

SCULPTED THROUGH SWEAT

Whitney Rygmyr tones her body and mind as a bodybuilder

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Hero Fitography

photos courtesy of
Whitney Rygmyr



To the right and up the stairs, she's hard to miss — gym backpack slung over an unused rack, lifting belt snug on her waist and fists flexing beneath bubblegum-pink grips. At 17 years old, Whitney Rygmyr (12) has carved out a section of Life Time Fitness where records are broken, tears are common and forfeit is unacceptable.

After two-and-a-half years of casual lifting, Rygmyr grew restless. Having noticed enticing physical progress, or "getting shredded," as she phrased it, Rygmyr took the plunge. She decided to pursue bodybuilding, a practice that trains separate parts of the body, working to intentionally build specific muscles and construct physique.

"I saw another girl had done a mini show, and I was like, 'Oh my gosh, that's kind of cool,'" Rygmyr said. "And then she told me that she didn't think I'd place well in [a] figure [competition], which I didn't place well in figure, but I was like, 'You know what, I'm gonna prove you wrong.' So I did a show and did not do well in figure, but I placed [well] in other competitions."

Feb. 3, Rygmyr began preparation for the St. Louis Natural Classic. Typical bodybuilding preparation lasts from 12 to 16 weeks, and it shifts many aspects of an athlete's lifestyle, such as diet and accelerated exercise. Rygmyr's prep first began 20 weeks out from her competition.

"The weeks withered away and I slowly took away a lot of my food intake," Rygmyr said. "It's not a healthy sport, if you think about it. Towards the end, I was eating 800 calories a day and doing three hours of cardio, seven days a week for, like, a month and a half. So, I wasn't getting any carbs or any fats."

With the increasing limitations, Rygmyr's initial enthusiasm for bodybuilding started to dwindle.

"It was just really draining towards the end, and I just missed a lot of my favorite foods," Rygmyr said. "It was isolating socially in a way, because I couldn't go out with my friends, I couldn't go get food, and so I was just in such a bad mood for the last two and a half months. I didn't want to be around people, because I would just snap so quickly, because I was so exhausted."

Bothered by the emotional toll that prep was taking on their daughter, Rygmyr's parents adopted different avenues of assistance; her mother aided in preparing meals, while her father applauded her discipline. Beyond her family, friends like Abby Rea, came together to support her.

"I saw her through her bodybuilding prep, and let's just say it wasn't the greatest time in her life," Abby Rea said. "There were a lot of tears, but if I were put in that position I probably would have quit. But she kept going, she kept fighting and it was just amazing to see her transformation."

Rea's unwavering encouragement did not go unnoticed.

"[Abby] knew how miserable I was, and she'd try to make it better," Rygmyr said. "Whenever I had a really bad day where I was just crying before I even started, she'd

come with me and help me rewrap my weights and set stuff up. It was just really helpful, and she tried to make it better for me, even though it was awful."

Even in the midst of tears and fatigue, motivation was plentiful. To complete her cardio, Rygmyr became a regular on the StairMaster, a piece of exercise equipment. For over a month, she endured two hours at level 14 every day.

"I was like, 'You're already this far' and, especially when I got more than halfway, I was like, 'That's so embarrassing to stop,'" Rygmyr said. "Then I was like, 'Imagine how good it's gonna feel when you finally compete.' I would always be on the StairMaster, and imagine myself on stage in my bikini. I was like, 'That's gonna be so worth it.' And it was."

June 23, four layers of spray tan, three hours of hair and makeup, nine rice cakes and one polygraph test later, Rygmyr was ready to step on stage. It was a bittersweet moment, as 20 weeks of agonized perseverance culminated in a single moment of elated recognition.

"I got a quick arm and leg workout in, and I had to eat four more rice cakes and two spoonfuls of peanut butter and honey, and then I stepped on stage," Rygmyr said. "It was just amazing. It was just euphoric. It made it all worth it."

Rea recalls fellow audience members cringing at the cheer that she let out when Rygmyr first walked out onto the stage. Deeply proud of her friend's success, Rea understood what that moment meant to Rygmyr: all of the hours in the gym had finally started to pay off.

"I think she just doesn't know how capable and strong she truly is," Rea said. "Whenever we're at the gym together, she's comparing herself to these people on social media. She's like, 'Oh, I need to be stronger. I need to be like this.' I think she's not aware of how much she has grown. I think bodybuilding has both grown her, obviously physically, but also mentally, and it's really been a joy to just see her grow in that sense."

Rygmyr competed in the wellness and figure competitions at the St. Louis Natural Classic. Wellness competitions judge female bodybuilders on the roundness of their hips, glutes, thighs and calves. Figure competitions emphasize the balance between muscle size and symmetry, with a focus on large back muscles and quads. Rygmyr placed first in Wellness Novice, second in Wellness Open, third in Figure Novice and fourth in Figure Open. Even with these victories, Rygmyr is still ambitious.

"Wellness Open is [for] people who have won [Wellness] Novice, or just anyone who wants to compete to get their Pro Card," Rygmyr said. "Once you get first on [Wellness] Open, you get your Pro Card. I got second, so I'm really determined to go back and get first and get my Pro Card."

Rygmyr's friends quickly celebrated the awards that Rygmyr and won, as well as her fierce commitment to her





"[Bodybuilding is] routine for me, so I get to shut off a part of my brain and relax."

Whitney Rygmyr (12)

goals. After her show, Rygmyr's friends took her out for dinner — Rygmyr's first unregulated meal in months.

"It was just really cute," Rygmyr said. "Then, I went to Chipotle with Abby, and it was so weird, because I used to be able to devour a full Chipotle bowl with the chips and queso, and my stomach had just shrunk so much because I hadn't been eating enough for two months, and I had like, a fourth of it, and I was like, 'I'm gonna yak.' But it was just so nice; I had so much energy after."

Many bodybuilders fall victim to the Post-Show Blues, and Rygmyr is no exception to the processes jolting end.

"No one enjoys being on prep," Rygmyr said. "It's not a maintainable lifestyle. My coach told me 'You're gonna see how you look on stage and get sad when you don't look like that anymore, but it's not healthy at all; your body's screaming for help.'"

So, why do it at all? For Rygmyr, it's about tenacity.

"I just like the idea of pushing myself to see how far I can go," Rygmyr said. "I like to see how far I can go just to test the limits of what my body can do."

Nearly six months after her competition, Rygmyr has begun a calorie surplus bulk with the goal of growing her glutes and other leg muscles. This was, she reasons, when she inevitably returns to competition preparation, her starting point will be that much higher.

"I'm not putting pressure on myself because I don't need to," Rygmyr said. "I don't have a deadline. I just do it for fun. I've gotten better about taking off days. I used to only take one a week, and now I take two to three. I'm seeing more growth that way than overworking myself."

Captions: Whitney Rygmyr (12) poses on stage at the St. Louis Natural Classic. Despite the physical and emotional toll of her prep, she persevered and earned top rankings in multiple categories. "[Bodybuilding has] given me a really good sense of discipline, and it's taught me the importance of setting small goals and working towards a big goal, one step at a time," Rygmyr said. Photos courtesy of Hiro Fitography. (on pages 8-13)

Rygmyr hugs Abby Rea at the St. Louis National Classic June 23. The two met playing field hockey. At the state quarter final game, Rygmyr received a high ankle sprain while celebrating a goal. "I get up and [my coach] hadn't realized that I was actually hurt and was like, 'Whitney, get up, why are you crying?' I was like, 'Coach, I can't hit legs for so long,'" Rygmyr said. "I had to go to gym in my boot. For glute kick-backs I couldn't get the ankle weight around my foot so I clipped the cable to my boot and kicked that back." Photos courtesy of Whitney Rygmyr. (on page 13)

Rygmyr smiles from her place in a line of competitors. For her, bodybuilding was a space to escape from school, college applications and social pressures. "It's just a stress reliever for me," Rygmyr said. "Going to the gym every day, I can be at peace with everything that's happening." Photo courtesy of Hiro Fitography. (on page 13) 📷