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'Iron Maidens' all-female weightlifting competition coming to Gowanus



Heavy lifter Charlie Nagle does a squat in last year's Iron Maidens weightlifting competition. Photo courtesy of CrossFit South Brooklyn

By Mary Frost
Brooklyn Daily Eagle

They are the women who do the heavy lifting.

And they will be lifting some astounding weights in the annual all female competition called the Iron Maidens Raw Open on Saturday, March 5. The event is organized by and is held at CrossFit South Brooklyn.

These ladies have been practicing their back squats, bench presses and deadlifts all year, and they're ready. Many of them lift more than they weigh.

This year's event has attracted 65 very fit competitors, who will be cheered on by their friends, family and interested spectators.

"Iron Maidens is at its heart a celebration of women who prioritize strength training," Margie Lempert, the meet director at CrossFit South Brooklyn, told the *Brooklyn Eagle* on Friday.

Lempert said the competition brings together women from all over the New York tristate area, "from absolute novice to experienced lifter," ranging in age from 25 to 70.

"There are just a handful of all women powerlifting meets in the country, most focusing on seasoned lifters," Lempert said. "What sets Iron Maidens apart is our focus on building community, and educating participants about the process of preparing for and participating in a powerlifting competition."

Lempert's goal is "to make this an accessible, welcoming and inspiring experience for participants and spectators with the hope that more women will pursue barbell sports," she added.

Rachel Hsiung, a digital product designer in Brooklyn who recently deadlifted 180 pounds, told the *Eagle* that weightlifting "is empowering and exciting on a few different levels for me."

"Historically it's been a pretty male-dominated sport, and it's the kind of thing that my mother probably would've frowned upon as being 'unlady-like,'" she said. "It's exciting that these days so many women not only participate but really kick ass at it. There's also the personal feeling of empowerment that I get when I lift an amount of weight that I didn't even think I could ever lift. It reminds me that the assumptions that other people might make about you — and that you might even make about yourself — are just that ... assumptions."

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Rachel Hsiung, a digital product designer in Brooklyn, practices for the Iron Maidens weightlifting competition. Photo courtesy of Ray Hsiung

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Scholarship kick off

CrossFit has held the event for five years, but this year the group has inaugurated the Iron Maidens Stay Strong Scholarship to help low-income women pay for college.

Their crowdfunding effort has raised \$22,300 already, surpassing their goal of \$20,000. The money will create a fund that pays 70 percent of college tuition for 10 students in Grace Outreach's College Prep program in the Bronx.

Danae McLeod, director of the College Prep program at Grace Outreach, will be competing in the event for the second year. She told the *Eagle* on Friday that she trains four to five days a week – weightlifting two times a week and doing strength training and cardio work on the other days.

McLeod hoists 180 in the dead lift, 160-plus in the squats and can bench press 100 pounds, she said. She does not consider herself to be a “super heavy lifter.”

Last year's Iron Maiden winner, Serene Khader, cleared 345 lbs. in the deadlift.

“My goal is to lift 400 total,” McLeod said. “Some competitors lift up to 800 lbs. total! I'm a lightweight in comparison. I'm not trying to win, but to be involved in a community of pretty strong women.”



Last year's Iron Maiden competitors. Photo courtesy of CrossFit South Brooklyn

McLeod helped connect Iron Maidens with Grace Outreach. The successful crowdfunding effort was “a happy outcome,” she said.

“It’s a relief that we can help the students stay in school,” she said. “Many of the women are undocumented or have lost financial aid through predatory practices.” Grace Outreach is creating a Scholars Program where the students will carry out monthly service work and receive mentoring throughout their college years, McLeod said.

Lempert said that the program prioritizes women-owned businesses as prize sponsors.

“Above all, this is an incredibly fun and raucous day of grit, camaraderie and awesome competition,” she said.

The Iron Maidens Raw Open takes place from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. on March 5 at CrossFit South Brooklyn, on Degraw Street between 3rd and 4th avenues.

Sponsors of the competition include Cafe Grumpy, lululemon, Left Bank restaurant, Slant Shack Jerky, Sara June Salon, Liddabit Sweets, Grand Army Bar, Twig Terrarium, Threes Brewery, Ample Hills Creamery and Pure Pharma.

February 26, 2016 - 4:29pm

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