

# INTERVIEW

Personal dialogue between  
PL USA Magazine and the  
Sport's Greatest Names.

## VICKY HEMBREE interviewed for PL USA by Chris Lydon MD



Vicky was all dimples, and pigtails, and POWER at the '80 Nationals

**CL:** How did you get started in powerlifting, Vicky?

**VH:** My dad (Bernie Gagne) was a physical trainer for the Air Force in Illinois. He was also a bodybuilder and Olympic Lifting coach. When we moved to California, he amassed weight equipment and built a gym in the garage, now referred to as Bernie's Powerhouse. He continued to coach strength athletes for both Olympic Lifting and the growing sport of Powerlifting.

**CL:** Did your dad encourage you to lift?

**VH:** When I was a little girl in Illinois, he always used to tell me how strong I was. When I was about 15 years old I remember him talking about female powerlifting pioneers like Ann Turbyme and Jan Todd. He always said, "Vicky, if you apply yourself, you can beat them!"

**CL:** How old were you when you started training?

**VH:** I was 17.

**CL:** When did you first compete?

**VH:** In 1978, three months after I started lifting, I entered an open powerlifting meet sponsored by the Los Angeles Police Academy.

**CL:** How did you do?

**VH:** I set 13 state records, got 1st place in the 198 lb. class and took the title for best female lifter.

**CL:** Amazing! You must have beaten a lot of experienced lifters.

**VH:** Yeah, actually a few of the athletes were seasoned, but a lot of the women were more like weekend warriors. When I first started, I think the majority of female lifters were trying to prove a point. Women's powerlifting wasn't well accepted and many of the athletes were lifting primarily to take a stand by competing in a traditionally male sport.

**CL:** You noticed a change in the talent level among the female lifters during the time you were involved with the sport?

**VH:** Definitely. The AAU was the predominant organization back then; there was more sense of unity within the sport. By the time I was into my second and third year as a competitor, the quality of the female lifters and the level of competition had risen dramatically.

**CL:** Tell me about your career; when did you win your first title?

**VH:** In 1978 I competed in both

beach was literally just outside the doors of the hotel. We went on tours; the food was great - not that I got to eat much of it. I was competing in the 181's but when I first got to Hawaii I weighed in at 193. I can remember starring myself for the first four days I was there. I did make weight, though!

But the stress of taking those pounds off took its toll and I lost a lot of strength. Ben Francis won the class and I took second.

**CL:** Do you know what your totals were?

**VH:** I squatted 463, benched 270, and set a world record with 501 pound dead lift.

**CL:** Was that the last time you competed?

**VH:** Yeah. I was the first woman to pull over 500 pounds in the deadlift and that record of 501 pounds stood for about nine years. I had a world record and a world championship title. I felt that I had accomplished what I'd set out to do in Powerlifting.

**CL:** That's why you retired.

**VH:** There were other reasons. Lifting to compete at that level was taking a toll on me physically and mentally. I was only 19; I wanted to do well at school and compete on the track team and have a social life.

**CL:** Did your decision to leave powerlifting have anything to do with the status of the sport? I mean with the growing drug use?

**VH:** To be honest, that was certainly a factor. During the three years I competed, it seemed that the whole sport was suffer-

ing from a loss of integrity. If you said you were a powerlifter, people automatically assumed you were taking steroids - and in most cases they were right. In order to stay competitive, I had to make a difficult choice. I chose to leave.

**CL:** What was it like having your Dad as a coach throughout your competitive career?

**VH:** He's a great coach, very supportive and motivating. My dad provided me with focus; he kept the goal in front of me. He always encouraged his lifters. My mom was supportive, too; she came to every meet to cheer me on.

**CL:** What have you been up to since you retired from Powerlifting?

**VH:** I got married after college in 1983. I have two great kids, Nicholas is 10 and Stephanie's 4. I work at Paragon Labs and I love my job. Of course I also host POWERLIFTER VIDEO MAGAZINE with Chuck LaManita.

**CL:** Is your husband a lifter?

**VH:** John started lifting competitively in 1981, but drug use was prevalent. He made the same decision as me and chose to consider himself a casual lifter.

**CL:** Did you continue to lift recreationally after you retired from competition?

**VH:** For a while I lifted to stay in shape, but it was not a priority and with the birth of my kids it sort of fell by the wayside. About four years ago, John and I made the decision to get back in shape. We wanted to be physically capable of keeping up with our kids! We wanted to be healthy and active enough to do things as a family.

**CL:** What made you want to come out of retirement?

**VH:** POWERLIFTER VIDEO MAGAZINE.

**CL:** You're kidding. I've never heard this story.

**VH:** In issue 4, POWERLIFTER VIDEO MAGAZINE interviewed me for a feature, "What ever happened to the past greats of powerlifting?" Afterwards, New Lou (producer of POWERLIFTER) approached me about being a host for the video. I loved the idea but I didn't want to be a has-been. If I was going to cover the sport in a video news magazine, I wanted to be part of it again. I motivated me to jump back into powerlifting right away. (I had a reputation to live up to!) I got my feet wet with strength competitions.

**CL:** Tell me about them.

**VH:** I competed in the Venice Beach IRON WARRIOR in 1995 when I took first place and again



Vicky was the first woman to break the 500 lb. barrier in the deadlift at the 1981 IPF Women's Worlds.

in 1996 when I took second. The five events include a 65-pound sled pull, shot put, strict curl, bench press, and the "farmer's walk", where you hold a 65-pound dumbbell in each hand and race around a rectangular course. I really enjoy doing the IRON WARRIOR - it's fun to compete without the pressure of a meet.

**CL:** But now you're easing your way back into real powerlifting meets.

**VH:** My first real meet was the AAU North American Bench Press. It was a held in Moreno Valley on April 26th and let me tell you, I was just as nervous as I'd been for my first meet. 16 years ago! I opened successfully with a 242 then went on to do 253 and 264 - all white lights! I won the 198's "Raw" category

and took the best female lifter title.

**CL:** What changes do you notice in powerlifting since you left the sport 17 years ago?

**VH:** The whole idea of a "raw" category is silly to me. Bench shirts were just hitting the scene when I retired and I never wore one. I don't see the point. I think that Powerlifting should be about who can lift the most, not who can afford the best equipment. I'm also happy that the AAU is officially a drug-free federation and does drug-testing. It's really sad that to the lay-person, our sport is synonymous with steroids. It's also unfortunate that the sport has fragmented to this extent. If I held a world record, I want to feel like I hold a world record, not just a record for the

AAU. There's no way to really tell anymore who's the strongest.

**CL:** Is the current state of powerlifting part of the reason you've recently started training for Olympic Lifting?

**VH:** It played a role, but I'm also excited about the possibilities of competing in the Olympics in the year 2000. I have it on good authority that the Olympic Committee is finally going to approve women's Olympic Lifting. My father's back to coaching me - both for powerlifting and Olympic lifting, and he hasn't lost his touch!

**CL:** So what's next on your comeback trail?

**VH:** I'm planning to do a full meet with the AAU this fall.

**CL:** I'm pretty sure there are some women out there that won't find that reassuring. Go get 'em Vicky!



Vicky gets ready to lift at the first IPF Women's Worlds. (Kathy Leistner)