me. ... It was very uncomfortable.”

In contrast she remembers her first day in a CrossFit gym. She was waiting for a class to start, and saw two women snatching.

“And of course at the time I didn’t know what they were doing, and I was like, ‘Yes. That’s what I want to do.’ Just being around other women who wanted to work hard, who wanted to lift heavy weight. I had never really seen a mass presence like that. It definitely normalized it,” Akinwale said.

“I never saw the image of a weak woman, ever.”

—Elisabeth Akinwale

“In a CrossFit gym, you blend right in, and that feels good. That’s the community you want,” she said.

As she met women from other backgrounds through CrossFit and heard their stories of worrying about getting too bulky or looking masculine, she realized how important it was to be an example to other women. It was in CrossFit gyms—where physical ability is the centerpiece—that Akinwale said she began to see many women still subscribe to traditional notions of strength.

“For me personally, I look at it as: OK, this is even more reason to keep standing up and being a presence because there are some barriers that I don’t feel ... are very real for other women,” Akinwale said.

As a relatively new sport, CrossFit doesn’t have the entrenched sexism present in many other professional sports. Men and women get equal prize money and airtime at the Games.

“I think it’s very symbolic of the fact that our sport values the contributions of female athletes just as much as men,” Akinwale said. “People enjoy watching the women just as much as they enjoy watching the men.”

This equality is present at an affiliate level as well.

“Males dominate coaching overall, particularly for coaching men,” Akinwale said about most sports. Not in CrossFit, at least at the affiliate level.

Female coaches abound in CrossFit gyms, but the October 2014 CrossFit Journal article “Coach.” detailed a lack of balance at the upper levels of the sport.

“When I first started coaching ... there were some men who didn’t want to accept coaching from a female.” Akinwale said that changed when they saw her skill as a coach and an athlete.

The Next Generation

A recent cover story in *The Economist* titled “The Weaker Sex” reported girls are outperforming boys in reading at the high-school level and enroll in universities at a higher number than boys, but traditional patterns take hold once men and women enter the workforce.

Women, as a group, are better qualified than men but earn about three-quarters as much as men, the article reported. In business, men hold more of the top positions than women.

“According to Claudia Goldin, an economics professor at Harvard, the ‘last chapter’ in the story of women’s rise—equal pay and access to the best jobs—will not come without big structural changes,” the article reported.

Cultural changes are needed as well. True equality has not yet arrived when the conversation surrounding the best female tennis players in the world is about their appearance.

We’ve come a long way, baby, but there’s still more work to be done. Part of that work is moving past the idea that muscles and strength are masculine traits and that men are inherently physically stronger than women.

The work begins with children. It starts by making a conscious effort to value the physical accomplishments of girls as much as boys and by avoiding defining strength as male and frailty as female.

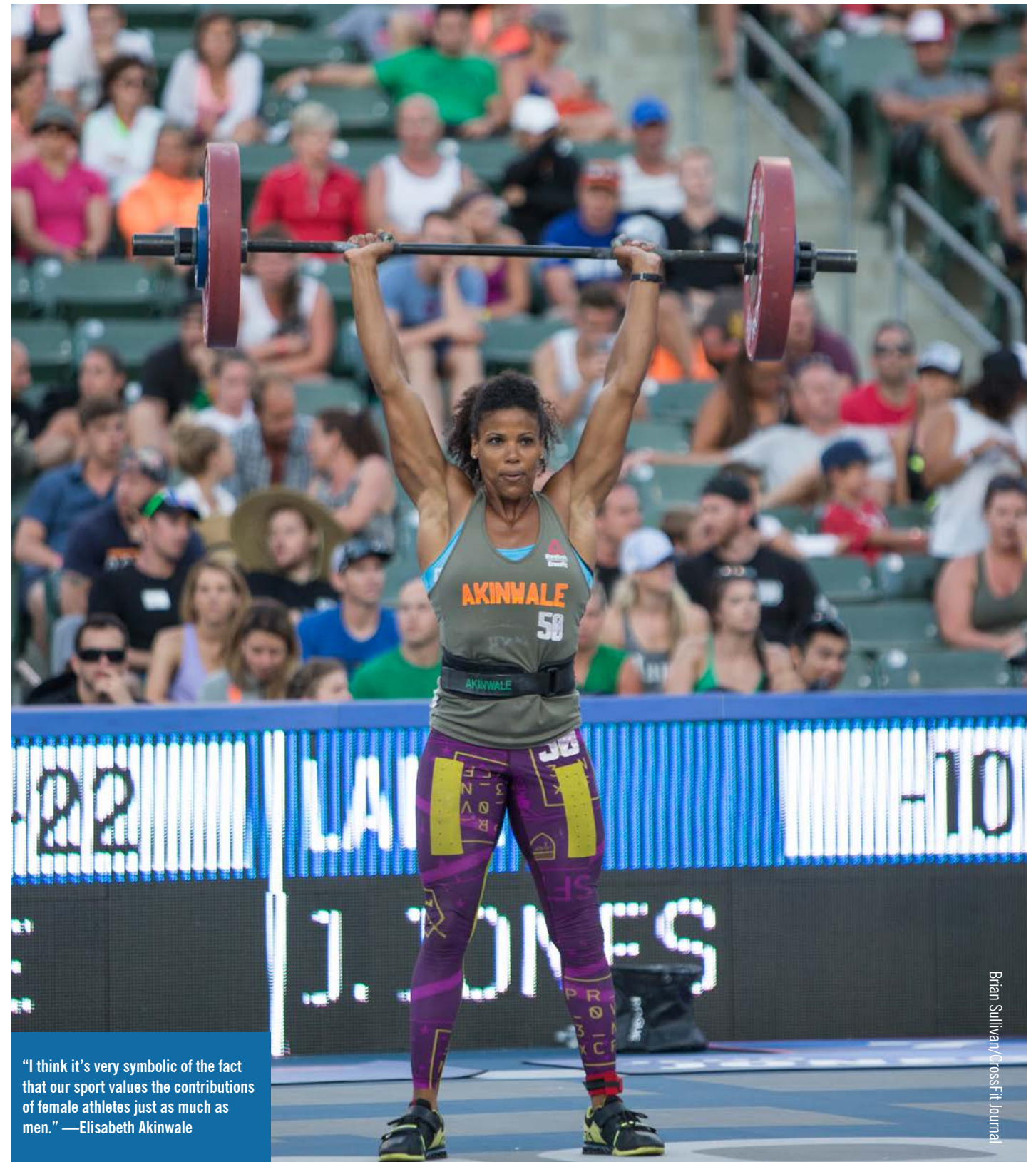
That work is continued in CrossFit gyms around the world, in which women prove to themselves, and others, that strength has no gender. ■

References

1. Costa MD, Guthrie SR. *Women and Sport: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Champaign, Ill.: Human Kinetics, 1994. Pp. 179.
2. Dowling C. *The Frailty Myth: Women Approaching Physical Equality*, New York, N.Y.: Random House, 2000.
3. Roth A, Basow S. Femininity, sports, and feminism: Developing a theory of physical liberation. *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*: 28(3): August 2004.

About the Author

Hilary Achauer is a freelance writer and editor specializing in health and wellness content. In addition to writing articles, online content, blogs and newsletters, Hilary writes for the CrossFit Journal. To contact her, visit hilaryachauer.com.



“I think it’s very symbolic of the fact that our sport values the contributions of female athletes just as much as men.” —Elisabeth Akinwale

Brian Sullivan/CrossFit Journal