

“I Don’t Want to be Barbie. I Want to Benchpress Her.” The Lifestyle of a Female Bodybuilder

MICHELLE JONES



WRITER’S COMMENT: In high school, I was on the newspaper staff for three years, but it wasn’t until the spring quarter of my third year at UC Davis that I had the opportunity again to work on my journalistic skills. John Boe’s UWP 104C Journalism class provided that opportunity for me. I love writing creative pieces—it’s a nice departure from more restrictive academic writing, and it also gives me a chance to develop my own voice and style. When we were assigned to write either a profile or a feature piece, Andrea Khoo and the lifestyle of a female bodybuilder immediately came to mind. I knew I wanted to tell her story because she is a great inspiration to me. I was also eager to learn about the history and controversies of her sport. The process of writing this piece was challenging but enjoyable. John Boe helped me to find the direction of my chosen topic, and he pushed me to never settle for less than my best.



—Michelle Jones

INSTRUCTOR’S COMMENT: As my student, Michelle Jones made writing look easy. I know she says that the process of writing this sparkling profile of Andrea Khoo was challenging, and I know she wrote and rewrote numerous drafts of this piece (and of another prizeworthy article as well). I know she put a lot of work into her writing, but she ended up producing pieces that are easy to read, easy to enjoy. When I first read the final draft of this piece, I immediately forgot about grading and just read for the pleasure of the story. And I found at the end that I had learned a lot about a remarkable woman, Andrea Khoo. Michelle Jones is herself a remarkable woman, a gifted writer and a natural journalist.

—John Boe, University Writing Program



ANDREA KHOO DEFIES THE STEREOTYPE that bodybuilders are just meatheads. She is an intelligent woman who treats her sport as a science, not a show of brute force. She is not scary-looking or ridiculously huge (although some may find her attractive, toned physique both intimidating and awe-inspiring). As a woman, she also defies expectations within the seemingly male-dominated sport of bodybuilding. Many people believe women should not try to get big because having large muscles is not feminine, but Khoo's muscular development is a celebration of the human body. She perseveres, despite the discrimination female bodybuilders face, because bodybuilding is her passion and her lifestyle. As a student of Khoo's for four quarters now, I was able to gain insight into the world of female bodybuilding.



KHOO WAS ONCE A SELF-PROCLAIMED “junk food junkie”—a lover of McDonalds, Doritos, ice cream, candy, pizza, and the like. She did anything to get out of P.E. classes in high school. And yet today, her hobby is professional bodybuilding, and she loves eating green veggies and egg whites (she spends \$800 a month on healthy foods!). Known as Enji Khoo to Hollywood and the fitness industry, she juggles three jobs while training hard for her bodybuilding contests. She is a P.E. lecturer at UC Davis, a kickboxing coach at Peak Performance (a gym in Davis, California), and a freelance designer of apparel and graphics. She considers designing her actual career—the rest are just hobbies.

Khoo's toned and golden body (5'4", 125 pounds, and 9% bodyfat) is equally sexy whether clothed in a form-fitting black dress with stiletto heels, or a trendy sports bra and spandex booty shorts (which she often wears running laps around Davis). She is 33 years old and started bodybuilding at age 27. She has been competing since 2003 in NPC / IFBB Figure Bodybuilding and WNBF / INBF Natural Bodybuilding (NPC = National Physique Committee; IFBB = International Federation of Bodybuilders; WNBF = World Natural Bodybuilding Federation; INBF = International Natural Bodybuilding and Fitness Federation). “When I was 27, I was surrounded by 50 of my closest friends at Sophia's Thai Bar. As I was blowing out the candles on my birthday cake, I asked myself what is the one wish that would make me happy?” “I decided I wanted to be a pro athlete, a natural bodybuilder and figure bodybuilder,” Khoo

explained. “It would be a huge accomplishment, since I’ve never been athletic and hated P.E. when I was in high school.” Khoo’s traditional Chinese parents supported her choice of postponing law school to follow her dream. As a Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist, Khoo already possessed knowledge of athletic training, so she knew how to transform her body to “look curvy like a bikini model, buff like a natural bodybuilder, or compact and ripped for figure bodybuilding.” She is her own sports nutritionist, coach, trainer, and designer as well. She spends around \$30,000 per year to compete.

A day in the life of this teacher and bodybuilder looks something like this:

4–6 A.M. Wakes up and trains cardio (usually biking for two hours, or biking for one hour and running six miles).

6–7 A.M. Replies to emails and voicemails from clients and students (upwards of 350 emails on a busy day).

7:30 A.M. Gets ready for work and eats breakfast.

7:45 A.M. Arrives on campus to start teaching (usually 8–10 A.M. Monday–Thursday).

10 a.m.–12 noon. Works on freelance design projects.

12–2 P.M. Weightlifting (2 body parts minimum).

2–3 P.M. Eats and showers. Has eaten 3–4 meals already. Eats a high-protein, low-carbohydrate, low-fat diet all year round.

3–5:45 P.M. Continues design work.

5:45–8 or 10 P.M. Teaches at Peak Performance.

Evening hours at home. An additional hour of bike riding. Finishes up design work.

1–2 A.M. Goes to bed.

Khoo believes that if people want something bad enough in life, they will make the time to accomplish it, even if it means only averaging two to three hours of sleep per night. If the only time she has to run is 1–2:30 A.M., she will do it. “To maintain a career, love life, social time with friends, etc. takes a high degree of multi-tasking, prioritizing, and time management,” she said. “Not everyone has the personality to become a

kickboxer or bodybuilder, [just like] not everyone has the personality to be an attorney or doctor.”

What makes Khoo happiest in life is making others happy. She considers herself a catalyst of happiness via fitness and nutrition. She has had students lose 90 pounds in four years of training with her and keep it off. She promotes getting fit naturally, which takes time and does not entail quick results. She considers herself to be physical proof of old-fashioned hard work: “The entire goal of my P.E. lectures is for UCD kids to regard working out as ‘fun.’ That way, we are more prone to exercise because it doesn’t feel like a chore. If someone shows me they are committed to changing their life, I’ll do whatever I can to help them acquire their dream,” she said. “Whenever anyone tries to thank me, I always reply that they do not have to do so because *they* invested the hard work and effort. *They* had to believe in themselves as much as I believed in them. All I did was help them realize their potential. God blessed me with the talent to be a leader who can inspire, motivate, [and] empower large groups of people. I am clueless to how I do it, or why I can do it. I guess if I were a superhero, [that would be] my superpower.”

Becoming a pioneer in media, entertainment, fashion, and fitness is one of Khoo’s main goals. She feels Asian Americans in general are under-represented in the media and entertainment, and she wants to be a positive role model for young Asian females. She was almost cast for a role on *American Gladiators*—three of the six women on the show are her fellow competitors—so the executives of NBC, Reville, and MGM know who she is. She would love to be cast as a new character on the NBC show *Heroes* as a “kick-ass villain that you love to hate, but who eventually switches sides and becomes a good guy.” Her other goals include launching and producing fitness DVDs and publications; opening a studio in West Hollywood to train beautiful gay men; running her first marathon at age forty and the Boston Marathon by age fifty. Essentially, Khoo’s dream in life is to be this generation’s Richard Simmons/Oprah Winfrey rolled into one.



THE FIRST REAL MODERN BODYBUILDING event for men took place in 1940. Thirty years later, when female bodybuilding started with George Synder’s “The Best in the World” contest, it was essentially a glorified swimsuit contest. Competitions claiming to judge solely on muscularity

did not actually begin until 1978, when the first U.S. Women’s National Physique Championship was held in Canton, Ohio. Yet even with the rise of feminism around the same time, these early events were not true bodybuilding contests. The women wore high-heeled shoes, posed with unclenched fists, and were not allowed to pose in some of the “men’s poses.”

In 1980, the National Physique Committee held the first women’s Nationals, the top amateur level competition for women in the United States. The first Ms. Olympia contest was also held that year. In 1985, a sequel to the 1977 Arnold Schwarzenegger documentary *Pumping Iron* was released; *Pumping Iron II: The Women* followed several women preparing for the 1983 Caesars Palace World Cup Championship. The American Federation of Women Bodybuilders was also founded in the 1980s.

Even with all of these advances, female bodybuilding continued to experience controversy in the 1990s. Women were still being judged on femininity and marketability rather than set standards. At the 1992 Ms. International contest, the IFBB judged using a series of femininity rules, saying competitors should not be “too big,” but not emaciated either. The winner of that event was Germany’s Anja Schreiner, who weighed 130 pounds at 5’7”. British competitor Paula Bircumshaw was Schreiner’s height, but had 32 pounds more muscle on her equally symmetrical frame, yet placed eighth in the competition despite being the clear audience pick. An audience uproar ensued, and following the competition the judging rules were rewritten to include physique requirements along with provisions for aesthetics. Despite the controversies, female bodybuilding competitions started to be televised live in the 1990s, starting with the 1991 Ms. Olympia contest. No longer were the competitions aired months after the fact.

In 2000, weight classes were introduced into the pro ranks. New judging guidelines included healthy appearance, face, makeup, and skin tone. The IFBB also introduced a “20% rule” in 2004, stating that those female athletes whose physiques called for it needed to decrease their muscularity by a factor of 20%. In 2005, the IFBB abolished the weight class system adopted in 2000.



THE HISTORY OF BODYBUILDING clearly shows the inconsistencies between the feminine ideal and the way female bodybuilders are both judged in competitions and viewed by some people. Female bodybuilders, unlike their male counterparts, are judged on an additional, ill-defined criteria: femininity. They are viewed as deviating from traditional gender roles and norms of what is beautiful, even by the men in their own sport. Aggressive posing for women is costly in judging. This ideal pressures many female bodybuilders to get breast implants, in attempt to maintain some sense of femininity (with such low body-fat percentages, many female bodybuilders lose their natural breasts). Money available for women is also limited, and they are often paid only a quarter of what male bodybuilders earn.

According to Marcia Ian in her article “When Is a Body Not a Body? When It’s a Building,” the gym is both a social and antisocial place. It is empty, even when it is full of people, because the social interactions that take place are as routinized as the training regimens. Likewise, it is full, even when empty, because it is physically full of machines and metal. Femininity is unwelcome in the gym because it symbolizes weakness and penetration—the male goal is to become impenetrable. Femininity is only welcome as an admiring audience. Women who rival men in physiques are not people, but things.

Khoo says she personally has not experienced such treatment because she trains naturally, without steroids. Steroid use in women may be one of the reasons why female bodybuilding is viewed as unnatural. “Men [as well as women] take me seriously in the weight room and ask me for training routines. . . . I’ve never had anyone think I was ‘unattractive’ for being toned or ‘too muscular.’ That’s the beauty of natural bodybuilding. A woman can become toned and lean, but not freakishly huge like women on steroids. A woman can retain her femininity. The public regards freakishly huge men/women as bizarre,” said Khoo. She added, “I would never date a (steroid) bodybuilder since my impression is people who use steroids have issues. I would date a natural athlete since I appreciate and understand how much dedication is involved to work hard to compete.”



STEROID USE IS PROBABLY THE BIGGEST topic of controversy in bodybuilding. Khoo said, “The IFBB would not exist if steroids and other

banned substances were not abused by the majority of athletes." Khoo believes some athletes go overboard with steroid use because they think the NPC / IFBB will make them a star, when the only man who really has become a well-known star through the sport is Arnold Schwarzenegger. Khoo refuses to promote steroid use because "I believe God blesses us with a healthy body. Why destroy this precious gift? The human body is a miracle." Steroids cannot effectively substitute for the complete change in lifestyle that is required for serious competitors.

Khoo also warns against all the dirt that goes on within the sport. "It's a shame," she said, "that my sport is extremely corrupt, politically driven, and there are many coaches and athletes who are unethical." Khoo, who struggles every year to change her body the old-fashioned way through disciplined eating and intense training, said when she started competing as a female bodybuilder she was naïve, but she has been able to manage because she has a strong sense of self. "As a woman you have to have guts, to be on stage in a tiny bikini which is literally glued to your chest and butt. You're wearing five-inch heels and trying to walk effortlessly," she said. "In order to succeed at the NPC / IFBB you must be stubborn as heck and not let other's opinions of you rattle your confidence."

Two friends and fellow competitors of Khoo's, couple Tina Smith and Bob Bell, host the INBF Capital City Natural Bodybuilding Championships in Sacramento, California, every year (this year's event is July 12, 2008). Like Khoo, Smith and Bell are natural athletes. Their mission is to educate and encourage drug-free strength training and bodybuilding, particularly by talking with high school students (they are part of the Sacramento SAFE KIDS coalition). Smith and Bell successfully appealed to Arnold Schwarzenegger to sign California State Senate Bill 37 in 2005, which stated that high school athletes are prohibited from using the performance-enhancing supplements synephrine, ephedra, and DHEA.



AS A STUDENT MYSELF, I think it is wonderful that people like Khoo, Smith, and Bell are out there promoting healthy lifestyles. My personal journey into the wonderful world of fitness began fairly innocently with the decision to take one of Khoo's P.E. classes four quarters ago. I didn't know who she was—I just picked the class out of the registration catalog because it sounded interesting. I didn't go to the gym regularly. I wasn't

inactive, but I also didn't know the proper way to train to see results in my physique. Now I'm sad if I can't take three to four P.E. classes in a quarter. I plan my core classes around the classes Khoo teaches. Each quarter I have increased the number of her classes that I take by one. Never have I loved 8 A.M. classes so much. I have discovered muscles I didn't know I had. I have become a glutton for the pain and pleasure of working out intensely. Dare I say, I really like how my body looks now, both in and out of clothes. Even more, exercise has become one my greatest highs.

Here is my progression into buffness, as I like to refer to it:

SPRING QUARTER 2007: Kickboxing

FALL QUARTER 2007: Kickboxing, Abs/Back Conditioning

WINTER QUARTER 2008: Kickboxing, Interval Toning (with dumbbells), Step Aerobics

SPRING QUARTER 2008: Kickboxing, Interval Toning (with dumbbells), Abs/Back Conditioning, Group Weightlifting (with machines)

Khoo's classes literally close enrollment after the first opening hour of registration. The waitlists for her classes are commonly over a hundred students. One of the main reasons her classes are so popular is because she is so knowledgeable about the science behind her sport. She is able to convey her expertise to students in a fun, motivational, and never condescending manner. Khoo even has a student-created Facebook group called "Mama Khoo Fanatics," the description of which appropriately reads, "Are you a masochist who spends your nights both looking forward to and dreading her P.E. classes? Have you ever slept on the couch downstairs because you were too sore to climb the stairs to your room? Have you ever passed up a trip to Jack in the Box because your conscience, in the form of Mama Khoo, reminds you of the dangers of empty calories and the importance of portion control? Join this group and feel free to post your own Khooisms or Khoospirations. And if you have never taken a class with her and have no idea why we are so obsessed with the woman, all you have to do is look at this picture to understand."

Some of my favorite Khooisms / Khoospirations posted on the website include Andrea-original quotations such as

*“I can kick your butt while smiling in Dreamhouse Barbie Pink”
(referring to her pink workout outfits).*



*“Isn’t it funny how the little things, like a new pair of earrings, can make you
feel like a million dollars?”*



credit line goes here.

As well as student comments about her:

*“Andrea Khoo’s wristwatch has no numbers on it. It just says, ‘time to kick
ass.’”*



*“Today she referred to herself as a Hobbit because sometimes she eats three
breakfasts.”*



*“My favorite Mama Khoo story is the one where she got hit by the car . . . and
then continued on with her run. You should have seen the car.”*



IT IS MY PERSONAL OPINION that Khoo's decision to participate in female bodybuilding was a stroke of good fortune for everyone who has taken her classes. Her enthusiasm is evident in her teaching because she lives and breathes her sport. Nothing sums up Khoo better than an entry on the Rate my Professor website posted on July 11, 2006: "Once, during the fitness test, I went into a sweat-induced dream state where I saw the face of God. She was tanned, toned, and had a million-dollar smile that, if harnessed, could cure cancer. I love Andrea Khoo."



Sources

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