

Feel the pain...Darren Antoine, above and Charlotte Donabrega pumping iron

PHOTOGRAPHS: JUSTIN LEIGHTON

Charlotte Donabrega is 16, shy, pretty and of Indian origin. She can lift 250lbs over her head. Darren Antoine 19 is a West Indian, five foot four, eight stone and slightly built. Both are body builders, training at the White Lion Youth Centre in Islington, North London.

The ground floor of the old school building, in what was the dining hall, is a hive of activity. In one corner a table-tennis match is underway. In other parts of the room boys and girls play pool, watch television or dance to music.

In a small room to one side more young people busily lift weights and contort themselves on various contraptions.

The generally relaxed atmosphere belies the fact that the White Lion has produced its fair share of serious contenders on the professional body-building circuit.

As a sport, body-building is much maligned. The men are regarded at best as narcissistic idiots, the women as sideshow freaks. Yet it is becoming increasingly popular and accepted as a sport.

Darren, who works as a press agency photographer by day, has been training at the centre for four years. He is no Schwarzenegger. “I don’t tell people I do body-building, because they’d just look at the size of me and laugh. But it’s not the size that matters, it’s the physique.”

Physique body-builders and weight-lifting body-builders train side by side but the results are very different. In physique training the emphasis is on muscle definition and body shape; weight training is simply heaving the greatest weight possible over your head.

Charlotte only started training a year ago and is already lifting twice her own weight: “I don’t know whether I’ll start going into the contests next year, but I’d like to,” she says.

Darren has already entered a few contests. “I don’t go in to win, if I get placed I’m happy; I just go out and do my stuff. There’s no way I could enter at the moment. I’m too out of shape.” He reckons that to get back into shape takes eight weeks of strict training and clean living. One late night during the run up to a contest can upset the whole pattern.

It is the strictness of the regime that puts many youths off. Both Darren and Charlotte train three nights a week. Alcohol and cigarettes are out, although the diet is not so strict. “I just eat normal food,” says Charlotte, “and build it into muscle.”

Recent coverage of women’s body-building has almost solely concentrated on the physique side and played on its sexual freak value. Women’s weight-lifters have been neglected. “Most people say women shouldn’t do it,” says Darren. “But I think they should. They can be just as good as the men.”

Popular misconceptions about the sport include the myth that everyone is gay and that they all use drugs. Darren says, “Most people think that body-builders are gay because they admire their own bodies. But building is just a way of getting the best out of yourself, of feeling good about yourself.”

He is as scornful about drugs as the health authorities: “It’s not fair. I think body-building should be about building your body naturally or there’s no point to it.”

Bill Acraman, the trainer at the White Lion, agrees: “none of the boys and girls take anything harmful.” He has encouraged both Darren and Charlotte to take the sport to competition level and has no doubts about the benefits of body-building for young people: “It gives them confidence and a goal.”

Ends

**Strong stuff at the White Lion**

Mark Piggott  
Martin McNamara

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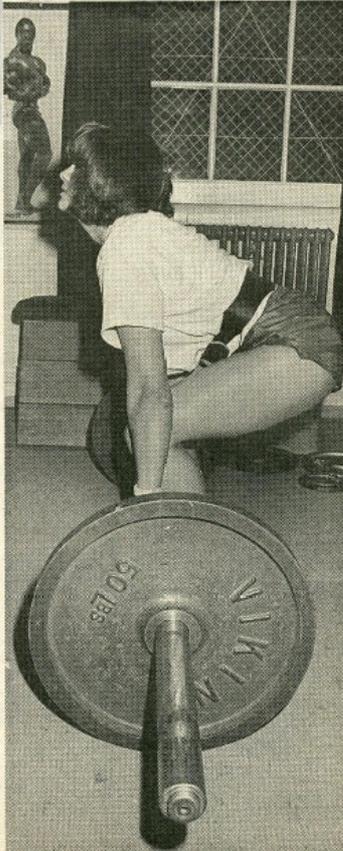
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