

Ep #182: All About Strength Training with Nancy Brown



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Jill Angie

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Welcome to *The Not Your Average Runner Podcast*. If you're a woman who has never felt athletic, but you still dream about becoming a runner, you are in the right place. I'm Jill Angie, a certified running and life coach and I teach women how to start running, feel confident, and change their lives, and now I want to help you.

Jill: Hey Rebels. So I am here this week with one of my new most favorite people on the planet. Her name is Nancy Brown. She is a personal trainer, she's my personal trainer now. I'm very, very lucky. But she's super special in many ways, and I'm going to explain to you what those are in a moment.

But one of the things I love about Nancy's work is that she is a trainer for the not your average runner. She's a health-at-every-size friendly trainer, she works with a lot of plus-size clients, she's very familiar with clients who have had disordered eating or body image issues in the past or are still working through them.

Obviously, she works just with women or people who identify as women. She's a really strong feminist, just like me, and I'm just super excited to introduce her to you today. We're going to talk all about all things strength training today so Nancy, welcome, and thank you so much for being here.

Nancy: Thank you so much. I'm super happy to be here.

Jill: I am too. It's so fun that we get to spend this time together where I'm not drenched in sweat and complaining.

Nancy: I'm just going to say you're not panting.

Jill: I'm not panting.

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Nancy: You're actually able to talk.

Jill: So fun. But I thought it would be really fun to start out with - so to help people to get to know you, for you to tell the story of how you got started lifting weights in the first place because it's a good one.

Nancy: Yeah, it's super funny, especially after the introduction you gave because I think that's how people perceive me now. And it's a 180 from my origin story. So I started lifting weights for two reasons. I thought it would get rid of my cellulite. I was completely obsessed with my cellulite. I was on message boards trying to find some magic bullet that was going to get rid of my cellulite.

And then I also thought that I might need a guy because I had this guy - I had this suitcase that I was trying to lug up the train to the JMZ and this guy came along and picked up my suitcase without asking and he was kind of cute. And he just carried it up. And I was like, I've always dated really skinny musicians, and so I saw this guy and I was like, what if this is a completely different kind of guy? Maybe I should go to the gym and date guys like this and then maybe my love life will be better.

So that's how I got started lifting weights. And it was very much about changing my appearance, making myself look perfect so that I could catch a man, and I actually went down this whole rabbit hole of doing bikini competitions. And basically got as close as I could to what I thought was whatever, some weird ideal of 2015. Bleached blonde hair, I looked like a ripped...

Jill: Wait, can we just stop and talk about the bleached blonde hair? You had bleached blonde hair?

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Nancy: Platinum blonde, yeah.

Jill: Oh my god. So you guys, you can't see, you will see her if you follow her on social, but Nancy's like me. She's got really dark hair, dark eyes. Alright, I'm a little shook because I did not know that. Please continue.

Nancy: So here's the thing; I really polished myself and strived and I got a coach and all this stuff. One of them was bad, one was good. But I really got - I succeeded in becoming this ripped Malibu Barbie kind of thing, and my life was not better. It was not better because I was still stuck with my same brain.

And that was a pretty profound experience for me. And so from there, I got into - I actually made friends with a powerlifter. I got into strength training. And it just felt like a much better fit. You'd go to powerlifting meets and people would be cheering for each other.

I saw people in a lot of different bodies, which I thought was cool. And it just felt like a much more welcoming environment. And then from there I got into Olympic weightlifting, which is a very similar vibe. It's maybe a little bit more of a competitive atmosphere than a powerlifting meet, but it's still a lot more camaraderie, a lot more acceptance. So a much cooler vibe for me.

Jill: So body representation was different there than it was in a bikini competition.

Nancy: Oh my god, yes. Yes. And even within bodybuilding - we understand bodybuilding, you're supposed to be ripped. But even in bodybuilding, and I've actually written about this. Women's bodybuilding

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has really been oppressed. The big female bodybuilders have really been kind of pushed out of the mainstream federation.

So women are still, even within bodybuilding, they're still trying to keep women small. So I was in the smallest category, but there are all these other categories. When you think of a female bodybuilder, you think of these big jacked female bodybuilders.

Well, they were really getting pushed out of the sport. And then now they've kind of made a comeback because an outsider started his own league and showed it was financially viable. It's like, oh, if you just promote these women, they're financially viable. But there was a lot of pushback and all these - I feel like I'm going on a tangent but it's crazy. All of these men who are in charge are literally still evaluating female bodybuilders based on their fuckability.

Jill: Oh, stop it.

Nancy: You know? So it's like, even - this is literally bodybuilding. These women should be able to get as big as they want, as long as they still whatever, hold up the proportion ideals. So it's extreme in bodybuilding. You would think that there were - even within the variety of jacked, there's so little wiggle room there.

And then you go to powerlifting and Olympic lifting and you see all kinds of bodies. You see super heavies, you see people who are super petite and I mean, you see all kinds of bodies. And some people are ripped, some people aren't. Some people are soft looking, and it's really cool. And yeah, there's just a lot more room in that world.

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Jill: So that world is more about the result you get and like, the lifting that you can do, the power that you can generate, versus what your body looks like.

Nancy: 100%. Yeah, it's completely different game.

Jill: I love this. I absolutely love this. So that's sort of fascinating that you started out with one goal, but it really led you - and I identify with that because I started out running because I wanted to get skinny and have a boyfriend. Like exactly the same thing. And I got neither of those things out of running, but I got so much more. But so let's - so fast forward. You left the bikini competition, you got more into powerlifting and Olympic lifting and how did you end up as a personal trainer?

Nancy: It's interesting. I don't know, I feel like my story's kind of weird. It's definitely not like, this is what I've been dreaming of since I was little. So I just needed a job. So I was finishing grad school. I have an MFA in writing. And I was finishing grad school, I had gotten a teaching assistantship in grad school, but I knew that I didn't really want to grind as an adjunct, and I knew that I didn't want to go back to waiting tables.

So I was like, I guess I'll be a personal trainer. And I really liked it. I was like, actually, this is really awesome and I feel like I'm having a really positive impact on people. And it's really engaging. I feel like I'm - it's enthralling, I pay attention all the time. It's a great career.

Jill: And it's fascinating because you are so good at what you do and just for people listening, we've never met in person. We do all of our training over Zoom. But you're so skilled at observing somebody's body

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movements and cueing them to make micro adjustments that get extremely big changes and results.

I find it fascinating. And because I've been a personal trainer in the past, I was not nearly as skilled as you, but it's hard enough to help people understand what's going on with their body when you can actually lay a hand on their shoulder or whatever, and you're able to do it all over Zoom, which it blows my mind. It's so fascinating.

Nancy: So in terms of the biomechanics stuff, I've had very good teachers, which is like, being a trainer in New York City is kind of amazing. Because I've gotten to work with some really high-level people. So like Dr. Pat Davidson, if anybody is into him, he's like, a biomechanics whiz with a PhD in exercise physiology and has written books and everything.

Jill: Have you ever met Jordan Metz? Dr. Jordan Metz?

Nancy: Nuh-uh.

Jill: Oh my gosh, we are all - in my coaching groups, we're all super obsessed with him. He wrote this book called Running Strong and he's all about - he has the iron strength workout that goes with it and he's in New York City so I was like - that's a tangent.

But like, one of the things that I think you do really well and a lot of your clients are, you work with plus-sized bodies. And what are some of the - if you're a plus-sized person and you want to start strength training, what are some of the considerations? How do you - when you're plus sized, how do you get started? What's the things that you need to think about? I guess that's kind of a weird question because maybe it's...

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Nancy: Yeah, so I mean, I think it's not a weird question. But it is a very broad question. So I think obviously I'm a little bit familiar with your running programs and I know that you do intervals, which I think is really awesome. So I think that obviously, you have heavier body weight, so you're going to be potentially stressing your joints. So pay attention and don't overdo it in the beginning.

Feel what your body is telling you, feel what your joints are telling you. Strength train, for crying out loud. But also, one of the things that I think is really interesting is that people's center of mass can change based on where they carry their weight.

So if you are really busty or you tend to carry your weight around your belly, your centre of mass is going to tend to be further forward. So what that means is that you're going to want to train your posterior chain so your glutes, your hamstrings. And then also train your abs because those muscles are going to help you keep your weight more centered over your foot.

So that's going to decrease knee problems, it's going to decrease tight hip flexors, stuff like that. And also just one thing that I've observed is just the - I think people - you do this obviously; this is your whole thing. But I think sometimes when people don't think that they are going to look like whatever, some fitness model, they almost need permission to just move and be happy moving.

And you can just enjoy movement and it doesn't have to be am I becoming something else, am I - I'm having a tough time putting a fine point on it. But I just remember like, I used to work in this big commercial gym and they had all of these posters and TVs with these size two fitness models on there, who by the way, have to diet for the shoots.

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They don't tell you that but that's not actually a sustainable body for anyone. And then I just remember this woman telling me very hesitantly on her intake that she didn't want to lose weight. And I was like yeah, okay, that's fine. And she was almost crying because she couldn't believe that I was like, yeah, whatever, let's just get strong.

Jill: So I think - I love that you said that. Because first of all, when I went searching for a personal trainer, I actually posted on my Facebook page, "Who knows a personal trainer that's able to do things over Zoom and isn't going to try to talk me into losing weight?" Those are my criteria. And your name came up a couple different times. But I think that we somehow believe that fitness is something that we pursue as part of a transformation, right?

Nancy: Yes. That's what I was trying to say, yes.

Jill: And like, hey, guess what, there probably will be a transformation as a strategic byproduct, but it's more likely to be your brain and not your body. You'll get strong. And we've talked about how - I have several different reasons for wanting to do strength training. The primary one is just to make my life easier.

Just to make it easier to carry groceries up 39 freaking steps to my apartment, or just to make life easier. And you've talked about the impact that it's had on your life. Like when you went hiking with your partner, right? And like...

Nancy: I don't want to make him sound bad, but I smoked him. I smoked him on the uphill.

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Jill: Nice. And so I think that - I tell my clients all the time, you've got to strength train, it's going to support your running. But guess what? You can just strength train for the sheer joy of being strong.

Nancy: Oh yeah. I mean, I think that that is actually now my main - now that I'm not competing in anything anymore, my main motivation for strength training is just so that my life feels easy. I'm also a little crazy. I think living in New York City can do this to you. But I'm always like, what if I have to pull somebody off the subway tracks? I want to be able to do it.

Jill: Yeah. That is something that I would think. Living in New York City, I'd be like, okay, what if I have to run up 40 flights of stairs in a burning building, or what if I have to swim the Hudson River to escape? What if I have to pull somebody up? I feel like living in Manhattan is a whole different level of life skills. And if you're not strong, there's a lot of people in Manhattan that are stronger than you that are going to survive. So yeah, that's fascinating that you say that.

Yeah, I think strength goes a long way towards living the quality of life that we want to live for sure. Let's talk a little bit about the types of strength training that you would recommend for runners. In particular, let's talk about squats because you make me do squats every Monday, we do squats. And I complain about it and I tell Nancy I'm like, I love these, I'm still going to complain about it and we have sort of an unspoken agreement.

But really, there's so much more to squatting than lowering your butt, right? So do you want to share some of your thoughts about that and maybe how people can get the most out of their squats?

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Nancy: Sure. So always, unless you're super, super experienced, in which case you're probably not going to listen to my anyway, always have the weight in front of you. So don't put a barbell on your back. It's going to make you do weird stuff because where you put the weight is actually going to change what you do with your body. Because you're always balancing over the foot.

So if the weight is in front of you, your body is going to move back. And that's what we want. Because what balances over the foot is the sum total of the weight and your body. So anyway, always hold the weight in front. So you can look up a goblet squat if you don't know what that looks like, but that's probably your beginner move, or body weight.

But when you do a body weight squat, you want to put your arms out in front of you. The biggest mistake I see with people squatting is they just kind of stick their hips back in space and they don't let the knees go forward. And I have an article which I sent you that basically explains that when you do that, you're actually placing strain on the back.

You're also not getting a very good quad workout, and you don't get deep enough to get your glutes activated. So instead, I would put a little elevation under the heel, so maybe a book or something like that, like an inch-thick book. And try to imagine breaking the knees and the hips at the same time.

So as your hips are going back, your knees are going forward. And they can totally go past the toes. That's fine. The big thing that you want to think about, so you can take a video. The big thing that you want to think about is that your head, your skull should be stacked over your ribcage, it should be stacked over your pelvis.

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So you don't want your back super arched and you don't want to be hunched over. That's the big thing is just a nice tall spine. Nice straight spine. If you can keep a nice straight spine, just go as deep as you can and then just keep working on that.

And if you want some reference, the best squatters in the world are Olympic weightlifters. If you want to see what a good squat should look like, just look up Olympic lifters squat, and you can see exactly what a squat should look like. Because it's not what you see these Instagram fitness gurus doing.

Jill: Yeah. And that was sort of - you really educated me on that when we first started working together because when I learned how to be a trainer, that was the thing they taught us is like, always keep the knees behind the toes, otherwise you're going to hurt the knees. And so I was like, okay I got to do that, I got to do that.

You taught me how to squat totally differently and I have none of the pain with my knees that I used to have when I would squat my old way if my knees drifted forward. And so it's - I just thought it was so cool to see - I'm totally not saying this right, but how some of these micro adjustments can make such a huge difference and I'm just going to leave it at that.

It really blew my mind that I was like, oh, I actually can let my knees go forward if I make these adjustments in the rest of my body. And I feel like I get so much more out of these squats. Before, I would squat with 40 pounds and be like, oh yeah, I could totally do this. And now doing it your way, I'm squatting with 15 pounds and it's so much more challenging.

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But I feel like I look in the mirror now, I'm like, my butt's higher. My butt is literally higher than it was a month ago. And I wasn't getting that with the squats that I was doing the way I was doing them. So it's like, so cool. You know who else I love to watch squat is small children.

Nancy: Yeah, they've got it down.

Jill: They've got it down.

Nancy: Yeah, my boyfriend's got a four-year-old and we taught her how to squat and she gets a lot of praise when she squats. So now she'll squat in the kitchen because we're all like, "Yeah, go, you're so strong."

Jill: That's so cool. But it's like, they haven't had it bred out of them I guess.

Nancy: Well, think about how much sitting in chairs we do. Little kids sit on the floor a lot, they're moving around. Charlotte, my boyfriend's daughter, she doesn't sit still for very long. So we just kind of - it's like use it or lose it. We lose that movement capability over time.

Jill: Yeah. And so it is fun to see if you look at kids, that's how it's supposed to be. Because a little kid will actually squat down and hold themselves in that hunkered down position to play.

Nancy: Well, and you can even look at other cultures where squatting's really common. And you see people who are in the 70s and 80s who can do a perfect squat. Just because they never stopped squatting.

Jill: Yeah, exactly. It's so cool. So squats we do with both legs. Do you recommend, especially for runners, to do any work on single legs?

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Nancy: Absolutely, yeah. So I would say that the biggest thing is first you need to master that stacking that I talked about where your head, your ribcage, and your pelvis are stacked. And if you're doing goblet squats with weight, you should feel some abs too.

So once you're feeling some abs and you see in the video that you're stacked, you're ready to move on to single leg exercises. So a lunge or a split squat or something like that would be really awesome. And then what I would tell you to do is get in front of a mirror or get a camera and see your - you should be lining up; your weight should be shifted over the front leg.

Your weight should be in that front foot mostly. Because when you run, you need to be able to shift your weight from one foot to the other. And when I say shift your weight, I don't just mean like, kind of throw your body from one foot onto the other. I mean actually shift your skeleton in the way it's supposed to move.

So when you're doing a lunge or a split squat, you want to see your nose lined up over your sternum, and then that should be stacked over your zipper, inside of your knee, big toe. So it should make a constellation. So you should see the middle of your body line up over the inside of the knee and the big toe of that front leg.

So that's how you know that your weight is shifted over to that front side in the right way. And if it's hard, the best trick is - so if I have my right leg in front, I'm going to reach my arm, my left arm forward and across. Or if I have my left leg in front, I'm going to reach my right arm forward and across and that'll help me shift my weight over.

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Because when you're running, when your left foot goes forward, your right arm goes forward. When your right foot goes forward, your left arm goes forward. So you can do that as you're doing your single leg stuff and it'll help you shift your weight over.

Jill: Wow. Oh, that's so cool. I had never even thought of it that way but yeah, I mean, our arms are always counterbalancing the opposite side of our lower body. Oh, that's so cool.

Nancy: And if that's not available to you, if a split squat or a lunge is not available to you right now, you can just be in a half-kneeling position. So you've got one knee down and one knee in front, and you can do some upper body movements to start getting stable in that position.

Jill: Okay. But you do the same thing alignment-wise. You've got your nose, your sternum, and then the inside of your knee.

Nancy: Exactly. But then you can do overhead press or put a plate between your hands and push it from your sternum to out in front of you. You can do all kinds of stuff. Just to challenge your balance a little bit in that position.

Jill: And just FYI for anybody who's listening, she has me do these things and they are challenging my balance. It sounds like oh, I'm just going to do an overhead press, but then when your lower body isn't stabilized by having both feet on the ground, all of a sudden, your abs are like, hello. Everything sort of engages. All those tiny little muscles that you don't really think about when you're just walking around suddenly engage and it's a challenge. It really is.

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What are some of the myths that people have about strength training that you're like, oh god, we have got to make sure people understand something different? Are there any?

Nancy: I think of course. I mean, I think the biggest thing that comes to mind - so first of all, there's this old myth that you're going to get bulky. Like if a woman strength trains, she's going to get bulky. And then one thing I've seen in the fitness world is all of these dudes who live in their fitness bubble are posting all this shit about lifting weights won't make you bulky. And I just want to be like, you literally have no idea what you're talking about.

Just because you find a CrossFit chick attractive doesn't mean that the women who are looking at her think I want to look like that. So it's like, they are - I feel like I'm not explaining myself. So you have two ends of the spectrum. You have some people saying lifting is not going to make you bulky - you have some people saying lifting is going to make you bulky, and then you have guys who are basically completely invalidating female training and females' opinions about their bodies being like, well, I think muscular chicks are hot so obviously they're not bulky, right?

And it's like, well, some women think they are bulky, some women don't want visible muscles. Someone might want to look soft. That's fine, whatever. So it's a lot more nuanced than that. You know what I mean?

You've probably going to be able to lift weights and not turn into a bodybuilder. So that's the first thing. But also, it's like, it's so adjustable. So you can find what works for you. So it's like there's no big deal. There's no permanent change that happens. Bodies are so fluid and adaptable, which that's exactly the reason why you have to keep running or you have to keep lifting weights to keep your speed up, to keep your strength up.

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Because otherwise your body is going to go back to homeostasis. So your body is totally forgiving. If you go to the gym and you put on a bunch of muscle and you don't like it, that's okay. You can just do a little bit less of what you were doing and you're going to be fine. There's just no reason - it's like the guys, those guys are trying so hard to get women to lift weights, which is a noble cause. But they're trying to do it by telling women that they don't know what they're looking at or they don't know what they're talking about. You know what I mean?

And it's like, instead, they could just be like, these are the benefits of strength training, it's really cool, you should try it, you can find a way that works for you. Did that make sense? Was that coherent?

Jill: Yeah, that's a great message. No, it totally was. What I think is so funny is people are like, oh my god, I'm going to get bulky. You don't accidentally end up looking like a bodybuilder. That takes hours and hours and hours in the gym and changing your entire diet. It's just not - it's not like if you go and do strength training for an hour three times a week, you're probably not going to get super bulky. Your butt might get higher.

Nancy: But the point that I'm trying to make - that probably will happen. The point that I'm trying to make is that I think some women don't want any muscle, they don't want any appearance of muscle at all. And I mean, I think muscles are awesome, but that's fine, they're entitled to their opinion. They actually can still strength train. They just make some adjustments.

Jill: So what you're saying is like, you can still be strong and not have the appearance of visibly defined muscles. You can still be super strong and have a body type you want.

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Nancy: You're probably not going to be winning the CrossFit Games, but you can for sure get stronger than you are. I think the message I'm trying to say is don't listen to guys and don't be afraid.

Jill: And really, don't avoid strength training just because somebody told you you're going to end up with a body type that you don't like because that's not true.

Nancy: Exactly.

Jill: I absolutely love that. And what about the myth that you need to do a lot of core, a lot of ab work? I have people saying I'm going to do 100 crunches a day or I'm going to work up to planking for five minutes at a time. And I'm like, I don't know, I feel like your time might be better spent elsewhere. I feel like - so let's talk about that.

Nancy: Yeah, so I have a few things to say. If you can plank for five minutes, either you're a champion planner or you're not planking right.

Jill: Wait, I just need to stop and tell - Nancy has me planking in such a way, she's like, adjust this, adjust that, I'm like, it's so much harder that way. So I can do it for 30 seconds, but I feel like I'm getting a lot stronger as a result. Anyway, I didn't mean to interrupt.

Nancy: Yeah, so if I want - if you're curious, I'm giving you a variation on what's called an RKC plank, which is short for Russian kettlebell club. So if people want to look up RKC plank, they can get something that approximates what you're doing.

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But yeah, you have different abdominal muscles and your rectus abdominis is the one that's visible for a six-pack and that's the primary mover for a crunch. It's not the ones that are really important. The ones that are important are pretty much - they're going to be invisible on most female bodies.

So your obliques, your inner obliques, your transverse abdominis. Those muscles are going to get stronger through certain ab movements, but they're also going to get stronger just through you moving with good movement quality. So doing the squats. You're getting ab activation there.

And the thing that's really important there is your abs are integrated. Your brain knows to fire the abs now when you squat. You've learned that. And you need to be able to carry the abs into your other movements. And so that's all about getting good movement quality in larger movements so the abs are helping you.

Jill: And so the other thing I hear you saying is like, okay, you can do crunches so that you have visible abs but that's not necessarily going to make you a better runner.

Nancy: No, it won't help you at all. If anything, it'll make you a worse runner. Because actually, you have two halves of your pelvis that need to be able to move a little bit. So when you walk, you can put your hands on your hips, and you can feel that they rotate as you walk independently. They rotate opposite from each other.

Your rectus abdominis, as far as I know, doesn't - the two halves don't operate independently. And it acts - it anchors to both halves of the pelvis, so it's kind of like glue. So if that rectus abdominis is on, you're going to

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have trouble moving those halves of the pelvis independently. All the rest of your abs, the two sides operate independently.

Jill: So if you've got a really strong rectus abdominis, and say the rest of your abdominal muscles are weak, can that lead to hip issues and so forth if you're running a lot?

Nancy: I wouldn't say the strength of rectus abdominis. This is me kind of talking on the fly, so if you have a really good physical therapist who disagrees with me, listen to them. But I do know that some people over-rely on the rectus abdominis for their posture.

So they're using the rectus abdominis to move through life, and so it's integrated into their movements, and those people are going to have a lot of problems with moving the hips independently. So it's less about maybe the strength of the muscle. A lot of times it's about whether the brain is telling that muscle to fire when it's not supposed to be firing.

Jill: Okay, that makes sense. And it's funny because you have me do a warmup before we jump into squats and everything, the hip lifts that you have me do. Is that to get my brain firing, to get my brain and my hamstrings and my glutes working together before we do anything else? So they're really...

Nancy: And also to relax your hip flexors.

Jill: Oh interesting. My hip flexors are probably really tight right now because I've been slumped over my keyboard all day so I'm like, okay, I'm going to sit up straight and now I can feel my whole body getting tight. I've been in my chair for 12 hours.

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Okay, so that's interesting. So basically, a lot of the - because you see all these challenges out there that are like, we're going to do a plank challenge, we're going to do a crunch challenge, we're going to do this challenge and that challenge. And a lot of it seems to be like its movements that are easy to do, and they give you that mental feeling of I'm really working on my fitness, but in reality, it's not doing you the service that you think it's doing.

Nancy: Right.

Jill: Okay, interesting. So for everybody who's doing plank challenges, let's just stop working on a five-minute plank and put that time and effort into other things maybe, right?

Nancy: Yeah. Or figure out - again, look up an RKC plank. Try to find a more challenging plank. Because also if you feel a plank in your back, that's bad news.

Jill: Or a lot of times I think - and I used to see this with my clients is they'd be like, oh, keeping my pelvis tucked is too hard, so they would pike up their hips. And I'm like, well then you're not working your abs, right? Not even involved. They're on vacation.

Nancy: Yeah, when I say that, it's really whatever, your brain stem or whatever, your unconscious brain. Your unconscious brain is really good at figuring out solutions when things are hard. It's really good at putting your body into compensatory positions so that you don't have to do the work. So you've got to be on that thing.

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Jill: Well, and I think that's what happens to a lot of - that's what leads to injuries in a lot of runners is that there's a weakness and the body's like, alright, I'm going to compensate for that. And then it throws something else out of whack. And because we're running this repetitive motion, then it just becomes an injury.

Okay, so the last question that I really want to cover today is I mean, you're super familiar with the coaching model that I use on this podcast, with my clients. So can you talk a little bit about how you integrate that into the work that you do with clients?

Nancy: Yeah. So I mean, it's a little bit difficult now to do this because I'm not in a gym setting right now. I'm all virtual. But one of the things that I love to do in a woman's first session is teach her how to do a kettlebell deadlift, and I don't tell her how much weight she's picking up. And I usually try to have her pick up around 50 pounds.

And then I tell her how much it is, and she's shocked. Because she didn't understand that she was that strong. Most women - not everyone, but most untrained women can pick up a 50-pound kettlebell safely, but they would not believe that beforehand.

And there are - I'm trying to remember, I wish I could give you the study. I'm trying to remember right now. I know that there's even stuff with personal trainers not pushing women as hard, which is not the case with me. I'm like, no, you're strong, you got it.

Jill: I can 100% attest to that fact.

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Nancy: But yeah, so I've actually worked with women who worked with other trainers, and they're like, oh my gosh, I've never picked up a 15-pound weight, or I've never picked up a 20-pound weight. Seriously because I don't know, there's this common conception that women just aren't naturally very strong.

And so one of the biggest things that I face when working with a client is just getting them to believe that it's possible. So I had one client who was very petite woman and when I had my first phone consultation with her, I asked her about her goals and she made a joke saying like, "Oh, I'll deadlift 200 pounds." And I was like, oh yeah, okay.

And then she was like, "What? I'm joking." And I said, "Well, how much do you weigh?" And she told me how much she weighed. She's very petite. And I was like, "Okay, well then 150. You'll do 150." And she thought I was crazy. It took her a year, but she deadlifted 150.

But she didn't believe me. It took her a long time to believe me. It took her a long time to believe me, so that's one of the biggest things. And then also, I don't know, just honestly, I don't - I'm not a certified coach. I have a lot of experience in the coaching world, but I try to coach mainly through demonstration. Over time and through modeling, I really want my clients to conceive of their body in a different way. I want them to see their body as an instrument, rather than an ornament.

Jill: I love that.

Nancy: Yeah. So I want them to start to relate to the body in that way. So if a client starts to kind of complain about how they look or something, I will usually redirect them and just get them to focus on the positive aspects of

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what their body is doing, what their body is capable of. And all that is is just offering them an alternative thought.

And I'm not doing this shit that's like, affirmation shit where I'm like, no, you could be on a magazine, what are you talking about? Because their brain is just going to reject that. It's going to completely reject that. So I'm sure some of your listeners are going to be familiar with the idea of a ladder thought.

But there's also a lateral thought. So you just kind of move over to a different thought. So somebody's thinking like, my body is ugly or objectionable in this way. And you're like, well, but it's a body and it's a body that can do this cool thing.

So you're not even in the realm of assessing appearance anymore. And I think that that's a big problem that I see, I don't know, in the world of advertising. It's like everyone's trying to be inclusive, which is really awesome. I think that it's important to broaden our idea of beauty, but also like, oh my god, can we just stop thinking that beauty's so important? Can we start to just focus on women's other values?

Jill: Right. Instead of let's get - because I think it's like we need everyone to think that they're beautiful in the exact body they have right now. It's like, alright yeah, that's all fine and good, but how about we don't even worry so much about if - you don't have to be beautiful to be a worthy human being.

Nancy: Oh my gosh, yes.

Jill: You also get to be smart and passionate and compelling. You get to do all these other things that beauty is like, so irrelevant. I'm with you on that.

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Nancy: And according to our society, you only get so many years of beauty anyway, so you might as well focus on stuff that's a little bit more durable.

Jill: Exactly. So I also - I want to touch on early on when we were working together, I was really struggling with, I think it was squats. I think it was squats and we were - you were just kind of helping me shift how I approach them. And we actually, in the gym in my apartment building, which I have many opinions about that, I don't train there anymore.

But you did something so subtle but impactful with me. I had done a couple sets and I said, "Why are these so fucking hard?" And you just redirected my brain to something else entirely. You just took me out of me thinking this is so hard, this is so hard, and you changed the subject and we were talking about something else entirely, and then you're like, okay, are you ready for your next set of squats? And I'm like, yeah, sure, and I nailed it.

And I'm like, oh my gosh, those felt so much easier, and you're like, yeah, because I helped you stop thinking this is so fucking hard. Do you remember that moment? That blew my mind. And I'm a coach, I do this for a living. And I was like, to have somebody so discreetly take my brain away from a shitty thought, and you didn't get me to believe that it was easy or that I was a badass or anything. You just took my brain out of that thought long enough for me to get busy doing the squats and they were almost effortless.

Nancy: Yeah, for sure that's something that works well with a lot of clients and I think it works well in my own case. I have been known to look at cat videos when I'm doing a lifting meet. I'm not kidding.

Jill: That's a brilliant idea.

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Nancy: My last weightlifting meet I was watching this video over and over of a cat swimming across a creek with its human and I was like, if that cat can swim across that creek, I can lift these weights. Because I mean, I don't know, my brain loves to catastrophize so I will totally go to that place of this is so hard, this feels horrible.

And so sometimes doing something as simple as looking at something while I'm doing the lift, and just trying to focus on that, or just - you can focus on the part of the body that feels okay. So the feet usually feel okay and also the feet are going to help you have better form. So just think about your feet.

There's a lot that you can do. But if you don't believe that the mind can affect your strength, try thinking about somebody who drives you completely up the wall, somebody you hate, someday who you just wish you would never have to talk to again or see on the news again for instance, imagine that person and do a set, and then imagine your cat or your dog or whatever, your niece or nephew and do a set. And see which one you feel stronger.

Jill: I'm curious because my brain is like - because I've gone rage running before and oh my gosh, I'm so much faster when I'm rage running.

Nancy: So actually I should say that. Different people operate differently for sure. And I think for me, I think I'm already - it depends on what kind of person you are. So I'm already very fight or flight, so usually I need to have my nervous system toned down a little bit. Somebody who tends to me a little bit more parasympathetic, like rest and digest, chill, will need a little bit more up, they'll need to come up a little bit.

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Also, you can get more forced. This is interesting. I remember having a conversation with Pat, who I talked about, Pat Davidson. Thing that just require kind of brute force, you can use that rage for, or if you have the movement really, really drilled down, you can hype yourself up into that sympathetic state.

So powerlifters will use smelling salts because boom, they're suddenly in fight or flight and they've got more power. But you lose some of that accuracy. So for instance with Olympic style weightlifting, you have to be extremely precise. And so you'll lose that precision. So you might be faster, you also might be more prone to injury if you're rage running. I don't know for sure.

Jill: I don't rage run because it doesn't feel good in my brain to have that raged emotion. And sometimes if I'm really angry about something, which is very rare, because it's so much easier for me to manage my mind out of it, but sometimes I'm just really mad and I'm like, and here's what I'm going to do with it. And I do find that I'm a lot faster, but yeah, I come back and I'm just destroyed. So I don't recommend it.

But I did want to touch on one more thing because you've used those coaching tools on yourself when you've had some challenges. Do you want to talk about that as well?

Nancy: Yeah. So I've had some really kind of strange experiences with my body. So I didn't, to be quite honest, I didn't really find exercise challenging. I started with cardio for sure because whatever, it can be a little stressful to be out of breath, but I never struggled with lifting weights. I loved it from the beginning. I never had any problems with motivation.

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And then I had this experience that I think has helped me a lot with my clients where basically, I was in trauma therapy. I had this can of worms get opened and I started having psychogenic seizures, which is basically it's not a seizure like a grand mal seizure. It's just your body making - it's your brain making you shake.

So it's excess energy, excess emotional energy and you start shaking. And sometimes it can get really severe, although it's gotten much, much better over the past year. But basically, after this started, I couldn't lift weights. I would go to the gym and I would start shaking uncontrollably and have to take a car home.

That happened a few times. And so I was like, trying to force my way through a lot because my identity was really built around being Nancy muscles. And being like, athletic. And I was so afraid to lose that, I was afraid of looking bad to my clients because I felt like they really looked up to my strength.

So I was doing stuff like okay, I'm going to take CBD, okay, I'm going to ground myself by putting sandbags on my body in between sets, and all this stuff. But the whole time in my brain, I was beating myself up. I was just beating myself up about how I'm so weak, and then I would really focus on the feelings in my body.

So the thing is people don't realize, in the kind of health and wellness world right now, there's a lot of emphasis on embodiment and interoception. So like, feeling all the sensations in your body. For some of us, we already feel that shit. We already feel it a lot and pay a lot of attention to it, so I was already on that end of the spectrum where I was probably paying too much attention to all the signals in my body and obsessing over them, and it got worse.

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And so it was like I was doing these external things like taking the CBD, using the weights, and I was just struggling, struggling, struggling with it. And I did eventually get on medication for the shaking, but one thing that really actually made a huge difference was I went to a retreat with Kara.

Jill: Kara Loewentheil, the Unfuck Your Brain - I think they're all familiar with who she is but let's give her credit here.

Nancy: Yeah. So Kara is a huge, huge person in my life. So I went to this retreat and I said something about being weak or something like that, and Kara was like, "Well, that's a thought." And I was like no, no, I have numbers to back it up. I was like, these are the numbers I used to do, these are the numbers that other women in my weight class are doing, and these are the numbers I'm currently doing.

Because basically once the weight would get too hard, I'd start shaking. And she just said, "Yeah, but Nancy, if I were doing what you're doing on your worst day, I would be getting a press release ready about it." And it just completely changed things for me.

And it's funny because I figured out that actually one of the biggest triggers for the shaking was shame. So it's like, first of all, there was a part of me that was like, why am I making myself do this when it feels so terrible? So it was this weird, it's almost like a mom forcing their kid to eat something they don't want to eat. That's how lifting felt because I was trying to force it.

And then also, this idea of like, I train with some - I lift with some pretty fucking strong people. So this kind of feeling of I'm falling short, oh my god, am I going to start shaking again? It's just going to get worse and worse. And so I needed an exit route from that. And I was just really in my

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thoughts. I was really in my thoughts and I really felt like this is a biological thing that's happening, that brain of psychological stuff isn't going to help.

And it totally made a huge difference. And my relationship with lifting is completely different now. I'm not trying to be - my goal then was to go to Masters Nationals in weightlifting, which basically means Masters means over 35. So I wanted to compete at the national level in Masters.

And now I'm like, I just want to be strong enough to pull somebody off the subway tracks. So it's just much, much better now. And I think it's given me a lot of perspective on working with my clients. So like I said, I hadn't really found lifting weights to be that challenging or scary. And then I went through this whole period where it was very scary for me. And so now I think I have a lot more understanding of clients for whom lifting weights is scary.

Jill: Yeah. And I think it is scary for a lot of clients because they have a whole bunch of thoughts about it that can come from any source in their lives. But yeah, it's so beautiful the way - the circumstance is the physical response that you were having, and it's fascinating how your thinking influenced the physical response in one way or the other, depending on how you thought about it. That's a really cool story. Having gone through that experience, what advice would you have to somebody who is feeling fear or nervous about strength training?

Nancy: You can think about exposure therapy. You can think about how can I make this exercise feel safe. So for instance, one thing you can actually do with somebody who really can't squat to depth because their brain is stopping them from squatting all the way down is you can put them in a safer position and have them do the same movement.

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So you can put them on their elbows and their knees, and then push their butt back to their heels. So they're literally - it's called a bear rock or something, but it's literally the same movement but they're right against the ground so their brain feels safe.

So you can just focus on what can I do - there's thoughts, but also work with the deepest lizard brain also. Can I do this movement closer to the floor? Can I do this movement in a way where I'm a little bit less out of breath?

I love how you have the running and the walking. So it's like, find your window of tolerance and stay within it. And then once that becomes easy, then you can kind of move on. You can kind of progress it. Does that answer your question?

Jill: It makes total sense and yes it does. And I just love how you framed it like, how can I make this movement feel safe? Instead of how can I get myself to do the movement, it's like how can I bring the movement to me, to meet me where I'm at. I absolutely love that.

Well, thank you so much for sharing this time today. This has been super fun. I want everybody to know who you are, so how can my people find you, follow you, what's the best place to connect?

Nancy: Yeah, so my website is trainwithnancy.com and if you go to the blog, there is an article about the squatting. The squatting form.

Jill: Oh yes, it's a good one.

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Nancy: Which you can find on the blog. And then my Instagram is @nancymuscles.

Jill: And there are some really cool videos of you moving some iron on that Instagram. I remember before we had our first consultation I was like, scrolling through your Instagram, I was like, oh yeah, this is the person for me. You were hired before we even got on a Zoom call. I was like, I love her, she's going to be my new trainer. And then if anybody wants to work with you, are you taking on new clients?

Nancy: I can take on one or two clients probably. But the books are still a little bit open. So you can reach out to me at nancy@trainwithnancy.com. but look at my website, do whatever first.

Jill: Okay, awesome. Well, again, thank you very much. Is there anything else that you want to add that you want people to know about you or strength training before we close?

Nancy: Oh, you know what, there's one thing that I wanted to add, which is that one of my close friends is a runner and he's gotten a series of stress fractures over the years. And I was really trying to talk him into doing some strength training.

Jill: Wait, he doesn't strength train?

Nancy: No, he doesn't strength train and he's actually a really fast runner. He's a really good runner. And so the thing about strength training is strength training will help you build bone density in a controlled way. So that then when you go out and hit the pavement, your bones can withstand that.

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Because running will help you build bone density, but it also is - if you're like, whatever, you're getting repetitive stress injuries, you need to do strength training. Because it's going to give you that controlled adaptation in which you can then take into your running practice.

Jill: I love that. I must say this 10 times a day to my people like, get your ass in the gym and lift some heavy shit. Preferably with professional help to guide you, but I just feel like if you don't make time for strength training, you're going to have to make time for injury. It's really almost black and white like that.

And maybe not right away, but maybe a few years down the road when you're so addicted to running that it's totally a part of your identity, and then you're going to get all these stress fractures. Let's just avoid that, let's start just strength training now so that you can be a runner into your 80s and your 90s and just grab people off the subway track.

Nancy: It's going to happen. Someday I'm going to get to do it.

Jill: You're calling the universe to hand you somebody's life to save. Alright, well, thank you so much for joining me today Nancy. It's been my pleasure and obviously we'll see each other tomorrow.

Nancy: Looking forward to it.

Jill: Alright.

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Oh, and one last thing. If you enjoyed listening to this episode, you have to check out the Rebel Runner Roadmap. It's a 30-day online program that will teach you exactly how to start running, stick with it, and become the runner you've always wanted to be. Head on over to rebelrunnerroadmap.com to join. I'd love to be a part of your journey.