

The Transformation of a Figure Competitor

For the past year I have been coaching an incredible woman. Stephanie Guerra is a retired Deputy Sheriff who served for 25 years. She came to me with a goal of stepping on stage as a Figure competitor, for the first time, at the strong age of 61. I am so very proud of Stephanie! Her determination, positive outlook, mental grit and physical strength are all traits to be admired. As she has charged ahead on her fitness journey, she has accidentally become an inspiration to many others at her gym, and even the grocery store!

I think you will find inspiration in her story as well. Take a look...

Sherry: Tell us a little about what motivated you to start your fitness journey.

Stephanie: I have struggled with weight and body image my entire life. I have never been hugely overweight, but bad enough to dislike myself. I have been physically active most of my adult life as well, involved in running, weight lifting, kickboxing and other pursuits. I have always been interested in the changes that could be made through body building, but didn't know how to achieve these results. And with a stressful job, while I found time to work out, I didn't know if I could make the commitment, especially to diet.

Sherry: It sounds like weight loss has been a long-time focus for you. What have you tried in an effort to get closer to the body you visualized you could have?

Stephanie: A few years back, I decided I really needed to focus on losing weight. I was at my highest weight. I went to Weight Watchers and lost 30 pounds. Over the years, I would gain a few, lose a few, never regaining all the weight but never where I really wanted to be.

Sherry: Congratulations on losing that first 30 pounds! What was your strategy to continue to get results?

Stephanie: I was always aware of nutrition. I had tried so many diets – Atkins, Zone, and Weight Watchers. I would be strict for a few months, see some results and become less focused on it. About 16 months ago, my husband and I decided to reduce our carb intake. Before that, I believed I could eat any type of food, as long as it was low fat and low calories. But I'd been reading about lower carb diets and healthy carb diets such as Paleo. So, I limited my carb intake to oatmeal and occasionally yams and brown rice. I also started lifting heavier weights. I began to notice a change in my body shape. My arms, always toned, began to look better. I was even getting slimmer in my midsection. But I decided I needed a goal. Just going to the gym every day – well I needed something more.



Making progress but ready to take it to the next level.

Sherry: Wow good for you and your husband! So you started setting new goals for yourself once you saw what you could do in the weight room?

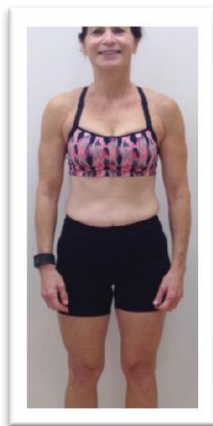
Stephanie: Yes, thanks in part to my son's girlfriend. After losing a lot of weight, said she wanted to enter a bikini competition. That got me thinking. Why can't I enter a competition?

Sherry: Had you ever considered competing before your son's girlfriend mentioned it?

Stephanie: Yes. When the Bodybuilding industry became "mainstream" in the 1990's, I was very interested. I knew a few women who competed and I read all the magazines and I knew who the current competitors were like Cory Everson, Rachel McLish, etc. I would watch competitions on TV and admired these women. I also started to lift weights with more intensity and frequency. However, I really never considered how it could change MY body. I had a full time job, family etc. Also, I just didn't think I could do it. I did not have the confidence and really didn't know how to go about it. And even though I lost (and gained) weight, I just didn't think I could do it – did I have the right body type, could I work that hard, was I worthy

Sherry: How did you learn about competing and start preparing for your show?

Stephanie: I Googled for a trainer in my area who might work with my age group and who knew something about competitions. I found a woman, and after a few emails, she offered me a complimentary workout to see if "we were a good fit". I met with her and signed up with her then and there. That was November 2015. My goal was to enter a Figure competition in March 2016. My trainer was incredible. I remember the anticipation I had on my way to my first meeting with her. Would she think I was too old? Would she think I was not in good enough shape to ever achieve this goal? I really didn't know what to expect and my own lack of self confidence almost steered me away from that first meeting. But I was wrong. My trainer/coach has been patient and inspiring to me. She has pushed me further than I thought I could ever get.



The starting point of my journey to the competition stage.

Sherry: What was your workout regime as you prepared for your first competition?

Stephanie: I worked out with her 2 days a week and she provided me with my workouts, through an app, that I did 4 days a week, with one day rest. I worked out hard both with her and without her. She also provided me with a weekly nutrition plan. She also took photos. She asked me to wear a two piece bathing suit. I was uncomfortable with my body, so I posed in a sports bra and workout shorts. No, I did not look horrible, but this was not what I wanted to look like.

Sherry: What was the most challenging element of the contest prep for you?

Stephanie: I think the nutrition was the hardest part. While I was good most of the time, I would find myself wanting something after dinner. I would be spot on the meal plan all the way through dinner. But there was no food after dinner at 6:30, my prime grazing time. There were days, when I just wanted something sweet to eat. I would eat rice cakes and jam, and sometimes spoonful of peanut butter and jelly. No bread (how self-righteous I was). I still struggle with it and at times when I think I want something, I force myself to remain where I am and not enter the pantry. And again, my own self doubts presented a challenge for me. Was I going to be viewed as ridiculous – a caricature of myself.

Sherry: Did you ever question your decision or readiness to step on the stage?

Stephanie: Yes, while I was seeing changes, I did wonder if I really would be ready for the competition. As I said my lack of self confidence was getting in the way. I was also struggling with other people's opinions. I'm glad my husband was very supportive. At one point, I asked him how he was going to feel seeing me on stage in front of a lot of people in a tiny bikini. He said to me, "the bigger question is how are you going to feel?" He was right. He knows me. He put up with the food for the most part and said as long as I was having fun...

Sherry: This is exciting, to learn about the mental transformation too. What else did you do to make sure you shined up there?

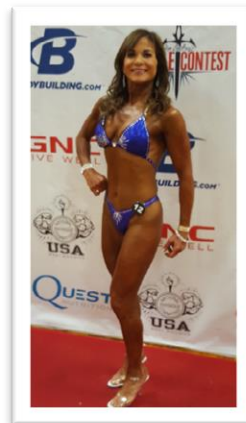
Stephanie: Well, even though I was still worried, wondering if I would look good, about four weeks out we decided I was going to compete! I chose the Figure, Masters over 40 division. I had a custom suit made and scheduled appointments to have a professional spray tan and hair and makeup to be done at the competition. I even had my hair stylist put in hair extensions. I got my custom suit about a month before the contest. I wanted to try it on with a contest look. Using a competition self-tanner, I tanned myself up and then put the suit on. I was bowled over. I looked good. My self-confidence began to soar.

Sherry: Tell me about your Big Day. What were you thinking? How did you feel?

Stephanie: I was excited and nervous, but I felt confident. Being the first time, I didn't know what to expect. How would the other competitors treat me? Back stage, everyone is nervous. The Figure gals were pumping weights and resistance bands and the Bikini gals were eating. Everyone was supportive. I realized at that point there was nothing anyone could do to be better than someone else. The months of hard work came down to this one day. I went on stage and did my best. I placed 3rd in my category and received my first trophy! So here I am on the big day. I felt great. One of the amazing things for me, walking around the venue in my suit and on stage, I did not feel self-conscious. I felt completely worthy of being there.



A quick glance in the mirror before heading back to the competition.



Feeling confident and ready for finals!

Sherry: Besides your new body, what else did you discover about yourself on your journey?

Stephanie: There were so many changes and revelations about myself along the way. I learned that how I was brought up had a huge affect on my entire life. I remember my mom saying things like “don’t brag, don’t boast, and don’t be conceited. Be modest and humble”. She also did not compliment me on my appearance and would complain about my weight, hair, my attire, etc. I learned through life and working in a competitive environment you need to have self confidence and you need to “sell yourself” and put yourself out there. But bragging had a negative connotation for me. I felt my accomplishments should speak for themselves. Subsequently, I think it limited my successes at work. Through this journey, I learned that it was okay to be a little boastful. After all, it took and still takes a lot of hard work and dedication to do this. Why not shout it from the rooftops I know – a little cliché.

I also found that there would be many people who did not share my enthusiasm for what I was doing. Some family and friends were “upset” that my focus and interests had changed and that I did not always want to do the things they were into. At first they were interested, but I think as they realized this was more than just a passing fancy, they became resentful and became “haters”. They stopped asking how my training was going and when I talked about it, they would change the subject. Others made comments that I was beginning to look less than feminine.

This road has not been easy. I have had a few “meltdowns” along the way. The structured eating, the working out 6 days a week takes a toll. I will always struggle with body image and second guess myself. But I have come such a long way. And in a relatively short time. I have had to rethink 60 years of beliefs and change those.

Sherry: What’s next for you? Do you plan to compete on stage again?

Stephanie: To do this first contest, it was just to do it. For the next, I really want to be competitive and that takes building muscle. It is much harder to build muscle when we get older, and I am 61 years young! So I’m giving myself plenty of time and planning on March 2017.

Sherry: Do you have any near-term goals or will you be participating in any other type of challenges during the 5 months you’ll be preparing for your Competition?

Stephanie: Yes, I am committed to competing again. I know that I will have to work harder than ever and there will still be ups and downs. I gave myself a break for a while on the eating, but it made me bounce back with new intensity. I have also considered other challenges and goals. I realized that after retiring I had no goals or challenges. So now I have given myself more goals and challenges. I am competing in a Rugged Maniac race soon – an obstacle course run. These things were never available to me as a younger woman – so now I want to try these things. I have surprised myself by doing things I was not able to as a younger person such as climb a rope. I am also less afraid of “failure”. Not being able to complete something or finish first is not a failure. For me, failure is not even trying. I also want to share my experiences and inspire others who feel a goal may not be attainable. Yes, I do have unreasonable expectations sometimes, usually the speed in which these things happen. But they will happen. I don’t want to be incapacitated because of health in the future and say to myself, “I wish I had done that” or “why didn’t I try this”.

Sherry: What advice would you give to anyone who is considering competing in a physique or any other type of competition?

Stephanie: Go for it! You're never too old to do anything as long as you really want it and are willing to put in the time and energy. Don't let others define who you are or what you want to be. That goes for anything in life. We all want others to approve of what we are doing but I care less about that now. Do things for yourself.

I could not be more proud of Stephanie for setting a goal, planning a way to achieve it, committing to the plan and accomplishing her primary goal and several others along the way. I could not be happier with the results her hard work has yielded. Way to stay the course Steff. You got this!

As a coach I spend a lot of time getting to know my clients' training and learning styles, their short and long-term goals, and their current status in relation to those goals. Through these explorations, I decide how and when to progress their training. I know that for the client, the act of trusting my guidance and staying the course takes effort and is sometimes scary, but ultimately they know I am striving to build programs to insure they get the results they want. Ultimately, the trust we create is what provides tremendous value to the internal and external end results.

Sherry Winslow is a certified personal trainer and sports nutritionist, physique and conditioning coach, obstacle race coach and winning NPC Figure competitor.

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