

Merrit Moon knew the decision was going to pay off.

As a wide receiver on the New Hope High School football team, Moon took the advice of his coaches and set out to lose nearly 20 pounds after the 2023 season. The junior felt dropping the weight would help him improve his speed and make him feel looser and more athletic.

Moon also believed the change would help him in powerlifting.

There are no guarantees athletes who lose that much weight are going to see significant strength gains, but Moon did things the right way and realized a goal at the same time.

On April 6, Moon recorded a total weight of 1,245 pounds to win the 165-pound weight class at the Mississippi High School Activities Association (MHSAA) Powerlifting Championships at the Mississippi Coliseum in Jackson.

Moon lifted 470 pounds in the squat, 255 in the bench press and 520 in the dead lift to win his first state title. In 2023, Moon was sixth in the 181-pound weight class with marks of 425 (squat), 225 (bench) and 500 (dead lift).

“I actually got stronger,” Moon said. “I am stronger now than I was last year. I knew last year I had a lot of fat on me and I had to trim it up.”

Moon believed he had the strength last season but that his technique needed to improve. He said his strength improved throughout this past football season and he then moved to enhance his form in the squat and dead lift. Moon said tweaking his technique allowed him to make even more strength gains.

“After last year, I really wanted to win because I really love powerlifting,” Moon said. “I was going to try my hardest to win.”

New Hope High powerlifting coach Brad Butler said Moon's health was his primary concern after Moon told him he wanted to move from 181 to 165. He said Moon handled the transition responsibly and was extremely dedicated to realizing his goal of winning a state title.

Butler said the road to a championship started when Moon was a freshman and he used to lift weight before school while many of his peers were still in bed.

"It is a direct correlation to how much time you put in is what you're going to reap," Butler said. "What you reap is what you sow. That is what is so good about this sport. Powerlifting can be a team sport, but it also is an individual sport and you really have nobody to blame but yourself (if you don't see the result). You're in control of it, which is good in his case because he is self-motivated and he can handle it."

Butler feels Moon moved a little better and gained hip flexibility after he lost weight. He said the improved flexibility allowed Moon to squat heavier weights. Butler said Moon also went to more of a sumo style in his dead lift, which enabled him to improve in that lift. A sumo style involves placing your feet wider than shoulder-width apart and gripping the barbell with your hands placed inside your legs.

At the state meet, Butler said Moon moved into first place after the bench press and was in good position going into the dead lift, which he said is one of his better lifts. With multiple reps available, Moon clinched with a safe weight of 520. Butler said Moon probably had 30 more pounds in the tank if he had been pushed.

"He is easy," Butler said. "He did it all himself. I just make sure he gets to the meets and that is it."

Still, Butler admitted dropping weight doesn't always equate to gaining as much strength as Moon did. He credits Moon for eating the right things and not doing a "fad" weight loss system.

With the 2024 football season on deck, it remains to be seen which weight class Moon will settle on when it is time for him to go for another title. Regardless of the weight, Butler said Moon's work ethic will give him an advantage.

"He saw what powerlifting could do for his body and just fell in love with it," Butler said. "He probably weighed 140 pounds when he started lifting. He was not impressive looking. Now he is."