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WEEKLY MUSCLE BUILDING EXPERT *Interview Series*



Luke Allison Interviews Ashley Cooper



LA: This is Luke Allison here with the CriticalBench.com weekly Muscle Building Expert Interview Series. Today I'm here with Ashley Cooper. Ashley, how are you?

AC: I'm doing great, how about yourself?

LA: Doing good. Thank you for joining us today. I certainly appreciate it.

AC: Sure, my pleasure.

LA: I want to sort of get into your background really quickly. What were you doing before being involved with Lean Hybrid Muscle and Critical Bench?

AC: You know, I started out as a figure competitor about...probably going on 2 ½ - 3 years ago. I started competing because I had played sports my whole life. I have a background in track and gymnastics and really pretty much any other sport you can think of, from tennis to diving, swimming, everything.

I was competing and just really doing well with that stuff. I won my first show, went on to do another show, won that. And it was just something that, you know, I decided not to do as a hobby. I really wanted to bring fitness as a part of my life.

So, I was going to college at the University of Miami, doing broadcast journalism. I wanted to be a sportscaster, kind of like Linda Cohn on SportsCenter. Just from there, decided that wasn't for me, kind of got into fitness a little bit after that and I've just been going ever since.

Critical Bench is a site that I've always been a big fan of. I'd always check-up on the different articles. They have a lot of great stuff for athletes, for figure athletes and bodybuilding people like myself and just how to kind of get toned, build muscle, things like that. So, I kind of became familiar with the site and I've become lucky enough to start to work with them and help out with a few different things here and there.

LA: What has your experience been with [Lean Hybrid Muscle](http://LeanHybridMuscle.com)? Is it a good experience; is it a sort of indifferent experience? What has that been like for you?

AC: No, it's been a great experience. For [Lean Hybrid Muscle](http://LeanHybridMuscle.com), I actually shot a video for them for the women. It's kind of like a little preview of what women can do, different workouts they can do, taking them through their paces. It was a great workout. I want to say it was challenging, it was a lot of fun, it really gives women...definitely I want to use the word challenge again, but it does. It gives women a good challenge in getting in shape and getting their cardiovascular...getting the heart rate up and definitely getting that lean, toned muscle that women want.

I know the series is for men, but I was lucky enough to help out with the women's side, because obviously I can relate to that, and it's going to help myself. And the funny

thing is, when I shot the video for [Lean Hybrid Muscle](#), many people don't know this, I was actually five months pregnant at the time. I wasn't showing at yet. I might have had a little beer belly, a little bit, but I was wearing a black shirt, trying to cover it up and just going through the workouts. So, it was s bit more of a challenge for me, but I absolutely loved it. I really did. It was something I was able to do during my pregnancy a little bit and then even a little bit after my pregnancy to help me get back into shape. So, it's been an excellent experience.



LA: I think there's an idea that at certain points it probably just a good idea to lean on other people and to sort of pick up a program, anything you've heard about or whatnot. Do you think there's any validity to that?

AC: To leaning on other people in terms of...?

LA: Well, just a program that you've seen or something that's gotten...been mentioned around, things like that, just because you can't possibly do all of your own programming all the time.

AC: Yeah. I could definitely see that. I think there's a huge...it can be a problem and it can be good for some people, I guess, with kind of like workout trends and like different videos that are out there and different things that are awesome for right now

that will be marketed on TV and on the internet. I think that people can kind of think, “Okay, well, I’m going to do this program. I’m going to do...” You know, I’m not throwing any program under the bus. If it does work for people. Like for instance, I know PX90 is a huge fad right now. People lean on that to get into shape. They’ll do the 90 days and then what do they do after that?

I don’t think looking for one program to suit your needs in fitness is the answer. I think you have to really learn about this stuff. You have to study the diet that it takes to get to whatever your fitness goal is. You have to study the technique in the gym, whether you’re going to be weight training or doing more circuit stuff for cardio. You really have to study-up on this stuff and make it a part of your life and not just rely on one specific program to get you to your goal and to maintain your goal. That’s really not realistic. People need to definitely realize there’s a lot more to be studied and there’s a lot of work that goes into this stuff. If you want to be successful, whether you’re an athlete or you’re just somebody who wants to be in shape, you have to have a good understanding of it.

LA: And like you said, it’s a lifestyle and that’s a lot more than just the time you spend in the gym.

AC: Yes, absolutely. You can’t really just go to the gym, do your 45 minutes to an hour, whatever you’re doing and then go home and eat fettuccini alfredo with a Coke and expect to get any sort of positive result. You have to make it a part of your life. You have to make an effort to eat clean. You have to make an effort to balance your meals with protein, with complex carbs, with things that are actually going to fuel your body and do your body good. You can’t just rely on a few minutes at the gym a week.

LA: Yeah, it’s disappointing that it’s not easy.

AC: Yeah, it is.

LA: But, that’s how it goes, I guess.

AC: If it was easy, everybody would do it, though.

LA: Yeah. There are some quotes, but I’ll leave those to other people. Let’s get into the competition side a little bit. I’m aware of at least three sort of different, I guess, types of competition for women. You have fitness, figure and bodybuilding. Talk a little bit about those and sort of where your interest is in reference to those.

AC: Okay. Well, I’m a figure competitor and what figure competing is, is it’s very similar to bodybuilding. I think that’s the one that most people are...most people recognize bodybuilding more. That’s when you build a lot of muscle, you get to be more bulky, a bit more dry or striated on the stage. Figure is a few steps down from that.

You're still going on stage and posing and you're being judged on your muscles, but it's not so much on your muscle as it is the overall symmetry.

What figure competitors do with their posing, they're not necessarily flexing, they're trying to show the symmetry and how your shoulders compare to your waist and how your waist compares to your quad sweep. You'll do four main poses which will be a front pose, side pose, back and other side. The judges really are just looking for overall symmetry, the flow of the muscle. They want everything to almost be kind of like an 'X', like an hourglass shape without kind of like the typical curve. It's more of an hourglass shape of muscle, in a way. So, that's what figure is.

And then fitness, that's for the women who do the routines. The routines will consist a lot of gymnastics and dance. And at the same time, they're very muscular as well and they do have a posing section during their competition, but their main thing is their fitness routine, which they'll do to music. They'll do the one-handed pushups and the back handsprings and things like that. They're absolutely incredible to watch. So, that's the difference.

LA: And it seems like there is a little bit for everyone. Possibly? Maybe not?

AC: It's tough. You're kind of asking somebody who's in a difficult position. You know, now they have incorporated bikini as well. So, that's for the girls who don't want to be as muscular, because figure is still pretty muscular. But, they incorporate bikini for the girls who have some tone, not necessarily are muscular. They kind of have good beach bodies.

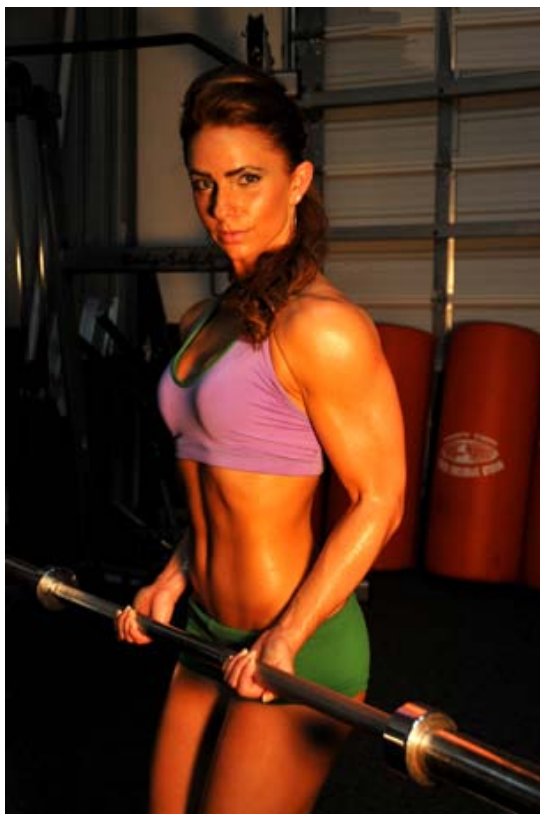
So, I would like to say there's room for everybody, but I kind of...I found myself in a very awkward position last season...or, I would say two seasons ago. Last season I was pregnant, so I wasn't competing. But, I was in a position where I was told to gain more muscle to compete with the girls on the bigger stage. So, I went ahead, I built more muscle. I was actually told by the judges that my symmetry and overall muscle tone was that of a top five Olympian. But, I came in with that muscle in a season where they didn't want that look anymore and they wanted a more obtainable look, something that was more similar to bikini.

So, a lot of the figure girls who had worked hard to gain this muscle now don't really have a place, because we don't want to be bodybuilders, necessarily. We don't want to have that much muscle, and we don't have the skill set at this point to do fitness and we don't want to lose the muscle we do have and do bikini. So, it's kind of like, where do we go now?

So, there's always challenges. There's always challenges. You always have to alter your physique to kind of fit the mold a little bit.

LA: And with the discipline involved, that's not always the easiest thing if you're sort of working towards subjective judging criteria.

AC: No, it can be one of the most frustrating things, because for myself, I'm a natural athlete. I've never used steroids, I've never used growth hormones, nothing. My supplements include whey protein, creatine sometimes and aminos. That's it. So, for me to put on the muscle I put on, I literally had to take a year of my life and dedicate it 110% to the gym and eating more food than I could possibly stomach. It was a huge challenge and my life revolved around that. And to have made the gains that I made and be told that, okay, just kidding. Lose them. It's very...it's physically and mentally...it's just very tough.



But, if you want to succeed in the sport, you kind of have to understand the attitude that goes along with it where you don't know what they're going to want from season to season and you're just going to have to be ready for the next challenge.

LA: What types of things do you look at for either influences or motivation?

AC: It's funny you say that. When I first started out my rookie season, I would look at the other girls. Not the other girls I was competing against, but the girls on the pro

stage. I would look at different figure competitors that, okay, you know, I loved Valerie Waugaman. She's a retired IFBB Figure Pro. Like, I thought she had the most amazing quads ever. So, literally right before I'd do a hard leg workout I would sit on the computer and look at her quads so I could visualize that during my leg workout. I'd be screaming, "Bid quads! Big quads!"

I got to a point where I achieved those quads. I got to the point where I looked, you know, in my opinion, I looked like the girls I wanted to look like. So, it really just came from just having to find it within myself to keep... There's got to be a fire in yourself to keep pushing. When you reach your ultimate level, you have to stay hungry. You have to...never look at yourself like you're perfect. You always have things you can improve on. So, I think it just comes from that, just wanting to do better regardless. I can always find a flaw.

LA: Always.

AC: Always.

LA: We're still early in 2011, but what sort of goals are you working towards and what's on the sort of immediate horizon for you?

AC: I have a lot of things going on this year. I'm coming back from having the baby. I took a little time to do that and get back in shape. So, I'm really looking forward to hitting the stage again.

The most immediate competition I know that I'm doing is going to be in Texas in August. So, I'm really looking forward to that. I'll actually be competing with a new organization called REAL. They're a 100% natural organization. They're tested. Every athlete gets tested. So, I'm looking forward to that, hoping to go pro. I'm really hoping to go pro with that organization.

Additionally, I have been writing a book called, The Fit Girl's Guide to Pregnancy and I'm hoping to have that completed and on the shelves by year's end. I've had a lot of interest in it and I have some publishers that I've been working with. I'm really ready to get it out there.

The book is about how to stay in shape and even how to get in shape during your pregnancy so you're not in a mad dash to lose weight after pregnancy, and also so women can be healthy during their pregnancy. There's a stigma that you can't do anything or you take it easy or you're eating for two. I just really want to kind of challenge that idea and show people that you can be active and can be in shape and it's what's best for you and best for your baby. So, I'm hoping to get that book out there soon.

And in addition to that, you know, I'm just continuing to train my clients and train myself, trying to get to the pro stage soon. I actually shot a pilot for a reality series that hopefully, we're hoping will get picked-up for the major networks. It was an amazing experience. It will be about fitness models and we'll be put through challenges, hoping to get the cover of one of the largest fitness magazines out there. I can't really say the name of the show or which magazine is doing it, but it will be incredible if it does happen. So, I'm really hoping that will be something I do this year.



LA: That's a lot going on, different things to keep you busy.

AC: Oh, yeah. It's a lot, especially with a little one running around. So, I've definitely got my plate full, but I love it.

LA: Go back to the sort of training and pregnancy. You had some ideas about sort of strength after pregnancy and training after pregnancy. Sort of go into that in a little bit of detail if you could.

AC: Well, one thing I noticed and I'm sure that other women who've played sports or who are heavily involved with weight training, after you have a baby you feel like you're in a different body. Not even just the way you look, but it's the way you feel.

For me, within two weeks after I had the baby, I had lost all the weight and I had abs again. It wasn't about that, but it was about how my body feels in the gym. To this day, my daughter is 11-months and I'm still fighting to get my squats back to where they were before because when you're pregnant your hips expand and your back starts to curve a little bit to support your big belly. Things don't just go back. It's very difficult. Things become a little bit weaker. Your stance becomes different. It's like you're learning how to weight train in a whole new body.

So, it's really been an amazing experience. It's been frustrating because I was thinking after I had my daughter I would be able to take a little bit at a time, but then once I was completely healed and ready to go, I thought I'd boom, just work hard and get my strength back. But, that's not the case.

You're learning form all over again as well. Squats were my main thing. I think I was pushing...I don't know what my max was, but I was repping 275 very, very easily before I had her, in the bucket, not hack, but I had a good strong squat. Now, I don't even want to tell you where my squats are. You have to learn your form all over again and learn how to trust your body. I think that's something that a lot of women probably struggle with in addition to myself, as they try to get back in shape and try to regain some of that muscle. So, it's been a challenge.

LA: It sounded like it would be almost like an injury, like coming back from an injury, but a more sort of systematic sort of across the entire body.

AC: Yeah. I mean, that's a really good way to think about it. It is. I would definitely say that. You hear about quarterbacks in the NFL who...they've had like a knee injury and now they don't play the same, not because they're not healthy, but because they have that fear. They're scared they're going to get hit again, so their game isn't up to what it used to be. And I would honestly say I'm at a point where...I'm healed. I'm good to go, but it's kind of like I have that fear where I don't completely trust my body just yet to pick up a certain amount of weight. So, it's very frustrating. It's tough mentally. It's really hard to like get over that.

LA: Well, it's good that you're coming out with materials and you have the support of a publishing company and whatnot, because that's a lot of times what people tell other people to do is, if you're hurt or you're coming back from some sort of special situation, your body, it's not functioning normal. You can't just pretend that you know everything you need to do.

AC: Right. I mean, I definitely hope to put that out and at least like shed a little bit of light on it so women who have lifted before they were pregnant do understand this is something they might go through or at least know that it's normal. Don't freak-out, you're not a wuss. You've just got to come back at your own pace and really work hard.



LA: Certainly. You had a blog post recently that was titled "Too Muscular" and it talked a little bit about how you got some sort of slanted local newspaper coverage. Talk a little bit about that.

AC: That was a local newspaper down here in South Florida. They titled the article "Too Muscular" and they posted a bunch of pictures of not even bodybuilders, but figure athletes who really aren't huge girls, saying basically that we looked gross. We were too muscular. It was unnatural, things like that. And it really...I have a thick skin, so it didn't bother me in the sense were I was like, "Oh, people don't like what I look like." But, it upset me because just what is praised are people who are almost overweight or people who are just completely average or completely normal and aren't necessarily that healthy.

The girls that I compete with are some of the most healthy, athletic women that I've ever met. They're diet is on-point, they eat clean, they workout in the gym hard. They're doing everything that they should be doing. They do everything they should be going on and off stage. They're much healthier than other people, but when it comes down to it, society doesn't want to see people that are that healthy. They want to see people that are kind of like average. That's really what kind of got to me, because the thing is, we don't necessarily look like that every single day. That's how we look like on stage. We're going to be more muscular and dry on stage.

It's just the ignorance, I guess, that kind of got to me. That's not how people look all the time. It's how we look when we're cut-down for a show. But, you know, people want to go ahead and write newspaper articles and turn their nose up at something they don't understand, then it's just their own ignorance and that's a shame.

LA: It's really weird, because I think you're going to be sort of well-supported in that sort of view that why are we a little bit more misunderstood than we should be. But, the only thing that comes to mind is most people just don't have a reference for seeing women that are really lean. That just really isn't available.

AC: Right.

LA: I don't know where you would go for that. Sometimes you have a comparable sort of an analogue for men.

AC: Well, I mean, that's the thing. Even with men's bodybuilding, people don't necessarily... You know, people always talk about men that are too muscular as well. You'll always hear that. You'll hear it from women, you'll hear it from other men. I don't know if these other men are jealous because they're not muscular or what the deal is. I don't know why a guy wouldn't want to be muscular and in-shape. I know it's not for everybody to look like a bodybuilder, that's fine. But, when it comes down to it, men are supposed to kind of be protectors and are supposed to be muscular.

And you see guys now that kind of do skinny jeans thing and just society is very different than what it used to be. So, I think when people see muscular people or people that are harder, especially women, they don't know what to think of it or how to look at it. They just automatically turn their nose up at it and assume, eww, that's weird. That person's a freak. They're disgusting. But really, we're in better shape and we're more healthy than you are. So, what does that tell you?

LA: Right. And there's not telling sort of what psychological response that sort of triggers, but there is an aesthetic there and maybe people can't appreciate it.

AC: Yes, of course, everybody likes different things.

LA: Yeah, certainly. Talk a little bit about the difference in training men and training women.

AC: Well, it's funny you bring that up. I've had experience with both men and women and I actually have trained couples, boyfriends and girlfriends, at the same time. And contrary to popular belief, women literally will kick guys' butts in the gym, I will say, a good 90% of the time when it comes to workouts. I'm not just saying this as a girl, because I'm a girl. My trainer is a guy and he, I will say, is pretty much a chauvinist. But, he will tell you the same thing.

Women will outwork men in the gym almost every time. I don't know why, I don't know what it is, but guys... I think maybe they come to the gym with the attitude like they know everything already, they know how to train. They've already trained super hard before so they can't be pushed any further. Maybe it's that.

But, yeah, the experience I have, like girlfriends and boyfriends will come in and these girls are like, you know, working harder than their boyfriends. They'll like lap them in circuits. It's hilarious.

But, as far as strength goes, guys will have their strength and they'll be stronger than girls, for the most part, except for on special instances. But, yeah, I think... I don't know why. I don't know what it is. Girls have this hunger and like the fire where they just want to work. I think they just have it in them a little bit more. I think we can take pain better than guys.

LA: Yeah, I think there's some weird...you mentioned the special circumstances with strength. I think women have a better upper body strength endurance or something like that that they do just better than men. I forget exactly what it is.

AC: I don't know if it's the upper body. In my experience, also, I've seen with men and women, women seem to have an easier time training legs than men. I don't know. Men seem to be really focused on the chest, their biceps, things like that. And when I have my men clients do legs, it's just...it kills them. They cannot get through like an entire leg workout hardly, like it absolutely kills them because it's not something they're used to training. Women seem to have a little bit easier time with that than the men do.

LA: And is that because nobody squats anymore or is it like a male specific type thing? What do you think?

AC: I think that it varies for everybody, depending on athletic background, if there is one, things like that. But, I think a lot of guys, in general, maybe they kind of skip doing legs because their legs very rarely show. Girls will probably do legs more because we wear more shorts or skirts or dresses and legs are something that we want to have look

good. I think for guys maybe if it's like an aesthetic thing, it's not as much as the concern for them. They're more interested in bulking that chest up or having big biceps to flex. But, at the end of the day, they end up looking like Spongebob Squarepants. So, you know, it's not a good look. It should be even.



And if you have weak legs, it's going to affect when you're trying to like, you know, do really heavy weights in your upper body. It can affect your upper body, too, if you don't have a good base. A lot of guys don't realize that, but I guess it just depends on how much they're actually into lifting, how much they understand it.

LA: Right. Well, and then the symmetry, you have to have the back side. You have to have hamstrings, glutes and lats and things like that, because those are all important also.

AC: Absolutely.

LA: Try too hard not to preach to the choir here. I'm trying to think...if people are interested in getting in touch with you, sort of I think you mentioned you're in Miami, but maybe sort of online. How do people find you?

- AC: People can contact me. They can look at my website. It's AshleyCooperFitness.com. They can also email me with any fitness questions. I offer online personal training, online diet consulting, online contest preparation. They can hit me up on my email at AshleyCooperFitness@gmail.com. I'm more than happy to talk to people and help them out. I've trained guys, girls, bodybuilders, you name it.
- LA: Well, I definitely appreciate the time. It was good to get a little bit of a different perspective and I'm interested to see how you do later this year.
- AC: Thank you very much. Yes, it's a pleasure talking with you and I hope we get to talk soon. You have some great questions.
- LA: All right, I appreciate it.
- AC: All right, take care. We'll talk soon.

About Ashley Cooper

Growing up in Cincinnati, I was the type who always wanted to run before I could walk. Never able to sit still for too long, I found sports to be the greatest outlet for all of my energy. I played them all: basketball, softball, diving, dance, tennis and, my two favorites, gymnastics and track & field. By the time I was in the fourth grade I'd convinced myself that I was the next "Flo Jo", and my world revolved around sprinting and long jumping.

One hot summer afternoon when I was 12, I was competing in a track meet in the open 100, 200, and long jump. When it came time for me to run the open 200 meter dash, there were no other girls signed up for the event, so I was given the option to withdraw or run against the boys. Never second guessing myself, I opted to compete with the boys. As we lined up on the blocks, I kept quiet as they taunted me for being a "stupid girl." I loved the hate, used it as fuel, and took first place. For me there was no greater high, and to this day I am addicted to competition and proving people wrong. My passion for competition continued through high school where I set school records in both track and gymnastics, and earned the MVP award.

My freshmen year of college I attended Springfield College, where I was part of the dance team and met some great people, but soon realized this was not the school for me. I worked hard on my grades that year and was accepted into the University of Miami. I studied Sports Administration, Broadcast Journalism and English while in school, with plans of becoming a sportscaster. I landed many amazing jobs and internships while in college, and I knew that with all of my experience and hard work in school, along with a great resume tape, I'd be able to find an on-air job eventually, but it just felt like something was missing.

I was fortunate enough to be given the responsibility of interviewing athletes before and after games, and do press conferences. I'd wanted to do sportscasting since I was in high school, knowing that sports were my passion. I wanted to be involved somehow, but analyzing and discussing sports was not enough for me. After I finished with competitive sports, I lived for lifting weights and training hard, but with no goal in mind other than to keep my figure.

One day in a grocery store I came across a magazine with a beautiful, athletic woman on the cover. I bought it and read through the pages filled with diet and training tips, as well as updates for fitness and figure competitions, and the women who did them. I thought to myself, "This is something I would be perfect for!" That day I set two goals for myself: 1) to become an [IFBB Figure Pro](#) and 2) to become an [Oxygen](#) cover girl. Not really knowing anything about the sport or how to get involved, I knew I'd need to find someone who knew the ropes.

The next day fate stepped in. I was on my way into my gym, when I saw a woman who looked like she must know something about figure competition. I approached her, and sure enough, she was an IFBB Figure Pro. She said she'd love to talk to me about it, and we made plans to chat the next day. As I told her my goals to become a pro figure competitor and fitness model, she told me that she had recently been on the cover of Oxygen. Her husband pulled it up on the Internet and, sure enough, it was the same cover that had inspired

me to get involved with the sport. I was sitting across from coveted fitness model [Kristal Richardson](#). I took this as a sign and began on my journey!

Since that day I have found great success in the sport of figure competitions, this success has led to great opportunities in fitness modeling and writing. I have been one of the selected few fitness models chosen by photographer [John Stutz](#) for the upcoming book, Fit Girls, Volume 2, and have been featured on fitness sites such as [ProBodyBuilding.com](#) and [BodyBuildingWeekly.com](#). To the great pleasure of my father, I am putting something I learned in college to work as I have become a featured fitness writer and the resident fitness expert for [TheTrustedBeautyGuide.com](#).

In order to be successful in this industry I've learned that you must have supportive people around you who are willing to put up with all the craziness. I'd like to thank my family first and foremost-- my mother and father Martin and Robyn Cooper, my big sister Monica and her daughter Emerson, my adorable little brother Drake, and the talented Kim Taylor. To Steve Conner, my high school track and gymnastics coach, your support has meant the world to me over the years. Huge thank you to my personal trainer Bjorn Moncur, my family at [Brickhouse Fitness Miami](#), and Tessie Lobon. Another very big thank you to my sponsors at [CriticalBench.com](#) for the support and many opportunities. Finally, a very special thank you to my coach Kristal Richardson and her husband Tom for everything they've done to help me in my journey.

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