

## Lilli Ewing: The Second Time Around

Contributed by Steve Wennerstrom, IFBB Women's Historia  
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Lilli Ewing has had two distinctly separate bodybuilding careers - one which had its wide-eyed beginnings in the early 90's, and the second coming this year some 14 years after she last competed in 1994. In both cases Ewing has carried a strong philosophical approach to her efforts, and what may be more unique by way of a comparison to her peers - a level of visual serenity she takes to the stage, while at the same time carrying a strong desire to give her best effort each time competes.

You first need to know that for Lilli Ewing, athleticism and a strong desire to succeed are nothing new, and they weren't elements that simply appeared when she undertook her bodybuilding exploits. Ewing was a top all-around gymnast in high school, as well as a track & field athlete that excelled in the long jump and 300 meter hurdle events. In track & field, she excelled at a high level, and qualified for the state championships in those events in her native Washington. College scholarships in both sports were in her future, and as a honor roll student, she was a sure bet to end up a top level school. With her eye on becoming a commercial airline pilot and attending a University bridge program (college preparatory), she was studying Aeronautical Engineering. She had even been accepted to the Air Force Academy in 1981.

But a not-so-funny thing happened on the way to college life. During a high school gymnastic meet she fell of the balance beam and tore her ACL, and did considerable damage to meniscus and cartilage around her knee. The athletic scholarship offers quickly evaporated.

Ewing eventually ended up at the University of Washington for, as she describes it, "about ten minutes". "At the time I entered U of W," says Ewing. "I had a cast on my leg from my hip to my ankle, and with three more months of that to go, the thought of making my way around campus on a daily basis with a full backpack became something I decided would have to be undertaken at a later date."

At that point, Lilli Ewing became part of the everyday workforce. She lived the fast-paced decade of the 80's, gave birth to her first daughter, and with the 90's came a new boyfriend with a passion for tennis. Ewing quickly picked up the sport, but just as quickly found herself back in the hands of a surgeon when game, set, and match led to another knee injury that required a surgery that required total reconstruction of the knee.

The surgeon, Dr. John F. Burns in Seattle, reassured Ewing that if she was dedicated to the rehabilitation program that he would prescribe, her knee could be stronger than ever before. Her belief in him brought the desired results. She was good as new.

As fate would have it one day, while still on crutches, she became re-acquainted with Willie Austin, the former strength coach at UW. It turned out that Austin owned a gym called 'The Gym of Seattle'. He invited Ewing to visit the gym and use it to further rehab her knee. It took very little time to become motivated by the many women who were training seriously. Soon she got the gut feeling that becoming a bodybuilder wasn't as far fetched as some thought. The new direction was an epiphany for Ewing. He saw rapid improvement. Her knee was healthy and so was her attitude towards her newfound endeavor.

With the notable improvements she saw in her physique as time went by, the next logical step was to try to the competitive bodybuilding scene. She told every gym member who would listen that she was going to enter a contest some day. That day would come in 1992 and it would have a dramatic impact on her future.

## The First Trip Down the Contest Trail

When Ewing decided to take her first steps into bodybuilding competitions she was already 29 years old. But her age served her well both in terms of muscle maturity, as well as dealing with the psychological aspects of dieting, training, and displaying her physique in a public forum for the first time.

The 1992 NPC Vancouver Natural in Vancouver, Washington, marked Ewing's inaugural contest effort and she won the novice class for women over 114 pounds. The seed of curiosity in perfecting her physique had been planted.

In 1993 Ewing took a major jump up to one of the country's top regional events entering the NPC Emerald Cup in Seattle, and the seed had quickly become a sprout as she came away with a victory in the heavyweight class, and a runner-up placing in the Mixed Pairs - all this at a time when winners of the Emerald Cup in those days came with names like Nikki Fuller and Shelley Beattie.

Without missing a beat she traveled south the following weekend to enter the NPC Pacific Coast Championships in Portland, Oregon. The sprout was now in full bloom. Ewing found herself winning not only the heavyweight class, but the overall title.....and by unanimous decision. She was qualified for a chance to test the waters at the national level.

Although Ewing's success was sometimes greeted with, "well, yeah you won the Emerald Cup, but that's not the USA or Nationals" response to her increasing desire to move up to the national level, Ewing's past athletic background helped immeasurably in giving her the impetus to forge ahead. And forge ahead she did.

In 1994 the NPC USA became her raison d'etre, and while her naysayers lamented that she simply wasn't ready, her supporters felt strongly that she was top-ten material at that level - not to mention that

the USA would be an excellent indicator of where she stood among the nation's top heavyweights.

The result was a fulfilling one for Ewing, she not only made the top-ten at her first national contest, her eighth-place finish firmly established her among some of the top amateurs at the time including Annie Riviuccio (4th), Suzan Kaminga (5th), Carmen Brady (6th), and California champion Valerie Gangi (11th). Ewing weighed in at a robust and beautifully balanced 156 pounds on her 5-7 frame. She was glowing in her presence, and the genetic base she possessed spelled further success if she continued.

But, as has often been said, "the best laid plans....." The 1994 NPC USA would be Ewing's last trip to the bodybuilding stage for 14 years.

Says Ewing of her departure from bodybuilding, "I always knew I was naturally athletically inclined, and I assumed that if I was going to take it further I would have to compromise my philosophy of being a "clean" competitor. I felt like my progress was good, but I didn't have it in my heart to move forward. I never judged anyone else for their decisions and to this day it's not something I spend my energy discussing as far as the pros and cons. Everyone needs to march to the beat of their own drummer. That's it, plain and simple".

So Ewing, after drifting away from bodybuilding, just as quickly drifted into powerlifting - and she found an even greater level of success than she had experienced in bodybuilding. "I had a great time while I was competing in powerlifting," recalls Ewing. "I was winning every event I entered and in 1997 I won the Natural Athlete Strength Association (NASA) title in my weight class (198 pounds) and broke three American and World records lifting 231 pounds in the bench press, 413 pounds in the squat, and 440 pounds in the deadlift."

Ewing's total at that National meet was 1,085 pounds and all four records still stand to this day - both as American and World marks. Following that meet, Ewing was invited to compete at an international competition in France but had to decline due to a severe chest infection. As was the case with bodybuilding, Ewing's interest in powerlifting had gone full circle.

## The Second Time Around

Needing a new direction after she put her powerlifting career aside, Ewing became a massage therapist from 1997 to 2006. During those years she recalls that she barely worked out, and really never felt compelled to go back to the gym.

But after giving birth to two more children and eating her way to an unhealthy 180 pounds, she decided to join the local gym. Gym members recognized her from her competitive bodybuilding days and she began helping a few with posing routines and training suggestions. Not long after, she was beginning to attend local contests just to watch. It was at the 2007 Emerald Cup while watching from the audience (the contest where she had won the heavyweight class years before) when it dawned on her that she could visualize herself on stage once again. It was that evening that she decided to clean up her eating habits and start working out seriously.

Thinking realistically, she made the 2008 Emerald Cup her goal as a contest where she would make a comeback, knowing full well that so many elements in the sport had changed since she had last competed in 1994.

The year passed and Ewing was nearing the Emerald Cup target date. "I knew my physique wasn't at its best," admits Ewing. "I wasn't even close to where I needed to be. But I didn't want to quit, and I felt I needed to finish what I started. Well, the result was a fifth-place in the middleweight class. It was a fair judgment, and it made me even more determined to continue.

The Emerald Cup experience, together with the memories of what she witnessed at the 2007 Ms. Olympia in Las Vegas, drew her even deeper into the desire to push herself to the levels of her early bodybuilding years.

Following the Emerald Cup, Ewing added the additional time-consuming burden of working on posing routines on a daily basis along with three hours worth of cardio sessions to achieve the muscle separation she felt she needed. With her daily training and diet in place, Ewing was ready to take two remaining steps in reaching her goal of qualifying for a national-level contest once again.

First came the NPC Washington State Ironman. It was an event she felt she was ready for - unlike her attempt at the Emerald Cup. Ready was the keynote phrase. Ewing won the overall title qualifying her for the NPC Team Universe.

Feeling confident that she was now on a roll, without missing a beat she entered the NPC Northwest - the final national qualifier of the year in the Pacific Northwest. Again, she came out on top. Not only did she win the Masters Overall division, she also added the overall Northwest crown in the open class - a victory that qualified her for the 2008 NPC Nationals, and a national-level event she so dearly wanted to return to.

"I realize I had become pretty single-minded over the course of the year," says Ewing with a knowing smile. "I had competed in three major events during the past nine months, but the NPC Nationals was calling me. My life had been non-stop - juggling workouts, raising kids, cooking for me, cooking for them, cardio at all hours of the day and night....and did I mention sleep?"

"I'm sure these are all things many bodybuilders can understand and relate to, but for me it was a much more important appointment with destiny. I wanted that second chance to get back to the national stage, and I knew I had to go to Atlanta.

"I was hearing it all from friends and fellow bodybuilders. They told me about certain women who would be there, and how good they were. But none of that mattered. I was going

to be there too. I was told I would be taking big risks. None of that mattered either. Life is a risk.

"No, the seed had been too deeply planted. A lot of people believed in me - more than those who had advised me not to enter. But I was ready to follow my heart again, and I never second-guessed my decision. Was I nervous? Yes. But a quick session of cardio took care of that. My next stop would be Atlanta, Georgia, and a date with the best the nation had to offer in the light-heavyweight class at the NPC Nationals.

Mission  
Accomplished

When Lilli Ewing arrived in Atlanta during that late November week, she wasn't that same bright-eyed 29-year-old budding bodybuilder any more. The last time Ewing entered a contest of this magnitude was in 1994. Now with much more experience with life in general, a 45-year-old Lilli Ewing was ready to meet her sternest test as a bodybuilder.

But in Ewing's case, the passage of time had added years to her numerical age, yet the same serenity that had showed itself so profoundly in her early days of competing, was still as compelling as ever. It has become a notable element in her overall stage presence that is unmistakably unique to her persona.

Her serenity notwithstanding, Lilli Ewing fared well, thank you. She found herself in a field of 19 contestants in the light-heavyweight class, and her final tally earned her the ninth-place spot. She made it into the top ten.

If you ask Lilli

how she feels about her effort, she'll likely tell you she's happy with her placing. And why not? Fourteen years ago when she entered her first national event her goal was to make the top-ten in her class. She succeeded with an eighth-place finish. Now, many years later, and with what she thought was a realistic goal of placing in the top ten of her class, she succeeded once again. But one thing is certain, it is also quite likely Lilli Ewing isn't finished yet. She may look serene, but the fire to keep improving on her physique is burning as brightly as ever - especially with the ample number of national events available to her as 2009 approaches.