



FROM SANTA CRUZ TO ST ALBANS

>> RISING FIGURE STAR SHAWNI DESALVO EXPLAINS WHAT IT'S LIKE TO SWAP FITNESS-MAD CALIFORNIA FOR ENGLAND
BY JOHN PLUMMER PHOTOS BY TAUSEEF ASRI

Everyone who loves fitness has dreamed of swapping rainy old Britain for sun-soaked California, where working out is as much a part of daily life as shopping and sleeping.

So you may wonder why one of America's most promising figure competitors with a face and body made for the west coast beach has done the complete opposite. Shawni DeSalvo turned her back on the Golden State a year ago to park her shapely booty somewhere rather less well known on the global fitness scene - St Albans.

It may sound like a crazy move on her part, and an extremely fortunate one for the residents of Hertfordshire but the Prolab-sponsored athlete believes the move has actually helped her physique to improve. Judging by our photos, it's difficult to argue. "Coming here has given me a completely different outlook on training," she says. "I think it's given me the ability to go much further than I would have done if I'd stayed in California."

DeSalvo is from the kind of sports-daft family that is commonplace in California. She took dance classes soon after she could walk and at the age of 11 she

started gymnastics. "I was heartbroken when I had to give it up at 16," she says. "But my body couldn't take any more." Had she been living in Britain at the time that would probably have been her cue to give up sport and spend the rest of her teen years getting slaughtered in bars. But Californian parents don't let that kind of thing happen. "They were adamant that I find another sport, partly because of the discipline," she says.

She turned to high jump and learned to leap as high as five feet. In her spare time she flirted with the gym to improve her performance. "I just mimicked what other people were doing," she says. "I trained my legs every other day and my upper body on the other days. Without really knowing what I was doing I built a lot of muscle. I was strong; I could leg press 200 lbs as an 18-year-old."

After high school DeSalvo graduated from the University of Oregon with a degree in exercise movement and science, became a certified athletic trainer, got married to Michael and slowly succumbed to a more sedate lifestyle - for a while at least. "I got into a routine of going to work, coming home, hav-

SNAPSHOT

NAME: Shawni DeSalvo
BIRTHDATE: 20 September 1975
BIRTHPLACE: Santa Cruz, California
CURRENT RESIDENCE: Harpenden, Hertfordshire
HEIGHT: 5ft 6ins
WEIGHT: 140 lbs off season, 125 lbs contest
COMPETITION HIGHLIGHTS: 3rd place at Contra Costa Championships May 2004
AMBITION: To become a pro figure competitor
TRAINING ADVICE: Be confident in yourself and be knowledgeable in what you're doing
TO CONTACT: www.de-salvo.com

ing dinner and relaxing,” she says. Not that she got fat. “Genetically I’m lucky,” she says. “If I stop working out I go back to 120 lbs and that’s where I hang out.”

By this time DeSalvo had moved from Oregon back to California where her husband had joined the fledging dotcom industry in Silicon Valley. “He was sat at a desk all day so he started going to the gym and eventually dragged me along,” she recalls. Her good genetics and athletic background kicked in and soon she had acquired an impressive muscular shape. However, her progress was put into perspective one day when she noticed Jenny Lynn, former Arnold Schwarzenegger Classic figure champion and still one of the world’s top three figure competitors, training at her gym in Walnut Creek.

Figure competitions are for women who want to sculpt a lean and muscular but not over-developed body. They are incredibly popular in the United States, where each contest will typically have three height classes, each containing around 20 competitors. Body fitness competitions - which is what figure contests in Europe are called - didn’t begin in the UK until 2003 and the first national championships that year included just three women. But, as with most fitness trends that start in the United States, they are much more popular today.

DeSalvo never knew what figure competitions were when she met Lynn but she knew a hot body when she saw one. “I could tell she did something because she was so defined and had such a great physique,” she says. “One day I plucked up the courage to approach her. She told me to check out her website and set up a consultation. She gave me a baseline diet, said ‘pick a show and try it.’” This was early in 2003. In November the same year DeSalvo placed ninth out of 22 in her height class in the figure category at the Sacramento bodybuilding, fitness and figure championships. “I didn’t know what to expect but to place in the top 10 in my first show made me very happy,” she says.

DESALVO'S TRAINING

The most striking aspect of DeSalvo’s weekly weight training schedule is the volume of leg work. She thinks they need most work. “I need to harden them a bit and bring in more definition in my hamstrings,” she says. Therefore she trains hamstrings and quadriceps on separate days, to make sure they get the attention they need to improve.

She trains each body part once a week, always sticking to three sets of 12 repetitions on every exercise. She is strong: she can bench press 60 kgs and hack squat 100 kgs and has a particularly powerful back. But because she competes in figure contests as opposed to bodybuilding contests she rarely goes for maximum lifts. The amount of weight is secondary to the feel.

She does three 30 minutes to 45 minutes cardiovascular workouts each week off season. In the run up to a competition this increases to a gruelling 90 minutes a day, six days a week. She does half first thing in the morning and half after her final meal of the day. The type of cardio varies but she has an exercise bike and step machine at home so often uses them. “If I use a treadmill I set it at a six degree incline and walk at a low pace to burn fat rather than muscle,” she says.

DeSalvo’s pre-contest diet consists of six meals a day, starting with eight egg whites and one yolk, 30 g of oats and flax seed for breakfast. Her next four meals are the same: fish (usually tuna) and 30 g of oats. Her sixth meal is another eight egg whites and vegetables. Early in her pre-contest phase she eats chicken three or four times a day instead of fish.



Dumbbell Lateral Raises



Leg Extensions



Hack Squat



Seated Pulley Row



Bitten by the competitive bug, she was back onstage in May 2004 for the Costa Contra championships, where she came 3rd out of 17. Six months later she returned to Sacramento to compete in the same show in which she made her debut a year earlier and finished fourth, a result that qualified her for the prestigious USA Championships in Las Vegas. DeSalvo's result in Sacramento was all the more impressive given that it occurred four days before she and Michael flew to the UK for him to take up a job in the telecommunications industry. Dieting for a competition, preparing to move house and emigrating must be three of the most stressful things imaginable.

Life didn't get much easier when they touched down in England. "We ended up living in a hotel for a month," she says. They couldn't find a gym that catered for bodybuilders and it was the start of a British winter - not easy circumstances to motivate yourself for a show thousands of miles away. Uprooting to another continent looked like it might turn a tough challenge into mission impossible. DeSalvo resorted to ringing every gym in the phone book to ask what their heaviest dumbbells were. Luckily, it turned out that one of the best equipped gyms in the country - Body Limits in St Albans - was just six miles from her home in Harpenden.

The gym has all the free weights and equipment anyone could need to build a championship physique plus something that you don't find very often in Californian gyms - character. The banter, the earthiness and the honesty that permeates the benches and dumbbells of UK gyms mean more than you might imagine. Take it from someone who is used to training in gyms where people are too busy looking at themselves to bother with anyone else. "My training has definitely improved since I've been here," says DeSalvo. "Before I didn't train as hard. The attitude in America is more about 'what do I look like in the mirror?'. Here it's not about what you're wearing or how much you lift



Cable Crossover



Dumbbell Press



Ab Crunch

SHAWNI DESALVO'S weekly workout schedule

MONDAY

BACK

- T-bar rows 3 x 12
- Lat pulldowns 3 x 12
- Seated pulley rows 3 x 12
- Dumbbell rows 3 x 12

TUESDAY

SHOULDERS

- Dumbbell press 3 x 12
- Dumbbell lateral raises 3 x 12
- Rear deltoid raises 3 x 12
- Front raises 3 x 12

WEDNESDAY

CHEST

- Flat bench press 3 x 12
- Incline presses 3 x 12
- Cable crossover 3 x 12

THURSDAY

REST

FRIDAY

QUADRICEPS

- Leg extensions 3 x 12
- Hack squats 3 x 12
- Leg press 3 x 12
- Squats 3 x 12

SATURDAY

ARMS

- Triceps extensions 3 x 12
- Triceps pressdowns 3 x 12
- Dumbbell kickbacks 3 x 12
- Preacher curls 3 x 12
- Barbell curls 3 x 12
- Spider curls 3 x 12
- Hammer curls 3 x 12

SUNDAY

HAMSTRINGS

- Lying curls 3 x 12
- Seated curls 3 x 12
- Deadlifts 3 x 12
- Lunges 3 x 12

it's about getting the movement right and getting the growth and if you don't get it right they're very quick to tell you."

Being exposed to new ideas has also helped. "My training has drastically changed since moving, allowing me to make some much needed gains," she says. "While I have a strong background in exercise rehabilitation it limited me in my training. I train much harder now than I ever used to. The hardest things for me to overcome were things like squatting below 90 degrees, breaking horizontal in a chest press, arching my back slightly during lat pulls... basically breaking ideal form. In injury rehabilitation these are things that I would not have a client do as it puts them at too much risk of re-injury. It took a great deal of coaching reassurance that this was necessary to get the growth I needed."

But there are some things about Californian bodybuilding that knock Britain for six: the weather, the outdoor lifestyle and even the love of working out. "The climate makes a big difference," says DeSalvo. "Because it's so warm people go around in shorts for 75 per cent of the year with their bodies exposed so it's all about how you look. Then you have Los Angeles and Hollywood in California, where everyone is image conscious."

More vanity means more better built bodies. "People in the United States are bigger," she says. "There are a lot of tall, thin men in Britain and a lot of overweight men but not many with athletic, rugby-player builds. In California there are a lot of guys spending a lot of time in the gym to impress the women on the beach." Consequently it's more mainstream. "Bodybuilding is much more well known back home and people understand it more," she says. That's particularly true for women. "You don't see a lot of women in England who are built," she says. "I definitely notice people look at me more because I don't look the norm." As a rehab expert, DeSalvo works with some of Arsenal's young female footballers. "Some think it's really cool, others wonder why I do it," she says.



Clearly there are pluses and minuses to both countries. Being exposed to both can only give DeSalvo an advantage over her rivals in the United States in the race to join the global elite. "I think I have the potential to go into pro level and do well," she says. "But if you get too comfortable in thinking you are the best it is more likely that you will not be for long... instead I prefer to strive to be the best which allows me to continue to improve myself."

Will she return to the States? "I don't see myself going back for at least a couple of years," she says. "I've got family out there so I will go back to visit

but the only reason I would go back to live would be a job. Sure it's beautiful and sunny. But when we start a family it isn't somewhere we'd want to be because of the cost of living and the expectations children have of what they think they should be provided with." And what about all of us dreaming of swapping our crowded island to join the tanned and toned on the Californian beaches - does she recommend it? "It depends on the lifestyle you want," she says. "Do you want a visual lifestyle? Because out there it's all about how you look. If you do it's a great place to go and you can learn a lot and meet a lot of people." **M&F**