



# Becca Swanson, '98 Staying Strong



BY ANTHONY FLOTT

COURTESY PHOTO

It's a good thing Becca Swanson is the strongest woman in the world – ever. Because for some time, it's as if she's been carrying the weight of the world.

Perhaps, though, Swanson was never stronger than she was this spring when she cast off her old life, packed everything she owned into a car and headed 1,500 miles west.

"It was a huge decision for me to choose failure in order to open up my life for a new prospect," Swanson said.

Calling Becca Swanson the strongest woman ever isn't hyperbole meant merely to convey that Swanson is "really strong."

It means exactly what it says.

No other woman ever has lifted more weight than Swanson. A competitive powerlifter for 12 years, Swanson hoisted a total of 2,050 pounds in three events – squat, bench and deadlift – at an October 2005 meet in Chicago

A ton and change. Double what the world record was in 1977, and at least 250 pounds more than any other woman. Swanson also has world records in each individual event, hitting 854 pounds in the squat (Chicago, 2005), 600 in the bench (Omaha, 2008) and 683 in the deadlift (Helsinki, Finland, 2005).

"Insanely huge numbers," wrote Steve Wennerstrom, historian for the International Federation of Body Building and Fitness.

Hardcore NU volleyball fans might recall a much smaller Swanson lettering for the Huskers in 1993. She was one year removed from Papillion LaVista High School, where she ran track and played volleyball with NU legend Allison Weston. The Monarchs were state runners-up her junior and senior years.

"I was a really good athlete but never the best," Swanson said.

An injury-beset Husker volleyball team sought her services, though. Swanson played just three minutes in three games, registering one serve and one dig.

"I thought I was a good hitter but ... these girls eat, sleep and drink volleyball," she said. "I was nowhere near as good."

She stuck to her studies in mechanical engineering. The program included a three-month co-op working for Union Pacific in De Soto, Mo., just south of St. Louis. There she joined a gym and discovered powerlifting.

"Instant passion," she said. "Instant.

"From having known failure with volleyball, I could recognize the passion I found for weightlifting. I was into it. I was lifting all the time. Nothing would stop me."

Guys told her it was too much. Try fitness competitions instead, they'd say. Family thought similarly. "Mom made it clear she didn't like the muscular female body," Swanson said.

Brother Scott, a standout baseball player at North Dakota State in the 1990s, wasn't surprised at his sister's commitment.

"Becca has always been a competitor," he said. "The thing that sets her apart from most athletes is that she is never satisfied with where she is and she pushes herself to be that much better.

"But to say that I was overly supportive would be a lie. I thought that weightlifting was just a hobby or activity that Becca did. Over the years I have seen that weightlifting was not just a hobby or activity; it was her life."

Swanson returned to school in Lincoln but continued to lift. When she began another co-op, in Omaha with Union Pacific, one of the first things she did was look in the phone book for a "hard-core gym." She met powerlifting coach Rick Hussey and the two hit it off athletically, romantically and professionally. Before Swanson graduated in 1998, she and Hussey opened Big Iron Gym.

Her life was changing. Her body was changing. Swanson got into bodybuilding, winning titles such as Ms. Nebraska, Ms. Midwest and Ms. Rocky Mountain, but powerlifting was where she excelled. She slowly added mass, increased her lift totals and, eventually, became the "Strongest Woman EVER to Walk the Planet."

She began to brand herself that way – literally – tattooing her title in pink and white on the back of her neck. She emblazoned it on her business cards and Web site ([www.beccaswanson.com](http://www.beccaswanson.com)). Big Deal Productions produced a documentary on her, "Strongest Ever." (To date it has played only in Germany and Finland but a trailer can be found online). She and Hussey built Big Iron into one of the Midwest's premier strength training facilities.

But becoming strongest ever came at a price.

"There's only so much a person's body can handle," Swanson said. "I had torn both biceps and an inner thigh muscle and had nerve pain coming down the center of my upper back going through my shoulders."

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At 250 pounds, she wanted to “look normal and kind of regain my femininity.” At 36, she began to see her life in macrocosm.

“Rick and I never got married and had no kids, so there were sacrifices,” she said. “Big ones.”

By the end of 2009, blaming “relationship mumbo-jumbo,” Swanson cut ties with Hussey and Big Iron Gym.

“I just wasn’t happy,” she said.

Swanson wrote a life plan, deciding to “physically let go of the past and start focusing on the future.” Among her goals promoted on her Web site: “I will become a World Renown Female Muscular Icon!”

That took her back to where it all started – Missouri. Swanson trained at the Harley Race Wrestling Academy in Eldon and within months was crowned the World League Wrestling Ladies Champion.

She sought a bigger stage, though. In March she took all her furniture to a thrift store, put everything else into her car and headed for LA.

“Seems I have always lived that way,” she blogged on her Web site. “Living like I am leaving. I think that just tells me that I was not meant to settle... YET!”

By April she was sleeping on mats at a friend’s house, working out at Gold’s Gym in Venice, and training at the American Wrestling Federation with Ric Drasin, wrestler/bodybuilder and one-time training partner to Arnold Schwarzenegger. She met with the big-stage WWE hoping to land a contract, but no dice.

“I’m too big for what they consider a diva,” Swanson said. “I weigh 100 pounds more than their girls. Not that it won’t ever happen; it’s not a closed door. I’m good enough to wrestle [and] they like what they see except for my size.”

Drasin says Swanson’s “look and ability to sell in the ring is a good plus” and “unusual.” But, he adds, wrestling is a “tough political business, and even though she has the look and can work pretty well, it’s still very hard to get the push. Just takes time and the right people, and even then there’s no guarantee.”

In the meanwhile, Swanson also has turned her hopes to TV and film.

Perhaps her muscular build and athletic prowess could land her a role as Vin Diesel’s sister, she said, or a “Vasquez role in ‘Aliens’ – a bad-ass female Navy Seal or whatever.”

By May, Swanson was blogging about casting calls and had signed with a commercial agent.

“This is big, Big, BIG!!” she wrote.

“I’ve lived more than most will ever,” she said shortly after arriving in LA. “You only get one life and that’s why I’m going with what’s going to make me happy.”

No matter how heavy the lifting. ■

**Tim Tewes** of Nelnet Inc. and FACTS/Nelnet Business Solutions was selected as a member of the 2010 United Way of Lincoln and Lancaster County Foundation Inc. Board of Directors.

**Al Vybiral** of Wahoo recently graduated from the Nebraska LEAD Program as a member of Group XXVIII. The Nebraska LEAD Program is a two-year leadership development program designed to develop the future decision makers, problem solvers and spokespersons for Nebraska agriculture.

**Dan Walker** of West Gate Bank is secretary of the Home Builders Association of Lincoln 2010 Board of Directors.

### 1983

**Jone Beer** has been promoted to office manager for Central Financial Services-Lincoln.

### 1984

**Mary Kanter** recently retired from teaching at Sheridan Elementary School in Lincoln.

**Thomas E. Morrow Jr.** has become an associate with the Lincoln law firm Wolfe, Snowden, Hurd, Luers & Ahl LLP.

**Patty Niemann** recently retired from teaching at Sheridan Elementary School in Lincoln.

### 1985

**Peggy Gomez** of Lincoln was named recipient of the Alumni Achievement Award in Art from the University of Nebraska–Lincoln Hixson-Lied College of Fine and Performing Arts. She is the owner of Gomez Art Supply and in 2005 founded Tugboat Gallery, which provides showing opportunities for emerging artists as well as established professionals.

■ **Jean Moon** is an obstetrician/gynecologist in Scottsdale, Ariz.

### 1986

**Dee Felici** has been promoted to regional sales director for Taste Traditions, an Omaha-based company that produces premium and restaurant-quality macaroni and cheese, soups and a line of Mexican entrees. She will be responsible for the Midwest region.

**Paul Gangwish** of Grand Island recently graduated from the Nebraska LEAD Program as a member of Group XXVIII. He operates P G Farms Inc. near Shelton.

■ **Lisa Murfield** of Odessa, Fla., has been elected president of HR Tampa, a professional human resource organization in the Tampa area.

■ **Ward Reesman** of Omaha recently graduated from the Nebraska LEAD Program as a member of Group XXVIII. Reesman retired as a special agent with the FBI and is now farming.

**Ron Rose**, Aurora, recently graduated from the Nebraska LEAD Program as a member of Group XXVIII. He is an energy efficiency consultant with the Nebraska Public Power District.

### 1987

**Emily Raef** has joined the Saint Elizabeth Medical Center and The Physician Network (Lincoln) as a physician’s assistant for the palliative care team.

### 1988

**Lise Olsen** was named 2010 Outstanding News-Editorial Alumna by the University of Nebraska–Lincoln College of Journalism and Mass Communications at the annual honors convocation. Olsen, of Pearland, Texas, is a senior