

TEAM GORILLA GIRLZ

CHANGING LIVES THROUGH FITNESS & THERAPY

WITH MESSAGES FOR HOPE AND PERSONAL GROWTH

SANTANA FRANCISCO

IFBB Women's Physique Pro

Age: 32

Occupation: Psychiatric RN

Resides: Dallas, Texas

Coach: JT Pelkey

Social Media: @psychofit_tana

Sponsor: Gorilla Labz Athletics Apparel

COMPETITION HIGHLIGHTS:

- **NPC Showdown of Champions:** Women's Physique, True Novice, 1st Place; Open Class A 1st Place
- **2022 NPC Texas Classic:** Women's Physique, Open Class A 1st Place, Women's Bodybuilding Heavyweight, 2nd Place
- **2022 NPC North American Championships:** Women's Physique, Open Class B 1st Place & new IFBB Pro; Women's Bodybuilding Light Heavyweight, 1st Place

In my interview with IFBB Women's Physique Pro Santana Francisco, she shared her personal journey from playing basketball to competing in bodybuilding, highlighting her natural gift for building muscle and her motivation to start going to the gym. Newer to the sport having only begun competing since 2021, Santana is very competitive, wanting to make sure when she stepped on stage, she would be ready. She proved that was the right strategy for her and it didn't take long before she earned her pro card. She is now getting ready for her pro debut at the IFBB Professional League Tupelo Pro, only her fourth show. Santana also discussed the importance of mental health in the sport, emphasizing the need for mental health awareness and the importance of building confidence and self-esteem through fitness and positive relationships. Finally, we talked about her vision for her future as a fitness professional.

“ I’VE ALWAYS HAD MUSCULAR ARMS. I USED TO GET TEASED ABOUT IT AND CALLED “MANTANA”. I TAKE AFTER MY DAD AND I’M PROUD OF THAT.”



Photo credit: @abetterdaywithjay_

PERSONAL JOURNEY

I played basketball growing up. When I was just six years old my dad used to take me outside to shoot hoops for hours. He was my coach up until I got into high school and then I went on to play at Langston University in Oklahoma.

I've always had muscular arms. I used to get teased about it and called "ManTana." I take after my dad and I'm proud of that. I would look at the Muscle & Fitness magazines he had around the house and I liked the look of the women in those magazines, but I was afraid to be that person because of the stigma of women having that much muscle, at the time. Even though I loved lifting weights, and I loved the way my body responded, I would never go as hard as I really wanted to because I thought I couldn't if I wanted to be attractive. I was afraid of being too muscular.

I had an academic scholarship and a basketball stipend. I was basically getting paid to go to school and was living a great life. But expectations and a toxic relationship had a negative effect on my mental health. I was struggling; the mental health issues eventually became too much. I was allowed to sit out a whole year from school, which I refer to as my “get out of jail free card.” When I came back the next year, I began working with the Dean on my thesis paper, however the overwhelming feelings came back, and I started partying as a way of coping. I was still able to make straight A’s up until my final exam, three days before graduation. In nursing school, you must pass your final exam to graduate. I did not. I failed my final exam by five points.

That was a wakeup call and led to a re-evaluation of priorities. I had already been in school six years. My parents and everybody had made travel plans to see me graduate. The school was nice enough to let me walk for graduation; I was supposed to graduate with honors. What was supposed to be a highlight in my life was in fact my lowest point. Later that night I grabbed a bottle of alcohol and went to the lake with the intention of killing myself. I was crying and I got in the water. I remember thinking, just walk in and keep going. The bottom of the lake will dip off and the water will cover my face. As I was walking, I looked up at the moon. It was a full moon and I saw my mom’s face and I knew this would hurt her. I couldn’t do it. I swam back to the shore and sat in my car for a long time crying and drenched. I felt like I was a failure for letting my parents down. I had not been living the way that I should have been living. In that moment I decided it was time for a change.

God put on my mom’s heart to call the next morning and tell me to come home. My parents helped me formulate a plan. I found an LPN to BSN program and within a few short months I had an LPN license and started working towards the 1000 credit hours I would need to eventually take the RN exams. It took me approximately three years to complete the hours and pass the exam.



BODYBUILDING JOURNEY

In 2018, I finally found my way back to the gym and decided I was going to finally live for me and not worry what anyone else thinks. I love the gym. I needed an outlet while I was working towards my credit hours. Even though I was working two jobs and studying, going to the gym was something I needed to do for myself. At the time, I didn’t know anything about the sport of bodybuilding, and I wasn’t on social media. I was just doing my thing. People started coming up to me asking if I compete. I had to ask, “What are you guys talking about?” When I saw the pictures on Instagram of the female competitors I thought, maybe I could compete. I still wasn’t confident, so I put it off but when the pandemic happened, I finally got on social media where I saw photos of Shanique Grant, Women’s Physique Ms. Olympia at the time. I fell in love with the look and felt like I had finally found my place. I decided once I finished school, I would do a bodybuilding competition.

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BRAND JOURNEY

I'm in the process of creating and growing my own brand, Psycho Fit. I just started a YouTube channel featuring fitness and entertainment with the eventual goal of starting my own training business. My brand is not just about fitness and intense training, but also about having both your mind and your body fit so that you can overcome challenges and be the best person that you can be. It's important to remember that even though today might seem like a terrible time, tomorrow could be better.

Ten years from now, my dream would be to have a Psycho Fit gym and mental health services combined. I want to figure out a way to offer affiliations or partnerships with counseling services that could help our clients stay motivated and on track to achieve the goals you desire. My mission is to help change people's lives to prevent them from suicide or mental health struggles, help them feel better, feel strong, and show them how fitness can be a beneficial and important part of that process. I have begun by sharing my own mental health journey on my YouTube channel, how I have learned to be more accountable for my actions and how that's translated into being more disciplined with bodybuilding. It has helped me to grow and become a better person.



I graduated with my degree in 2021 and did my first bodybuilding competition that August. I won my first show but there were only two of us in my class. By this time, I had a coach and we decided to do the NPC Texas Classic, where I won again and then went to the NPC North American Championships and earned my pro card. I extended my off season to give myself time to prepare for my pro debut, and am now less than three weeks away from stepping on stage at the IFBB Professional League Tupelo Pro.

Along the way, I had met Pete, owner an apparel company, who later introduced me to his former business partner, James Lord. James and his wife Jazmin of Gorilla Labz Athletics Apparel reached out to me with a sponsorship proposal to become a part of Team Gorilla Girlz. They have truly been a godsend and the best sponsor I could ask for. We've been communicating via social media, and I am looking forward to finally meeting them in person at the Tupelo show.

“TEN YEARS FROM NOW, MY DREAM WOULD BE TO HAVE A PSYCHO FIT GYM AND MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES COMBINED.”



Personally, I want to make top five at the Mr. Olympia. If I can make top five, I will feel like I have done what I needed to do in this sport. Of course, I would love to become number one. Beyond that, I want to help bring more women into the women's physique division of the sport. I love the artistry and beauty of the women's physique division and I believe women should embrace their stronger side. Bodybuilding has helped my mental health significantly so I'm all in for anything I can do to influence and improve people's lives by promoting the benefits of mental health and fitness.

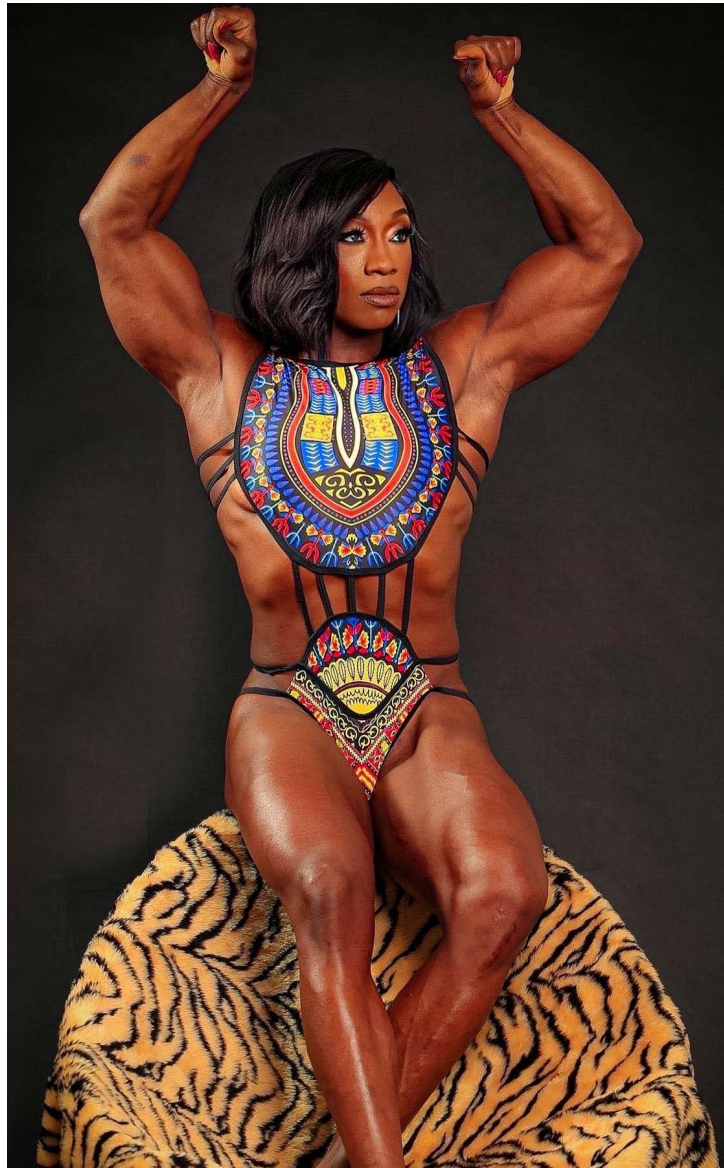


Photo credit: @abetterdaywithjay_

MENTAL HEALTH - SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Hindsight has helped me realized just how much I was affected by bullying because of how I looked, racial comments, and feeling like an outcast growing up. I was one of only two African American females in my school up until 5th grade. At least when I was growing up, once I got off the bus, I got relief from it all. These days, kids are on their phones and see the comments constantly on social media. The importance of mental health support for young people has never been more important than it is today.

I see so many people, of all ages, who care more about feelings rather than accountability or results. It's all about how they feel or what are people going to think. They want to be somebody so bad that if they don't get their way, they don't know how to handle the rejection. Social media is a major contributor to those feelings of worthlessness and low self-esteem due to the constant commenting and misleading perception that everyone else is living a perfect life. This oftentimes leads to engaging in self destructive behavior including self-harm like drinking, drugs, promiscuity, cutting and more. That's why I feel so strongly about getting out my message. I want others to know that whatever you're going through at this time, you can get past it. Allow yourself to figure out who you are and go after whatever it is that you want in life.



“ BODYBUILDING HAS HELPED MY MENTAL HEALTH SIGNIFICANTLY SO I'M ALL IN FOR ANYTHING I CAN DO TO INFLUENCE AND IMPROVE PEOPLE'S LIVES BY PROMOTING THE BENEFITS OF MENTAL HEALTH AND FITNESS.”

When I was younger, I think what caused me to want to hurt myself was that I was afraid of what people would think about me for failing. I finally realized; nothing comes easy. I had to be accountable for my own actions. That was a game changing lesson for me to learn and one that I want to share. People want to fit in so badly. On social media everyone feels they can comment, and they can be mean or passive aggressive. Being exposed to that constantly will wear you down and make you feel like you're not worthy or not deserving of a better life. We've seen the huge impact negativity has had on self-destructive behavior and suicide rates. Surrounding yourself with positive people and making fitness a part of your lifestyle are two great ways to help build confidence and self-esteem. I have found it's amazing what happens when stop allowing others to have such control over you and you can instead be true to yourself.

When I was having suicidal thoughts myself, I was always trying to find peace within myself. I thought I could find it in a relationship with a man, but I finally realized I must find myself and learn to love me first, before I try to find that in someone else. Reading the Bible has allowed me to tap into that spiritual aspect of myself. Getting closer to God and working on my relationship with Christ has helped me push past plateaus because I know that God is with me and I have faith that I can get past whatever obstacles I may face that day.

God is my hope, my love, everything that I need to power me through this life.



Photo credit: @bodygraphics_photography

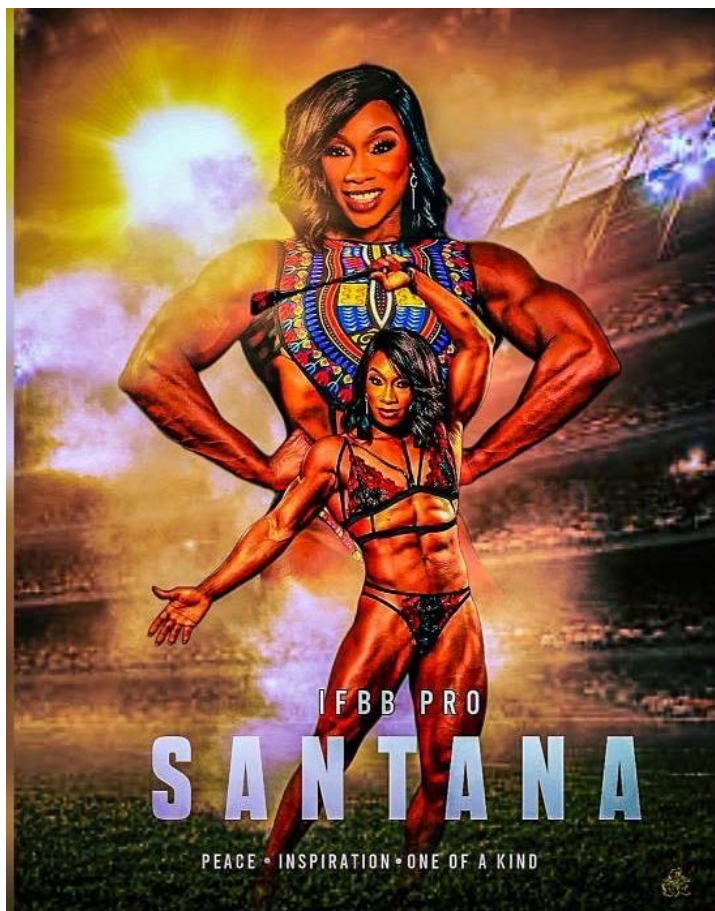


Photo credit: @real1jayspic

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I know that better days are ahead because God has healed me. I feel that even if you don't believe in God, just look at the Bible. Look at it as if were just a normal book and surely you will find something in there that will help you to be a better person. For example, honor your father and your mother, it's not a bad thing to do it whether you believe in God or not. Thou shalt not steal; you shouldn't be stealing, regardless of whether you believe in God. Everyone can use these messages to give you hope for a better day and make yourself into a better person or a different person than what you were before.

Santana, your story and message is so relevant. Every one of us has struggled with wanting to fit in, disappointing others, or negative comments by others and social media is constantly amplifying those things. Encouraging others to embrace who you are and seek help when needed is so important. We certainly hope your dream to combine fitness and mental health services in a gym setting, and providing a holistic approach to finding peace from within comes to fruition.