



PART ONE

The MoDa Experiment

# GREATER

## EXPECTATIONS

by Charles Peeples

*Heather peered out from the stage over the crowd of unfamiliar faces, wishing she could be somewhere else. At fifteen, thin and bespectacled, she could be as sassy as the next teen, but she hadn't wanted this sort of lime-light. Between her and those expectant faces was an Olympic barbell with plates big as manhole covers at either end, one hundred thirty-five pounds—more than she weighed and certainly not part of her everyday world; she was no jock—didn't even play any sports! How had she gotten pulled into this? Closing her eyes briefly, she ducked under the bar, feeling it almost immovable against her shoulders.*

The road to this predicament had come half a year earlier, when a soccer-mom told me that her daughter Amanda, a seventeen-year-old senior at a nearby high school, had quit her off-season efforts to improve her strength at the school's gym. As Amanda tells it, "Many times we found that the weight room was closed to everyone except for the football or wrestling teams. When we could get in, the machines were never free because after using a machine the boys would stand there until one of the other guys came to use it. They also didn't like the fact that we girls could lift more with our legs than they could using proper techniques. So they would use greater weights and do it the wrong way. They'd tell us that we were doing it wrong which is why we used more than they did. Also the guys covered their

legs by wearing sweatpants since the girls who went to the weight room were soccer and lacrosse players, and had bigger legs than some of the boys."

I was hardly surprised—the much-heralded advances in girl's sports still haven't changed the attitudes of society towards girls and strength. To my mind, the teen boys, subject to the same attitudes and dealing with their own physical identities, were less to blame than the parents and coaches. Many parents set less than stellar examples of fitness (how many moms and dads do you know who can do ten good pushups?) and very few girls' coaches (most of whom are men—isn't that interesting?) really give more than lip-service to serious strength-training off-season for their athletes. But here was a mom and a daughter who got it. "I'll train her two nights a week at no cost," I told the mom, "but here's the catch: you have to come train with her." The mom thought this over. "Okay. Can her sister Heather come too?"

A week before Thanksgiving 2006, the girls and their moms (Heather: "Can my friend Tina come?" Charles: "As long as her mom comes and trains too.") began their training. Initially we focused on free-weight exercises—I always do this with new clients because dumbbells are basic, versatile and available anywhere. The girls learned correct form, how to

spot one another and how to improvise. I'd quiz them on the mechanics, the "body-logic" of what they were doing, and some of that took a while to sink in. But eventually I was able to stand back, get out of the way and watch them work each other. And what I saw was remarkable.

Once they'd gotten into the swing of things, a synergy began to emerge, a combination of support and competitiveness, with mom as the catalyst. Gloria is slender and wiry, always self-deprecating and upbeat, and as we all learned, strong. Within a few months, despite some physical limitations, she was able to do squats with one hundred thirty-five pounds and even more amazing, bench (triceps) dips with a forty-five pound plate on her lap. Amanda and Heather weren't about to let this go unanswered ("if mom can do it...") and soon all three girls were doing it themselves. As I'd predicted, their leg-strength blossomed; Tina, a year younger than Heather but huskier, especially enjoyed having heavy chains hanging from the bar when squatting. And the donkey-calf raise (a novelty to anyone outside the bodybuilding world) was a favorite for all three.

Later I'd query Gloria how the girls really felt about all this. "They weren't that interested at first, but after three

or four weeks they became comfortable with what they were doing –no one watching, partnering with each other, seeing the weights increase, even engaging in a little competition. They’d never been addicted to fast-foods, but now they even began to forgo the Friday night pig-outs as their food choices changed. That included snacks, with a couple of hard-boiled eggs and a block of cheese replacing the bags of Pringles.” One difficulty came at their school- no snacks of any type are allowed between 7:30 when classes begin and lunch beginning at 11:00. Amanda took in some protein powder and it was confiscated. I find it hard to understand how school administrators expect active, growing teens to go for almost four hours without eating something and remain attentive.

By February, I was sufficiently encouraged by what I’d seen to set a goal for the girls: “I call this project ‘MoDa’ –MotherDaughter. And I want to share it with others. In May I’d like you to come with me to the PhillyFIT Bash and demonstrate what you’ve accomplished by performing squats onstage.” Amanda nodded, Tina shrugged, but Heather looked at me in horror. “Do we have to?”

There were differences at the Bash venue which none of us had considered. Unlike the Olympic weights the girls had been using at the studio, those provided by Velocity Sports were rubber-coated.



These tend to slide if the bar tips even slightly –which of course it did, since instead of a solid floor we were on a makeshift stage which flexed under weight. No bar collars were on-hand at the moment, so even with spotters, the girls experienced a slight “Bongo-Board” effect with that shifting weight across their shoulders. More significantly, they’d always trained facing a mirror, which provided visual guidance to the proprioceptive senses; now they were looking off a stage into an audience. Weights they’d repped with ease at my gym suddenly seemed much heavier.

So little Heather, who’d lifted far more in training, sank under 135 pounds and couldn’t get back up unassisted. Tina would do the same initially with her 185. Amanda would struggle with her 225. This was a white moment. It could have been humiliating, a complete rout, negating the confidence they’d gained these past months, undoing my reassurances against the stage-fright which had nearly kept them –especially Heather– from participating. But Heather, facing the dread of an audience which had just seen her fail, and a bar which still wanted to bury her, reached inside herself and found something new which had grown along with the sinew these past months. Settling under the bar once more, she pumped out half a dozen confident repetitions, her example leading Tina and  
*(For more on MoDa please visit [www.teamvalkyries.org](http://www.teamvalkyries.org). And start practicing now to win cash prizes in the MotherDaughter Team Pushups Challenge at the next PhillyFIT Bash)*

Amanda to redeem their initial attempts in a similar manner.

I saw something big happen that day, far bigger than anything I’d expected. Though I told them this, I’m still not sure they grasped it. These girls had no background in, nor aspirations toward, weight-lifting. Even Amanda, though a soccer player, was no jock. No high-powered league sports or fanatic athletic-scholarship quests here... just ordinary schoolgirls who took a few moments amidst their busy teen-life to do something few schoolgirls will even try, and grew in ways they never expected. This doesn’t happen in a vacuum. It took a mom, an unusually independent-minded one, to help make it happen. Is it too much to hope that there might be others out there?



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