

Elyse Paugh's heart pounded as she walked to the center of the gymnasium mat. Overhead the competition spotlights beamed down on her. In front of her was the 285-pound barbell, a weight she had failed to lift in the powerlifting competition that day - twice.

A one-minute timer began to tick, and the crowd, which included her friends and family, burst into supportive applause. Paugh closed her eyes, inhaled, and convinced herself the bar wouldn't be heavy.

As she hauled the bar up to her hips in the classic "deadlift" stance - conquering what had eluded her in the previous two rounds - she grinned and dropped the weight.

"I literally went to the bathroom and sobbed after – not because I was sad, but because I was so relieved that I got it up," she said. "Because if I didn't, I would've lost the whole thing."

Paugh, now a 20-year-old sophomore transfer at Boston University and state powerlifting champion, recalled that moment 18 months ago, which she counts among her proudest.

Paugh started powerlifting when she was 16 after her high school science teacher advertised a local powerlifting competition. Meant for the boys in the class, the competition piqued Paugh's curiosity.

"After class I went up to him and said, 'Hey I can do this - I'm pretty strong.'"

Her teacher was surprised.

"I didn't look particularly muscular at the time," Paugh recalled.

Regardless, he was supportive of Paugh's interest in participating and helped her register for her first competition.

With no formal training, Paugh researched proper powerlifting form and began preparing for the local meet. She immediately fell in love with the sport.

Romy Tarantino  
JO 200 section C1  
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Snapshot Profile

“It included a lot of trial and error,” Paugh said.

Over the past four years, Paugh competed in and won multiple local and state competitions. In March of this year, she placed first in the North Carolina State Championships.

Since Paugh is self trained in the sport, she stayed motivated by the prospect of “hitting” a new personal record. Paugh said the “supportive environment” in the powerlifting community made it easy for her to return to the gym each week.

“Even outside of meets - in the gym I could be deadlifting and people will come up to me and be like, ‘Wow that’s so impressive that you can do that,’” Paugh said.

Powerlifting is a male-dominated sport, but since 2011, female participation has grown by more than 600%, according to the USA Powerlifting Women’s Committee Report.

Paugh will compete in her next powerlifting competition in the fall of 2025. This semester, she took a break from powerlifting to focus on her other commitments: bodybuilding and playing for the Boston University Women’s Rugby team.

Despite this, Paugh will continue to powerlift for as long as possible.

“It’s just like a love for the sport, I guess,” Paugh said. “I can’t imagine not lifting.”