

EPISODE 588

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:34.6]

FT: Welcome to So Money everyone, I'm your host Farnoosh Torabi. Do you ever wonder what it's like to be a stunt person on a set of a TV show or a movie? Well we have a unique guest on the podcast today, professional stunt woman Janel Stevens. She's performed on shows you may have watched including Mysteries of Laura, Luke Cage, Quantico, Blind Spot and one of my favorite shows, Orange is the New Black on Netflix.

She's also been in several movies, she is also a personal trainer and Janel is the founder of her own fitness training company called Prowess PT. So I'm curious, how does one become a stunt person, how did Janel enter the field? How does she balance the inconsistent paycheck of show business with the consistency of life's expenses and bills? Speaking of money, how much can you earn being a professional stunt person? Is jumping off cars and running through glass doors a lucrative career? Janel's done it all and she tells it all.

Here we go, here is Janel Stevens.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:01:33.4]

FT: Janel Stevens, welcome to So Money, professional stunt woman. I'm excited to talk to you.

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JS: I'm excited too, thank you for having me.

[0:01:41.8]

FT: Absolutely. Everybody who is listening, I have a booker who helps me from time to time, her name is Liz and she's fabulous and she connected us, you and I Janel. Liz's goal is to get us some more guests on this show that I would never meet perhaps in life and people who are in the entertainment world. Sometimes we love hearing from people in showbiz because it seems like such a glamorous lifestyle. But, they're just like us, you know?

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JS: Definitely.

[0:02:18.4]

FT: You Janel, you're a professional stunt woman, you've worked in a number of shows from Mysteries of Laura, to Quantico and of course, Orange is the New Black, one of my favorite shows and tons of movies. You're also an entrepreneur so we'll talk about that.

But first, Janel, tell us a little bit about your performance world, what you do as a professional stunt woman, how you got involved in that and I watch Orange is the New Black, tell me, what scenes might I have seen you in?

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JS: Okay, well in terms of getting into the business, I worked with somebody, Heidi Snapof was actually just finished season, being the stunt double for Jamie Alexander in Blind Spot and I worked with her at Equinox when we're both trainers and I knew she was a stunt woman then but at the time, I was still ramping up at Equinox and all that.

Then, you know, our lives went separate ways and then she came in to the martial arts school that I go to several years later and I was like, "Wow, Heidi, how are you? What are you doing?" And she just said that she was completely into the stunt business and I was like, "Wow, it would be really cool to do. I would love to do something like that." She was like, "Are you serious?" I'm like, "Yeah I am," and she's like, "Well, I think you'd be really good at it. Give me some information, slight resume and a headshot, and I'll pass it around."

I didn't think too much of it even though I would have loved to have done it. Months later she contact me and she's like, "Are you still interested? Because I think I have a job for you," and that was Mysteries of Laura. After that, you know, It was a really fun day, the coordinator was pleasantly surprised at some of the stuff that I could do in terms of shooting a gun. In fact, he basically — I guess word got around and I started working.

Timing wise, I felt like I had trained for this job my entire life without even knowing about it because when they first started telling me to put a resume together, I was like, "Well I don't have a resume, I don't do stunts," and they're like, "No, put your skills together and all that." When I was putting it together, I actually had to condense it a little bit, not realizing all the stuff that I had did would prepare me for this job.

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FT: What are some of the crazy things you've had to do? I don't know if maybe your friend was taken aback that you wanted to participate, because is there a lot of demand for people who want to be stunt women? Like you know, jumping out of buildings and jumping from car to car, I mean, how — that's what we see on TV. We don't really know. Maybe there was some CGI involved but what is your day like? I mean, what are some of the crazy things you've had to do?

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JS: I haven't had to do anything like super crazy yet, more in training because as it goes in the stunt business, the saying is if you're not working, you're training. Because they're so many things that you can do on set and some people specialize in certain things and then, you know, you can always say no to a job, and sometimes it's even preferred that you do say no, especially if you don't, or are not very skilled in whatever stunt that they want you to do. Because then you're going to make yourself look bad and then the production won't get the shot that they want and it doesn't do very well for your reputation at all.

So I've had to for example, one episode in Blind Spot, where I basically threw myself through a glass display for the scene.

[0:05:53.1]

FT: My gosh, really? What?

[0:05:55.2]

JS: Yeah.

[0:05:56.2]

FT: There's a way to do that and not get hurt?

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JS: Yes. In fact, we trained for it, there was a lot of rehearsal time, a lot of match, we setup a whole area. Because in the stunt business, it can be very dangerous but we try to make it as safe as possible so especially the stunt coordinators. So we had a lot of reps of setting up a mock set where there were pads and I would, you know, make sure that I was falling the right way so that when I did it on set, I did it as safe as possible.

There was a slight padding on my fall but it's basically like, make sure you close your eyes so no glass gets in your eyes and it's candied glass but it is still sharp so did get cut a little bit but it was actually pretty fun and I only had to do it one time since all the repetitions and the practice that we did...

[0:06:49.8]

FT: Right, you had one take.

[0:06:52.6]

JS: Yeah, exactly, one and done, that's the best way to do it. I had three glasses to go through but they got it in the first shot so it was perfect. I was able to do it more than one time too. I mean, people see certain stunts like getting hit by a car for example. But you can actually train for stuff like that.

[0:07:07.3]

FT: Wow. Would be nice life training. I'd like to know how to get hit by a car and actually not injure myself. Because I live in New York City and let me tell you, I look twice several times before crossing the street on my street, especially.

What's the industry like in terms of longevity? I'm going to transition now to talking about your business and kind of the impetus for that. First, tell us a little bit about the likelihood of staying in stunt work for a long time. Does it have an expiration date? Because it does really depend on your ability to stay fit and physical and able-bodied to do this stunts and I would imagine after a while it gets to wear on you.

[0:07:46.2]

JS: Yes it does but I mean, again, I'm new in the business so I have a ways to go even though I kind of started a little late. But I feel like as long as you are training and keeping yourself physically active, I've met wonderful stunt woman that have been in the business over 20 years, you know?

You can do it. Especially, like I said, I'm new so I'm assuming that once you get to a point, you can become a little bit more picky in terms of the jobs that you pick so you don't have to do everything. You can definitely stay in this business for decades and even transition into being a stunt coordinator or a fight choreographer where you're not actually doing the stunts but you're putting the fight scenes together and stuff like that.

It's definitely more than one way to stay in this business for a long time.

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FT: Talk about Prowess Training and how — Prowess Private Training that is, how this idea came about. I mean, talk about wanting to always be fit for the stunt work, this is a great way to do it and be in control of your career.

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JS: Definitely is and like I said, it was like a perfect storm and the timing were just excellent in terms of me getting into the business. I had worked at Equinox for five and a half years and then wanted to venture out on my own so I started my own personal training business and was loving that. I had originally come back to New York. After I graduated college, I stayed on to being the assistant coach for the basketball team that I played for. I just needed to get out of Buffalo and I wanted to work on the business side of sports so I got my masters in sports administration but that didn't work out.

I realized quickly that I was not the type of person that could sit behind a desk for eight hours a day. I fell into personal training, that's when I started at Equinox and then after that, I started my own business and then, I mean, that obviously helps for my physicality and keeping in shape but also it gives me a steady income so that I can supplement it because originally when I came back to New York, I was trying to do modeling and acting as well.

I started doing that but, you know, I cancel clients for very minimal income for an extra job one day. That was very stressful and then I just really fell in love with training. So I did that and I've had my business for maybe four and a half years now. That's something that will always be. My clients, you know, even when I go, I was away for four months just recently on a job and my clients are just like, well we'll wait for you to come back, we're here when you're ready to come train again. That's also a blessing too that I have some really loyal clients so that when I am in a low point with stunt work that I can fall back on that.

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FT: Do you ever wonder about the life that could have been? I mean, I think so many people who pursue a career as actors and performers, there is a point, maybe several points, they

reach where they're like, "I just don't know if how much longer I can take this. I haven't eaten in six days because I haven't made any money but there's always that potential to break through and sometimes it's just a matter of time, it's just failing enough but who knows, it's a gamble. How did you make your bet?

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JS: Like I said, when I was doing the acting and modeling, that at the time was not the right timing for me and I had to stop doing it because I wasn't making enough money to sustain life. At the time I was doing an office job, I was doing public relations. So I was trying to take my lunch time to go on auditions and castings and stuff like that and it just was too stressful.

I wasn't making enough money. so I left the corporate world to become a trainer because I ran into somebody that I had known years, the same situation as how I understand. I just ran into somebody that I had known for a while and he was a trainer so he coached me through what it would mean to mean to be a trainer and initially I took a pay cut to do it but I figured that that would be the career for me to have the flexibility to do acting and modeling.

Then I fell in love with training so I stayed with that for a while and in through training, I found a martial arts school, the one that I go to now. I have since become a very high level in martial arts that I'm doing on. I do Muai Thai, I've been New York state champion, I do Jit Kun Do, and second degree black belt and I'm a purple belt in Jiu Jitsu.

I was at that level when my friend walked in to the school. Just the timing of everything, just came together.

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FT: Were you always super into fitness as a child even growing up? Was this part of your lifestyle and always a goal to pursue this in some way?

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JS: Yes, I've done sports ever since I was four years old in some way shape or form. My father always allowed me to go to try anything and everything that I wanted to do. I played everything from baseball to basketball to – I ended up playing division one collegiate basketball.

It's definitely been a part of me since I was very little and always active, always into sports, always doing fitness so we just seem to fit the fact that trying to do acting and modeling, it wasn't as fun for me as stunt is now because now I'm still in front of the camera but now I'm doing more of the physical aspect of it.

For me, it's a lot more fun than reading lines and doing that.

[0:13:36.4]

FT: The puzzle pieces are all coming together it seems like, right? Everything happens for a reason, looking back of course, you only really realize that in hind sight but it sounds like your life has really taken a very beautiful shape. What do you attribute that to?

You said, you know, some of it is luck, you run into people but what is it about you that has allowed you to maintain really two careers going here?

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JS: Yeah, I guess I just have a very strong mindset to finishing what I start, which is one of the reasons why I got back in martial arts which has brought me to stunt work because my strong background in stunts is fighting. Just the perseverance to do it because I had to stop martial arts when I was in high school because of basketball.

Not thinking it would take me into stunts, just I wanted to finish that and getting a black belt isn't finishing anything, it's really just the beginning but getting back into it, I was just very determined to get back on the track that I had to leave at a certain point and you know, I'm a very strong believer in hard work and if it feels right to just pursue it no matter what and no matter how many downfalls you face.

Just get back up and continue to live out your goals. If it's right for you, if you feel that it's something that you want to pursue then pursue it no matter what anybody says or how many failures you incur, that's life. There's ups and downs and you know, who knows, I may come up to a stint of where I'm not working at all but I'm not going to stop doing what I love to do.

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FT: You had talked earlier though, about you know, taking a hiatus from modeling and acting because it just wasn't really paying the bills, what would you say is your financial philosophy? Overall Janel, what would you say is your money mantra?

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JS: Save. That's one of my biggest things is just save.

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FT: Save now or forever hold your canned tuna.

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JS: Basically.

[0:15:47.8]

FT: Because that's all you're going to be eating.

[0:15:50.9]

JS: Any jobs that I get or you know, some money comes in, I definitely save, I have a financial planner, I have an accountant and I'm very big on saving and also keeping track of my finances. I learned that through equinox as well that we would have to give our projections every month and I kept that in my own job.

So I have Excel sheet after Excel sheet of just making sure that I write every dollar or cent that I spend every day, every month so that I know where I'm tracking and how I'm doing every month if I have to make any changes then I can do that.

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FT: To be you, you have to be really disciplined. I mean, I started working out just this week after having a baby and trying to get back into the swing of things and I'm trying to get regimented about it, trying to get motivated. You do this every day and you motivate others to stay regimented. How has that also shown up in your financial life?

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JS: I guess it's a testament of the person I am. It's also quite as kept up, sometimes it's very hard from a lot of times it's hard for me to get up and get to the gym. I cheat that by saying hey, another stunt person or another martial artist, hey, you working out today? You want to go over some stuff and just that's my – what's the word I'm looking for? For a lack of a better term, that's what gets me out of bed and gets me up in training every day. Day in and day out.

Because it could become monotonous but I guess like I said, it was determination for me and for me, because I don't work on salary. It's so much more important for me to keep track of my finances and making sure that I'm staying on top of it because every day is different for me. I could have three or four clients, I could have no clients, I could have a stunt job, I could not. It's something that's my livelihood and it's very important for me because there's no regular check coming every week or every two weeks.

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FT: Do you feel like, you know, in some ways your childhood prepared you for the type of career that you have in fitness and training? How did your childhood prepare you or not prepare you for your financial life today as an adult?

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JS: It definitely prepared me. It's also my parents too, my dad has always been a stickler for saving and making sure that you're setup for the future and to the point the nausea and now I'm throwing his things back at him, him and my mom. They're like – they get frustrated.

[0:18:31.5]

FT: They're like, "Oh, you were listening?"

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JS: Yeah, exactly. It's my parents too and also me as a child, my childhood definitely set me up for the career that I'm in now because I'm just in athletics. Being athletic can save you a lot in this business just by being able to adapt to certain stunts, for certain skills that you have to have.

My parents being on top of me in terms of my finances and stuff like that and you know, preparing myself because I got a basketball scholarship for college. So you know, they've always made me aware that you know, my skills got me to the point where I have no debt basically, I have no student loans because you know, my athleticism as being a kid and then, you know, getting myself through college basically.

But I never took that for granted either because I was always aware of what that meant and you know, just because I didn't have to pay for school doesn't mean that you know, I didn't have to organize my finances before, during and after.

[0:19:38.5]

FT: You know, I think it's great that you got a scholarship to college. Not all students who play sports, and even play sports really well, can make it to a college where they have their tuition paid for. I think that's a misnomer sometimes, you know?

I was reading an article about this and I wonder if you've experienced this too with friends in school that they went very far in high school with swimming or basketball or soccer or whatever it was but playing at the college level is a much different caliber and there is this expectation that as long as my kid is getting all the rewards, getting all the trophies in high school that that's going to prepare him or her for a college scholarship. The sports college scholarship is sometimes not as real as we think it is.

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JS: It is and it's not. You definitely have to have the mindset for it because you know, playing in college is, at any sport, is like you said, a huge next step from high school, it doesn't even compare. I would be in tears in my freshman year. My coach, my freshman year in college basically told me because there was a coach in change right after I got recruited but he was like, "You're not division one material. What are you doing here?" I had to fight through. The mental fortitude to get through college sports sometimes is astronomical and you just have to have that mindset and know that it's not going to be easy.

People would look at us on the team saying, "Oh, you get all this stuff for free," you know? You know the stuff, it's like, they don't understand the sweat, blood and tears that had to go into the court, into our studies because you have to keep up a certain GPA to stay on the team, which is, you know, something that I was always aware of. You know, I knew that I wasn't going to play basketball my entire life so I had to make sure that I had the education to fall back on to get a job afterwards.

It's a very big mental challenge as well as physical and then again with the physical, you know? My brother had the skills and talent to play at a school as well to get that athletic scholarship and my parents pushed him towards that but he didn't want to do it. In his heart of hearts he didn't want to do it and I had to tell my parents, "You know, if he doesn't want to do this, he's not going to make it at collegiate sports." You have to really want it and you have to really work hard for it.

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FT: Yeah. Where did you go to school?

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JS: Canisius College in Buffalo, New York.

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FT: Oh yeah, Buffalo, New York. Are you from that area?

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JS: No, I'm from here, I was born in Manhattan, raised in Long Island.

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FT: No way, okay.

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JS: It was cold up there.

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FT: It's like a whole other state.

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JS: Yeah, it definitely is, every time I was up there, I'm going back on New York, they're like, "You're in New York," I say, "No I'm not, this is not New York."

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FT: Perhaps not as scary you know? Coming to New York, trying to pursue the whole showbiz thing as a New Yorker, there's some familiarity to at least where you're from. It wasn't so jarring. It could have been for someone from like the mid-west coming in New York for the first time.

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JS: Yeah, definitely.

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FT: Trying to get on Broadway. Tell me about a So Money moment? You know, a time in your life that you felt that your financial wisdom and skills really paid off?

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JS: Well, I think I am going through it now recently. I'm in the process of buying a coop right now.

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FT: Oh my gosh, tell me how that's going.

[0:23:19.7]

JS: It's crazy. It's an uncharted territory for me. So all my savings, all my diligence in terms of my financials and all of that I think is paying off because I make my accountant's life very easy every year and then in making this decision, I went to him, I went to my financial adviser, speaking to my broker, just asking the right questions, going to my bank. I am not just rushing in here without information.

I'm trying to make a very calculated risk but informed decision at the same time. So this is one of the biggest moments for me financially and I think everything that I have done so far has helped me get to this point.

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FT: Is there a reason why you are going coop instead of condo? Most apartments in New York are coops. Yeah, but then you have to look at a larger down payment usually. That was my experience. I went to see a coop when I was first apartment shopping in New York, I saw a coop that I thought, "This price can't be real," and then I saw and I was so sold. I wanted it right then and there and the woman I talked to her about financing and she's like, "Financing? Oh no, this building is cash only." I'm like, "Oh, well then I will see you, never. This meeting is over."

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JS: Too bad too. Yeah, it's basically like I said, my savings has gotten me to the point where I have I guess 20% down and I'm pretty grateful and fortunate that I can do that at this point.

[0:25:02.9]

FT: That's so exciting. I love catching people as they are about to embark on that. It sounds like you are doing the right thing, taking all the right steps, calculated risks, good for you. Take your time. This is why, people, you should wait to buy and people are sometimes so impatient with wanting to become home owners that they're willing to put less down. They're going to buy a house that needs all of these improvement and that's going to be headache and tie up for a long time.

So it's worth it to wait, get your ducks in a row like Jenel and be ready to strike when the moment is right.

[0:25:40.2]

JS: When I was making the transition from Equinox to being my own boss basically, that was extremely stressful too and you mentioned getting all of your ducks in a row and everybody was like, "Well why don't you leave Equinox sooner? You can be on your own." But I definitely waiting at least a year or two to make sure that I had the right savings, to have all my ducks in a

row and again, at the time make a calculated risk because I was going out there and jumping out without any safety net. I needed to make sure that I was protecting myself in a way.

[0:26:12.7]

FT: So smart. How about failure? What's something that you are not that proud of? A financial boo-boo?

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JS: Oh man, in the beginning when I first incorporated my business I didn't realized the power of an accountant and after incorporating when I got hit with the first year or I really don't remember if it was a quarter or a year where I had to pay taxes and I had to pay several thousand dollars that I didn't have and it bought me tears and after that is when I got very educated on what a financial adviser, and an accountant, and everybody can do for you.

At the time, my parents had to help me and that crushed me even more because I am a very independent person and having to ask my parents for money as an adult who just started a business –

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FT: Yeah, how did that go? What was their reaction?

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JS: Oh they were completely supportive and my parents, I have been blessed with very, very, very supportive, loving, caring parents and any adventure or anything that I do that's big like this condo or this coop sales or buying anything or starting a new business, they are always there behind me and they're like, "You know, worst case scenario, if you completely fall in your face you know you always have a home to go to.

So they've been very supportive but because of that it's also me wanting to be like, "Okay but I need to do this on my own." I am a very independent person but they felt for me, they were sad with me but they helped me out too but I was the type of person that, "I will pay back every cent that you are letting me borrow right now so."

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FT: In some ways that makes parents want to be more there for their kids. When you as a child, as an adult-child, exhibit independence and determination to make it out on your own, I find that it makes parents so proud of you and as a result less disappointed when you really do need their help because it is obviously a really tough time at that point. It is not just like you are going to them like the bank of mom and dad, like an ATM right?

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JS: Yeah, definitely. Yeah it definitely makes a difference for sure. They are, they always say how proud they are with me and my brother that it does make them want to help even more.

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FT: So are you planner? I want to know where you are seeing yourself in the next few years. Obviously a home owner living in your nice coop but are there any other buckets that you want to fill in the next few years as you've now experienced a very diverse background from playing college basketball to performing, stunt work, running your own business, training, what lies ahead?

[0:29:11.2]

JS: Well because I am so new in the Stunt I am just really focused on making myself better for that. There is so many more skills that I am starting to train for that. For example, a lot of people come into iStunt with so many different backgrounds, gymnastics or fighting or fire burns or driving. So everybody, I haven't met anybody yet that knows everything very well. So I am looking to get that and that I was petrified of motorcycles before.

[0:29:45.6]

FT: So you want to be that person who knows everything really well. I'm your gal.

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JS: Yeah, I know it's impossible but I would say I am trying to train for. I had no gymnastics background. If I could have said to myself when I was younger, "Do not give up on gymnastics," I would do that in a heartbeat not just because I wanted to do the flips because I do but in terms of also areal awareness if I have to fall or throw myself through something it just helps. So I am working on that.

And I just really want to train for the things that are lacking in my toolbox for stunts and just become a better stunt person because for me where I am right now, I love to get some more shows or movies under my belt so that financially residuals will help me if I want to start a family or something like that. So for a woman it's much harder.

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FT: Yeah, so here's a nosy question, is it a lucrative career path if you go full stunt work and you become that go-to woman who can do it all?

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JS: It can be very lucrative and again, you get out what you put in. So if you are training your butt off – and then again, it also has to do with the look that they are looking for, what they need at the time and so it can definitely be very lucrative. It can be very frustrating at times too and there will be down moments and stuff but if you put yourselves in the right market, you meet the right people, you network, you train, if you go after it, it can definitely be worth every blood, sweat and tear that comes in and you put into it.

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FT: If you find an actor or an actress that's doing say a trilogy, there's a lot of stunt work, you could move with that film. You can easily become that person's go-to stunt person.

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JS: Definitely. It can definitely do that, yeah and bring you on to every show that they're on. People will like that

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FT: All right, well I am going to let you go so you can start networking because that sounds great. That's like taking your stylist on or your makeup artist on if you're like Beyoncé that is a nice gig.

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JS: Yeah.

[0:31:59.0]

FT: Jenel, thank you so much.

[0:32:00.6]

JS: No problem.

[0:32:01.4]

FT: This has been really fun to get to learn a little bit more about the stunt work life. Wishing you all success with the business, the coop and becoming the go-to stunt woman.

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JS: I'm working on that but thank you.

[0:32:16.9]

FT: Who is your favorite? Who would you like to be the stunt woman for? Is there an actress out there that I'm trying to think like someone who looks like you who does a lot of stunts?

[0:32:26.6]

JS: Yeah, actually before I started this business, it would be really cool to be a stunt person for Zoe Saldana or Halle Berry so those two especially.

[0:32:36.1]

FT: They are going to take on some of these films.

[0:32:38.0]

JS: Yeah, I know exactly. When I saw Columbiana that was one of the movies that I was like, "It would be really cool to be her stunt double" but we'll see.

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FT: A girl can dream.

[0:32:49.6]

JS: Yes.

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FT: Jenel, thank you so much.

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JS: Thank you so much, it was a pleasure to be on the podcast with you.

[END]