

## Heavy lifting

Annika Yates



Training at the Thai Nguyen Sports Centre, June 2020. Photo: Thanh Hue

The women of the Vietnamese national weightlifting team are strong. They are medal contenders at international competitions, which is not typical for many of the nation's sports teams. They are remarkable not just for their physical skill but also for overcoming Vietnamese cultural norms. In his book *Saigon's Edge*, Erik Harms uses the term 'edginess' to think about the lives of people on the outskirts of Ho Chi Minh City, moving between cultural ideals of rural and urban and the messier realities of the city. Similarly, these athletes live on the edge: building their lives around competing under the Vietnamese flag on a global stage, while eschewing standards of femininity in Vietnam.

Weightlifting as a sport is composed of two separate, highly technical lifts, in which the athlete quickly moves a loaded barbell from the floor to a still, overhead position. The lifts require strength but also flexibility, speed and precision. The adrenaline channelled in each lift is shared with the audience sonically as their hard-soled lifting shoes hit the platform and as the athletes drop the barbell from overhead. Athletes compete by weight class, meaning some are as small as 45kg and as large as 180kg in body weight. At the elite level, they could be lifting one-and-a-half or two times their body weight overhead.

Vietnam's national weightlifting teams are especially skilled at the lower weight classes. Years ago, I was discussing the sport with my Vietnamese tutor, trying to get help with specific vocabulary. He had never really heard of the sport or even knew much about the team. I showed him videos of the women's team. He sat back in his chair incredulously and said, 'They're so small! That's how many kilos? They're strong like ants!!' He didn't mean it as an insult; like ants, they are lifting one or even twice their body weight overhead.

The athletes live and train far away from family, which is unusual for Vietnamese young women. The idea of building a body that is capable of such extreme feats of strength goes against many of the conventions of femininity in Vietnam, and requires them to delay or eschew altogether the lives that they would have otherwise led: getting married and starting families at a young age. What drives them to commit to this sport, even as it forces them to live lives far from the norm, without much recognition from the people who share the nation they represent?

The training centre is out on the edges of Hanoi, a peaceful campus set back from the road with very little signage. If it weren't for the five Olympic rings welded into the pattern of the metal gates, I wouldn't have known I was at Hanoi's national training centre. The guard has pointed Trang, my translator, and me to a large building, and as we walked closer, we could hear the sounds of weights clinking together and barbells hitting the ground. The training hall is light and airy, with high ceilings, light blue walls and light-coloured wooden lifting platforms spread evenly throughout, accented with the standardised primary colours of weightlifting plates and the silver shine of barbells. Both the men and women's teams are there.

Trang and I set up folding chairs on a cement porch between the training hall and the soccer field. Someone from the team has decided that we will interview the women in pairs. Our conversations are punctuated with the loud sounds of barbells dropping to the ground. The first set of athletes say that they had thought I was a Wada (World Anti-Doping Agency) official here to conduct drug testing. Soon, we all relax into conversations about our mutual love of weightlifting. I expect to hear about the arduous challenges, physical and mental, of preparing for international competition while living lives that are spatially and culturally different than that of their families and peers. Instead, they share their love for the simplicity and independence of their lives and tell me about how they fell in love with such a weird sport.

Each athlete says that they knew nothing of the sport before moving to the training centre. Some weren't even really sure what sport they were being recruited for.

The initial experience was one of shock, but they quickly got excited when they learned more about weightlifting. Most were recruited at age ten or eleven. Typically, the athletes were recruited in the same way: a national team coach visited their physical education class in secondary school and found students with weightlifting potential. 'I cried for two weeks when I started. Weightlifting was exhausting and scary and I had to be away from home,' Le Thi Tham says. 'But eventually I got used to it.'

The experience of building strength and the combined fear and adrenaline of making these quick, big lifts are unique features of this sport and are part of what drives their love of it. I ask these athletes what participation in this sport is like: 'You know the feeling when you keep trying harder and harder, and you can finally accomplish something you thought you could never do? I think I love weightlifting for that. When I can lift a higher weight than my record, I feel like I can reach something out of my limit by trying,' Hoang Thi Duyen says.

Vuong Thi Huyen says: 'I love it when I can overcome myself. Weightlifting gives me that feeling and motivation.'

While other elite athletes may talk about the constant struggle of pushing their physical limits and rigorous training routines, these athletes paint a different picture, one of a good training routine and time with their fellow athletes. Nguyen Thi Van says it's an easy and comfortable life. 'We eat and practise. We have a lot of time to hang out too.'

Is life at the training centre stifling? Do they feel like they lack freedom? Nguyen Thi Thuy and Nguyen Thu Hien say: 'We think the life outside [the training centre] is more difficult than in here. You don't have to worry about earning for family, being responsible for family and relatives, only practising and eating and gathering.'

Even the outside societal norms that dictate the standards of feminine beauty are not a dominant narrative at the training centre. They've heard that women shouldn't build large muscles, that lifting is too dangerous for women's bodies, that eating so much to build strength isn't a good thing to do. But they agree that the sport is more important than those cultural pressures.

'This sport's not like what people think. It requires technique and practising, not just lifting something heavy by strength,' says Ngo Thi Quyen. 'I hope people become aware that it's also a kind of sport and it's important too. And I want to represent all the female athletes and let other people know about female weightlifting and not have stereotypes anymore.'

Some of the athletes thought that this was particularly noticeable in Vietnam. Thuy says: 'I hope Vietnamese people can have an open mind like our international friends, who have no judgement or stereotypes about a woman's body, who aren't talking about women behind their backs and giving strange looks when some muscled female athletes walk in.'

Vietnamese weightlifters get few opportunities to compete because there aren't many weightlifting competitions in general, and fewer in the region, but competing is the goal. Many of the athletes say representing Vietnam makes them feel proud. 'I want to prove to our international friends that Vietnam is a small country but our accomplishments are not lower than those of others,' Thuy says.

For other athletes, it's all about sport. 'I have a great passion for weightlifting and actually, I don't need other people to understand it as I do,' Huyen says. 'I can always keep chasing my dream. That's enough.'



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