

Hear Her Roar

By Andréa Maria Cecil

“She left a lot of men in her wake. A lot.”

—Mark Cohen

Karyn Marshall, the first woman to clean and jerk more than 300 lb., has joined CrossFit Shrewsbury in New Jersey as a member and coach. Like most endeavors in her life, she’s attacking CrossFit at nothing less than full force.

On Aug. 17, Karyn Marshall walked into CrossFit Shrewsbury without fanfare.

She had come to inquire about the training methodology; one of her chiropractic patients had told her about it, and it caught her attention.

So before her scheduled trip to Norway a few days later, she stopped in and “just introduced myself,” she said.

There, Marshall met Stefanie Hicks, co-owner of the affiliate in the New Jersey borough roughly 50 miles south of New York City and about a mile from the Atlantic Ocean.

“I told her who I was (and that I was) interested in CrossFit,” Marshall said.

But when she made the acquaintance, Marshall omitted some details.

“When she walked in the door, she had a presence,” Hicks said of the 5-foot-10, 175-lb. woman. “I knew she was somebody; I just didn’t know who she was.”

When Marshall left, Hicks hopped on the Internet.

“I looked her up and was like, ‘Oh my God!’” Hicks said.

Marshall mentioned she had an Olympic weightlifting background. What she didn’t say is she was a pioneer of women’s weightlifting: Marshall was the first woman to clean and jerk more than 300 lb.—an achievement forever memorialized by Guinness World Records in 1985.

A year earlier, in 1984, Marshall had made the Guinness World Records with a 289-lb. clean and jerk. For 73 years that record had been held by a Barnum and Bailey circus performer named Katie Sandwina, who had clean and jerked 286 lb.



Anthony Topper

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Marshall set 60 world and U.S. records in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1987, she was the first women’s world weightlifting champion. The inaugural event was at a different time and place than the men’s championships. Marshall’s gold medal made her the first American to win a world weightlifting title since Joe Dube—a man—in 1969.

Over the years, she has graced the pages of *Sports Illustrated*, *Glamour*, the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Chicago Tribune*. She made the covers of the *Guinness Sports Record Book* in 1986 and 1987, as well as *World Weightlifting* and *USA Weightlifting* publications. Marshall has appeared on the *Oprah*

Winfrey Show, *Regis and Kathie Lee, Live With Regis*, *The Joan Rivers Show*, ESPN and CNN. She also was flown to Japan to be on a TV show for Nippon Television Network Corp. called *Super People of the World*, and she appeared on a BBC show.

These days, Marshall’s accomplishments are no secret to CrossFit Shrewsbury’s 50-plus members

“Everybody knows who she is. I make it a point to tell everyone,” Hicks said. “They’re pretty psyched. They’re wowed.”

In March, Marshall will be inducted into the USA Weightlifting Hall of Fame during the Arnold Weightlifting Championships that are part of the Arnold Sports Festival held annually in Columbus, Ohio.

She is much more than ink in record books, however. Her story—like many in history—has its fair share of conflict.

A History Lesson

Marshall started training in 1978.

That year, Jimmy Carter was president; the Women’s Army Corps was abolished and women were integrated into the U.S. Army; Dianne Feinstein became the first female mayor of San Francisco; St. Paul, Minn., was the second U.S. city to repeal its gay-rights ordinance; and U.S. Senate proceedings were broadcast on the radio for the first time.



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“I grew up in a different era. Women were not given the same opportunities in sport, or in life, that exist today,” said the 54-year-old Marshall. “Back then, women in weightlifting were not accepted.”

In 1979, she entered her first competition: a qualifying meet for the Empire State Games in New York State.

“I was told, ‘Weightlifting is a men’s event. Why don’t you try something like synchronized swimming?’” she recounted with a laugh.

Marshall was ultimately permitted to compete as an “extra.”

“I won my weight class, but I was not allowed to go on in the Games,” she said.

Winning her weight class meant out-lifting members of the opposite sex.

“She left a lot of men in her wake. A lot,” said Mark Cohen, Marshall’s lifting coach of 12 years. “She faced a lot of adversity.”

At that time, there were no state championships, no nationals, no worlds, no Olympics for female weightlifters.

“There were not sanctioned events for women,” Marshall said.

Mary Hyder remembered those days, too.

The 51-year-old started competing in Olympic weightlifting in 1980.

“We started out at first just lifting with the guys. We didn’t have a 15-kg bar,” said Hyder, a USA Weightlifting senior coach who lives in the Baltimore area. “Occasionally, they’d have another girl there and we’d weigh in each other. We would weigh in with clothes when the guys would weigh in.”

Although they were allowed to compete with men, women were not taken seriously, Marshall said. That’s where she said she found her motivation.

“Oh, the women want to have their little nationals and they’re going to lift their little weights,” she said, imitating comments from representatives of the U.S. Weightlifting Federation, the organization that preceded USAW, which is based in Colorado Springs, Colo. “They were humoring us. The higher-ups in weightlifting, they dismissed us.”

When a group of female weightlifters approached the federation hierarchy about creating a women’s division, representatives categorized it as an impossibility, Marshall said.

“(We) were told there would never be a women’s division in weightlifting. Never—that was their response,” she recalled.

“We were second class in how we were treated, so we fought really hard. There were ways you could do it. The way I chose to do it was to prove I deserved to be called an athlete and to prove that I was world class.”

She added: “That’s when I started training to break a Guinness World Record.”

An Olympic Lifter Becomes a CrossFitter

At 8:30 a.m. on Saturday, Jan. 15, the WOD at CrossFit Shrewsbury was a triplet.

- Five rounds for time of:
- 8 ground to overhead
- 16 knees-to-elbows
- 32 squats



Andréa Maria Cecil

The first finisher recorded a time just over 17 minutes. Marshall finished in 22:33.

“Hard. It was hard. I was suckin’ wind,” she mustered between heavy breaths just after finishing the workout.

For her ground-to-overhead movement, Marshall chose to clean and jerk 95 lb.

“She’s pretty much pressing the same as some of the guys in here,” Hicks said.

During one of her first CrossFit experiences, Marshall did a workout that involved 10 rounds of 6 135-lb. hang cleans.

“She excelled incredibly. The only issue when she came in here was her endurance,” Hicks said.

But that’s changing.



Anthony Topper

“I love it. I absolutely love it. It’s so cool. It reminds me of the old days when I used to work really hard.”

—Karyn Marshall on CrossFit

“My endurance in three months has gone through the roof. I mean, I can run,” Marshall said. “I love it. I absolutely love it. It’s so cool. It reminds me of the old days when I used to work really hard.”

And CrossFit is a good fit with Marshall’s self-described obsessive personality.

“I have five pairs of CrossFit shoes,” she said, followed by her ever-present smile.

Each time she goes to the box, she brings four pairs with her: running shoes, Adidas Sambas, Inov-8 F-lite 230s and her Adidas weightlifting shoes.

“She wants to learn it all, do it all,” Hicks said.

Right now, Marshall does three to four CrossFit workouts a week and lifts two to three times a week.

"I really just wanted to embrace CrossFit to the point where I'm not just brand new, where I have some competency," she said. "I'm really good at lifting one really heavy weight once, and now I'm trying to incorporate that. Everything is new. I'm trying to attack every workout. I just love that I can push myself in new ways."

Three months after starting CrossFit, Marshall estimated she dropped about 10 lb.

"I know I've put on lean body mass, and I've dropped body fat," she said.

Beyond the Bumpers

When Marshall isn't lifting or working out, she spends time with her dogs—Jack Russell terrier Buster and English setter Hawk, both of whom she rescued from a pound.

"They're both very athletic dogs," she said. "I love them to death. They bring joy to my life."

Marshall, who was born in Florida and grew up in the Yonkers and Bronxville, N.Y., areas, also has two cats from a pound.

During her summer, she spends five weeks volunteering as a coach with the 6 A.M. Club in Monmouth County, N.J. The outreach program incorporates speed, agility and strength training for at-risk youth who live in the county's underprivileged areas. At its inception, it was for 11-to-18-year-old boys.

When Marshall discovered the program in 1999, she called founder Lt. Wesley Mayo Jr. of the county prosecutor's office to ask why there wasn't a girls' program.

"I told him about myself and background, and we started a girls' program that summer. I have been involved ever since as the girls' coach," she said. "It is a way for me to give back for all I have received from sports."

In September 2000, the New Jersey Senate issued a resolution recognizing Marshall for her time and leadership with the 6 A.M. Club.

"She speaks to girls at my gym," Cohen said. "I'd have her come speak to my kids anytime, anywhere. She stresses the importance of education. She's a brilliant



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Marshall earned her bachelor of science in nursing in 1980 from Columbia University. After that, she worked as a financial analyst for her father at Wall Street brokerage firm William H. Tehan Co. until 1990. She went on to study at New York Chiropractic College, graduating valedictorian, summa cum laude, in 1993. She opened her current practice, Champion Chiropractic, in 1994 in Shrewsbury, N.J.

"I was always working and training, and that was just my life," she said. "I figured (weightlifting) was like my second job."

In between those years, Marshall married and divorced twice. Her last name is a remnant of her most-recent marriage; she was born Karyn Bastiansen.

"I kept it because everyone knew me by that," she said.

Marshall never had children.

"It was never a strong desire," she said.

"I just want to do so much. I love to just get absorbed into something and enjoy

it—I've done that with school; I loved college. I've been at a college for 10 years, soaking up everything like a sponge. I guess I get really into stuff. ... Maybe it was my own wanting to do so much and seeing people with kids, realizing that they've given up their lives."

At CrossFit Shrewsbury, Marshall is not just a member but a coach and has helped to elevate the affiliate's offerings, Hicks said. "It has definitely taken this facility to a new level," Hicks said. "Now I have a coach. She took me from a 65-lb. snatch to a 95-lb. snatch in one day. It was all technique based, not strength based. Karyn's awesome."

Arguably, Marshall's coaching style mimics the way in which she has lived her life: when she sees barriers, she aims to destroy them.

On the afternoon of Jan. 15—a few hours after the morning WOD—Trevor James, the so-called CrossFit Shrewsbury intern coach, was attempting a 210-lb. snatch.

He missed twice.

"Relax. You got two minutes on the clock," Marshall told him. "Don't think about the past. Think about what you

want to do. Visualize your body doing what you want it to be doing."

The 18-year-old James, who was not to be called off his efforts, tried and missed four more times.

Upset and defeated, he sat on the floor near the wall and said he realized before his final attempt that he had never even overhead squatted that much weight.

"OK. First of all, you never walk up to the bar with a negative thought in your head," Marshall lectured him. "You have to think, 'I own this. This is mine.'"



Karyn Marshall's Athletic Achievements

- ▶ International Weightlifting Federation world champion.
- ▶ United States Weightlifting Federation nine-time national champion.
- ▶ Set 60 world and U.S. records.
- ▶ Won five gold medals in five world championships.
- ▶ First woman to clean and jerk more than 300 lb.
- ▶ Cited in *Guinness Book of World (Sports) Records* 1986-1998.
- ▶ Best official competitive lifts: 112.5-kg snatch, 137.5-kg clean and jerk, 247.5-kg total.
- ▶ Masters (age group) IWF two-time world champion.
- ▶ Masters (age group) USAW six-time national champion.



Anthony Topper

Always a Fighter, Always a Competitor, Never Any Regrets

Next up on Marshall's agenda: the 2011 National Masters Weightlifting Championships on April 1 in Savannah, Ga.

"There's records to be broken," she said with absolute confidence. "I think I'm going to be setting national records at the nationals and personal records at the nationals."

Marshall added: "I think I'm stronger. I think I'm fit."

Cohen agreed, taking it one step further.

"I'd like to see her put records so far out of reach that no one will be able to touch them," he said.

Marshall is the most driven, competitive woman he knows, said Cohen, who has been involved in Olympic weightlifting for about 35 years.

"I once made a joke about playing tennis, and she jumped at the chance.... I kicked myself (later)," he said, jokingly. "Let's face it: When you're a superior athlete, you're a superior athlete."

Leo Totten, a USAW senior international coach, said Marshall was more than a pioneer in women's weightlifting.

"The fact that she was so good, she was a good representative of the sport. People kind of said, 'Huh, maybe there is something to this women's weightlifting thing,'" said Totten, who instructs, or has

instructed, every certification offered by USAW. "It really opened the door for women's weightlifting."

Marshall became a star in the Olympic weightlifting world, Hyder said.

"She was definitely the biggest thing in women's weightlifting back then," said Hyder, who still competes. "She was always a good athlete overall, a pretty intensive competitor. She, a lot of times, was a (weight) class ahead of me. Occasionally we were against each other. She always won."

By the time women were allowed to compete in weightlifting on the Olympic level, it was the year 2000. Marshall was 44.

"I feel that I did my part. I was a part of history. You need that. It was never going to go from nothing to (the) Olympics. There had to be a process and a journey. I was part of that journey."

—Karyn Marshall

"I was not competitive enough at 44 with the younger women. And that was good," she said. "If I was good enough it would tell me that the sport ... really didn't thrive."

People sometimes express sadness over the fact that Marshall—a living legend of sorts—never was able to compete in the Olympics.

She, however, said she doesn't see it that way.

"There has to be that first generation to break the glass ceiling," she explained. "I'm a fighter. It made me train that much harder to somehow say, 'I'm good at this, I'm serious about it, and I deserve a spot on a world stage.' And that's kind of how we all forged our way into creating nationals, worlds and then ultimately the Olympics."

Marshall continued: "I feel that I did my part. I was a part of history. You need that. It was never going to go from nothing to (the) Olympics. There had to be a process and a journey. I was part of that journey. I was part of that first generation of women. We got weightlifting on the map. I was able to break down some barriers. ... I was the first woman to clean and jerk more than 300 lb. No one can take that away from me."



Websites

[CrossFit Shrewsbury](#)

[Arnold Weightlifting Championships](#)

[USA Weightlifting \(USAW\)](#)



About the Author

Andréa Maria Cecil, 32, is managing editor at the **Central Penn Business Journal** in Harrisburg, Pa. Andréa is a native of New Orleans who now lives in York County, Pa. There, she's been doing CrossFit since 2008 at **CrossFit York**. Additionally, she dedicates two to three days per week to training in Olympic weightlifting.

