



TRAILBLAZING DARAJA

by Rachel Payne

DARAJA HILL-WEIDEMOYER

Age: 27, married

Degree: Athletic Training, Florida Gulf Coast University

Occupation: IFBB Pro Bikini Athlete, Posing Coach & Online Fitness Coach, empoweredtopose.com

Coach/Team: Pro Physique, Paul Revlia

Competition Highlights:

3X Olympia

Highest Placing African American Bikini Pro, 4th place, 2022

2019 NPC North American Championships, earned pro card

Sponsors: Core Nutritionals, Pro Tan, CJ Elite Suits, TLF Apparel, Cured Nutrition CBD, The Shoe Fairy

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Your placing at the Olympia this year was history making - 4th place Bikini Pro at the Olympia! What was going through your mind at that time and how did it make you feel?

Breaking into the top five at the Olympia means the world. Having little girls and other women coming up to me and saying, “I see you up there and I know I can do it, too!” or “Before you, I didn't think it was possible.” I have to tell you, after I got off stage I called my grandmother, she grew up when they were first integrating schools, and I told her I was the first black woman to make it to the top 4, and she started crying. She was so happy, so excited and so proud! For me it's just very personal and important to me that I can represent.

Let's step back a minute, tell me about your journey to the stage.

Like many competitors, I was always an athlete growing up, playing tennis, track and field, soccer, and I love snowboarding and ice skating. I had never lifted weights before but once I got to college I started going to the gym. Eventually, I met my boyfriend, now husband and he was the first one to suggest I compete. At the time, I was struggling with self esteem, and like so many in their early 20's, trying to figure out who I was and he thought I could be pretty good in this sport of bodybuilding.

My background in athletic training also helped in terms of basic understanding and I really enjoyed the process. I made it a point to learn as much as I could about nutrition while preparing for my first competition in 2018.

Did you prep yourself?

Yes and no. There was a guy that I received guidance from initially. He looked like a bodybuilder and I figured he knew what he was talking about. I did appreciate it at the time but I came to realize bodybuilding is different from bikini. Through my own background and training I was smart enough to make adjustments to the plan. About that time I started following Paul Revlia (Team Pro Physique) on social media because his videos kept popping up. Always wanting to learn more, I reached out to him after my first show. We did two more shows that year and he's been my coach ever since.



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And now you work with team Pro Physique as a coach?

Yes! I wasn't originally planning that I would coach, but over time I began to love that part of the process as well. Bodybuilding has opened a lot of doors for me. Not only did it help with my self esteem but I also learned a lot about discipline and the commitment it takes to go through prep. The lessons learned have been both valuable and have bled over into other areas of my life. It enabled me to grow in terms of success, and as an individual.

What are the biggest lessons you've learned from this sport?

I learned the importance of boundaries. Being a people pleaser, I did not know boundaries were necessary in order to have a healthy relationship with other people as well as with myself. I learned discipline and follow through because it's such a direct reflection of the effort you put in. I can't think of too many opportunities in life that can show you your progress so straightforwardly. I also learned having a routine is incredibly important. It's a metaphor for how I move through life. I understand that there is a need for balance in life but at the same time, I feel it's important to be committed and consistent if you are truly going to be successful.

Can you explain?

If you have a plan and you stick to it 98% of the time but that other 2% you don't, you have to ask yourself, what progress are you losing out on? If you don't give it your best in your training or you cut your cardio a little short or cheat on your nutrition here and there you may not see the results of that 2% right away but they will show up. It's like you're taking two steps forward and three steps back and then ask why haven't you made it to the finish line yet? I feel as a professional athlete, there is no room for a 2% margin of error and I'm not sure a lot of people grasp the level of commitment necessary to reach their goals. Combined with the many fitness influencers who promise the world and the mounds of misinformation online, I hate seeing athletes that have been misled or misguided.

You began competing in 2018 and turned pro in 2019. Was there a difference competing as an amateur versus competing as a pro?

When you first begin, you don't know what you don't know. You are learning everyday about your body, about the process, about how your body responds to the process and why that's important to know. By the time you turn pro, you know a whole lot more, not all, but at least a whole lot more. You can better manage your time, valuing your time, and narrowing down food sources that are good for your digestion to give you energy. On the other hand, during that first show, ignorance can be blissful and exciting where the 2nd, 3rd, 4th shows you know what's coming and you have to get ready for it because it always feels more challenging to stay motivated. Having a good "why" is key along with a good competitive drive!

What was your first Olympia experience like compared to your most recent?

Getting to that level the first time you are like a fan girl, googling at the top girls and just happy to be there. Up until that time I had consistently been placing high and so my first Olympia was my lowest placing. I decided I never wanted to feel like that again; it lit a fire in me to do better. My next goal was to make the top 10. Going into the second Olympia I didn't know how well it was going to go. I just wanted to show the improvements I had made and was excited to show what I had accomplished and achieved. This last Olympia was the most stressful because I was planning my wedding while prepping and wanted to fully experience all that goes along with a wedding without compromise. Our approach was to do whatever I have to do, make the improvements to my glutes especially, come in with the level of conditioning that the judges wanted to see from me, and focus the best I can. I had no real expectations except to make the top 10 again. The roster was loaded. I remember thinking as they were doing the callouts, cool I made the top 10. Then they were doing comparisons and I didn't hear my name yet. At that moment I realized holy crap, I made the top four! I can't even tell you the euphoria and excitement I felt. I was beyond my expectations. When I finally walked off stage, I broke down and cried. Nothing was going to ruin my day after that.

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So what do you have planned for this year?

This year it's just me, my prep and work. Nothing else to worry about, several things to be excited about, including a planned vacation. Prep has gotten off to a really good start and I'm excited to savor every moment. My goal is to do better at documenting my journey, sharing more on social media; it's kind of been fun. I need to qualify again for the Olympia so I am shooting for August/ September shows.

You have several sponsorships and collaborations, correct?

Yes. My first sponsor, I've been with since the beginning, Core Nutritionals. They are awesome. It's so important to me that with all of my collaborations or partnerships that I like the product, use the product, and I like the brand, the message, and the people behind the company. I want to be affiliated with companies that align with me and what I value. I've been so fortunate to work with companies that are made of quality people. Two years ago I collaborated with my shoe and jewelry sponsor, The Shoe Fairy, on a shoe design and that was really cool. Valuing yourself and being present are two really important factors for me. I really am lucky to be aligned with companies that value their customers, provide great customer service, and quality products.

When did you start your own website and coaching business?

I began in 2019 when girls started reaching out to me for posing. At the time I was an athletic trainer but I felt a pull towards coaching and finally recognized that I could have a sustainable source of income and have full control of my schedule through posing and decided to do it full time. It grew into competitor and lifestyle coaching with Team Pro Physique. I'm not sure where I see this going in the future so for now I just want to let my passion flourish and thrive. I would love to continue coaching and I will see what projects I may want to explore and develop long term and beyond the stage.

What message would you like to share with people who are looking up to you now?

I strongly feel that your self image and self worth are defined more by your habits and the things you do on a day to day basis. Your ability to commit to yourself and your health is where that value should lie. If that translates into losing a few pounds, then so be it. But the moment you put that self worth on a certain number, a certain expectation of how you're supposed to look, I believe can lead you down a tunnel of disappointment and trying to rework the plan, frustration, and starting over and over again. Focus on putting more value into the process of eating the things that you know are going to provide your body the minerals and nutrients it needs to run efficiently. If you're trying to build muscle or tone up or whatever it is, you have to have your nutrition right. Feeding your body on a cellular level and a spiritual level, combined with discipline and routine, will help you create a better version of yourself. It bleeds into other areas of your life and you become a better version of yourself. You value yourself more, you start to say no to the things that don't align with your values or make sense for your time. You prioritize things that you feel are important to you and you weed out the people that may not be serving your best interest or are conducive to your growth. It's ok to distance yourself from those things and those people. It's ok if your environment changes, if that means that you are growing and evolving. It's really just about taking care of you.



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Well said Daraja. It's been a pleasure sharing who you are and your journey with our readers. Know that we are rooting for you and wishing you all the best to take it to the top step.

That would truly be amazing! I am just going to keep fine tuning my body and doing everything the judges have asked for, and keep showing up. That's the only way it can happen.