



'I Felt Powerful': How a 72-Year-Old Vegan Nun Found Strength Through Powerlifting

By Aurelia d'Andrea
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Photo courtesy Cristina Vance Photography
@cv_photography_llc

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Sister Pat Farrell remembers the first time she stepped into a gym and powerlifted a barbell weighted with 10-pound bumpers. It was just last March, and it was a defining moment. "I felt powerful," says the 72-year-old Catholic nun. "It was like, 'Oh, I like this.'"

A mere four months after her inaugural powerlifting session, in July of 2025, Farrell—who adopted a vegan diet 12 years ago—entered her very first powerlifting competition. Her aim? To deadlift her own weight. Farrell not only reached her goal, but surpassed it, deadlifting 160 pounds and taking home a first-place medal.

"I was the only person in my weight class and age class to be competing that day, so I was guaranteed first place," she says with a laugh. "But the thing is, I exceeded my goal."

A Dominican Sister of San Rafael, Farrell initially took up strength training after injuring herself while engaging

in a very mundane activity: putting on her pants. "I ended up pulling my hamstring, and it was messed up for quite a while," she says. "I realized that I really needed to be attentive to some of these more structural parts of this body."

Photo courtesy of Cyndie Cammack, OP

Why Weight-Bearing Exercise Matters More with Age

While powerlifting is growing in popularity worldwide, especially among the Gen Z set, experts say it's older people, and women in particular, who benefit most from consistent weight-bearing exercise, helping them stave off the progressive loss of muscle and bone mass prevalent among older adults.

"People lose mobility with age," says Katya Gorbacheva, author of *Vegan Powerlifting Starter Guide: For Women Aspiring to be Strong and Confident* and the powerlifting coach Farrell enlisted to help her reach her fitness goals safely. "Patricia could barely do any lower body movements without knee pain in the beginning. She could barely squat without support," says Gorbacheva.

But once Farrell got into a regular training groove, "she got more mobility in her hips and in her ankles and in her thoracic spine—the areas that usually get tighter with age."

Most Americans, by the time they reach the age of 65, are not only grappling with a decline in their physical well-being, but also juggling multiple prescription medications for ailments including [hypertension](#) and [heart disease](#), which Farrell has managed to sidestep. "I

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don't have diabetes, I don't have high blood pressure, I don't have high cholesterol," she says. "I credit it to being vegan."

At the San Francisco Bay Area gym where she trains several times a week, Farrell has found a welcoming community that cheers her on and commends her for her consistency and commitment to the sport. With that support behind her, Farrell plans to compete in the 2026 USA Powerlifting California State Championships in January, with a goal to lift and press more than she did at her first meet. This time, the stakes are a bit higher.

"It's statewide," she says, "so I will have competition."