

COMING ON STRONG

The nation's best high school heptathlete and scholar, Arizona's Gea Johnson is showing there's more to building muscle than what meets the eye

Photography by Tony Duffy

by Laura Dayton

Sally Johnson didn't like her name. She thought it was too run-of-the-mill, and she didn't want her children to have ordinary names like hers. So her first born daughter was given a different sort of name: Gea. And one thing is for certain, Gea Johnson is as extra-ordinary as her name.

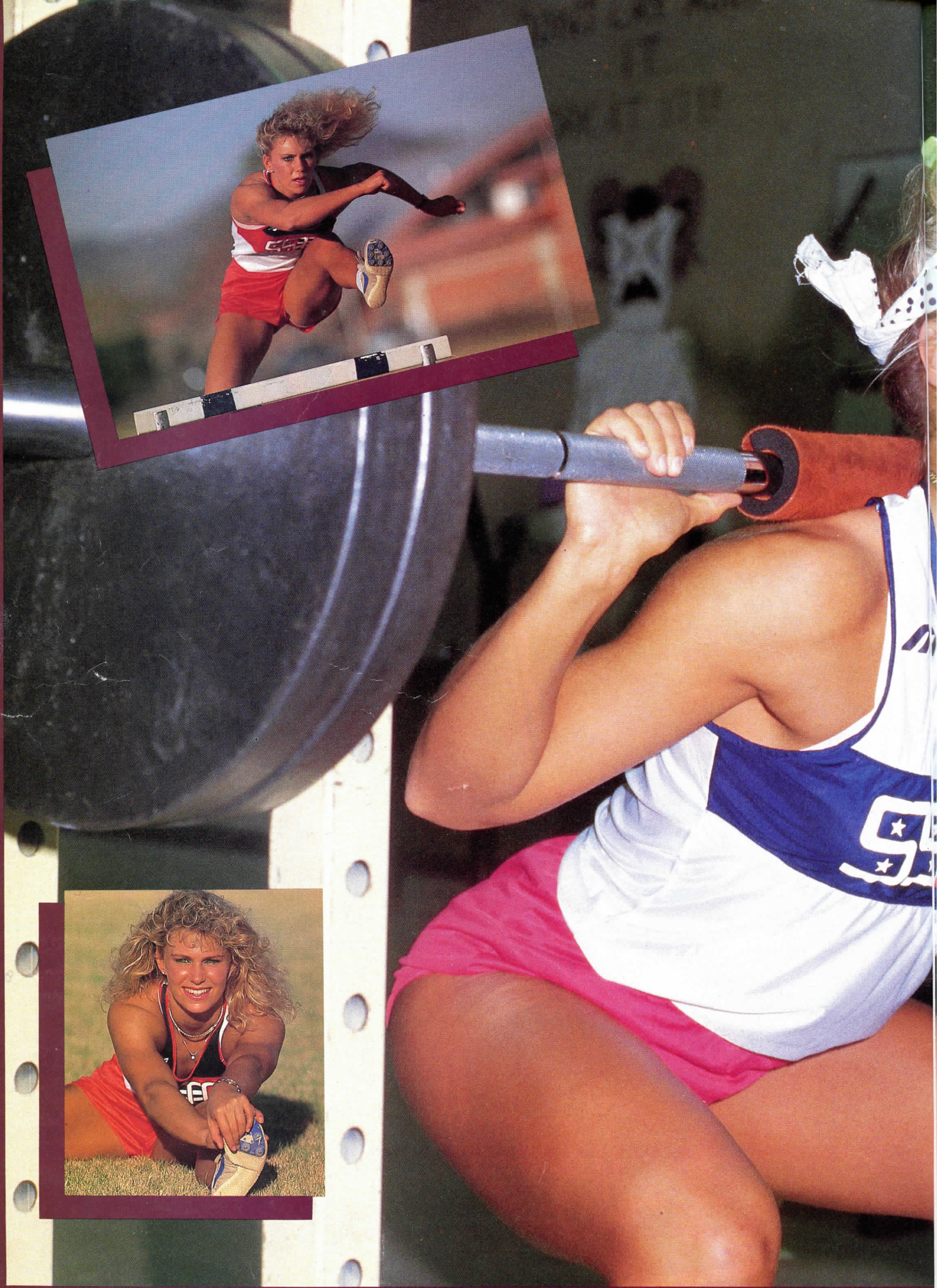
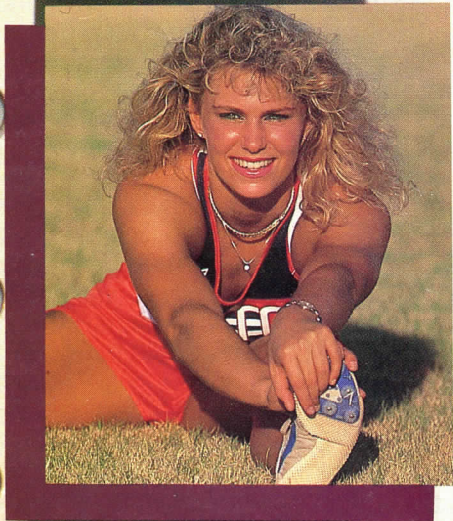
This high school senior from Phoenix, Az. wasn't content with straight A's, so she took on some extra credit courses to come up with a G.P.A. of 5.3. Last year she totaled the highest score in the nation for the heptathlon—a grueling combination of the 100-meter high hurdles, high jump, long jump, shot put, javelin and the 800- and 200-meter track and field events. The combination of these two achievements won her the distinction of being chosen as the best female scholar athlete in the nation last year, an honor bestowed on her by the Washington D.C. Touchdown Club. She's also class president at Washington High. She's been offered a full-ride scholarship to Stanford University and is looking forward to qualifying for the Olympics in 88. And she's only 18 years old.

Although it's hard to believe she has any spare time, last year Johnson took some time away from her track and field training to give bodybuilding a try. At the urging of some friends she decided to test the waters cautiously by entering Wally Boyko's Ms. Fitness contest in Las Vegas, a competition that combines aspects from both bodybuilding and beauty contests. Among the women vying for the title were top-flight bodybuilders like Sandy Riddel, Mishay Santos and



Last year Gea Johnson decided to give bodybuilding a try—but cautiously. She entered Wally Boyko's Ms. Fitness contest held last summer in Las Vegas, a unique cross between bodybuilding and beauty contests. Up against her for the title were such notables from the world of physique athletes as Mishay Santos (at left in photo above) and Sandy Riddel (far right). For this particular contest, the title went to Johnson, shown second from the left in the lineup and at right with her six-foot trophy.







Her training is geared for building the explosive power she needs for track and field, and Gea Johnson's routine evolves heavily around squats, power cleans, jerks and the bench press. Her sights are set on the Olympics, and she's determined. "I would never quit anything, I hate the word. My mom always taught us you could accomplish anything, as long as you didn't give in. And that's exactly what I believe."

Deanna Panting. For this particular contest, it was Johnson's physique, proportions, blonde hair and blue-eyes that won the six-foot tall trophy.

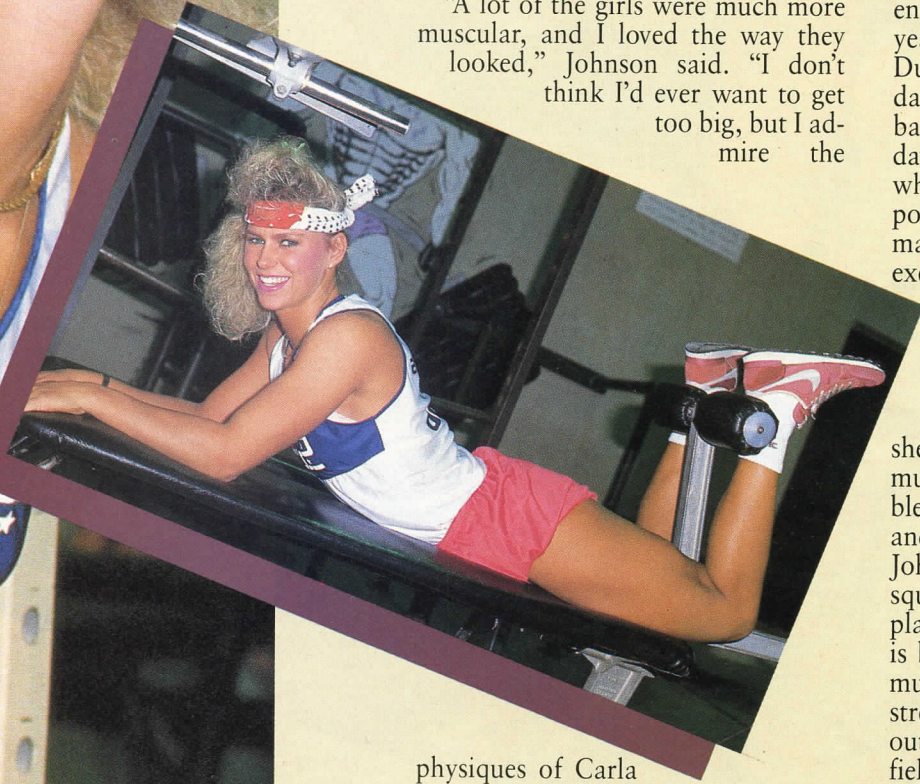
"A lot of the girls were much more muscular, and I loved the way they looked," Johnson said. "I don't think I'd ever want to get too big, but I admire the

While her bodybuilding is on hold, her training is not. Johnson has her eyes fixed clearly on the Olympics, if not in 88, then definitely in 92. To that end, she's been weight training for two years in conjunction with her track. During the off-season she trains everyday, and during the on-season she cuts back to two or three weight training days per week. And she knows exactly what she's training for—explosive power. She restricts her training mainly to Olympic and powerlifting exercises, the bulk of her workouts concentrate around squats, power cleans, jerks, the bench and incline press.

Although she's not planning on tackling serious bodybuilding yet, she's building a base of power and muscle that could offer some formidable competition some day. At 5-foot-6 and an average weight of 135 pounds, Johnson has no problem repping out squats with 250 pounds. And she plans on upping her poundages, which is bound to keep packing more solid muscle on her frame. But for now, she strength trains to look good, and to out-perform the competition on the field. "Right now, track is what's going to get me through college—and I hope to the Olympics," she said.

"But I'd really like to get seriously into bodybuilding later. That's one of the great things, it's an older sport. A lot of women don't start until they're in their late 20s, and they're still competitive into their early 40s it seems."

Johnson's athletic career started with swimming, advanced into gymnastics, then branched into varsity basketball, volleyball and even soccer, before she settled in seriously with track two years ago. The oldest of five



physiques of Carla Dunlap and Mae Mollica who have managed to get muscular and yet retain their femininity. I think Cory Everson's beautiful and it's interesting because she was also a pentathlete.

"The Ms. Fitness was a good contest for me. I'd always been muscular and I wanted to see if I could be competitive in the sport. After the Las Vegas show I entered the teenage Arizona contest and won again. But you can't train for bodybuilding and track at the same time, so I've put my bodybuilding on hold for the time being."



No doubt Johnson's got a winning combination of beauty, brawn and brains. She was chosen as the nation's top female scholar-athlete for 1985, an honor she won by holding top heptathlon rankings along with a straight-A average in her academic studies. Her school, Washington High School in Phoenix, honored her with this sign when she returned home from Washington, D.C., where she received the award. Johnson's immediate plans are for college and the Olympics and she plans on keeping strength training in her daily routine.

brothers and sisters—sharing equally uncommon names like Mya, Thayne, Tava and Shay—her mother encouraged them all to become involved in sports. Which they have. Mya—Gea's best friend and younger sister—runs the 800 and mile and is also ranked with the top 10 in the nation.

Now in her last year of high school, Johnson is somewhat indecisive about what's in store academically. The Stan-

ford scholarship is hard to pass up, but she's also prepared to miss her family with the move to California. She hasn't decided whether to major in International Business—she has four years of French—or follow her instincts and go into sports reporting or commentating. From her track record so far, it appears that whichever direction she takes, she'll be an extraordinary success. ○

