

Star City Strong Fest Executive Director Inspired By The Virginia Commonwealth Games

By Chris Moody, VAS Contributor

Leigh Stover remembers the feeling she had seeing a Strongman competition for the first time. There was a man in a parking lot, holding a battle rope, pulling a Hummer. People were deadlifting cars. There was a farmers' carry.

For Stover, all of it was impressive, motivational, and a calling to her to join a community of people who valued strength as a vital part of overall fitness. She had a feeling of fulfillment that she found something she didn't even know she was looking for.

That feeling is something Stover wants to give others at the 2026 Star City Strongman competition and StrongFest, set for Nov. 7 in the Riverdale Village in Roanoke.

That first exposure was in 2014, when the Strongman competition was part of the Commonwealth Games. It. From there, Stover was hooked.

"I saw people who looked like me and I saw them using their body in a way that was just so strong and powerful," Stover said. "I joined the gym and competed in the 2015 Commonwealth Games and that experience directly led to what I'm doing today. I'm incredibly grateful for it," she said.

Since the Star City Strongman even began as its own competition in 2016, it has grown considerably. Competitors are classed in 11 divisions. First responders have their own division, fittingly labeled the "hero division," where they compete against each other, and that competition is fierce.

"Over the years, that's definitely been an attraction for people because we'll get firefighters or police officers from different areas. They come together and they, they get pretty competitive, but they have the best time," Stover said.

The top three finishers in the open divisions will qualify for national competitions.

For spectators, Strongman offers a close-up look at classic feats of strength and grit. This year's events include a truck pull; a car deadlift; natural stone shoulder-loads; and a loadable circus dumbbell press with weights scaled by division. Strongman has grown steadily since 2020 at the local level, Stover said, with more meets across Virginia and the U.S. Top-three finishers in open divisions earn trophies, prize bags, and invitations to a national competition; novice champions also receive national invites, with prizes awarded through the top three.

This year marks the fourth year of StrongFest, a festival around the competition designed to give businesses, non-profits, and sporting organizations a place to connect with the Strongman competitors and enthusiasts.

“StrongFest is a free community festival built around introducing people to different ways to get active and involved locally,” said organizer Leigh Stover. “We bring together gyms, sports and recreation organizations, nonprofits, local businesses, food vendors, kids’ activities and interactive experiences throughout the day.”

Proceeds benefit the Star City Strong Foundation, which supports access to strength sports and backs research on the connection between movement and mental health. The Iron Fund currently covers competition entry fees for first responders, officers, military service members, mental health service providers, and adaptive athletes to reduce financial barriers. Funding comes from athlete entry fees, vendor fees, sponsors, and an online raffle in the run-up to the event.

“We wanted to bring a festival together where people could access those and kind of find their own place,” she said. “We recognized there's not a lot of access to other active communities. Strongman's pretty niche in itself. Things like yoga and Pilates, and different kinds of active communities don't get that recognition, so we wanted to bring a festival together where people could access those and kind of find their own place.

This year’s StrongFest carries a carnival theme, and organizers are encouraging every participating group to turn its space into something people can do: a game, challenge, demo, or mini-lesson that gets visitors moving. Expect family yoga, fitness challenges, partner workouts, mobility and stretching sessions, and even hands-on aerial arts on a small rig. A local physical therapist will offer recovery guidance, and a mobile sauna will be on site. Stover is partnering with the Play for All Foundation to run a Strong Kids Zone with activities that mirror Strongman movements through a playful carnival lens. She’s also exploring a special appearance by Strong Style Pro Wrestling.

Organizers are still adding partners and encourage local gyms, sports and recreation groups, nonprofits, and businesses to join with interactive, carnival-style activities. StrongFest also plans a day-of raffle and family-friendly prizes.

Stover’s goal is simple: more people moving, meeting new communities, and seeing themselves in strength. “StrongFest is a free community festival,” she said. “We want people to come out and just enjoy the day.”

For more event information – Visit: <https://starcitystrongman.org/>



2015 Virginia Commonwealth Games Strongman competition at the Berglund Center, Roanoke.