

MuscleTime Report: The State of the Sport of Bodybuilding in 2008

Written by Wolfgang Koellerer with Millard Baker
Tuesday, 05 August 2008 00:38

The 44th Mr. Olympia bodybuilding contest will be held in Las Vegas on September 26-27, 2008. The Olympia is the single most prestigious bodybuilding competition in the sport where all of the top contemporary pro bodybuilders aspire to compete. As the 2008 Mr. Olympia approaches, MuscleTime reports on the current state of the sport of bodybuilding?

The Enduring Popularity of Arnold Schwarzenegger and Classical Bodybuilding Physiques

A fellow Austrian bodybuilder named Arnold Schwarzenegger won the last of seven Mr. Olympia titles in Sydney Australia twenty-eight years ago. The overwhelming majority of contemporary bodybuilding fans still admire Arnold's physique more than those of today's top bodybuilding stars. What is the explanation for the popularity of the relatively smaller physique of Arnold over the significantly more massive present day bodybuilders?

Does the large number of IFBB pro bodybuilders competing on stage with distended abdomens disgust current fans of bodybuilding? Does the pervasive appearance of unusually shaped muscles that disrupt the symmetry of bodybuilders' physique have bodybuilding aficionados longing for the golden age of bodybuilding? Could it be that the bodybuilding physiques quite simply looked a lot "better" years ago?

Decline of Professional Bodybuilding?

Why are large, successful expos required to keep professional bodybuilding contests on the IFBB pro calendar? What forces are responsible for the changing economics in the business of bodybuilding?

What is happening to the sport of bodybuilding? And why have the people in power at the top levels of the IFBB become so complacent as the popularity of the sport continues to decline? What is the IFBB waiting for? I do not understand the lack of any apparent strategy for promoting the future of the sport.

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I have worked in the bodybuilding industry for almost 10 years now and have been a fan of professional bodybuilding for about 20 years. I am shocked at the current state of the sport. In the interest of full disclosure, I fully acknowledge my own self-serving motivations as co-owner of MuscleTime and Titans DVD. The entire MuscleTime team remains very passionate about the world of professional muscle in spite of the challenges of making a living in the sport of bodybuilding (which become increasingly more difficult with the collapse of the bodybuilding dvd market that has arrived due to the free distribution of full-length titles on various internet peer-to-peer networks).

I am reluctant to sit still and continue to watch the sport slip into an even deeper abyss. I do not hold the illusion that my article will single-handedly bring about change in the sport. At the very least, I will feel somewhat liberated by sharing my frustrations with MuscleTime readers who share my passion and concern for the sport. And perhaps, just maybe, somebody in a position of power and influence in the industry will be receptive to my critique of bodybuilding and implement important changes directed at saving the sport.

Interested fans have observed the steady decline of the sport of competitive pro bodybuilding. Interest in competitive bodybuilding has not grown but deteriorated while at the same time, health club and gym memberships have exploded.

Evidence of the Slow Death of the Sport of Bodybuilding

Here are a few observations that point to the decline of competitive bodybuilding:

(1) *Pro bodybuilding webcasts:* Why are there not live webcasts of all IFBB pro bodybuilding contests now? If an internet webcast available to a worldwide base of bodybuilding fans attracted the numbers that it should, then the popularity of the sport should expand steadily into every corner of the planet. (I applaud Bodybuilding.com who in conjunction with the Chapman Media Group have set high standards for a professional webcast production.)

(2) *Expos calling the shots:* Why are promoters at the mercy of the expos even if it means a "slap in the face" for their prestigious contests? For example, why would John Balik move the 2008 Iron Man Pro into January at least six weeks ahead of any other pro show? This presents a clear problem for athletes who would be required to maintain contest condition

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for an extended period of time if they wish to compete in both the Iron Man and the Arnold as many traditionally have in the past.

(3) *Pro bodybuilding subsidized by ping pong and car shows:* Why are promoters forced to rely on side show events to subsidize and support bodybuilding contests? The successful shows seem to throw together a hodgepodge of loosely related events to support bodybuilding e.g. ping pong tournaments, car shows, motorcycle shows, UFC/MMA contests, arm wrestling contests, female and male "best body" contests, MILF contests, etc.

(4) *Most prestigious bodybuilding contest relegated to second-class facilities:* Why is the number one bodybuilding contest in the world held at second class facilities? The Olympia Weekend took a big step backwards when it was moved from the Mandalay Bay to the Orleans in Las Vegas; everyone complains year in, year out reminiscing about the wonderful and magnificent production at the Mandalay Bay. Why is the fan turnout insufficient to support leasing first rate venues?

(5) *Lack of bodybuilding coverage on television:* Why did pro bodybuilding fail to make a successful jump to television or cable networks? Nowadays we have multiple ESPN cable channels but practically no pro bodybuilding coverage whereas in the 80s and 90s we had regular shows (American Muscle) and limited Olympia coverage (albeit at obscure and ever-changing times on the television schedule). But no more...

(6) *Poor coverage of pro bb in magazines:* The bodybuilding magazines are no longer covering all of the Pro contests; most rarely send photographers and reports to contest location resulting in uninspired reporting lacking decent detail or insight into the event.

(7) *Fans losing interest in pro contests:* Why are fewer and fewer fans interested in seeing contest coverage in the magazines?

(8) *High failure rate among promoters of new pro shows:* Why do great shows run by new promoters unable to make it? Some of the best run new pro shows seem to end up closing down after one or two shows.

Failure of Leadership in the IFBB

The sport of bodybuilding draws from a base of several million people from every part of the world - namely the hundreds of millions of people who work out utilizing the training and nutrition principles from bodybuilding. How is it possible for the top levels of the sports to fail to draw big crowds?

It is obvious that the sport of bodybuilding is no longer creating enough interest. The sports nutrition and supplement industry are still seemingly thriving because they are successfully exploiting the incredible numbers of people who work out.

It is a failure in management in the sport of bodybuilding, beginning at the top, that must be held accountable for the decline in the sport. The incredible growth of the health and fitness industry over the past two decades has been astounding. It is difficult to understand how pro bodybuilding would fail to benefit from the dramatic increase in numbers of gym members.

Should the the IFBB President and the rest of IFBB management be held at least partly responsible for the state of the sport. Why does it appear they are helplessly watching the sport die? Why are they not leading the charge to save the sport? Should IFBB members demand more of their "leadership"? Really, what are they waiting for?

What is the Root of the Problem?

We think that the sport is failing to appeal to new generations of potential bodybuilders simply because none of them are inspired by the look currently rewarded at the top of the sport. Certainly, there is a certain audience who will eagerly pay to see "freaks". But much like the audience that pays to see a circus side show, the audience does actually want to look like the bearded lady or become inspired to achieve circus sideshow stardom.

People would rather look like classical bodybuilders; when asked which bodybuilder's physique inspires them the most, serious trainers are more likely to name Arnold Schwarzenegger than any of the current top stars of bodybuilding.

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The IFBB made a major mistake in the early 1990s when extreme mass combined with shredded conditioning were all that were needed to win the major bodybuilding championships. Muscle shape and symmetry were given little value toward scoring; major flaws like torn biceps were ignored. The age of the freak show commenced.

How could anyone believe the resulting physiques were able to continue inspiring the majority of muscle fans? Some fans continue to go to shows to see ridiculous size and mindboggling muscle monsters. But hardly anybody wants to be one of those monsters.

Is the mass at all costs look really what bodybuilding is supposed to be? Is this the vision that the Weider brothers had for the sport of bodybuilding?

We here at Muscletime are envious (as are most people in bodybuilding media) of the times when Arnold and his fellow pros in Venice, California were having a good time with the love for pumping iron at Gold's Gym and/or Muscle Beach. They were not required to assume the health risks at showtime like the pros are required today. Is this what the IFBB represents? I doubt it. Are they perhaps afraid that viewer numbers would go down if they enforce the "classical" look again?

Action to Save the Sport of Bodybuilding

Here are our humble suggestions to the top people in our industry.

(1) Please act now. Do not wait any longer! Make changes no matter how hard they might appear in the beginning. Many athletes and people within the industry will be furious at the changes. However, the fans must be considered the number one priority going forward.

(2) Do not allow distended midsections on stage any longer. Make no exceptions based on degree of celebrity. If athletes are unable to control their abdominal distention, they should never place within the top ten of any IFBB pro show regardless of their size and conditioning.

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(3) Emphasize symmetry and the classical bodybuilding physique. The athlete's "look" includes the ability to adequately move and present their physique.

(4) Publish clear rules for what the physiques in the sport are supposed to look like and then have the courage to actually enforce your own rules without exception.

(5) Emphasize the fans and the fans only. Do not listen to the industry "insiders" who have guided the growth of the sport in the past. Ideas like the 202 and under class only benefit the athletes and the promoters. Fan numbers will continue to dwindle in the long run due to the increasingly excessive length of the show. Additional classes like the 202 and under class simply diminishes the quality and prestige of pro championships; handing out more first place trophies is not going to increase the popularity of the sport.

(6) Keep the shows short. Fan numbers will continue to dwindle in the long run due to the increasingly excessive length of the show. The media and industry insiders should be required to sit through the entire events of one current contest weekend without taking a break and without working - just like we expect spectators of the shows to endure. Do you think anyone will acknowledge having a good time? They most likely will admit being bored especially if the competitors are out of shape.

(7) Hire a professional sports marketing agency. It would be worth the investment on real sports marketing professionals. Find legitimate market experts to examine how to make bodybuilding competition more entertaining. That is the ultimate goal. People want to be entertained. The major flaw of bodybuilding shows is the lack of entertainment. The entertainment should probably involve real sports action rather than WWE style entertainment. The current succession of bodybuilders trying to dance during posing routines is extremely tiresome to watch. For the most part, bodybuilders are not dancers but dedicated athletes. As such, athlete against athlete competition should prevail where the audience can identify with the drama of competition.

Conclusion

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If only one percent of members from commercial gyms around the world were interested in watching the Mr. Olympia contest, the so-called "super bowl" of bodybuilding, on television, then the face of bodybuilding would change forever. Prize money for the Olympia would easily exceed one million dollars. The number of print magazine titles would double; bodybuilding magazines circulation would increase exponentially. The supplement industry would become a huge beneficiary of bodybuilding's new success. Bodybuilding movie producers would be able to produce high-budget feature films with all top bodybuilding athletes.

Whether or not you agree with all of my proposals, I hope you agree that I have a point. So, what is the IFBB waiting for?