

Strength Is Not a Bonus: Kayla Bonkowski on Why Women Who Train for Performance Change Their Relationship with Fitness

Why Strength, Not Cardio, Became Kayla Bonkowski's Foundation for Fitness

Sterling Heights, Michigan Sep 23, 2026 ([Issuewire.com](https://www.issuewire.com)) - The conventional fitness recommendation for women has been, for a long time, cardio-primary. Run more. Walk more. Use the elliptical. Build lean muscle as a supplement to the real work of burning calories through sustained cardiovascular output. The research on women's long-term health, strength, and metabolic function tells a different story. Kayla Bonkowski, a competitive fitness athlete in Sterling Heights, Michigan, has been living that different story since 2021.

Bonkowski competes in LexArtis CrossFit events -- including No Boys Allowed, a women's competition, as well as Battle of the Boxes and Cougars and Sugar Daddies -- where the standard is performance, not appearance. The leaderboard records what she can do, not what she looks like doing it. That distinction, she argues, is the one that changes a woman's relationship with fitness from a maintenance activity into a performance practice.

"Strength training is not a supplementary activity," she says. "It is the foundation."

What the Research Says About Women and Strength

The case for strength training in women's fitness is well-established in the exercise science literature and frequently underrepresented in the consumer fitness conversation. Resistance training builds lean muscle mass, which is metabolically active and burns calories at rest in a way that adipose tissue does not. It increases bone density, reducing fracture risk over the long term. It improves insulin sensitivity, body composition, and functional strength across the lifespan. These are not marginal benefits. They are the primary adaptations that determine physical health and independence in middle and later life.

Cardiovascular exercise produces its own important adaptations -- improved heart health, capillary density, aerobic capacity. But the evidence for resistance training's long-term benefits for women is strong enough that treating it as supplementary to cardio, rather than as equal or primary, is not a clinically defensible position.

[Kayla Bonkowski](#) holds a Bachelor of Science in Psychology from Rochester College, earned Cum Laude in 2017, and is completing her Master of Social Work at Louisiana State University. Her academic background in psychology includes the psychology of health behavior, which gives her a framework for understanding why the cardio-primary recommendation persists despite the evidence: it is what has been marketed to women, it is what women see each other doing, and the social reinforcement of familiar behavior is a powerful force even when the evidence suggests a better option is available.

"Women are often sold cardio as the primary mode," she says. "The research on strength training says something different."

Performance as the Organizing Principle

The shift that Bonkowski describes is not primarily about which exercises a woman does. It is about

what she is training for. An appearance-organized fitness practice measures success visually and ends when the visual target is reached or abandoned. A performance-organized fitness practice measures success in terms of what the body can do -- and that standard does not have a natural endpoint.

Performance is always improvable. There is always a heavier lift, a faster time, a more complex movement to develop. This indefinite standard is not a source of frustration for the athlete who has internalized it. It is the source of the practice's durability. The athlete who is training for performance never runs out of something to train for.

Bonkowski has lost more than 70 pounds since beginning consistent strength and conditioning training in 2021. She does not minimize that result, but she consistently reframes its significance. The weight loss is what the practice produced. The practice itself is what she cares about maintaining.

"I'm not training to be smaller," she says. "I'm training to be stronger. Those are not the same goal." The distinction determines what kind of athlete you become and how long you stay one.

Competition as Honest Accountability

Competition in women's fitness events provides a form of feedback that training alone and appearance-focused metrics do not. A leaderboard records what a woman did -- the weight moved, the repetitions completed, the time posted -- against a field of other women doing the same work. There is no aesthetic dimension. There is a score.

Bonkowski entered her first LexArtis event with the understanding that the result would be an honest measure of where her fitness actually was. Not where she hoped it was, not where her training suggested it might be, but where it demonstrably was when tested against an external standard. That honesty is uncomfortable in the moments before a competition begins and useful for the entire training block that follows it.

No Boys Allowed, the women's competition she has entered, exists specifically to create that context: a competitive fitness environment organized entirely around what women can do. The format does not compare women to men or to an aesthetic standard. It compares women to each other on the basis of performance.

"Competing against other women in a strength and conditioning format is one of the most direct experiences I've had," Bonkowski says. "You show up, you perform, the result tells you where you are. That is the most useful information available."

In Macomb, Michigan, where she trains, the preparation for each LexArtis event has the quality of genuine athletic preparation: specific, directed, and organized around a performance objective rather than a visual one.

The Identity Shift That Makes It Last

There is a point in a women's fitness practice where something changes. The practice is no longer organized around a goal the athlete is working toward. It is organized around an identity the athlete has already claimed. She is an athlete. She trains. She competes. The fitness behavior is not contingent on a target or a timeline; it is an expression of who she is.

Bonkowski describes this shift as the one that makes a fitness practice genuinely durable. Before the

shift, the practice is held in place by external motivation: the goal, the program, the progress photos. After the shift, the practice is held in place by identity -- and identity is a considerably more stable foundation than motivation.

This is not an observation unique to women's fitness. But it has particular relevance in a cultural context where women's fitness is systematically organized around external standards -- how the body looks to others -- rather than internal ones -- what the body can do. A woman who trains for performance builds her fitness identity around a standard she controls and defines. That is a different position than one organized around meeting an aesthetic expectation set by someone else.

In Sterling Heights, Michigan, Kayla Bonkowski is completing her Master of Social Work at Louisiana State University alongside her athletic practice. The identity she has built is not athlete or graduate student. It is both, sustained by the same underlying commitment to showing up for difficult things consistently.

"The first time I walked into a competition, I was not there to be impressive," she says. "I was there to find out what I was capable of." She has been finding out ever since.

A Standard Worth Setting

The fitness recommendation Kayla Bonkowski offers to women is not complicated. Train for what your body can do. Build strength as a foundation, not a supplement. Use competition as a tool for honest assessment of where the practice actually is. Measure progress in performance terms rather than appearance terms.

These recommendations are not novel in the exercise science literature. They are underrepresented in the consumer fitness conversation, which continues to organize around appearance, restriction, and the promise of transformation. The gap between what the research supports and what the market sells is where the opportunity for a different approach lives.

In Sterling Heights, Michigan, Bonkowski is not waiting for the market to catch up. She is training in Macomb, competing in LexArtis events, completing her MSW at Louisiana State University, and building a practice that reflects what she believes the evidence actually supports.

"Strength training is not a bonus," she says. "It is the foundation."

Structure beats motivation, and strength beats aesthetics as an organizing principle for a fitness practice that lasts. Kayla Bonkowski has been building from that foundation since 2021. The practice is still going.

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