



Physique Medal winners at the 2002 Sydney Gay Games. Copyright © Bianchi. Courtesy Federation of Gay Games.

Bodybuilding

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Bodybuilding is distantly related to the medieval carnival feat of strength. For its justification, however, the sport looks to a model of the "classic" Western body dating from 400-300 B.C.E. Periodic revivals of classicism, in philosophy as well as in art, returned that muscularly "armored" body to attention--particularly as an occasion for artistic display during the Renaissance.

A similar "rediscovery" of classic themes during the Victorian era exploited the Herculean body for various metaphorical purposes; among others, the presumably "natural" perfection exemplified in the Greek *kouros*, or male body, was enlisted in support of nineteenth-century physical culture movements.

However, neither classicism nor health totally accounts for the emergence of the male body into visibility or for the more recent entry of women into bodybuilding. At the heart of bodybuilding as an acceptable activity or sport is desire for the body, as well as permission given to "build" it in public. Commodity culture has made a business of creating, as well as satisfying, this desire. The fact that desire for the body is often homoerotic has complicated bodybuilding as entertainment and sport.

Gay men and lesbians are an important--though more often denied than recognized--part of bodybuilding, both as athletes and as consumers of the physical culture and entertainment products that the sport sponsors.

Sandow and the Emergence of Bodybuilding as Entertainment

Beginning in the 1880s a German weight-lifter and theater strongman named Friedrich Wilhelm Muller found part-time work by displaying his muscular body, nude except for a very real fig leaf, in poses riffed from Greek statuary. In 1893 Florenz Ziegfeld, always on the lookout for new acts for his father, hired Muller as an act for the Trocadero Theater in Chicago, one of the chief entertainment sites of the Columbian Exposition.

From this springboard "The Great Sandow" (as Muller now called himself) went on to world-wide fame. Capitalizing on a mix of commerce, faux-classicism, and cult health, Sandow sold physique training apparatus, books, and magazines. In addition, and not incidentally, he sold the shapely male body, without apology--divorced from a need to be viewed either heroically, artistically, or morally.

Despite the fascination with the male form evident throughout the history of art, the body itself has remained wrapped in taboo--viewable only when armored in weapons or other "drag," and even then, only when justified in some manner by a moral gaze. Ziegfeld was certainly not the first to profit from this fascination. Nonetheless, he significantly broadened its possibilities.

With help from Sandow, Ziegfeld reshaped the vaudevillian exhibition of strength familiar to fair, carnival, and traveling circus (where actual weights were hefted on stage) into an exhibit that emphasized the visual pleasures of the body in display (in muscle enhancing poses, although without weights).

In addition Ziegfeld exploited the covert eroticism of Sandow's staged appearances. For example, he invited selected female guests backstage where, for a contribution to charity, Sandow's admirers could run their gloved hands over the model's muscles. The nod to charity assured that eroticism would remain discreetly covered by altruism, and, in this manner, rendered publicly acceptable.

Sandow never claimed to be the world's strongest man. Rather, he was, in Ziegfeld's marketing phrase, the "world's best-developed man." Ziegfeld's initiative and organization, and then Sandow's energetic self-promotion, raised the muscled-body--the *look* of muscle rather than its *work*--into a mode of respectable public entertainment.

By separating aesthetics from utility, the new entertainment prized the making of muscles as an end in itself, distinct from utilitarian results of increasing strength or improving health. The underlying equation was subtle, but clear, and in various ways the link between "Looking Good" and "Feeling Good" still governs much of popular culture today.

The Emergence of Bodybuilding as Sport.

The expression "bodybuilding" entered the language during the 1890s, distinguished at the time from "weight-lifting" (organized as a sport earlier in the century). Sandow's staginess--such as his classical poses and the bell jar in which he appeared at the Trocadero--exemplifies the criticism made against the industry of muscle-display. Bodybuilding, as performed by Sandow and his successors was, purists criticized, merely a performance--worse, it was a performance *of* a performance.

In the earliest bodybuilding contests, for example, weights were lifted off-stage; the "show" was the resulting "pump" derived from the exercise of muscle. Weight-lifting, on the other hand, was aptly if simplistically named--heavy weights were lifted in order to demonstrate strength. This division between utility and "look" is implicitly gendered, as we shall see, and still governs the way competitions such as power-lifting (and other weight-lifting derivatives) are distinguished from "physique" contests.

In addition to the twin vogues of physical culture and nostalgic classicism, the new technique of the photograph also brought upper-class "art" and "health" into the bourgeois, modern home. During the last years of the century mass-market publications targeted a newly-leisured and moneyed audience.

Men's magazines, for example, banked on a growing representational freedom with the male form and, to some extent, created a market for it (and, of course, for its covertly erotic possibilities) through the nostalgic views they offered of pre-urban, manly men at work and play.

In support of his burgeoning physical health industry, Sandow published his own magazine in 1898 and then a few years later organized the first Physique competition. This 1901 competition was significantly a class-conscious affair, notables and personalities were among the 15,000 spectators in the Royal Albert Hall in London.

An American physical culturalist, Bernarr Macfadden, lost no time before organizing similar events in the United States, and he continued to do so until the early 1940s. Two of Macfadden's winners deserve note.

Albert Treloar won the first competition of the "Most Perfectly Developed Man in America" (held at New York City's Madison Square Garden, to a packed house). Treloar later became Director of Physical Education at the Los Angeles Athletic Club; Treloar's association with the Los Angeles Athletic Club would prove to be fateful, since from there Treloar introduced the science of physical culture to Southern California, a place that is now synonymous with the cult of the built body.

Another Macfadden "find," Angelo Siciliano, won the 1921 competition, and later went on to make a fortune

peddling physical development, in the back pages of comic books, under the name of Charles Atlas.

During the post-World War I years physical development went into eclipse as a legitimate sporting pastime. Nonetheless, the spectacle of the nude male body continued to find commercial outlet under a variety of guises. Physical fitness, for example, was still marketed via the healthy body, but, in addition, cinema's emerging star industry traded on personality, and bodies often were significant aspects of that commerce.

A third factor, too, was the growing sophistication in the marketing of "physique photography" (forerunners, for example, of today's Bruce Weber and Herb Ritts). These "physique" magazines, especially after World War II, were often marketed to an emerging, if closeted, gay male audience.

Even though weight-lifting had entered Olympic competition in 1920, the industry associated with the organized displays of muscle remained limited to boardwalks and cabarets. Hoping to recoup the prestige of the "real" sport and distinguish it from "male beauty pageants," in 1939 York Barbell Company sponsored a "Best Built Man" contest.

Shortly afterward, in 1940, similar concerns for the "serious" nature of the sport prompted the Amateur Athletic Union to host the first "Mr. America" contest. Bodybuilding as it is known today had finally found legitimate sponsorship, although still a contested one.

Ideological Assumptions, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Sexual Anxieties

The tension between bodybuilding and weight-lifting masks a variety of ideological assumptions. A struggle of class and class privilege, for example, lurks behind the argument of whether one *uses* muscle or merely has it for show.

Gender-anxiety is also deeply embedded in bodybuilding. In the gender roles dictated by patriarchy, women's bodies are for show, men's are for "work." Early consumers of physique magazines were often urbanized men, newly leisured and educated, who turned to nostalgic portraits of rough-housing men (laborers and cowboys, for example) partly to reaffirm their own urbanized (and thus it was thought, diminished) manhood. Sandow and others like him marketed health; but under the guise of the classical body they modeled gender as well.

Bodybuilding was born of mixed motives and it continues to be a many-faceted enterprise, crossing aesthetics, commerce, representation, health, eroticism, and simple greed. Joe Weider, an entrepreneur not unlike Bernarr Macfadden or Eugen Sandow, arguably created bodybuilding as the commodity spectacle that it is today. (Ben, his brother, was more instrumental in organizing the international sports network, the International Federation of Bodybuilders [IFBB]). At one time the Weiders published as many as twenty separate magazines, whose subjects covered the spectrum from health to muscle to sheer mass.

Joe Weider's *Muscle and Fitness*, originally a mimeographed circular called *Your Physique*, which was begun in the 1940s, is still one of the top-selling publications of the genre, with a monthly circulation of over six million copies. Like Sandow's *Physical Culture* magazine, Weider's print enterprises were designed to support other enterprises.

In pursuit of further commercial opportunity, Weider founded the Mr. Olympia contest in 1965 and shortly thereafter enlisted a young Austrian champion named Arnold Schwarzenegger to write about and promote the sport.

In the name of the well-built body, the entwining of spectacle, building of massive bodies, competing for money, and marketing of health supplements had become a self-perpetuating enterprise. This entanglement was confirmed in 1977 with the release of the film *Pumping Iron*, starring Schwarzenegger, then five-time winner of the Mr. Olympia contest.

The buff and bearded Austrian's appearance in this film made bodybuilding a household name. The franchising of Gold's gyms--like McDonald's, everywhere--brought his butch masculinity into the reach of even the most sedate urbanite.

Less happily, however, Schwarzenegger also committed himself to erasing the taint of homosexual eroticism that homophobic critics often find disturbing in bodybuilding. From the perspective of the twenty-first century, it can be argued that the stalwart heterosexuality of the bodybuilding industry (and Schwarzenegger's energy as well, as witness his famous comment, quoted by Charles Gaines, that "A good pump is better than coming") during these formative years was in part a response to the challenge mounted against customary gender norms by the feminist and gay rights movements.

The industry and its spokesmen were certainly anxious about the perception that bodybuilding, especially as distinct from weight-lifting, attracted gay men and that the audiences at bodybuilding events were often disproportionately gay. (Even as another portion of the industry was specifically targeting gay men as consumers of physique culture.)

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, culturally accepted standards of appropriate sex and gender, however, were also being destabilized by a number of factors. Capitalizing upon the relaxing of obscenity laws and media standards, muscle industries and clothiers alike exploited the male body for its erotic appeal.

The languorous bodies displayed in relaxed poses in advertising spreads for clothiers such as Calvin Klein may resemble the warrior bodies of classical Greek statuary, but unlike them they were designedly "built"--usually not by hefting rocks, but by hours spent at the gym.

The gendering implicit in the distinctions between weight-lifting and bodybuilding makes itself evident at this point. "Real men" weight-lifters repudiate the notion that gym-bodies *and* bodybuilders--here, read *gay*--have any association whatsoever with the sport of hoisting weights to build strength.

The anxiety about the homoeroticism of bodybuilding is clear in the industry's often artificial attempts to assert an aggressive heterosexuality. For example, contemporary weight-lifting and health magazines such as Weider's *Muscle and Fitness* or *Men's Fitness* routinely police the stray homoerotic moments of their layouts by carefully framing male-male images heterosexually--that is, with a curvaceous woman posed between the two men.

Bob Paris and the Anxieties of Gender and Class

When Bob Paris won the title Mr. Universe in 1983 he brought these anxieties of gender and class to the surface. Paris is surely not the only successful gay bodybuilder, although to date he is the only top winner of IFFB-sanctioned contests publicly to declare his sexuality.

Nor is his experience unique. His troubled road to visibility is paralleled by other gay male and lesbian athletes in other sports--for example, David Kopay in football, Greg Louganis in diving, and Martina Navratilova in tennis. "Organized" sports, in its earliest forms, was designedly about teaching underclass boys how to be *proper* (heterosexual) men, and its ideological function in that regard is still apparent.

For all the nervousness about the gay presence in bodybuilding on the part of the bodybuilding establishment, gay men and lesbians constitute an important segment of bodybuilding fans. One sign of the appeal of bodybuilding to many gay and lesbian athletes and fans is its popularity at the Gay Games.

Legally forbidden to use the word "Olympic" in their designation, in 1982 lesbian and gay athletes gathered in San Francisco for what would be the first Gay Games. At that first gathering the Physique Contest was one of the most popular events, and it remains so to this day.

In Gay Games V (1998), for example, bodybuilding was one of the few sports that actually sold tickets, and it was the only contest sold out before the games. In 2002 more than 200 men and women participated in the Gay Games VI Physique Competition. A notable phenomenon is the increasing participation of lesbians in the Games' bodybuilding competitions.

Although women's competitions had achieved sufficient following to merit national contests by the 1970s, women achieved success only to have their achievement exploited, perhaps justified, erotically. The first "Ms. Olympia" contest was not hosted until 1980. (The film *Pumping Iron II: The Women* followed, belatedly, in 1984).

A 1981 story in *Muscle and Fitness* indicates that beneath the gazing eye on muscularity other anxieties circulate. For instance, the opening paragraph gushes over the contestants' "regular" femininity. The bodybuilding establishment's nervousness over the "masculine" appearance of female bodybuilders is a continuing issue.

But if femininity is a performance, largely meant for patriarchal and public display, masculinity likewise is no less a scene staged in public--otherwise it loses its point. In this respect, bodybuilding might be said, still, to be sorting out the narcissism inherent in the gendering, not of femininity, but of masculinity.

Bodybuilding in general asks the question that its actual contests all more-or-less explicitly ask: who *is* the real man? The gay or lesbian body-builder, then, becomes entangled in the larger cultural panic surrounding the issue of gender.

The history of bodybuilding reflects this panic; to the presumptively heterosexual weight-lifter, "real" women are the threat to the masculine, but in addition, so is the symbolic (i.e., homosexual) woman within. Consequently, in the effeminized discourse most commonly used to stigmatize homosexuality, bodybuilding's status remains that of gender failure--ironically, despite, and perhaps because of, the show of muscularity.

Thus, if muscles, to the Greeks, were a sort of armor, today they signal a kind of gender campery. One critic, clearly straight, whines, "Muscles are the latest props of the dandy." By failing American gender in such a spectacularly butch venue, then, gay bodybuilders such as Paris (and his lover of the time, bodybuilder Rod Jackson), can be said to have demonstrated what women and body-builders have known all along: Gender is something to be performed, in public, for show.

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