

Jennifer Zollars

IFBB Wellness Pro

Age: 36

Occupation: Coach

Website: Snaxinthewild.com

Email: snaxinthewild@gmail.com

IG: @jeni.snax

Sponsors:

@liquidsunrayz : LSRJen

@cutlernutrition : JeniSnax

Coach: @raymilet

Competition Highlights:

2023 Houston Tournament of Champions–2nd

2023 Vancouver Island Showdown Pro–2nd

2023 Legions Sports Fest Pro–2nd

2022 World Klash–2nd

2022 NPC USA Championships–1st,

earned Pro card



If you look at Jennifer Zollars' Instagram, it's filled with photos of happiness. It is her faith that pulled her through the difficult times of an abusive relationship and a life-threatening medical condition. She's overcome the challenges and is graciously sharing her story.

THE START

I played basketball in college and needed something to do when that was over. I jumped into CrossFit and Olympic weightlifting, building a good foundation of strength and muscle. It also served as my liberation from the emotional turmoil that comes with divorce and an escape from a physically abusive relationship. My daughter and I moved in with my parents. I did CrossFit because I was determined to make sure that I would become strong and that I could defend myself. It was a mental hurdle, too and CrossFit allowed me to become stronger in my mind. I had to learn how to be confident in myself and believe that I would never be afraid of anyone ever again.



THE TURNING POINT

I did CrossFit for about seven years. I became strong and built a lot of muscle. While aesthetics wasn't really my goal, I was in pretty good shape. I was eating for performance more than aesthetics and I absolutely loved doing the elite CrossFit competitions until COVID shut all the competitions down. When the competitions started back up again, I entered an event. During the trail run, I was like, I should be in great shape, why I'm breathing so heavy? I didn't really perform well and I thought something is wrong. I trained hard for this, and I just can't breathe, I can't recover, I was lightheaded. On the way home, I told my boyfriend, now amazing husband, that I felt a sharp pain in my side. He suggested maybe I pulled something in my ribs. I shrugged it off and went into work Monday as usual. I was an X-ray Technologist at the time and I was pushing a portable X-ray machine with a student and I just didn't feel good. I began coughing and thought maybe I'm getting sick. When my shift was over, I went home. The coughing continued to get worse and I couldn't catch my breath. I started coughing up blood, and really began to worry. My mother thought maybe I had gotten pneumonia because it was cold over the weekend and I was doing that trail run outside. It made sense. About 3am on the night before Halloween, a sharp pain in my side woke me up out of a dead sleep. I couldn't breathe, and I couldn't call out for help. I also didn't want to startle my daughter, who was only two at the time, so I crawled down the hall to my parent's room so they could get me to the hospital.

When I arrived at the hospital, they did blood work. I was informed that I had an elevated clotting risk. They did a CT scan immediately. We discovered I had developed a pulmonary embolism with blood clots in both my lungs. The one in my right lung, developed into a saddle clot causing an a pulmonary infarction. It's like a heart attack in your lungs. In my case, it resulted in a lot of cell and tissue death leaving only 70% lung function on my right side. I'm thinking, how can this be? I'm in great shape, so this is not possible. You think this happens to a smoker, or somebody that uses drugs or alcohol, or someone that has a clotting disorder and I don't have any of those. More research and blood work determined that the cause of the clotting was due to the birth control I was taking. There is a warning label on the pill container, but you never think it could happen to you. I was in the hospital for six weeks. It was bad and the doctors said be grateful that you were in great shape, this could have killed you. It would have killed a normal person.

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RECOVERY

Being in good health can absolutely save your life when you're faced with a heart attack. Most people don't realize what the recovery process entails. They put you on tons of medication, you're weak, and you're wanting to work your way back into your normal life, which includes the gym. It's hard because you are so weak. A lot of people fall into depression and the medication certainly does not help. So you're working hard to get off of those medications and you're working hard to gain your strength.

When I came home from the hospital, I could barely roll over in the bed because it hurt my chest so much. I would have to ask my dad help me sit up so I could at least get to the kitchen table. It was a team effort with my family and my boyfriend. Taking care of me, helping out with my daughter, everybody was just amazing. After six weeks, I was so tired of taking the pain meds, but the pain was so bad that I had to take the medicine. I remember crying at my doctor's office and saying, "I don't want to be on painkillers anymore." The nurse practitioner, who was also a friend, suggested I speak with the doctor about medical marijuana. I work in a hospital and I didn't want to jeopardize my position but she said, "If you talk with them, maybe your hospital would be willing to work with you." So I did and with a medication card and my doctor approval, I was allowed to use medical marijuana. Over time, the pain started to go away. It really helped me get away from the painkillers because I didn't like how they made me feel. I felt drugged on them, I couldn't process my thoughts, and I knew I couldn't function on the pain meds. I also had to take blood thinners and as a result I would bruise so easily, but it was necessary to break down that blood clot. I had to be really careful not to exert myself too much for fear of an internal bleed. I couldn't drive because of the painkillers, and they actually took my license. It was a really low point for me. I asked my mom to take me to the church. I just sat there and cried and prayed. I prayed to please let me feel better, I have a little girl counting on me, and everybody is trying to help me. After that prayer, I remember feeling that I can fight through this, I can do it, it's just gonna require more time. I fought my way out of hole to get back to where I am today. Looking back, it was such a long journey. My friend Katie, the nurse practitioner, was instrumental in helping me ease back into working.

BODYBUILDING

I was basically forced to retired from CrossFit. I no longer had the cardio output to perform like that. I was sad and began to wonder, what do I do now? I'm a competitor and I need an end goal to work for. Working out just to work out wasn't enough. I need like a specific date to be ready by.

Bodybuilding had announced the Wellness category during COVID and it caught my attention because it looked like my body type. I reached out to Fitness Pro Darian Borello. I used to work in the operating room with her dad; he was a surgeon. He had mentioned the sport of bodybuilding to me and suggested I contact his daughter. At the time I replied, "I'm not into that stuff", but two years later I sent her a message asking if she knew anything about this new category. She agreed to help me get started and I just fell in love with Wellness.



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IMPACT

I didn't realize the impact my story of overcoming life's challenges had made on people. Jim Mannion himself told me, "The people want to hear that." I had always felt that I didn't want to bother people with my sob story, but he said, "You've overcome so much, you have a partial lung and you're competing." So, I've learned to speak out and speak up. I want to help others discover their strength to overcome challenges. My story goes far beyond the stage. I made a promise to God when I turned pro. I told him, "You've blessed me with my pro card, I promise to give back to the community every chance I get and share my story and spread Your word." I'm a devout Christian; it's a big part of my life. I pray during my fasted cardio in the mornings and give thanks for all He's done to give me another chance at life. Life can end in an instant; I've faced that twice. So I'm very grateful that I have each day that I can wake up and both compete and help others. I try to lift people up on social media even if it's not a coaching client. I want to try to motivate them.

The pulmonary embolism helped to ignite the love I have for God. I didn't fully understand His love. I didn't understand why and how others felt His love, but I faced a life-changing medical incident that made me see what a great God is and now I just have such a love for Him and everything He does. I understand that everything that has happened to me is part of His plan. However hard or easy, it is it's all part of the plan in the end.

CURRENT HEALTH

The blood clot finally dissipated. I get a yearly CT scan to keep check on everything. I still have a lot of scar tissue and I never got complete function in my lungs. I was one of the people that could not receive the COVID shot due to possible medical complications, so I had to be careful to avoid exposure. I ended up getting COVID anyway and received an IV treatment that was really painful. It felt like it was burning and just messes with your whole system. I had to be monitored very closely since my lungs weren't strong enough yet and to make sure I didn't get blood clots. Sometimes you just have to do what you have to do.

FAMILY

I wanted my daughter to know what I had to go through and show her that you can fight through anything that you're going through. My daughter is now 10 and I coach 4th grade basketball. I try to explain my athletic background to the girls and help them see that even when they get frustrated with the game or teammates that quitting isn't the answer and you can fight through this.



Q AND A WITH JENNIFER ZOLLARS

WELLNESS COMPETITION

You started competing in 2020 and two years later earned your pro card at the NPC USA Championships. Since making your pro debut, you've placed 2nd at several shows. What are your goals for 2024?

Wellness is a competitive category. The women in our category are all individuals and that's what makes the sport so beautiful. I love seeing how each person trains to their genetics, shaping and enhancing their bodies.



Our goal is always to qualify for the Olympia. This year, I am planning to compete back to back at the Houston Tournament of Champions in about seven weeks, then at the IFBB Professional League Charlotte Pro and then a few weeks later at the IFBB Professional League Pittsburgh Pro. If I qualify, then I'll take a break until the Olympia. If I don't qualify, we'll plan for the next series of shows.

SNAX IN THE WILD

You are a Posing Coach and Training Coach, online and in person. How did you start your coaching business, Snax In The Wild?

When I was competing in CrossFit, I was always hungry. Because I was so active in it, I was burning so many calories. Everybody just started calling me “Jenny snacks” and it just stuck. When we decided to create our business, my husband said, “Let’s go with Snacks In The Wild. You know why? Because every time I look at you, you’re in the wild, you’re always eating.” So together we started Snax In The Wild deciding to spell snacks phonetically. I do the coaching and my husband is the marketing man helping me outside of his full-time job, VP of Product Development and Marketing at a gas company.

Snax In The Wild is a relatively new company at just 1 ½ years. I primarily work out of my house, and occasionally train people at Anytime Fitness or CrossFit Gym 518. The bulk of my business is online and it’s just growing each month. Competing is the best PR that I have for this business. My goal is to continue coaching and expand into motivational speaking. My attorney/sports agent and I have been brainstorming about that.

Previously, I had gone from X-ray Technician to Oncology Analyst and simultaneously running Snax In The Wild. I recently took the leap of faith to focus on building my business and currently have a roster of about 17 on my team. My plan is to continue to compete for as long as I can. At the end of each season, I regroup with my family and coach to discuss the healthiest decision for us right now.



THE FUTURE

Are you affiliated with any domestic violence organizations or health awareness organizations?

I am working on a project with a friend and mental health therapist to help women who come out of abusive situations. While she can address the mental health therapy aspect, I can help them get started with exercise as a way to empower and strengthen their mind and bodies, giving them an outlet as well as building confidence.

The Pittsburgh Penguins donate a lot of their time at the Children’s Hospital. I’ve started talking with them about their programs because I’d like to be involved with that. I’m not a celebrity athlete that they would know, but spending time with them, talking and doing activities is something anyone can do. They need it and appreciate it. It’s something my husband and I both want to do.

Whether it’s in the community or working on these special projects, by sharing your story you’re not only bringing awareness about domestic violence and health adversities, but also helping to educate others about this amazing sport of bodybuilding. You can plant that seed so that young people understand, even after high school or collegiate sports, there’s another sport they can do. And they can do it for years to come. I’m really excited to share your story. You have truly overcome so much. It’s a testament to what strong faith can do.

