Girl Power
Ragin’ Cajuns team places second in national competition

Music blaring from giant, wall-mounted speakers can’t drown out the clang of iron, or the enthusiastic cries of senior Alexus Jackson, a member of the Ragin’ Cajuns Women’s Powerlifting team.

Jackson, who is 5’4” tall and competes in the 158-lb. weight class, is working out in Bourgeois Hall on campus. “To me, it’s just about competing to the best of your ability. I come in, I work hard, I compete and I win,” she said.

A senior dental hygiene major, Jackson has been pumped up about powerlifting since freshman orientation, when she saw a poster that posed a question: Do you want to be a national champion? “I’ve always wanted to be the best of the best and I’ve always loved lifting weights. I love being in a competitive environment,” she said.

Jackson said getting her best friend since sixth grade, Dana Wallace, to try out for the team was a tougher sell. “I had to convince her to do it,” Jackson said of Wallace.

So began the careers of two of the best powerlifters to ever hoist a barbell for the team, which placed second at the Collegiate National Championships in April in Orlando, Fla.

Jackson can bench press 286 pounds, an American weight class record for the lift. Wallace, all 4’8” and 94 pounds of her, is also an American weight class record holder, for her ability to squat 286 pounds. To put this in perspective, it’s the equivalent of a 200-pound woman loading 600 pounds onto a barbell, resting it across her shoulders, squatting until her thighs are parallel to the floor, and standing back up. In other words, Wallace, despite her diminutive size, is strong. Really strong.

“People have a misconception about powerlifting,” Wallace said. “They think you’re supposed to be big and bulky. I’m not. I’m toned, and people can tell I do some kind of work out, but when I tell them I powerlift, it’s like, ‘Oh. OK. What’s that?’”

Powerlifting is composed of three lifts: the squat, the bench press and the deadlift. In competition, athletes get three attempts at each of the lifts. The highest weights recorded for each one are totaled, and the lifter with the most points wins.

A blend of athletic ability, work ethic and genetic predisposition determines the best powerlifters. Brawn, for example, isn’t typically as important as stature. Unlike many other sports, short lifters are often the best lifters.

Consider the bench press, for example. The lift involves lying on a customized bench and bringing a set amount of weight to the chest, then back up again. The entire motion is sort of like a reverse push up. Shorter arms equal a shorter distance the weight must be moved.

“Just as a basketball coach might be thrilled at the prospect of a 7-foot tall athlete, the opposite is true in powerlifting. If you’re short, it really makes you a good squatter and bencher, but it hurts your deadlift,” said Travis Werner, head coach of the Ragin’ Cajuns men’s and women’s powerlifting teams.

“Most people have at least one lift that they are weaker in. A good dead lifter typically struggles on the bench. Those two really counteract each other. Long arms make a good dead lifter.”

In the dead lift, a barbell with a set amount of weight is hoisted from the ground to hip level, then back down.
“Almost all of our lifters were athletes of some sort. They can’t continue their careers, for whatever reason, and a lot of them fall back on powerlifting,” he said.

Wallace, who also ran track in high school, thought her athletic career was over by the time she arrived at the University in 2010. “My skill level wasn’t up to par,” she said, “but it did feel kind of weird to not be involved in any kind of sports when I got to college.”

Now Wallace, who earned a bachelor’s degree in psychology in the spring and will attend graduate school at Loyola University in New Orleans, works as a judge for competitions sponsored by USA Powerlifting. The organization sanctions the club sport, and also coordinates the Collegiate National Championships. The Racin’ Cajuns women’s team has developed a strong presence there in a short time.

The UL Lafayette team was formed in 2000, according to Werner. “We’ve had some extremely talented women lifters in the past, but we never fielded a full team until 2007,” he said. By 2012, it had won a national championship. The following year, the squad finished fourth in the nation.

The team’s achievements are all the more impressive since universities and colleges of all sizes compete against each other at the championships.

“If you have a school that has 1,000 students,” Werner explained, “you’re head-to-head with schools that have 40,000 students.”

He credits assistant coach Abby Goss as the driving force behind the success of the women’s team. Goss, while competing as an undergraduate in 2007, was the only member of the women’s team, and began actively recruiting fellow students to join.

“She came in and she said she was going to make things happen and she did,” Werner said. “By the time she was a senior, there was a whole team that had grown around her.”

Goss, who earned a degree in exercise science and is now a fitness trainer, said her teammates referred to her as “the team mom, because that’s just the way I am.”

Her passion for the team, and the sport of powerlifting, remains strong. “It’s really exciting to see girls who aren’t afraid to lift weights,” she said.