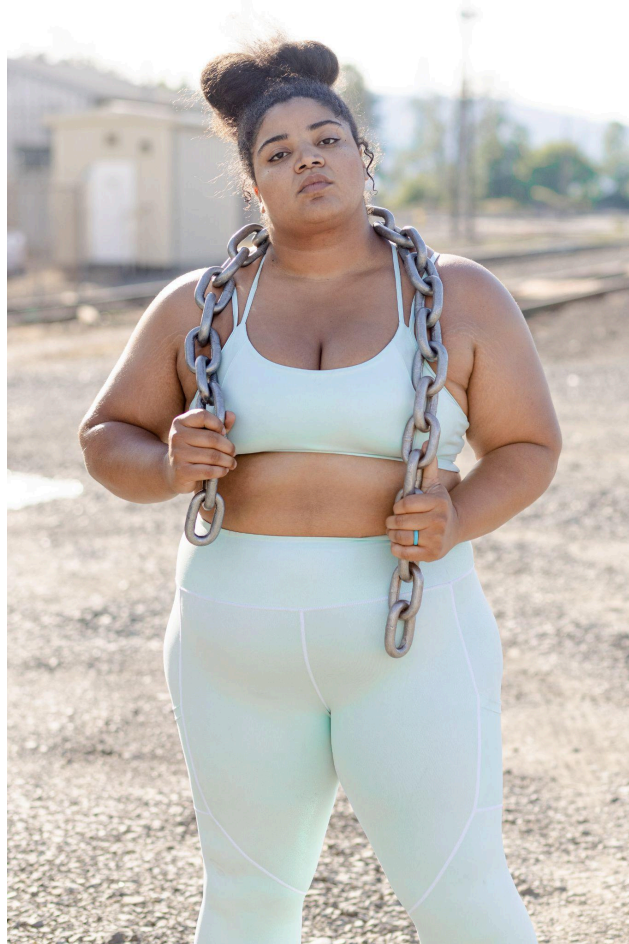


Heavy Lifting

Gabi Dixson finds her place in Strongwoman competitions

By Pierce Baugh V and Lily Crane



Photos by Dillon Vibes

When Gabi Dixson was five years old, her father says she grabbed the throttle of his four-wheeler, refusing to let go. Patrick Dixson, a former defensive lineman for Carroll College football, tried everything he could to break her grip. Seconds later, they crashed into an irrigation pipe. It was at this moment that Patrick realized his daughter's gift — the unshakable hold she'd have on the world.

Nearly three decades later, at the 2022 Giants Live Strongman in Liverpool, England, Dixson displayed her grip strength's full potential.

Waving to the crowd, Dixson made her way to the center of the stage in a bright red Team USA shirt and cheetah-print compression shorts. Ahead of her sat a contraption

that looked like a Medieval torture device: the Hercules Hold, which consists of two pillars, each weighing roughly 352 pounds.

For many, such a device would appear as corporal punishment. Dixon walked up to the platform and clenched the metal handles attached to the pillars, which tilted in opposite directions. With the clock ticking, Dixon took a short, deep breath.

Dixon showed no signs of easing up on her grip. Instead, her eyes were locked on a spot straight ahead. She offered a toothy grin and stuck her tongue out. At the 50-second mark, Dixon was still smiling. At 1:08, she released the pillars and bowed, summoning cheers that filled the stadium.

Her time placed second in the event among both men and women. She only trailed Mark Felix, the world record holder, in the event. Dixon also set a new female record for the Hercules Hold that day.

Dixon hails from athletic stock. Her parents, Patrick and Beth, met at Carroll College in Helena, Montana, where they played football and volleyball, respectively. Her younger brothers play football at Western Oregon University, while she has younger sisters who play soccer and compete in track and field. Patrick recalls his eldest's competitive streak from a young age.

“She was playing indoor soccer, and this little girl was getting to the ball before she got to the ball, and Gabi let out this blood-curdling scream,” he says.

While attending college from 2009 to 2013, Dixon competed in track and field in both discus and shot put while pursuing a degree in psychology at Concordia University. There, she was coached by University of Oregon legend and Olympic gold medalist Mac Wilkins. However, Wilkins deduced that Dixon was better suited for shot put despite her preference for discus.

Dixon wasn't bothered by Wilkins underestimating her abilities — she was determined to prove that she had a body fit for the discus. She eventually won two national championships in discus, one in hammer throw, and one in shot put by the end of her collegiate career. Just barely missing the cut-off to qualify for the United States Olympic Trials, Dixon felt unsure of how best to move forward.

In 2016, she received an email from a 24 Hour Fitness gym inviting her to an event called “Finding the Next Olympic Hopeful.” The organizers were seeking athletes to try lesser-known Olympic sports, including rugby. Although she didn't win the competition, her performance showcased her elite potential.

Later on, rugby coach Te Awinha Arunui-Tate noticed her and encouraged her to come to a USA camp. Arunui-Tate was amazed by how quickly Dixon adapted, given her limited experience.

“She would do things and make it look really easy, and she had only just learned it last week,” says Arunui-Tate.

Many people put her and others with similar body types under the stereotypes of “unathletic” or “lazy,” says Dixon. Rugby, a sport she initially had no interest in, opened her up to a whole new world that she felt welcome in because of her size and strength.

“That was actually the first time that I felt like my body was not only accepted but needed. They wanted big, strong girls,” says Dixon.

Dixon played for a local club team on the North Island of New Zealand before transferring to a team on the South Island that needed someone with her strength and size. She was the lock and tight head prop for her team. In 2020, Dixon tagged along with a teammate, Jamaya Maruariki, to a Strongman gym. Unfamiliar with the competition, Dixon found herself captivated by the lesser-known sport.

Strongman is similar to powerlifting but is based on endurance and power, with more diverse competition categories. There are the basics, like squatting, but there are also unique events like the frame carry, where a person has to stand in the middle of a giant wooden frame and carry it as fast as possible.

With only three weeks to prepare, Dixon won the competition, defeating the reigning three-time champion, Shayna Wirihana.

“Strongman is the truest expression of strength amongst all strength sports,” says Martins Licis, a former World’s Strongest Man Champion and 2022 The Arnold champion. “We don’t discriminate against objects.”

While most Strongman competitors are willing to lift any object, Dixon is just as motivated to uplift other people. She’s used to entering new spaces and overcoming the odds. As a Black woman, she’s used to being one of just a few — or sometimes the only — women of color in strongman competitions and at gyms, which are “predominantly white spaces.”

Dixson deflects the expectations and limitations that society, and even people close to her, have placed on bodies like hers. She sits at a point of intersection, proclaiming herself as “a Black, fat, queer woman.” Many people, Dixson says, look at people like her with low expectations.

“I really just want to expand people’s minds and ideas of what you can do,” says Dixson.

During Black History Month 2024, Dixson launched her nonprofit Gym Space Equity (GSE), aiming to make strength gyms more accessible and affordable for people of color. While GSE has traditional forms of fundraising, like sponsorships from local businesses, Dixson’s model also encourages capable strength gym goers to add \$5 or \$10 on top of their regular gym fees to help make gym membership more affordable by subsidizing their gym fees.

Despite their intentions, GSE has faced its share of pushback. Natalie Smith, Dixson’s GSE partner, says that she and Dixson have received death threats, threats of violence, and criticism because of their work with GSE. Yet, Dixson and Smith are motivated to help all people enter Strongman.

Dixson’s first U.S. Strongman competition was at the Rainier Classic in Seattle, Washington. She competed in the trump stones event, where athletes choose from items of varying weights to lift. Points are gained from both how heavy the chosen item is and how many times it can be lifted. Dixson was sitting comfortably in third place until the fourth event. Feeling ambitious, she went for a 315-pound trump stone but was unable to lift it.

Even with the blunder, others saw Dixson’s raw talent. She started working with a new coach with a dream competition in mind: the Arnold Sports Festival, or “The Arnold.” Despite consistently placing fifth in World’s Strongest Woman, it wasn’t enough to catch the eyes of The Arnold’s organizers, and it evaded her for three years.

In late February 2025, Dixson achieved her goal of competing at The Arnold for the first time. Despite finally reaching the competition, Dixson placed last out of 12 competitors.

“I just can’t even think of a time at really anything I’ve gotten dead last. Like, I am somebody who likes to win, somebody who’s naturally doing the winning,” says Dixson.

Even though she placed last, Dixson exceeded the limits of what she thought was possible. One task on the docket was the stone-to-shoulder event, which involves lifting and guiding a 300-pound stone from the ground up one’s torso and to the shoulder. Although Dixson nervously anticipated the challenge, it ended up being one of her

strongest showings. She proved to herself that she could do something she never thought possible.

Dixson now turns her focus toward securing her next invitation to the Arnold Sports Festival. She knows that competing isn't just about her, but rather the many people who see themselves through her.

“It's all just about building my platform and my brand,” says Dixson. “And make sure all these little chubby kids know that they can do big things.” Dixson adds, “We are out here. We are making strides. So just keep being that person, and more of us will come.”