



THE
BLACK PRINCE

My Life in Bodybuilding: MUSCLE VS HUSTLE

ROBBY ROBINSON

The
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My Life in Bodybuilding;
Muscle vs. Hustle

by
Robby Robinson

The BLACK PRINCE
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For Charlie Mae

FOREWORD

Robby Robinson is an enigmatic figure in the history of bodybuilding. He is a genuine introvert in the genuinely extraverted arena. He is retiring whilst his physique is arresting. He is quietly spoken and of few words in an activity beset by hype and exaggeration.

To encounter Robinson makes him no less of an enigma. He is an impactful presence. He keeps to himself, even in company, and yet when he does interact, he is there in a fullness of engagement, a profound intensity of communication that very few human beings can offer.

When one relates to Robby Robinson, you encounter the history, the man, the physique and the bodybuilder. Of course, these aspects are all tied into the one person, but it is the interplay of these components of Robby's personality that make him such a compelling figure.

The history is, in some ways, well known. He was and is a superstar bodybuilder; one of the most successful professional bodybuilders ever to take the stage. He won an IFBB Mr. America in 1975, drug-free, with a 29" waist and 20" biceps. His illustrious career included numerous World and Universe titles, Pro victories and culminated in a number of Masters Mr. Olympia titles.

And yet an even richer history lies in the background. A childhood in the Tallahassee woods, an extraordinarily different home life and the experience of racial prejudice in the southern states in a less enlightened era. His formative history made him a man of remarkable resolve.

Robinson the man is illustrated as his history becomes part of bodybuilding's history. Confronted with continued inequity and blatant unfairness, he did not sell out nor did he limp away defeated. He continued on, undaunted, letting his discipline and his physique do his talking. He remained the captain of his own fate. He kept his own sense of self whilst operating in a world that would (and has) totally unsettled and destroyed a great number of good people.

And then there is the Robinson physique. Now aged 64, he has returned to the drug-free 203lb 5ft8” physique that first boggled bodybuilding’s collective mind in 1975. Sitting opposite you, Robinson does not seem that big, except perhaps when you glimpse the triceps that seem to go on forever. But then he takes off his shirt and flexes ... and still he seems not so big... and yet he is huge.... As 20” upper arms still peak and bulge. Full muscle bellies crowd tiny joints. Flaring lats frame a minuscule, detailed waist, which suddenly explodes into sweeping, shredded quadriceps. He is both huge and small and rock hard. His physique still is a challenge to the observer’s capacity for perception and appreciation. He embodies the true bodybuilding aesthetic. He presents a physical and optical illusion which is paradoxically real and right before your eyes.

When Robinson walks, there is a feline grace to his movement. There is no waddling uncomfortable gait here, so often associated with the current 250lb+ competitor. An astute observer sees the fluidity of a champion athlete; the running back and the sprinter can still be seen in his carriage. His aesthetics are built upon a functional athleticism.

And most every morning at 8 a.m. at Marina Fitness in Marina Del Rey, the bodybuilder Robby Robinson can be found training. He might be training with and instructing a local bodybuilder, or an interstate bodybuilder or an international guest who has flown half way around the world to participate in his Master Class. Or he might be training with his partner or by himself. But Robby will be training. Each rep will be perfect, each set will be at a specific cadence, each workout will have a specific purpose. Each muscle group will be engaged fully whether he is doing warm up sets of preacher curls with 40lbs, or sets of 8 squats and dead lifts with 450lbs+ (which he still regularly performs). All exact, all focused, all without histrionics or antics. Just focused, precise effort.

Whether there is anybody else there or not, Robby is training. He is still learning about his physique, and its response to training and nutrition. If bodybuilding has a Zen practitioner, if bodybuilding has a venerable grandmaster of the art form, it is Robby Robinson.

This book is a chronicle of Robby Robinson's exceptional life and the journey upon which it has taken him. You can glimpse his spirituality and his soul in the stands and positions that he takes. His gift to us? Robby Robinson, enigma though he may be, is what bodybuilding always has been about, what it should be about, and hopefully, what it may become again.

PAUL GIBNEY Ph.D.

Brisbane, Australia

July 2010

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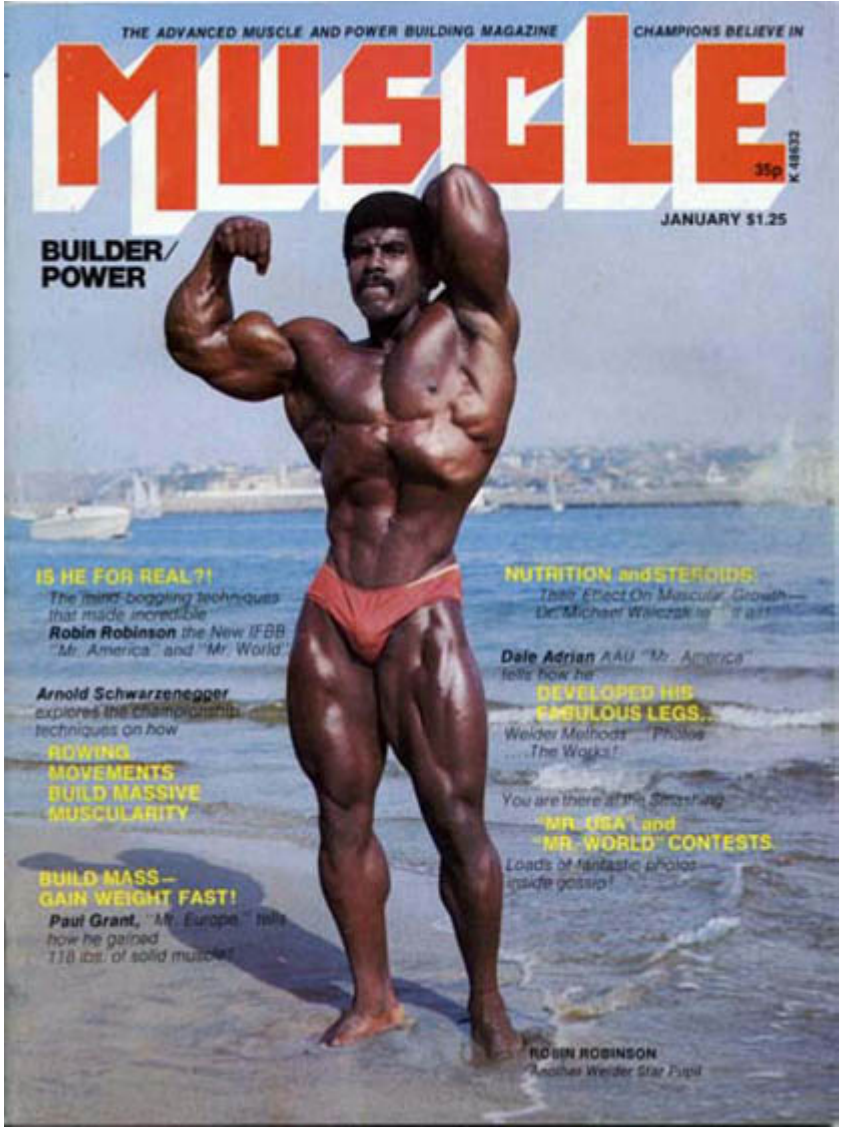
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SHOT OF A LIFETIME

Florida's Tallahassee Regional Airport. Here I am in my tight-fitting, low-cut, heavy-cotton, brown bellbottoms with my green platform shoes, green paisley broad-collared shirt. My afro ripples in the wind. A bit too 60s, I suppose in 1975, but I still love the self-expressive style of that time. I have in my hands two tickets: the first is a one-way Eastern Airlines ticket to Los Angeles, California, the other is a ticket to train with the world's greatest bodybuilders. It came as an invitation from Joe Weider, the trainer of champions, who was looking to add me to his stable of bodybuilders in Venice, California.

Is it foolish to leave my secure job of six years with benefits and insurance to fulfill my dream of becoming one of the bodybuilding greats? It isn't often a black man gets a job as wire room manager at the largest newspaper in Tallahassee, the capital of Florida. But maybe this is my ticket out of the South and the shadow of its racist history. Racism doesn't seem to be an issue in the sport of bodybuilding. Hell, Sergio Olivia, an Afro-Cuban, was Mr. Olympia for three straight years.

I became aware of professional bodybuilding when it was first getting worldwide recognition back in the early 60s. We grew up together. Now at 27 I have 17 years of hardcore training experience under my belt.

It was Joe Weider who initially inspired me to become a bodybuilder. When I saw the illustration of him in *Muscle Builder* (the top muscle magazine of the day) with beautiful women hanging off his arm, I was sold. He motivated a lot of people to get in shape and take care of themselves.

I know I have what it takes to become the number one bodybuilder in the world: discipline, determination, winning genetics and confidence that won't quit. If I just put myself in the right place, and that's Venice, California, it should only be a matter of time.

If someone told me at this moment about the battles I would face against Joe and even his reigning king, Arnold Schwarzenegger, I still would have taken the shot of a lifetime.



SON OF A BOOTLEGGER

I wasn't the first-born male in my family and yet I was named after my father, Robert, probably because, except for skin shade, I looked so much like him. Southerners love to add a bit of frill to names so they added a "Lee" to mine. And people used it, calling me Robert Lee every chance they got.

My momma used to tell me that when I was born my eyes were sealed shut and remained that way for several days. She told me that meant I was blessed with the special gift of sharper instincts and the ability to look inside for answers.

Florida in late the 40's was struggling for black equality. The second World War had ended and there was optimism that the United States would see the contradiction of fighting Hitler's racist treatment of Jews and not its own racial injustices that faced Blacks here.

In my youngest years, the Robinson clan lived in Tallahassee, on St. Augustine Street in a community set down in a ravine. If it rained, all the water would flow down to where we were, and the neighborhood would be flooded. It seemed like it was always flooded. All the houses sat up on stilts. Ours had no electricity, so we used kerosene lamps and cooked on a wood-burning stove. And because we had no running water in the house we had to draw our water from a faucet just outside and heat it for our baths in a large tin tub.

Peach trees flourished in the area, and my family made part of our living off the harvest and a special brew called "buck." We would collect peaches in pails and set them in the shed. The peaches would rot and create a fruity liquor. Momma had several wash tubs full of it. She would pour it through a sheet to strain it and sell the peach brandy right out of our house to the locals. There were also a lot of pecan trees in the area. Later during our school days, many kids, including me, made their school lunch money picking up the pecans and selling them to the local pecan factory.

Our community was insulated and we rarely associated with outsiders. We were considered gypsies or, as the other blacks would call us, “gechees” or the Goulash people. This implied that we moved often and most likely had some kind of operations outside the law. I knew my parents were doing things that were illegal, yet I saw how hard they worked to keep a roof over our heads and food in our stomachs. They put forth an unbelievable effort. They didn’t trust the white-owned banks with their money, so cash was hidden behind wall boards and buried in the chicken yard.

One of my first memories occurred when I was three years old and concerned about the devil. My head was swirling with stories of him told by the church-goers. So when I came running around a corner to see what some kids were screaming about and saw a man dressed in a full devil’s costume, I nearly had a heart attack. After I scrambled back around the corner, I watched the “devil” play with a group of kids as I trembled. Years later I found out it was a our neighbor, Carl.

Besides the wild, threatening fables about the devil, not a lot else was spoken to the young-uns, in fact a lot was kept from us so that the little I know of my family’s history, I overheard from the adults’ hushed conversations. The unspoken rule was, don’t ask questions or you’d find out real fast where your place was. My father carried around a folded up piece of paper in his Bible with our family tree on it, but he never showed it to us. I just got the occasional glances at it.

I did discover that, before I could remember, we lived in Terrell County, Georgia, and there were twelve of us children in the Robinson clan. When my father learned there were better wages and opportunities in Florida, we moved, leaving some of my older brothers and sisters behind with my grandparents. In my earliest memories of living down in the ravine, there were only three of us kids. I always imagined they would bring the rest of the clan later, once they settled and could afford a house. But they never did.

Another early memory was when we made a trip back to Georgia. I figured out that these were my father’s parents and grandparents living across the street from one another.

They were all very fair-skinned, except for my grandmother. We were all standing around a large hole someone had dug. Nobody was talking to each other and they weren't telling me anything, so I had no idea what was going on and it terrified me. The wind was whipping my pant legs as I stood there watching them lower a wooden box into the ground. I'm pretty sure this was my great-grandmother. That was how little I knew of my family.

My father, Robert Sr., was a quiet man who loved to read his Bible, which he carried around with him in a paper bag. He worked for most of his life in the local saw mill, bringing in the majority of the family's income. This physical work, along with amazing genetics, gave him an incredibly developed physique. At 6'2", and 225 pounds of solid tight muscle, he had a strong, intimidating presence. He used his brawn, and when it came to discipline, he had a heavy hand that got worse as time went on. He was a very good-looking man who got a lot of attention. Pop knew he had a great physique and displayed it every chance he got. And at a very young age, I couldn't help notice how the women responded to his fair-skinned, handsome looks and how he played into them. He kept his thick eyebrows and mustache neatly-trimmed and wore his crisp suit often.

The minute my pop came home from the saw mill, he would shower and put on his white T-shirt, khaki shorts and fedora. He was always well-groomed and sweet-smelling with his hair freshly-cut in the high-right and low-left style, popular at the time among blacks. And boy, would he strut around the neighborhood. All the honeys were after Robert. My momma had to put a rope around him.

Momma's given name was Lucille Lewis, but for some reason everybody called her Charlie Mae. She was an incredible woman and the force that held our family together. I always wondered how she did all she was able to do and look as beautiful as she always did. Charlie Mae, because she had some Seminole Indian on her side of the family, had high cheek bones and shiny, long, straight raven hair that had strands of gray through it. She always wore it in two long plaits down her back. She had a body like Sophia Loren: large

breasts, tiny waist and a bottom that drew a lot of mens' attention. I loved seeing her in her brightly-patterned long cotton dresses. They would have short sleeves and buttons that ran the length. Momma gave me my heart and taught me how to be loving. My eyes, like hers, would always give that quality in me away.

Mothers hate to admit they have a favorite child, but in private Charlie Mae used to tell me I was hers. She had a way of saying the right thing to make me feel special. Very early on, I was aware of how skin color affected the relations between people, even in one's family. My siblings and my father were all very fair-skinned and Momma and I very dark complexioned. I was the spitting image of my father, only six shades darker. I was so dark my brothers and sisters called me "Black Boy." This didn't particularly bother me because Momma used to hold me close and call me her black baby, making it special to be so dark-skinned.

Willie Jr. was the oldest of the three of us children living down in the ravine. He had a terrible stutter which made him keep to himself; it also made him thoughtful of others. I felt close to Willie even with the fifteen year difference between us. I think this came about originally because his coloring was leaning towards my side and not that of my younger sister Sally Ann, who had a fair complexion and light brown eyes. Momma would often give me little pearls of wisdom and affection, but she doted on Sally Ann.

Most of the time, I was left by myself to run around with my nappy hair, shorts, no shirt and bare feet. As early as five years old, I remember believing I was a little man, already aware of my manhood and wanting to explore my aroused feelings. An attractive woman, probably in her thirties, lived next door. Her name was Miss Lyncee and she had no problem letting me crawl into her bed. This may have begun innocently enough, but just when Miss Lyncee was allowing me to explore further than a five-year-old boy had any business going, my Momma walked in and snapped me out of my behavior.

“Robert Lee, get your mannish, little wooly-headed butt out of that bed.”

Discipline was enforced regularly through fear. We kids were scared into being good. Grown ups laid the fear trip on us with regular threats like: “wait till your father get home” or “the devil gonna get you.” But the “Mr. Jessie Bomber” threat was the most feared. Jessie Bomber was a 250 pound brother who wandered the neighborhood. I don’t know what he did for a living, except being a ladies’ man. I only saw him walking around the neighborhood flashing a money roll, dressed dapper from his perfectly broken-rimmed fedora to silk pants and a big pinky ring. He was known for putting bad kids under a tin tub and sitting on it until he got ready to get up. A frightening man he was. “I’m going to put Mr. Jessie Bomber on you!” elders would warn. And that’s exactly what I got after I was yanked out of our neighbor Miss Lyncee’s bed along with a trip to Mr. Johnson’s house for a buzzed high-right low-left cut, like Pops; letting me know my reins were being tightened.

Being the questioning kind of kid I was, it didn’t take long for me to be suspicious of Pop’s way of sneaking out. I was little, must have been six, when I followed him after he slipped out our back door and ducked into Miss. Agnes’ house, three doors down. I pressed flat up against the house right under her bedroom window and knew right away what was going on inside. From that day on I started looking at Pop out of the corner of my eye, and our relationship changed forever.

One day in the spring of 1951, our peach buck liquor business came to an end when revenue agents showed up at the door. The two men went directly for the shed and busted up all the barrels of buck with their axes. There was peach brandy everywhere. It was during one of the many rains, and I remember being traumatized, looking out our front door, overwhelmed by the event and the smell of peach buck.

By summer, Robert Sr. and Charlie Mae moved out of the St. Augustine Street house and out of the ravine. I was glad

to move. It seemed like a lot of bad things were happening there.

My parents found a huge 14-room house to rent about ten miles from our old one. And though the house was just a mile down the hill from the Florida A&M University campus, we were deep in the woods, making us instant country folk.

The plantation style house must have been a hundred or so years old. It had weathered wood siding, and like our last house, was perched seven feet off the ground. The house had a porch that wrapped entirely around the house and its shade drew my mom's friends to gather and chat. I realized early on that none of the old folk were telling me what I thought one needed to know about life, and the only way I was going to learn anything was to hide and listen to their conversations. So underneath the porch quickly became my favorite spot.

The move to this house on 727 West Wales Street felt like a move up and into a better situation. Unlike our last house, this one had electricity. I loved the house and all its hidden nooks and crannies. There was a lot of space to explore, and my imagination ran wild.

We adopted a dog, or rather he adopted us by showing up one day and never leaving. He became my confidant and I named him Five Cent. A stocky, tan-colored German sheperd-with-something-else-mix, Five Cent followed me everywhere and quickly became my protector. When it came time for Momma's discipline with the switches, that dog was there to take those switches for me and run. Five Cent loved to be under the porch as much as I did. We were in place waiting, come early evening.

Then, one by one, after each of their long days of work, Momma's lady friends would arrive and start talking about who they saw cheating on whom, what mysterious illness had overcome which person, or what young girl in the neighborhood was pregnant. Miss Bernice and Miss Louise would join Momma with their straw fans and their lavender and sage smudges to keep the mosquitos away. They talked about everything. Little did they know, I was under there

listening. I found what they had to say a lot more interesting than what kids talked about.

They often swapped stories about voodoo and black magic concoctions prescribed by an old woman named Miss Mae. She was the unspoken threat for misbehaving spouses.

I had eavesdropped on so many adult conversations, that when I started school in the first grade, I considered myself wise to the ways of the world and way ahead of the other kids. But as we started to read out loud in front of the class, I realized I had a problem, and it wasn't just that I was the only kid whose mother made him wear a black wool suit, white shirt and black bow tie to school every day no matter how hot it was. Like my older brother, I stuttered. The other kids were relentless with their teasing. Instead of lashing back at them, I withdrew more into myself. Everything everyone was saying and doing seemed stupid and meaningless. I wanted to learn and grow. It became obvious early on to me that the people and kids around me would not be part of this process.

There was a huge spread of land behind the house so my parents immediately planted a vegetable garden to supplement our meager income. After the initial turning of the soil by Pop, Momma took care of all the gardening, from the planting, watering and fertilizing to picking and pruning. Her garden was natural and organic. She planted by the season and the position of the moon and fertilized with compost she produced from vegetable scraps. On gardening days, Momma would wear her blue jeans, one of her floral-patterned shirts, heavy work shoes and a big straw hat. She always produced an abundance of collard greens, string beans, potatoes, tomatoes, mustard greens, butter beans, okra, carrots and corn. I remember thinking how great it was for Momma to decide on a meal and be able to go out back and pick what she needed right out of the ground.

She would say, "Robert Lee, go on back and pinch me a couple of snips of parsley."

"Yes, Momma."

“And tell me if you see any of them nasty green worms around,” she would add.

I never would see as much as a lady bug. She took such pride in her garden and knew what special bark or herb to plant with what to keep the critters away. Along with her vegetables, she had beautiful roses and many different flowers, making her garden the talk of our community. Neighbors would love to come and look at her garden and buy her extra produce. I marveled at the huge clay pots of colorful coleus and ferns she had on the first landing leading up to the porch.

Food was a big part of my childhood. We may not have had a whole lot of possessions, but we always had an a lot of fresh, quality meats and produce. It was the type of food rich people would consider the poor man’s way of living. But I felt like a rich man because the meals made-with-love were so nourishing, they left me not only satisfied in my stomach but in my heart and soul as well. I never had the feeling we were struggling or poor, though at times we were.

Momma was an incredible cook, especially when it came to her seasonings, sauces and gravies. There was always the scent of spices traveling through the house. You wanted to eat whatever she cooked, and it was hard to resist seconds of vegetables, cornbread, black-eyed peas and rice. Momma would pan fry a chicken neck bones with corn oil and place it in a huge pot along with tomatoes, potatoes, collard greens, and carrots to produce an incredible stew. It was like nothing you’ve ever tasted. Instead of deep frying, typical in the black culture, she barbecued her meats and chicken. Even her corn meal was ground fresh from the corn grown in her garden. It was the kind of food that people say puts meat on your bones. Momma’s food alone was helping me put muscle on my young frame.

Coming home from school, as soon as I turned the corner onto our street, I’d catch a whiff of her collard greens, cornbread and grilled chicken and know I was home. This was always a treat at the end of a school day. Even without a formal education and unable to write, she knew how to survive and flourish on the gifts of the earth. That was smart to me.

Momma's cooking made a huge impression on me, and I loved being around her while she cooked. You could find me under the kitchen table waiting for the spoon to come over the edge for me to lick.

I would ask her, "Momma, how do you make it so sweet?" and she would simply reply, "I stick my finger in it." To this day, I truly believe that woman was made of sugar.

Even though I was a solid, seemingly strong kid, I remember sickly times during my first seven or so years, with constant colds and bad cases of the mumps, measles, chicken pox and oral thrush - a yeast-like infection, causing whitish patches. There were days I felt heavy and lifeless. We didn't have black doctors in our community, and just as with the white-owned banks, no one trusted the white man's medicine or care. Parents knew the remedies, plants, herbs and teas for all the ailments and passed them down through the generations. For thrush they would use cream of tartar and mix it with honey or sugar cane, then mop out your mouth every day, as long as the infection lasted. It would usually go away after three or four days. To build our bones and immune strength against colds, it was cod liver oil every morning till you gagged.

For chicken pox, they got you up early in the morning and took you to the chicken coop where anxious chickens had been pent up all night. You had to lie down in all the chicken dung and whatever else was on the ground. Then Momma would go around to the back of the coop and as Pop opened the door, she would shake the cage to scare the chickens and make them come running out and scratch your back and the little infected bumps. For some unknown reason, these scratches, that didn't even leave a scar, would clear up the virus.

For the mumps, a salve made of sardines and herbs that made you sweat was rubbed on your skin and scrotum. I was terrified when I got the mumps.

The treatment for measles was dandelion compresses rubbed over your entire body. If you saw a kid walking around

with his hands bound up with socks and tape, you knew he had one of these infections and you kept your distance.

But the strangest by far was the clay used for treating dysentery and diarrhea. Because our neighborhood still only had outhouses, at night we urinated in tin pails. There was a special tree a couple of yards down the dirt road that we would all empty our pails of urine around. If you saw speckles of blood in your excrement, you knew what was in store for you. It was right to this tree to dig up some of the clay right around its base. After eating some of this, your entire digestive system would be flushed out within a day or two. I witnessed how all these remedies worked and I was a true believer, though I hated the thought of eating clay soaked with others' urine.

Momma talked about being part Seminole, so I was conscious of my Indian heritage, which made me feel a strong connection with the earth and its bounty. I felt more of a connection to nature than to people, which probably explains why I spent most of my childhood running around barefoot and exploring the woods alone.

By this time, Willie Jr. was living out of the house and operating his own auto mechanic shop. Without any training, he could break down a car and put it back together in a very short time. This made me believe Willie Jr. was brilliant, even if he did have a stutter worse than mine. When he got nervous, he stammered worse. Sharing two traits; a dark complexion and a stutter, made me feel closer to Willie Jr. than to any of my other siblings. But once he moved out, we didn't see much of each other. Because of him, I realized that I had to do something about my stutter or it would get progressively worse, like his did. What came naturally was to talk as little as possible, and when I did talk, to slow my words down. I took to reading books out loud in my room. Over time my plan worked, and my stutter became almost undetectable.

I was seven years old when Jerry was born and eight when Momma gave birth to stillborn twins. Nothing was said to me when the midwife carried away two bundles. Our lives and work just went on as usual and the next year mother had a healthy baby girl she named Shirley Ann. Like all of us

Shirley Ann was delivered in the house with the help of a midwife. After I asked to be in the room, I was allowed to stand quietly in the corner and watch as Momma gave birth. It took some hours and she was in a lot of pain. At one point, the midwife shouted at me to bring her peeled white potatoes and to put them in an old sock. To my amazement, immediately after they were tied around Momma's legs, her screams of pain stopped.

I helped take care of Shirley Ann, but mostly my job was to look after my younger brother, Jerry. I didn't mind because he was as cute as a bug's ear and fun to be around. With Momma's great meals, we were all pudgy little kids, but Jerry had us beat and deserved his nickname, Bubba. He was so round and full of energy that one day he rolled off the porch, dropping six feet to the ground. Bubba sat right up, shook off his surprised tumble and probably wouldn't have cried, if he hadn't heard my concerned voice.

The new plan my folks came up with to supplement my father's income turned out to be similar to their old plan, only now it was selling moonshine instead of peach brandy. And even though moonshine brought in more money than the buck, it also brought with it more risks and greater repercussions if caught. To begin with, they had to set up the deal through the white man to obtain it. Somehow my father would either pick it up or have the glass, ten-gallon jugs of moonshine delivered. In not very long, my folks were selling half pints and pints.

For years, no matter how scorching the Florida sun was, we had to dress up in our black wool suits and walk two miles to hear my father, of all people, preach the Sunday sermon at our church. On one particular Sunday, I was sitting next to Pop in the Deacon's corner across from "the sisters' corner." Momma was sitting in the congregation with Shirley Ann in her arms. Halfway through the service, one of the sisters across from us uncrossed her legs with a high and wide swing of one leg. When Momma saw under her skirt what was intended for Pop's eyes, she took off her shoe and threw it at the woman. Then after giving Pop a venomous glare, she stood

up, turned with a “huh” and walked out, never to return to the church.

My parents’ relationship got worse and having moonshine in the house didn’t help. Pop’s heavy hand, once used only for minor discipline, was now used just to get his point across. They had loud, physical fights usually ending with him storming out the door, no doubt to go drink and chase women. We would always run right to Momma’s side to comfort her through tears. Then late at night, knowing that Momma would always take him back, Pop would come home and crawl into their bed. This went on for years. His violence trickled down to us kids. Sally Ann, Shirley Ann and Bubba got the worst of it. In different ways, we all suffered psychologically, but somehow I never was a victim of his physical wrath. I’m not sure why that was. Perhaps I was more threatening to him because by then I was already big and muscular. Maybe my quietness was unsettling, or maybe it was because I looked so much like him. I was becoming more physically fit and strong whereas his physical development was diminishing from the years of drinking.

My siblings and Momma were less fortunate, and I always felt guilty. During a couple of incidents, things got so brutal and the whole family became involved. One time, Pop slammed Sally Ann’s head with a bucket of nails while Momma threatened him with a hatchet. As their protector, I ended up right in the middle, nearly getting my fingers hacked off.

Even though his violent behavior was never directed at me, with each experience, I could feel a wall of defense building around me. The strength and respect he had commanded with his behavior quickly dissolved in my mind. I started to see him as weak. I distanced myself from him.

I withdrew even more from people and spent a lot of time reading, biographies being my favorite. I loved to read about how people managed their lives. Some stories were about success and some were about people who had failed, people who had had fame and fortune, but who forgot to be

humble. Instead of being happy, they were consumed by it all.
I was determined I wouldn't become one of them.



BLACK BOY

My father's physique and his attitude about it made such a huge impression on me that at a very young age I took notice of my own. Though I was aware of our similar muscularity, I did not want to become like him in any other way. In defiance of my father, I would build a better man, one with greater strength, loyalty to his wife, a more successful man who didn't abuse alcohol or loved ones.

We bought our first television and at age seven I discovered Jack LaLanne. At the time, I didn't feel like a healthy kid. I felt sluggish. Then I started to do pushups, sit-ups and calisthenics. Jack LaLanne's movements had a crispness and precision I came to imitate along with his statuesque posture. I wouldn't miss a show. My coach, Jack, got me addicted to working out every day. I went from being a pudgy, round little thing to a tight, in-shape little man, walking around pulling my waist in. For years, I was right there in front of the TV for every workout, doing pushups until I was sweating like a pig. Momma would run me out of the house, complaining about the sweat on her hardwood floors. But she would continue to support my workouts by mopping up the sweat, time after time.

With all its closets and hideaways, the house was perfect for setting up a small workout room. At age eight, I took claim of a large closet, hung two mirrors and deemed it off-limits to others. After school, I would lock myself in and perform Jack's routine, posing in the mirror in between the jumping jacks, pushups and squats.

Now some may think it's vain to gaze at yourself in the mirror, but for me it wasn't vanity at all. I didn't see myself as good-looking, so there wasn't any, "my God, you're handsome." It was more about observing a change I created with work and focus. Flexing my muscles helped me feel my body more. I saw the body as a miraculous creation. I thought that the most important thing I could do would be to respect

and appreciate God's gift to me. He gave me the clay and it was up to me to mold it. So I studied my work in progress and watched muscle develop out of mush. Every day, I saw parts of a sculpture that both God and I had a part in creating. After each workout, I would lie on the floor of my hideaway with my palms up and my eyes closed and try to drift into the power of the universe. I truly believed I could access power this way.

The fourteen-room house on Wales Street was a strange place to live. I would hear distant sounds like someone crying. The old folk talked about things like the dead and strange occurrences. Their conversations about this other mysterious world you couldn't see fascinated me.

The house was always full of strangers. Sometimes they would rent a room and stay for a time. So I thought nothing when I opened the door one day to see a perfect stranger, until Momma introduced him to as my older brother, Reilly. I should have guessed this because he looked a lot like Pop: tall, fair, with a beautiful head of hair and a body for days. Reilly had been in Detroit working with Pop's brother. We never really jelled. I'm not sure if it was because he was a real pretty boy with a pretty boy attitude and I was a little black nappy-headed bruiser, or because he reminded me so much of Pop. He stayed for a year or so without working, just hanging around being a pretty boy. The women loved him.

We had been living for six years on Wales Street when the revenue squad was tipped off about our bootlegging. They raided the house as they did back on St. Augustine Street. I had seen Pop slide mason quart jars up in between the walls. At the time, I thought this was odd but when the revenue men came, I knew that's what they were there for. They didn't find the stash, but they did find the seven quarts Pop had on hand for the customers. The next day, my parents, Reilly and a couple of neighbors sat together on the porch, looking very gloomy. As I stood below the porch, with Jerry in a wagon, I could tell things hadn't gone well. My parents were given a fine, but the worst part was that we were evicted. So we were in for another move. I was 10.

The next house was smaller and further out in the woods, on South Western Street. The 30-year-old wooden house was raised up six feet like our other house, with a porch on just the front of the house. Even though there was less land behind the house because it butted up to some woods, my parents found room for a vegetable garden.

The woods with its lakes and ponds became my playground, full of adventures. Because the land was so rich and lush, there was an abundance of wild critters, making it possible to hunt and eat a lot of game meat: quail, blue jays, deer, squirrel, fish and alligator. I would either go hunting by myself or with Pop, and later with Jerry. Rabbit with gravy and grits was our breakfast. If there wasn't a rabbit in my momma's trap that morning, she would fish a couple of bream or catfish and grill them with our grits. Every meal included some fresh animal meat. Aside from the wild game, there were chickens, goats, pigs and a couple of cows grazing around back. Beef was the first meal on Sundays. What we didn't choose to hunt, we bartered with other families in our community. Alligator tail was the delicacy we opted to trade for, not catch ourselves. Fish was the second most popular protein food. Momma and I would do all the fishing either early in the morning or late in the afternoon when the fish would bite more.

Fishing was one of my favorite pastimes. With Momma, I loved the solitude deep in the woods with nothing but the sounds of nature. The half-hour window around daybreak, when the water reflected a grey sheen and the dragonflies rested on the bobbing cork, was the best time to catch fish.

One morning, after we had both caught about five pan-size brims each, enough for breakfast that day before school, and grabbed our poles to lay out one more casting, something strange occurred. What looked like a huge fish from a prehistoric time jumped high enough to clear the water and flashed his enormous size. By my estimation it was length of a Volkswagen and half its girth. We both couldn't believe what we witnessed. By the way Momma reacted, I knew this was not my imagination blowing things out of proportion. This was

real. Never before had I seen fear in Momma's manners until this moment. She was tough. When I attempted to question her about what we saw, she just quickly rolled up her pole and said, "Boy, don't be asking me no question. It grown folk business. Let's go."

We left there in a flash. Never was a word spoken about it again and never did we fish early in the morning. Seeing that monstrous fish propelled my imagination and the belief that anything is possible.

Why my parents started selling moonshine again is beyond me. This time they upped the stakes. Pop would take a large portion of his earnings from his lumber mill job and pay the white bootleggers up front for several barrels of the liquor. As if that weren't risky enough, he would have the barrels delivered to a point in the woods behind our house. It was usually he and I who went looking for the abandoned barrels. Once we found them, we would fill a couple of tin containers we had brought with us and then bury the remaining barrels. Our chances of being caught were great because we made weekly trips to our reserves, with the revenue men frequently patrolling the woods.

As the customers and sales increased, our house became like a saloon, known to the locals as the Juke Joint. There were always people hanging around the house for their 50-cent drink. Along with selling the moonshine, Momma would have barbecued ribs to bring in more money. Folks would come throughout the week, but the weekends, starting Friday afternoon, were the big days. I would rush home after school and help set up the barbecue. It was usually my job to man the grill. As young as 12, I was collecting money not only for rib sandwiches, but also for bootleg whiskey.

We all tried to make a little money off the drunks, even providing them with entertainment. And though I was shy, if you gave me a stage, I'd perform. My brothers and I would sing all the current hits on the radio. "Any Day Now" by Sam Cooke, "Twist and Shout" by the Top Notes, and Little Richard's "Good Golly, Miss Molly" were some of our favorites. We had a competition with some of the regulars, like

Mr. Shine, the tap dancer. Because he never had money, Mr. Shine, a veteran alcoholic freeloader, would tell stories and dance for his drinks. Didn't matter who, he even worked us kids to give him a 50-cent drink of liquor for free. Sometimes I would. The minute he got his drink, he was off tapping. Mr. Shine would tap all night. Tap until he was sweating. People liked his dancing so they would shout, "Come on Shine, let me give you some of my liquor." And they would give him a 50-cent drink out of their pint or half-pint or whatever they ordered. They would all sit at the table and drink until they passed out. Some would come on Friday and not leave until Sunday.

I was never entertained by the behavior of the drunks, and watching them turned off any possibility that I'd start drinking. As they sat around getting drunk, they'd lose their inhibitions and look at you with misbehavior in their eyes. You'd see a woman sitting at the edge of her chair with no panties on. Or one would purposely walk into the wrong bathroom while I was taking a bath in the tin tub. I started to dislike being around them.

By 13 years old, my sights shifted from being just fit to developing bigger muscles and more strength. When I caught a glimpse of a comic book with Superman on the cover, I knew who I was going to be. A Super Hero. Superman was how I saw myself: strong, independent, protector of the good, loyal to Lois Lane, or Lucille Lewis (Momma) in my case. To top it off, there in the back pages of the comic books, I discovered an advertisement for pamphlets on muscle development. I immediately sent my quarter away for the George Jowett and Charles Atlas booklets and received what I called "my training manuals."

I knew I was going to have to find some weights to duplicate the exercises illustrated in the booklets. After scouting around, I found ten-inch steel bars at the local steel mill. Fisherman used them as anchors for their different sized boats. They weighed from 20 to 50 pounds. They were perfect because they had small holes drilled through their ends, so with a little wire, I could hang them off either end of my bar, known by most as a broom stick. With 40 pounds attached to

my bar, that's some good starting weight for curls and overhead presses, especially for a 13-year-old. Using the 50 pound bars, I would do bent over rows, squats and lunges. I was on my way.

My body responded very quickly to the new exercises and weights. My weight was up to nearly 155 pounds. Flexing became a big part of my routine, and I could see I was becoming very muscular. I knew I had a gift. I appreciated it and I knew what I wanted to do with it. It became a religion to me, one I practiced every day. It was fun and rewarding and after a short time, I recognized that it made me feel healthier and stronger overall. If I didn't train for some reason, I went back to feeling sluggish. Without understanding it at the time, Momma's cooking was playing a huge part in my development. What most people don't realize is that 85 to 90 percent of the bodybuilding equation is one's eating habits.

Even with Momma's great food I was like all kids in that I loved candy. Sugar Daddies and Butterfingers were my candies of choice up until that fateful day in school with Eddie Johnson. I knew Eddie fairly well because Bubba and I would have our high-right, low-left buzzed in by Eddie's father, a barber who worked out of his home. Eddie was known for loving his candy. There wasn't a day that passed when you wouldn't see a Snickers or Baby Ruth sticking out of his back pocket. He was always taking bites of some kind of chocolate bar. One day, when we were in ninth grade, I was behind Eddie as we were about to walk down a long flight of stairs. Out of the blue he stopped and turned toward me. When I saw his eyes roll back into his head, I reached out for him, but before I could grab him he collapsed and fell, rolling and sliding to the bottom of the stairs. He landed with a loud thud, and his mouth hurled vomit mixed with blood and huge chunks of candy. He hadn't even regained consciousness when they took him out on a stretcher. Eddie Johnson never returned to school and no one ever knew what happened to him. Bubba and I never went back to his house to get our hair cut, and I stopped eating candy and chips and drinking sodas from that day, in 1961, on.

Aside from being called “Black Boy” I started being teased about my training. “You’ll never be a muscle man, you old Black Boy,” some would say, staring at me. I felt myself distancing myself from others, including my family. I couldn’t stand to hear all their jabs and negative talk.

Momma had a good friend who used to come by the house often but she stayed too long and drank too much. She was a nice, seemingly normal lady until she drank. In the black community, the adjective “fat” has long referred to something really fine. It was more than appropriate that this lady was given the nickname Fat because she was a very attractive, voluptuous woman. When I was 13 she was probably in her early thirties. I tended to look at Fat with a suspicious eye because on several occasions I had followed Pop to her house.

On this particular night, the house was full of patrons drinking late into a rainy Florida night. I was asleep in my small room on the ground floor in the back of the house next to a bathroom used by all the guests. From a dead sleep, I woke into a near scream by a sensation I had never experienced. As I was squirming but unable to shout out, I saw that it was Fat, having her way with me. Covered with the smell of alcohol, Fat raised her head and put her finger to my mouth and said, “Shhhhh.” I was in shock. It was almost impossible to fight the aroused feeling as I tried to figure out what in the hell she was doing and why.

All I could think about was Momma and how much trouble I would get in if she saw this. I struggled with feelings of guilt. Now, not only did I have to keep my Pop’s secrets, I had one of my own. It ate me up because it put me in his corner where I didn’t want to be.

I felt like it was the kind of experience that could tarnish a soul and lead a man down a perverse road. One thing is for sure, having an early sexual experience piqued my curiosity about sex, but my world was all about strength and self-empowerment and that didn’t include girls.

My dog Five Cent and I would take off and walk the neighborhood looking to get away. On one of these walks, I discovered some kids around my age playing football on an

empty field. They asked me to join them and I became a regular. We got very competitive, and without all the normal football pads, it was making me one tough kid. Because I had such a head start in my athletic development, I quickly became the sandlot football legend, as well as a basketball and track star. I was beating everybody and creating intrigue. They knew I had a secret behind my agility and strength and were curious about how I could be so beefed up when they were all pretty scrawny. Three guys started pressing me to let them in on my secret weapon. They were Gregory Hogan, Ira “Lil’ Bro” Walker and David “The Bird Man” Burney. I told them what I was doing and how I needed to upgrade my workout and start using equipment. They jumped on my plan and we set out to construct a new gym. We were all 14 and poor, so we were forced to be inventive.

We ventured out looking for suitable equipment. Down by the tracks, we found old metal train wheels we could use as our plates. I knew the broom stick wasn’t going to hold these 70 to 80 pound wheels, so we found an old telephone cable tie-down bar sticking out of a heap of rubbish. This would serve us perfectly, since I could easily stack all four of the train wheels onto the bar. For our bench, I took a 2x6 board, cut it to a 4-1/2 foot length and perched it on two cement blocks. By taking one block away, and dropping one end down, we had our incline and decline bench. With no squat rack, two of us had to lift the loaded barbell up on the third person’s shoulders. That’s a lot of work when you’re trying to rest from your set of squats. But it made me even stronger, both mentally and physically.

Besides our small home gym, we also went down to Richard and James Wood’s covered carport where they were using cement blocks as weights. We worked out fast and furiously, serious about every movement. We stuck to all the basic exercises I had learned in my manuals and trained every body part daily, six days a week, with Sundays off. My mind was so focused on my training that one day I didn’t even notice Five Cent hadn’t come along to the Wood’s house until I was on my way home. When I got home, I finally found him in our favorite spot, under the porch, dead. He was probably

ten so I believed he had died of natural causes. His death hit me hard because he was the closest friend I had, but it also drove me deeper into my training. No matter how I felt: angry, down, sad, I never had a workout that didn't leave me feeling better, happier, more driven. And the harder I trained, the better I felt.

We accomplished a lot with the little we had, but I was starting to outgrow this gym. I was ready for tougher challenges and new territory to conquer. Down at the newsstand where I'd been buying my comic books, I started looking at *Strength and Health* and *Muscular Development* magazines. From what I read, the route I would have to take to become number one was to win the prestigious AAU Mr. America contest. I would have to join the American Athletic Union (AAU) for \$30 to be able to compete. I would have to establish my name at this level before I could advance and join the ranks of the International Federation of Bodybuilding. The IFBB had three prestigious amateur competitions: Mr. America, Mr. World and Mr. Universe. I would have to win not just my weight group but overall in the Mr. Universe to qualify to become a pro and be able to compete, most importantly, in the Mr. Olympia contest. But that would be a while away and until then I would enter and win any and every local competition I could while dealing with the escalating racial challenges of the South.

My country life kept me pretty isolated from people in general, and white folks in particular. The only white family I knew was the Innes family, who lived in several shacks even further out in the sticks than the Robinson clan. They were hicks, straight-out rednecks, so it was poor whites meeting poor blacks. Somehow we ended up equals, treated each other that way and got along fine. We fished together, hunted together and ate alligator tail together.

Mr. Innes would build boats out of scraps which I actually got into, but that was the adventurous me. Once we set out in one of his creations on the lake in the woods behind my house. Within a matter of minutes the boat started to fill with water and flipped on its side, with Mr. Innes under it. There was a bit of a struggle as we both worked to free him.

The first words out of his mouth, even as he gasped for breath were, “Robert Lee, are you okay?” Early on, this is how I thought blacks and whites interacted, respectfully and caring.

During the 1960s, I didn’t realize the magnitude of the civil rights movement happening in Tallahassee because in the black community, parents and teachers avoided discussing the subject of racism with 14-year-olds. I do remember hearing a couple of teachers talking about protests, but I didn’t understand what they were about. I was starting to understand why my community was so quiet about things. It was fear. Fear for their families. Fear that they would be called out and wind up as alligator meat. They were stuck wanting the best for the next generation but uncertain as to what to tell them.

I didn’t live far from the railroad tracks that were one of the racial divides in Tallahassee. We knew what side of the tracks to be on after dark, and so did the whites. That’s just how it was. Along the tracks, on our side, there was a canal with such a bad stench we called it “the stink ditch.” A walking bridge ran over the ditch and the tracks that connected the two sides. The bridge was our “home-free” mark, come dusk. A couple of times I made it back over the bridge by the skin of my teeth. But it worked both ways; sometimes a car full of drunk white men would make the wrong turn after dark, and they’d get pulled from the car and given a whooping they wouldn’t soon forget.

It wasn’t until one of my first trips to downtown Tallahassee that I had any real in-your-face racial incidents. This day I decided to walk to Floral Street and take a bus to see one of the parades Tally Town was known for. I sat in the back of the bus as black people still were required to do. I knew altercations were very possible, and I wasn’t one looking to start anything.

As I approached the sounds of the crowd, I remembered why Lil’ Bro, Greg, Bird Man and I traveled in a group. The security of friends definitely gave us more confidence. We had each others’ backs and we never got in trouble. I could see the densely packed crowd up ahead and it

made me feel uneasy. Crowds, I decided right then as I was being swept into one, were not my thing.

And then, because it was unavoidable, I bumped into a big white man. After I immediately apologized, he looked at me and said, “Boy, you better have apologized.”

It blew my mind how rude and demeaning his comment was. I couldn’t understand what he got out of such a comment. Did he make himself feel better? More powerful? I was infuriated to the point that I wanted to punch him out. But that would have only added to the negativity of the situation.

This day stands out in my mind because a few moments later, just a couple blocks from the parade on the stairs of the Capitol, I passed the Ku Klux Klan holding a demonstration (with rifles and pistols), preaching their racism. If they were trying to scare the living daylights out of me, they succeeded.

This first experience with racism was so mind-boggling, I was immediately jolted into an anger I had never experienced. The conversations with myself would sound a little like this: “Robinson, this racism is serious, and you’re not making it up in your mind. You are going to have to deal with it every day in some shape or form for the rest of your life. Knocking that man’s lights out would have landed you in jail, and a rap sheet isn’t going to help you be a great bodybuilding champion or a great anything, for that matter.”

I swore that day I would not let any kind of “ism” stop me from reaching my goal to become a world champion. There was no way I could succeed if I allowed myself to be broken. Feeling less than someone else is not in a winner’s mind. The two do not go together. I was aware that every choice I made was either from weakness or strength. Different situations could either weaken or strengthen me. What I learned from reading about others’ lives was that I needed to look at everything as a challenge and use it all as an opportunity to grow stronger and wiser.

My walks home always took me through the woods. It was in nature that I contemplated life, having conversations

with myself and with God. Alone amid the purest of His creations was where I felt the greatest connection to this energy and to its unlimited possibilities.

One balmy afternoon in the late summer, Pop, Bubba and I were deep in the woods chopping old pine stumps into splinters that we used to light the fire wood in our stove and fireplaces. As we stood in a circle, about ten feet from each other, a voice in my head told me to move from that spot because the blade could come off its handle. Call it instinct or a voice from above, either way I moved to the left side of my father. In the next second my gut tightened as I saw Bubba move into that very same spot I just vacated. As I was opening my mouth to warn Bubba, Pop was swinging the ax sending the blade flying off its handle. In that split second we all froze. We knew there'd be no time to react. I held my breath as I watched the blade tumble through the air, headed directly for Bubba's chest. Then, for some unexplainable reason, the blade seemed to hit some kind of force field that slowed it down and sent it just to the right of Bubba. Without a sound, the blade landed softly on the ground next to him. We all let out a big sigh and looked to each other in disbelief. Bubba was supposed to have been a fatality that day. The splinter gathering came to an immediate halt. We collected what we had readied and left. The incident was never to be spoken about. I knew I had witnessed a miracle, one that reinforced my belief that a higher power existed.



A HOUSE DIVIDED

Throughout high school, I never had a girlfriend. It wasn't because the girls in my class weren't attractive, because they were. Most of the girls took amazing care of themselves, and always looked so tidy and proud in their cardigans and tight-waisted full skirts. With their slim, but full-figured bodies, they held their heads high, with a bit of an attitude.

I had several crushes and I flirted a bit, but up until my junior year the girls paid me little notice. It was obvious their attention was on the fair-skinned guys. I didn't mind because I believed I was all that; they would regret it down the road. In the meantime, I would work on myself, doing everything I could to become a famous athlete. I knew all the girls would then be after me. While the boys in my high school were making moves on the girls, I was focused on being a star. This dream filled my every thought. Before deciding to do anything, I would seriously consider whether it would help or hurt my goal. Aside from that, I was still shocked and somewhat confused about relations with girls as a result of my experience with Fat. But because of Momma, I had a respect and an admiration for women. When I heard boys in school or the men at church making nasty comments about women, it would make my heart sink a little. I didn't want to have any part of their club. It registered as a weak attempt to increase their position and power by putting the other gender down. What was it; I would ask myself, an ego boost?

In a way, girls were guilty of the same power play with their discrimination against the darker brothers, but I couldn't blame them for their attraction to the possibilities of a better life, closer to a white life. I saw the beautiful, fair-skinned Frances Gallon, on whom I had a crush, snub me for a lighter skinned guy. When she wound up pregnant, I realized a better life is never guaranteed.

I had one short liaison but it was only from afar and through several letters. Her name was Catherine and she was

white. At one of my many odd jobs, I was serving bread on a cafeteria line during a girl's state convention at Florida State University. I saw the debutante representing Gainesville, Florida, and I fell in love with her at first sight. She was a pretty girl with straight sandy blonde hair and glasses. When she made eye contact with me the first day, I picked myself up and smiled at her. That very first day, the older black woman working next to me said sharply, "Boy, you better pay attention and start serving that bread and stop looking at that damned white gal. Don't you know you'll get lynched, messing around with the likes of her."

I snapped back to attention with her harsh words. I was taken by surprise because I had never heard that kind of talk. No one had ever told me bad things would happen if I looked at a white girl. And as daring as I was, I wasn't about to let anyone tell me who I couldn't look at. So as the days went on, we kept looking at each other and smiling. At the end of her three-week stay, I took it further and wrote down her name and address which I had seen at her table. I wrote her, professing my love.

When Catherine replied, my sister intercepted her first letter and gave it to Momma. The whole family then knew and gave me hell. They were frightened not just about my safety, but about theirs. I didn't think that way, because I was in love. Fear and hate were the last things on my mind. We wrote a couple of more times and then I dropped it. As time went by, her face faded and I realized that it hadn't been a smart thing to do after all.

Because I wasn't going after the girls at school and I was into myself and my physique, the kids thought I was a sissy. But I was proud of my body and wanted everyone to see it. On my way home from school one afternoon, I had my shirt off and was walking all flexed-out when a car passed by and some kids called me a faggot. It gave me quite a jolt. I didn't know what a faggot was, but I knew it didn't make me feel good. From that point on I never walked around with my lats spread in the typical bodybuilding mode. I saved my exhibitionism for the stage and my mirror.

Discipline, when it came to my workout schedule, had become a habit; but the discipline a young man should have in things such as respecting elders, and men particularly, was something totally undeveloped in me. Momma was always the one whipping my butt when I did something wrong. She was a loving, good woman who was consistent in her responsibilities to the ones she loved, and I respected her for this. Even when she used the switch on my butt, I didn't question her authority and instead accepted the fact I had done something wrong. Pop was neither good nor loving. He avoided all connection and confrontation with me and received none of my respect. Without that respect, I developed a tough guy attitude which got me in trouble on more than one occasion. The most profound experience I remember was during a P.E. class with my teacher, Mr. James Oliver. He looked like my father: tall, lean and muscular and because of this, I didn't like him. He not only taught our P.E. classes, he coached all our teams: football, track, baseball and basketball. Even though he stood between me and my athletic pursuits, I managed to be a bad ass and once made a sassy comment for all to hear. Out came Coach Oliver's paddle from his back pocket, and he gave me a whooping I would never forget. I'm sure all could hear that paddle resonating through the campus. The beating was a shock for me, especially coming from a man, and though it was horribly painful, I didn't cry. After that I was more respectful to Coach Oliver and he seemed to appreciate the toughness in me because he began to encourage my athletic pursuits more. Physical discipline was hard, often, and encouraged at every turn in the black community, even at church. Black kids were aware white kids didn't get the beatings we did, and thought they were spoiled as a result. I used to wonder about the differences in the cultures. Was it something passed down from slavery? Were elders trying to instill a toughness they thought we would need to get by in the world not made for us? Blacks tend to believe a person at any age will only learn a lesson through a beating. I always had conflicting thoughts about physical discipline, having seen it turn into abuse and become a power struggle.

My freshman year, I joined the football and track teams at Lincoln High School, a great school for athletics. We won

many championships during my years there. The more I played football and ran, the more I lifted weights. The more I lifted weights, the better athlete I became. My first year I was the starting running back and already the star of the team. I was daring and nasty on the field and had no problem running you over to make my catch or take the kick return all the way back if the team needed six points.

For a short time that year, I started hanging out with the cool crowd. We would sit in the back of the classroom and goof off. I guess they were able to make good enough grades, but I was not and flunked English. My teacher, Miss Willie B. Estrasas, not only made me attend summer school, she also had me recite the poem "Invictus," by William Ernest Henley every day in front of her classes for my entire sophomore year. I'll probably know that poem by heart for the rest of my life. That was it for me and cool groups. After that I kept to myself. The rest of the year I did much better in my classes and gained 1600 yards and scored 20 touchdowns on the field.

Bob Hayes, who was at Florida A & M University at this time, was running faster than any man before him. Our track team would practice at the university's field, giving us the amazing opportunity to watch him run. I followed his wins and records with every step he ran. Bob was my idol and the kind of athlete I wanted to become.

The weight room at A & M also holds special memories for me. But if those gym walls could talk, I would be in a lot of trouble. We used to sneak in after hours by climbing an old pecan tree that went all the way up to a window into the gym. Pecan trees are easy to climb and we were all experts from our pecan collecting business. Once through the window and into the equipment room, we had to shimmy eight feet across a steel beam until we were above a big box of old gym clothes. From there we'd crawl along the beam, then drop 15 feet into the box. Once safely on the floor, we lit a couple of candles to begin our workout, and no one was the wiser.

While my training and my achievements in football and track were outstanding my sophomore year, the situation

on the home front couldn't have been worse. I knew it was only a matter of time before something bad would happen.

As always, Pop took me with him to the white lightning drop-off in the woods. If people say wisdom comes with age, I would disagree. My instincts developed early, from the strong connection I had with myself, and my instincts were on fire that day. Every thread of my being was telling me this was not a wise thing to be doing. Not this day.

Walking through the woods, I said, "Pop, this doesn't feel right. I think we should turn around."

He replied, as he had so many times before, "Boy, shut up. You don't know what you're talking about. This is grown-up business."

That ended that discussion but I thought, "If this is grown-folk business, then why am I here?"

"Go on ahead to the drop, I'll start digging the holes," he commanded.

Florida State's property line ended here in the woods with a post and wire fence. Pops would dig the holes next to every other pole along the fence so we could locate them easily on our return. The closer I got to the drop point, the clammy my hands became. "This does not feel right," I said to myself. When I came within five feet of the tin cans, I heard rustling in the woods around me. I was frozen in my tracks when I heard the unforgettable screaming and hollering. First, I could just make out several guys lying in the brush like combat soldiers, then four or five white men started approaching me with their snub-nosed 38s drawn and pointed at me.

"Nigger boy, you're in trouble," they shouted as they advanced towards me.

As I stood there frozen in my horror, I could hear in the distance a familiar sound. It was the sound the wire fence made when I had climbed over it, but this time it was Pop scurrying over it. As my heart sunk and my adrenaline shot to my head, I realized I was on my own. I had a circle of men

surrounding me and there was nothing I could say or do that could help the situation. No amount of muscle would have spared my fate. The first one kicked me, the second one hit me in the stomach and the next one punched me in the head and I went to the ground. Since they really wanted my father and they couldn't take me to jail, they gave me a terrible beating. The kicking continued as I curled up on the ground. I was all busted up when they finally left me lying there, looking at the punched tins spilling their spirits.

When I reached home and found the house a wreck, I thought the revenue agents had searched the house, but it had been Pop going mad, trying to hide. He had finally gotten a job with the city and I guess all he could think of was losing it. Later that day the agents came to house and spoke to my mother. She took responsibility for the crime and accepted the summons.

In court my mother took the rap. She was found guilty and wound up serving two years in a women's correctional facility. With Momma's priority being to hold the family together, she knew that the income from Pop's job would at the very least keep the roof over our heads. She knew I already had part-time work at the bowling alley and figured we could fend for ourselves in the kitchen. If we hadn't realized before Momma left that she was the force that held our family together, there was no doubt now. I withdrew deeper into myself - I think to strengthen myself. Our home life completely changed. It was like a plug was pulled out of four young lives. Her garden withered and died and her weekend barbecue went cold. There were no more delicious homemade meals prepared with love. Though we hadn't thought it was much, Momma had actually brought in quite a bit of money with her barbecue and produce sales.

As all of this sunk in, Pop's drinking hit an all time high and he spent most of his time away from our home, the reminder of his shortcomings. His brown paper bag that held his Bible now included a fifth of whiskey. He was always drunk, trying to play like he wasn't. He never told us where exactly our mother was, never gave us an address to write her,

but worst of all, he never even talked about her. And while she was away, he rarely brought money or food home.

Our broken household didn't bring us kids closer. You could tell that each of us felt we were on our own and had to fend for ourselves. I somewhat looked after the younger ones, cooking easy meals of beans and rice, but I didn't like to be in the house either, particularly if the old man was there. When the weekend rolled around, I would stay with the Johnsons in the spare trailer down by the lumber yard where Mr. Johnson was the grounds man. I could stay and eat with them for free and earn extra money splitting wood. Then in the evenings and during the summer, I worked at Captain Louie's Galley as their cook. I loved it because I was my own boss and I got to cook in front of a window, putting me on stage.

Although these tough times increased my distraction from my studies, they strengthened my determination to succeed at what I was best at, athletics and bodybuilding. I worked hard at them because I knew they would be my means to becoming successful.

During my junior year I met Alfreddie Batts, a freshman at Lincoln High. My first attraction was probably to her skin, as black as mine. As I got to know her, the tragedy of her family life gave me tremendous empathy for her. When I met Freda, her grandmother, Miss Nelly Batts, had taken in both Freda and her twin brother Albert. Miss Batts had discovered not only that her son had been abusing the children for years, but that the three of them had been living in his car for most of their lives. I never learned what happened to their mother. Miss Batts was respected as if she were the Mahatma Gandhi of the community. I adored her. She was strong and positive and filled the gap that Momma had left. She encouraged me to join them in church and support Freda's gift, her voice. Freda's singing was so amazing it would give me goose bumps. It also got her singing engagements and radio spots as early as her sophomore year. Between her grandmother's inspirational guidance and my encouragement, Freda's self-esteem began to grow.

Midway through my junior year, my siblings and I received a letter from Momma. It came as a huge surprise because it was the first contact we had had up until now, and also because she had never known how to write, not even her name. The letter blew my mind and brought a smile to my face. It made me believe there was nothing you couldn't do if you put your mind to it.

Six months later, she came home. Pop was on the porch and the four of us kids were out front when a black Chevrolet pulled up and she got out. All fit and trim, she looked more beautiful than ever. While everybody was frozen in shock, I ran up to her and with a big embrace said, "Momma, I'm glad you're home." But as she was patting me, she saw Pop pick up his brown bag and walk into the house. She followed after him. We stayed outside thinking they needed the space to reunite and say whatever they were going to say to each other. I couldn't make out any of their words, but I could hear Momma doing all the talking. He kept walking through the house as she followed him. I think she was pleading with him to stay. They went through the living room and into the dining room. Then with his bag, Pop was out the back through the kitchen door. He came from around the side of the house, passed me without any acknowledgment and walked right on down the street, disappearing into another life, without even a goodbye. When Charlie Mae came out and sat down on the porch, I could see she was broken-hearted. Her black skin went ashy, as it seemed all the life in her had been drained out. I couldn't understand how a father could walk out after 24 years and so many children, leaving us with nothing.

We found out later Pop was spending the money he made from his city job on another woman. Later he bought property for them to live on. For the next year or so, he came around occasionally. I never looked him in the face again, having finally lost all respect for him. For a while he gave Momma \$50 a month to take care of four growing kids. I looked in every spot I'd seen Pops stash money, knowing he must have for gotten at least a couple of hiding places in his drunken haze. Sure enough, under a floor board in an upstairs

closet, I found a couple of hundred dollars. But it was tough. Some months the electricity was turned off and we had to use kerosene lamps and put our food in a big tin washtub with an ice block.

Charlie Mae was never the same. She began drinking heavily and let herself go. Momma never planted another garden or sat on the porch with friends. The effect one spouse could have on the other one's life astonished me. And there was nothing I could do.

By that time my surrogate mother, Miss Batts, was declining. She had been diagnosed with cancer and without treatment, she was rapidly dying at home. I spent a lot of time there helping care for her. When she died, the house was left to Freda and her brother, who were still in high school with few resources to pay for it.

During my senior year, I had made the decision to move out of my family's house and into a small trailer home my friend Ira's family had parked in their backyard. I knew Momma and my sisters and brother were disappointed I left, but going out on my own gave me hope that I could escape the confines of a world that didn't support my desire to be successful.

In contrast to the tragedies around me, my life on the athletic field was better than imaginable. I was All-Conference, All-State running back and most valuable football player and track man during my senior year in 1965. I ran a 9.5 in the hundred yard dash. Twenty-four feet 11 inches was my distance in the broad jump. I threw the shot put 52 feet 11 inches and was the discus champion at my school with a distance of 183 feet 11 inches. Being a great athlete gave me a lot of confidence in myself to the point that I was a little cocky.

The AAU's division for bodybuilding was very popular at this time. They held competitions almost every weekend somewhere in the state of Florida, as well as in other Southern States, particularly Virginia and the Carolinas. It took me some time to save up, but I became a member and received my list of their competitions. Greg Hogan was the crew member with

the wheels. His blue Volvo carried us through the South, into Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, South Carolina and Louisiana.

Sometimes “Big Bro” Ira would compete with me, but Greg and “Burney” would just come for support. It was usually Burney and me sitting in the back, with me eating my apples and bananas, envisioning the competition and how I would look and feel when I won. With the competitions always held on Saturdays, we would leave Friday night and depending on the distance, either drive through the night or pull over and sleep for a while.

There was a lot of attitude from the other competitors directed towards me and plenty of name-calling from the audience like, “Don’t let that nigger win all the body parts.” I could see their disapproval towards me wasn’t so much about me being a nigger as it was about me being a nigger who was so much better than the white competitors. So I took their derogatory comments as cheers, indirectly letting me know I was the best. This negative attention only strengthened my resolve and made me a tougher, in-your-face competitor. Up on stage, I strutted and flexed with enough attitude for all the competitors. I didn’t care when I didn’t win; everybody knew who the best was on the stage. What I wanted to win was the South Eastern United States Championship. I figured in time, they would have to award me the title. My training had taught me patience.

Since my school was all black and segregation kept us from playing against white schools, I hadn’t had the opportunity to compete in any sport against white athletes. Hell, I didn’t even know white athletes existed. So the experience of racism in an athletic competition was new for me. Having a Negro, particularly a dominating, muscular Negro, up on the stage was new to the white bodybuilders. I could tell they needed a little time to get used to it.

After the show, my crew and I would quickly jump in our Volvo and leave town. Only a couple of times, when the words became too strong and right in my face, was I verbally aggressive back. Nothing ever became physical, and I’m surprised we were never attacked or our car ransacked or

torched. I thought it was our size, but probably it was just our luck. I was so driven, I never thought about how easily we could have wound up alligator meat.

Once up on that stage, luck was not involved, so I always came prepared to do battle. If I was going to be the only “spot” up there with 40 to 50 white competitors, I had better have the whole package. I was so far ahead of the other competitors in my development, at times I was embarrassed. I was killing them with all my years of hard and heavy workouts and my bountiful, natural eating. There would always be a handful of guys who were big, but they looked softer, with less defined muscles. I wondered if they were eating something different from me. But I knew their results lacked the hardness my muscle had so I kept doing what I was doing.

The judges never quite knew how to place me. They knew they didn't want to award a Negro the first-place trophy. So they would give me all of the body part awards and put me in fifth place. Maybe they thought I wouldn't have gotten out of there alive and they were doing me a favor. I was fine with the placing because it was obvious, who the winner was. I was on a roll. In my eyes, I was winning at every stop and building a reputation. I was becoming a legend in the South.



THE WAR AT HOME
AND THE ONE ABROAD

The months following high school graduation in 1965 were difficult and solemn for me. I had received a scholarship offer to play football at Florida A & M, the route Bob Hayes took, but without acquired abilities and attitude, I let the offer sit. I was down on myself and didn't believe I had the aptitude for college. There was also the nagging fear of getting my draft papers for Vietnam.

I got a part-time job setting up pins in the bowling alley. It put money in my pocket, but reminded me of the limitations of my education. Whereas traveling and competing in bodybuilding competitions on the other hand had opened up my world and created many new possibilities.

With the possibility of going to A & M, I ventured onto the campus hoping to train in the weight room I had only been in after hours. There I met a brother named Bernard Jacobs. He was a student at A & M, then probably a sophomore. He had pure size, thickness and muscularity. I was so inspired and motivated by seeing a black man that was big, muscular and in college. The times we trained together Bernard taught me all the power lifting moves like the clean and press, dead lift and squat. He was a stickler for technique and demanded perfect execution of the exercise. I discovered that with the correct body placement in these compound exercises, you not only make the exercise easier on the body's entire structure, you also put more stress or work where you want it, on the muscle bellies not the joints. That added up to being able to lift more weight, more efficiently with less wear and tear on the body. I started to wrap my knees and wear a weight belt on heavy sets to protect and stabilize my knees and back.

A & M's equipment was limited to a horizontal leg press and some scattered weights, so with my confidence high in my athletic accomplishments, I decided it was time the crew tried to get into the nearby Florida State weight room. The

gym was in the basement in a 10 by 20 foot room, behind a jail-like cage. Walking down the stairs, my heart started to race as I made out sounds of weights clinking. Though not much larger than A & M's space, Florida State's weight room had more equipment. While we were standing at the door looking in, our jaws hanging and eyes popping, a white student who was working out came up to us and introduced himself as Richard Baldwin. I was amazed at his physique; it was even better than any of the competitors I had seen the previous week. He had developed his body in a beautiful, healthy way. Richard was a little shy and reserved, but nice. He let us come in to train. From that day on, football took the back seat. His style of training was heavy, but not so heavy that he lost the perfect control and awareness of the muscle throughout the movement. His approach was concise and his execution was like art. I realized through watching Richard that if my movements were precise with intense awareness of the working muscle, I would mold and create a beautiful, aesthetic body. In other words, I would get different results depending upon my execution.

Richard inspired me and fueled my dreams by opening a new world to me. He treated me not only as his equal but as someone special. One day he said to my friends and me, "You guys can come by my house and look at my muscle magazines."

I played off my utter surprise but quickly said, "Sure, when?"

Richard gave us the address, and that day we went over to visit him. Here was a white man befriending me and my crew and allowing us into his home at a time when most white folks did not allow black people into their home unless we were there to clean it. It was the first white home I had ever been in. Not the Innes' shack or even other blacks' houses for that matter. That was just something we never did. Even among blacks there was lack of trust. Richard had us enter through the front door no less. It was a beautiful home with hardwood oak floors and elegant leather furniture. But it was in the bathroom that I was most amazed. Until then I had never seen faucets in a house with running water.

When I walked into his large living room and saw all of his muscle magazines, I could hardly control my excitement. I was getting pumped up just sitting there looking at the physiques and talking about how I was going to be on this cover and in that article.

Richard let us stay for hours as we looked at his *Muscle Builders*. I could see the joy he got out of watching us marvel at the photos and articles in the magazines. But you should have seen the look on his wife's face when she walked through the door and saw three dusty, poor negroes sitting on her floor. Richard gave her a look, saying it was okay and she slipped out of the room and into the kitchen, never to be seen again.

Already studying and comparing the physiques, I stopped on a picture of Frank Zane and realized how similar his build was to Richard's. He was right up there with the best in his development.

I had fun dreaming. Articles about Harold Poole, Freddy Ortiz and others motivated me and allowed me to see myself in their places. My vision was to have my picture on the cover of *Muscle Builder*. We returned many times to Richard's house to read every word and study every photo, until Richard graduated and moved away.

Another character, Big George, would also allow us in to train at the university gym. Because of his size and presence, he ruled the Florida State weight room. So if Big George was there, I was welcomed. He was a big, tough, white guy and I was a big, tough, black guy. We both took pride in that fact. But there wasn't a thought about race during our workouts. He and Richard protected us from the guys who didn't want us around or lying down on the benches.

The majority of the time, Big George was doing ten sets of ten repetitions using two of the basic exercises. That was his thing; two exercises, ten sets, ten reps. He would invite me to do face-offs; you face your partner and do your ten curls with a 90 pound barbell, before passing it to him. With only a one minute rest while the other guy did his set, we would be sweating a river, white sweat and black sweat all

mixed together. Big George instilled a toughness in me. Our grueling workouts set my standard for training hard.

I would catch him at the gym once, maybe twice a week. On my other days, I worked around what we had just trained, still basically training the whole body every day but Sunday. If Richard or Big George were there I could train, if they had a class, it was a long walk back to the woods.

I found an article in *Muscle Builder* about Arthur Jones and his new method of training. When I read that he'd set up a gym in Deland, Florida, I knew I had to go check it out. With my confidence at a high, I called his number and got the okay to come see his facilities.

Mr. Jones was a real character. His spread included not only an arsenal of equipment that he had designed, but also a menagerie of exotic animals, from fancy birds to alligators. After he showed Ira and me around, he led us into a huge airplane hanger that housed his gym.

His new equipment line was called Nautilus, and his training approach was brutal. He put me through a leg routine that took no more than 30 minutes. Mr. Jones believed that after a warm up set, all a muscle needed to respond and grow was one set, using the maximum weight load you could handle, taking it to failure somewhere in the eight to ten repetition range. Since I had years of lifting heavy and had the endurance from my ten sets per exercise, I was prepared to handle what he demanded. The thing that challenged my muscles was that his equipment was new to my body. The only leg press apparatus I had ever seen was one that you pressed vertically from the ground with an overhead platform of free weights. With its chains and gears, the Nautilus machines must have been inspired by a bicycle. One machine could be used for a leg press and a leg extension. Here is where I learned about super-setting exercises. He had me do a set of leg extensions, immediately followed by a set of leg presses. This pre-exhausting set made the quadriceps pull from every corner to move that weight, taking my legs to a new level. Every aspect of training fascinated me. I wanted to keep learning.

Then the papers came.

Being drafted into the United States Armed Forces was not something I welcomed. The idea of traveling thousands of miles to fight a war I really didn't understand was confusing. I started to worry I would lose all my hard-earned muscle, and that my bodybuilding dreams would not be realized.

At 19 years old, I had a lot of hormones and emotions flooding through my system. And now all of a sudden I had to start making major life decisions. With little communication going on in my family and in the black community, there was no talk about what was going on in the world. It was clear I had to learn about everything on my own.

When I got my draft papers, I immediately started reading the *Tallahassee Democrat* to find out what was happening in the world. There was a piece on how some Americans were going to Canada to escape the draft. This sounded like a good idea to me. I felt like I was already fighting a war in the South with racism. I had no quarrel with the Vietcong. They'd never done anything against me. Even though I wanted to go to Canada, Momma convinced me otherwise. She thought avoiding the draft was a good idea, but she didn't want to see me go to jail. As always, Momma was right.

It was then that I proposed to Freda. I cared about her and felt bad that she had lost her grandmother. I figured I might as well send her my military salary and if I didn't make it out alive, the government would be responsible for taking care of her. We were married at the house by a friend of Miss Batts, the Reverend Sanders. It was just the three of us and Freda's aunt Callie Lewis, who lived across the street. No honeymoon, just back to work the next day for both of us.

In December 1965, I went into basic training at Fort Benning, Georgia, feeling very alone. I had a tough time being told what to do and following the army's rules. But if you didn't follow the rules and regulations, you'd end up in the stockades. I had never been in jail and wasn't about to go that route, so I realized I had to change my mind set. I made the discipline part of my own training. All the while I was a total

rebel in my mind, hating taking orders from white authority and constantly considering going AWOL.

My drill sergeants were all built from years of working out. That made an impression on me as a 19 year-old. They were hard on us and had a power you were not going to go up against, but I did resist giving my mind up to them. I took pride in my strong independent thinking. But when I thought back on failing English in Miss Estrase's class because of my stubborn, know-it-all attitude, I realized this was a similar situation. My resistance was not serving any purpose and was shutting down the possibility of learning and growing further. After that discovery, I started to have respect for their authority and take on their demands as a challenge. All in all, they were the type of man I wanted to become.

I figured if I had a goal or mission, I would have something to focus on; the experience would have some use afterwards. I knew the better my discipline, the better soldier and bodybuilder I would make, so I practiced our army regimes just as I had practiced my bodybuilding. Discipline to me meant following a preset course with intense focus, while wearing blinders. You accepted no distractions.

I loved being pushed in the physical regimes because my mind was still set on becoming Mr. America and Mr. World. The workload was perfect for me. I was able to eat as much food as needed to keep my muscles full and strong.

On top of the basic training, I also kept up my own daily training routine. In my duffel bag, I toted around 110 pounds of weights and a weight bar that stuck out of the bag. I shrugged off a lot of flack for my early morning workouts because it was unheard of to lift weights in the army. Again, it was considered sissy to want a pretty body.

There was a certain amount of camaraderie among most of the men in each barracks that empowered us as a group. In a way I felt like I was back on the football field. Some of the white soldiers were okay with their black comrades and some were not. In the barracks it was either all white or mixed. Like back home, here, if you stumbled into a strictly white unit, you were quickly reminded you were in the

wrong place. Though blacks were the majority in my barracks, there was a comfortable feeling between us and the few whites. That made us a stronger unit because we weren't going to be thinking about color out on the battlefield. We put all hesitations behind us.

I befriended a white comrade, Derrick, and through him learned to accept and respect someone of a different race. We had a deep concern for each other and the situation we were both in. This type of bond with anyone was new to me.

After infantry and then advanced infantry training at Fort Dix, New Jersey, and now a Specialist Fourth Class, I decided to go on to paratrooper school at Fort Benning, Georgia. I figured more training time would prepare me better and delay my deployment. We were told it would be to either Vietnam or the Dominican Republic.

During my leave in Tallahassee, I found Freda doing well in her senior year, still singing. Miss Ruby Diamond, who owned the Florida Hotel and was one of the richest white women in Florida, hired Freda part-time as her assistant.

If my strong conviction not to go to Vietnam wasn't enough, while I was away, antiwar sentiments were starting to brew and demonstrations around the country were in the news. I realized that we soldiers would be looked down upon because of the Vietnam War. This had a huge effect on me. I knew I was on my way to Vietnam and that I might very possibly die there, yet I wouldn't even get respect for dying for my country. My respect and grief for the guys who lost their lives strengthened my commitment to myself and my survival. I felt it was me against the world and you don't entrust anyone with your life, so when the day to report back to the base came up, I didn't show. I knew it would only give me a couple days.

Refusing to go back after my leave time, I lost a stripe, and half a month's pay as well as being given battalion clean-up duty and KP for a month. I didn't regret it. I liked having a little more say over my fate. Returning late caused me to miss my group's deployment to Vietnam, and I was sent to The Dominican Republic for a six-month non-combat tour of duty.

We were the occupying forces in the Dominican after the Johnston administration's invasion in 1965. With the weather similar to Vietnam's, it made ideal training ground to further prepare more troops for Vietnam.

In the Dominican, it would rain for seven consecutive days nonstop. I felt like I was back in Tallahassee. All I cared was that I wasn't in Vietnam. The enemy down in the Caribbean was not people; it was the bugs and tarantulas that were everywhere. Tallahassee had its share of insects but I hadn't seen anything like the varmints in the Dominican. We would dig a foxhole and dozens of tarantulas would scatter out.

During my six-month tour there, when we weren't out on a week long training maneuver, we would spend days confined to the compound. It was like we were in a prison. So everyone was looking to dig a hole and get out at night. If you could get outside the fence, it was a holiday. Every night it was a party with the women coming up to the fence, cackling for a John. "Too mucho grande" is what they would say to me, but I just wanted to be on the outside, walking around. If you got caught outside the perimeter, as many of my tent mates did, you were fined and had to serve battalion clean-up for a month. Fortune seemed to be on my side.

I was glad that for now my biggest worry was that I would lose the size I had worked so religiously to achieve. For me, that meant staying away as much as possible from the sea rations that we were given when we went out in the field. The one can of salted beef I tried made me sick for days. So I learnt quickly how to survive on very little, mostly fruits and boiled eggs. I would lose five pounds out in the field for two weeks, and then try to put them back on at the base camp with my Hoffman's Vanilla Protein Powder mixed with water.

Out on maneuvers, my job was a deuce mortar assistant gunner, setting elevations and dropping ammunition. Our only concern was an erratic round could fall short and take out your own men. I lost the hearing in my right ear as a result of my job. This didn't get an early discharge for me, because when I was sent home from the Dominican, my time

served was two-years and 20 days. I had fulfilled by two-year draft requirement and couldn't be sent to Vietnam. This left a bittersweet feeling in me. I felt lucky and relieved, but guilty that I'd slipped through while so many didn't and lost their lives.

I took what I thought I could use from my experience in the army and tried to leave the rest behind. Working as a gunner made me stronger and gave me an edge in my lifting. I realized that, much like the principle of gaining muscle, the army broke us down in order to build a stronger person. The discipline conditioned my mind to trust order.

I adapted to increased physical and psychological demands - more than I had from simply lifting weights. I went into the army already having a life or death tenacity in my approach to training and life, but the army allowed me to hone the attitude and practice. Stamina was ingrained forever in my brain. My experience toughened my intent and instilled in me a determination to stand up for what I believed in. I was hell-bent on leaving my mark in life.

I was glad to be finished with my service, thankful I escaped Vietnam, but skeptical about what I would find on the home front.

My tour of duty had been taken alone. With only one letter from Freda and no support from my family, I was torn about seeing them. While in the army, a friend of mine named Henry Rosier had met up with me and told me that he had gone by to check on Freda before leaving for my tour. He said she was seeing someone. I went to Freda's house with the intent of working things out. As I walked through the house calling her name, she was nowhere to be seen. Then I found her in the bedroom, sitting on the bed with her elbow resting on her knee and her hand over her mouth. I stood there for a second, waiting for some kind of greeting. My attention shifted to the sound of a baby, and looked to see one, moving around in a crib. I was immediately drawn to the cute little bald thing, dressed in pink baby clothes with no shoes. Because she was so skinny, she stole my heart. When I picked her up, she started moving her arms and legs in a playful way.

I didn't question if she was my daughter, because I was focused on them being happy. All the while, Freda showed no emotions. Having been neglected and abused herself, she had no tools to nurture and care for a child. In retrospect we could have both used counseling, but at the time I thought I could fix the situation.

Because I was still angry over my family's circumstances, I couldn't face seeing them. I needed to get my life in order; I wanted to accomplish something. When my father finally left the family for good, the situation affected everyone involved. Momma withdrew into a life of alcohol and depression. I learned my older brothers, Willie Jr. and Reilly, had moved her and my sisters to Palmetto, Florida, while I was away. Jerry, with no visible job, was sporting expensive clothes and cars while chasing women and playing the gangster. And my sisters were lost young women with nowhere to go. Sally Ann, who had a child outside of her marriage, was now Freda's best friend. This didn't sit well with me, but I said nothing.

A lot of guys I knew were recruited shortly after I had been, coming in at the tail end of the war. I had hoped to come back and pull my crew together, but it wasn't meant to be. Greg lost a bit of his mind. He was a 26-year-old man, living with his mother, talking to himself. When I would go to see him, he would mumble strange words through the screen door. David, the youngest of the group, was drafted, but because he was a bit gumpy, he was given a job downtown in a government building. He had stopped training and had started drinking heavily. Richard Wood was imprisoned for killing a man. His younger brother James, while attending a newly desegregated school, was convicted of raping a white girl. It was heart-breaking. So much had changed for the worse and in such a short time.

It was inevitable that a strong-willed black man at this time of Malcolm X's influence, would want to learn more about the Muslim religion. With the thought of organized religion still leaving a bad taste in my mouth, I didn't want to be part of a group. But I read "The Diary of a Black Muslim" and could relate to aspects of the Muslim philosophy. I agreed

with its underlying belief that discipline is the foundation of a strong mind and body, and the idea that a black man should not be aggressive, but if confronted with indecent treatment should defend his right to be treated equally, even if it meant death. On the other hand I agreed with Dr. King's belief in integration, rather than separation. I doubted that it would happen easily. Could blacks and whites sit down and have a serious conversation and come to some kind of agreement? Understanding? Set up rules and guidelines? It was hard to see how anything could turn around the state of things, passed down through generations of blacks being treated badly. Would the stigma ever disappear? This weighed heavily and constantly on me because all the events of my life were a constant reminder.

Starting my training again, I knew that finding a place to work out was going to be a challenge. Ira made it out of the war okay and was training to be a deputy sheriff. But our schedules wouldn't jibe, so I was on my own. Without the four of us, the thought of going to Florida State, on the white side of town, didn't interest me. I wanted to go back to my old training grounds at Florida A & M, but there was a whole new guard at the door. As a grown man I was not about to climb a tree and get caught breaking and entering. So I had to solicit new help. As fortune had it, some of the university football players were training the day I went scoping out my prospects. A football player by the name of André White allowed me to pass as one of them and train at the same time they trained. At times like these my luck was so great, I thought I had an angel.

It took me some time to get a training routine together. I felt like I was starting all over again, with only the foundation and conditioning I had maintained with my daily weight training and the army's rigorous conditioning demands. All the running, chin ups and walking bars had given me another kind of strengthening that was good, but I had to retrain all my muscles to lift the heavy weights again. I didn't look at my time spent in the army as a setback because it had given my joints, tendons and ligaments a chance to rest from all my years of heavy training.

At this point, I was training hard, but wasn't hell-bent on becoming a professional bodybuilder. I was concerned about avoiding the black man's plight, so many I knew fell into: a battered self-esteem from lack of respect and quality job opportunities. I knew from my younger days of working hard with odd jobs and just breaking even, that packing books was definitely not what I wanted. I heard people in the black community say: abide by the law, go to church, do right, live by the Lord and everything will work out. However, I couldn't trust that everything would work out, especially being a black veteran with only half his hearing. I needed a solid field, one I could be secure in. So I used the GI Bill to take a home-study course in heavy equipment, specializing in road construction. The idea of building something from drawings, with completed work at the end, appealed to me. Through each course and test, I was proud of my accomplishments. I worked hard and graduated in the top percentile. After several interviews for job placement, I was told that no company would hire a black man as one of their operators. After all that.

Since I was under-qualified, it was only with the help of a finance company that I could secure a good job in Tallahassee. I paid the company \$20 a week for six months for helping me get a job as the wire room manager at the *Tallahassee Democrat* newspaper. This was a dream job for a black man. I was responsible for collecting all the news that came in from the Associated Press and the United Press International wired messages, distributing stories to the different departments. I loved the job because it was challenging and educational. However, it meant getting to work at 5 a.m. and staying until 5 p.m. Fortunately, they had a really good cafeteria, so I could get quality meals and not have to worry about bringing them. It was a demanding job that kept me on my feet all day. I was ready to get that bus at 5 p.m. so I could finally plan my workout. Training at Florida A&M was going well and I was back competing. To my delight, there was a competition at Florida State in six weeks.

I had already started wearing clip-on hoop earrings and scarves on my head, and I pulled out all the stops, styling at the first competition I entered. I arrived dressed in a pair of

green patent leather platform shoes, brown bellbottom pants, dark brown jacket and a soft brown oversized top hat with a long brown and white feather. Boy, the looks I got.

Ellington Darden, one of the competitors that day in 1969, had already established a name in the amateur circuit throughout the South. He was a good-looking guy with the broad chest, carrying himself with incredible style. He had a James Dean look, with a blond Pompadour wave. By his manner, I could tell he was an educated man. From our posing, you could tell that he had done this before, and I had not. But I had better development and size. He ended up winning the first place prize and best chest in the body part awards. I came in fifth overall and won all the remaining body part awards. After the award ceremony, while we were all still up on the stage, Ellington saw me drift to the back, behind the group of competitors. He pulled me to center stage, holding my arm up and presenting me with the award. The crowd was silent at first, stunned by his gesture and then it went crazy, applauding and screaming. I guess Ell had won before and figured I could use the support, being so young and having to endure racial slurs from the audience. He was right, it made me feel better as a person and gave me the confidence to stay with competing. I had a lot of respect for him as a competitor and as a man.

Since my sights were again focused on competing at a higher level, I wanted to experience a big show. When I read that the Mr. Olympia was coming up, I hopped on a Greyhound bus and headed up to New York City in September of 1970. The reigning Mr. Olympia, Sergio Oliva, was battling it out with an Austrian named Arnold Schwarzenegger. This was the only professional IFBB show an amateur bodybuilder could advance to if he won overall in the IFBB Mr. Universe. The prize was \$1000.

I arrived straight off the bus wearing my one and only dress outfit, the same one I wore to all the shows I entered. Those same green platforms, brown jacket and pants and my large floral printed shirt. My fro had gained considerable size since returning from the service. If you had told me I wasn't going to be a superstar, I would have laughed at you.

I stood at the back of the theater and coolly leaned on a rail, quietly freaking out. Never before had I seen such incredible physiques, flexing body part for body part. Sergio and Arnold. A black man and a white man. The two best physiques in the world, banging it out. The crowd was larger and louder than any I had experienced at a competition. Their screams were deafening. Adrenaline surged through my body and I could barely breathe. I could feel my heart pounding and my muscles flexing on their own. That was me up there, strutting and posing, ripped to the bone. I could hear them call out my name for the comparison round.

All the other competitors seemed to fade into the background as Arnold and Sergio posed for the title. I knew Sergio's physique because he was more well-known, particularly on the East coast, so I focused on Arnold. He had a charisma that radiated a polished glow to his physique. They were both impressive and had beautiful shapes to their whole package, but Sergio had larger, more developed muscles by far. Because they were the two big names and the best in the show, at the end they were asked to be the only competitors on the stage. After their pose-down, the announcer told them they could leave the stage. As they started to walk off, Arnold courteously gestured to Sergio to exit first. At this point, Arnold slowed down. Once he saw that Sergio was backstage, he turned around, walked back to center stage and continued posing without Sergio. Sergio's lack of focus on his opponent cost him the show, because the crowd went wild again with Arnold's posing. His stunt won him his first Mr. Olympia title.

The show had a big impact on me. On the one hand, I was fueled with more determination in the gym and had a sharper vision of myself up on that stage, on the other hand, it became even more clear that a career in bodybuilding would not have the financial security my present job had. The idea that the top competitor could only bring home a \$1000 paycheck once a year was insane.

Meanwhile, my position at the *Democrat* helped build my confidence that there was a place in the world for me. The most exciting moments for me were when they ran stories of me winning a competition. The writers were supportive of my

accomplishments and they made sure I got my story in print. More than ever, I wanted to be someone and I knew that meant working harder than everybody else.

Working at the *Democrat* allowed me to pay the mortgage on Freda's house and support my growing family. Four years had gone by since returning from the service, and we now had three children, Sheri Denise, Tanya Marie and Robert Lee III. My weekends were spent at home, and in the evenings, since I wasn't into going out and partying and because Freda was home with the kids during the day, I relieved her so she could go out with her friends. Because neither of us had had good adult role models, we lacked communication skills. We had trouble getting close. We were able to operate on a certain level together, but thriving and growing was not happening for either one of us. Looking back, I realize even with a house, a portion of my paycheck and gifts, Freda was not getting what she needed to be happy. I could have been around more, but after being abused for so long, it seemed impossible for her to be happy. Without my support, while I was in the army, Freda had abandoned her singing. I thought this must have bothered her, because now I was seeing the possibilities of becoming a professional bodybuilding slipping away and this disturbed me. I believed I could have it all, yet, I felt in this relationship, I wasn't getting the support or encouragement I needed to reach my goals.

Arguments escalated more and more often. I couldn't see myself realizing my dreams, so I left and moved into my own apartment. I didn't make an effort to see her or the kids. I would leave money at the house for them, but could never bring myself to knock. By now, Sherrie was six, Tanya was three, and Robert was a toddler. I wouldn't talk with them again for another 35 years.

I became relentless, placing huge demands on my body with work and training. One day in my fifth year at the paper, I had a hard time breathing, with pain at my sternum. For someone who was normally a ball of energy, I was exhausted. If I stood up after bending over to pick something up, I had so much pain in my chest I thought I was going to have a heart attack. Stubborn warrior that I was, I kept working and lifting

weights. After two weeks, dragging myself home from work, a voice inside me said, "Take yourself to the hospital or you are going to die." The closest hospital was a white-serving one, but because of my condition and the fear of a backlash if they turned me away, they reluctantly admitted me. I was diagnosed with pericarditis; the sac around my heart was inflamed and filled with fluid. They immediately stabbed a eight-inch needle through my sternum and into the sac surrounding my heart and pulled out several cc's of fluid. After weeks in bed and pretty much addicted to Demerol, my bodybuilding career looked as if it were over before it had begun. When I didn't pass stool for four days, I'd had enough of the pain killers.

Once again, I had to think about my future plans and goals. I was still determined to win the three most important amateur competitions: the Mr. America, Mr. World and Mr. Universe. Although the *Democrat* had kept its doors open to me, I knew there was no way I could keep this demanding job and chase my dreams at the same time. I battled with the decision. Undoubtedly, if I had asked for anyone's advice, they would have told me it was insane for a black man to give up the security of a rewarding job with a great paycheck. But I did. I wanted to do things I knew I couldn't do in Tallahassee.

With the time I needed to build myself back to competition shape, I used my second GI Bill to support myself as I attended the Tallahassee Junior College for Commercial Arts. I thought the commercial arts would make a fun and rewarding career; one I could do freelance or part-time while pursuing a bodybuilding career. I loved using pen and ink to do calligraphy and draw from life.

Art school allowed me to dress creatively. My favorite outfit was a short bolero jacket, white shirt, bow tie and a pair of pants with the buttoned square placket in the front. I quickly became the talk of the campus. The mixed student body made me feel on equal footing with my peers.

During my first semester, while walking through the central square on campus, I couldn't help noticing a group of girls critiquing me. Behind them, a striking young woman pushed her way through the crowd and made a beeline for me.

From that first day, this young lady, Ashley made it known that I was hers and we started dating. She was mulatto, with fair skin and fine features.

Within a couple of months I started competing once again in small amateur or gym competitions on the weekends. Because I had no car, I stayed somewhat local in my pursuits and occasionally took a Greyhound bus to overnight destinations. Traveling alone took every bit of my confidence. Long gone was the support of friends and the secure feeling I had riding in the back of the Volvo, carbing up on raisins and bananas.

With a total of 25 to 30 contests under my belt, I was starting to establish a name. My confidence to venture into other gyms was growing. Even then, it was not easy getting through those doors. But I was determined to be a star regardless of the doors closed to me because of my blackness.

My breakthrough came in 1974, in New Orleans, at the Mr. Southeastern United States, where for the first time, I was awarded the first-place trophy, as well as all the body parts. I knew as I stood up on that stage, even with my black skin, I was beaming from the adrenaline rush. The promoter of the show came up to me and said,

“You know, there was a lot of fans that were angry you won all the awards over them white boys. They asked me, how could you let that nigger win all them trophies? All I told them was, because that nigger was that good.”

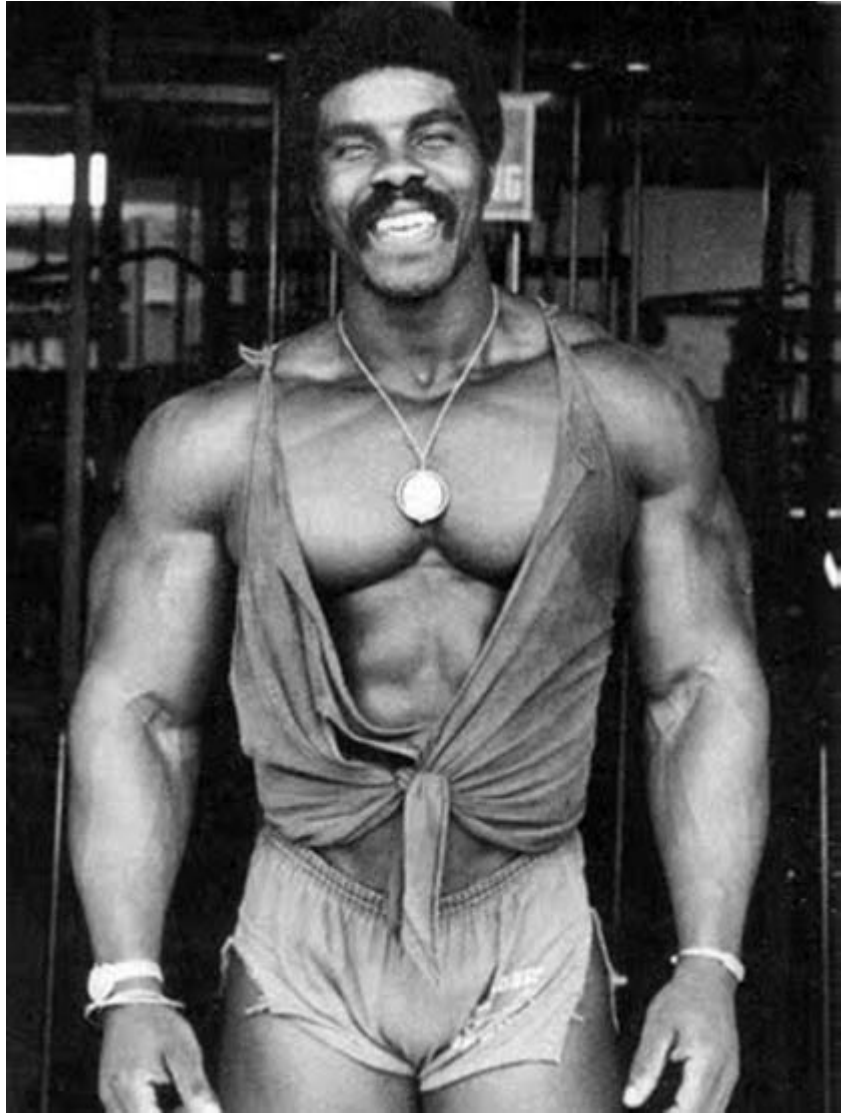
Now more than ever, I had to prove that on my own, even with these obstacles, nothing could stop me.

I didn't expect that with this victory, I could finally win the most prestigious show in Florida, the AAU Mr. Florida. The highly coveted title was one its promoter, John Mese, would not allow a black man to hold, representing Florida. He was a questionable character, whose intent to promote white competitors was obvious. Pressure? Never. Not during a grueling workout or any conflict. I always stayed smooth, relaxed. And that is the attitude I had on stage. I would

literally shake my booty at the judges as I would hit a pose. What did I have to lose?

They placed me in third, but gave me all the body part awards. Kent Kuehn, a friendly man with dyed blond hair and a confident strut, cheered his fellow competitors on, and won the event. I liked Kent but he had nowhere near the muscular development I had. But there was another competition scheduled that Saturday night, right after Mr. Florida. The AAU Mr. Greater Florida would make use of the venue, bodybuilders, judges and crowd to promote a new show. So within 15 minutes, the same competitors were back on the stage. Ironically, I won and Kent came in third. I figured Mese was worried his motives would look too obvious if he placed Kent on top again. I cleaned up that day, taking home 12 trophies; third-place, first-place and ten body part awards.

In the audience, was a spectator, a recently retired competitor who, tired of witnessing the injustices, decided that day to start promoting competitions himself. He came up to me and told me, "I hold your physique in high regard." Stan Morey was the first person, besides my training buddies, to say this to me. It really opened my eyes to what I had. It's hard to see your own physique. Stan would go on to become one of the top promoters for the AAU in Florida and fight for me so I could compete and enter some of the AAU competitions that had turned me away. Stan pushed me to join the Weider bodybuilders in Los Angeles, California, not Joe Weider, as it was to be published in magazines for years. Stan's support enhanced my presence and notoriety. He would later make a call to Arnold about this incredible black bodybuilder who was destined for greater things. He called Arnold as a friend asking him to set up an appointment with Joe Weider. It never happened.



THE MASTER BLASTER

After a year at art school, I saw in *Strength and Health* (Bob Hoffman's magazine), the next competition I wanted to enter: the 1975 AAU Mr. America. Taking place in Los Angeles, it was their most prestigious amateur title. Winning would get my name in the mix with all the bodybuilding stars; and the "The Master Blaster," Joe Weider, would invite me into his federation. Originating in 1939, the AAU Mr. America title had created stars out of Steve Reeves and Bill Pearl.

Even though the competition was only eight weeks away, I would be ready. I was never far from show-ready because I had eaten well and trained hard year round. So for the next two months, up until a couple of days before the show, I trained like a maniac and continued my normal diet.

I couldn't wait to get up on the stage. My competitors had been in the west coast bodybuilding scene for some time and were known from their pictures in *Strength and Health* and competing in this very show. California bodybuilding fans and judges had never seen me. Coming in as the unknown gave me a huge edge. My confidence was unparalleled as I walked into the backstage room where the bodybuilders were warming up. When everyone stopped and looked at me, I couldn't help but say out loud, "You all might as well go home."

When I found my spot next to an equally muscular black competitor, I extended my hand, "Robert Robinson, how ya doing?"

Dave Johns was from Pasadena, not far from Bill Pearl's gym where he trained. Dave said, "I placed sixth here last year. What do you think our chances of winning are?"

Flexing even harder, I asked, "What do you mean?"

Reluctantly, Dave answered, "I mean, guys like Sergio will win, don't you think?"

“Come on, Jim Morris and Chris Dickerson won this competition and I just won a title in the South. This is the big stage. They can’t deny the best.” I argued back.

As I started to carb up on raisins and pump up with basic exercises using my body weight, Dave continued, “Yeah, well, I think I drank too much vinegar and lost some size; dried me up too much. You ever used that to cut up?”

“No, I just come as I am.” He did look a little flat. Too much concern was a sign of doubt, and with doubt, people over or under compensate and blow their mark. It is amazing to see a competitor’s muscles deflate before a show by just seeing another competitor in better shape. That’s exactly what I witnessed at this competition.

On stage, the crowd was behind me with their cheers. I ended up placing second in the medium class and fifth in the overall, but as in so many contests before, I was given the Most Muscular Award. When I accepted my trophy, I strutted across the stage holding it over my head, like I had won the title. With the honor the Most Muscular Man award carried with it, I knew I would get the recognition I needed. I was thrilled. I could sense these guys were on something, and felt proud I was beating them. I couldn’t help but think if I could get some of that, with the way I trained, I’d look like some kind of monstrosity.

After Dave Johns placed low, I told him there was always next year. He gave me his number and told me I always had a place to stay when I was in California.

In the meantime, it was back home to take the Mr. Florida title. With Ira by my side, we drove to the competition in Tampa. This year, placing so high in the AAU Mr. America, gave me dominance over my competitors. It would be hard now for the judges to keep up the charade. If I won, I would be the first black man to hold the Mr. Florida title - a huge deal back in the mid-seventies. Representing my state as its best bodybuilder would give me the notoriety needed to move on to the national level. Again, up on the stage, I was the only black man standing in a vast sea of white bodies. The other guys had muscular physiques, but there was no comparison. I didn’t

know then that possessing a mesomorph body type, with the hardiest blood type -O- on a 5'8" frame gave me a huge edge in bodybuilding. I believed that if my efforts exceeded those of my competitors, I would be the best. I won first place and was now ready on all levels to tackle my next goals: the IFBB Mr. World and the IFBB Mr. Universe.

Now that I had started winning, I became a little greedy and couldn't resist competing one more time in the AAU Mr. Southern States, in Gainesville. The year before, I had swept the competition, taking home not only the first place title, but all the body part awards as well. That was when the promoter had said I won because I was "that good." Since it was only a couple of weeks away and I had already sent in my entry form, I couldn't resist. A week before the competition, I received a letter from the AAU promoters asking me not to come. Even my competitors had signed the letter. I saw it as a compliment "Robert Lee, you kicked everybody's ass last year. Why don't you give the other guys a break and not come back? That and another letter I received the same week, let me know it was time to move on and out of Florida. The other letter was from Joe Weider, inviting me out to California to be a part of his stable of bodybuilders.

With very little money, I took Dave up on his offer to stay with him in Pasadena. He was a probation officer and lived not too far from Bill Pearl's gym. For the next three months I stayed with Dave, training with him at Bill's gym. Bill was nice enough to let me train for free and Dave fed me, so I was able to get by.

Dave was easily the strongest training partner I had ever encountered. He had thighs twice the size of an average man's leg, and calves I had never seen on a black man. Following his schedule, I began a new approach to training and my development exploded in response. That schedule provided more rest, which allowed the body time to heal and grow. Instead of working the whole body every day, as I had for years, we were isolating body parts on certain days. So a muscle had a good four days' rest before we would work it again. In addition, we were giving ourselves a four to five minute rest between sets, allowing us more energy to lift

heavier on the next set and squeezing out one or two more reps.

Flyers for the IFBB Mr. America competition, just three months away, went up on the bulletin board at the gym. The sixteen-year-old IFBB version of the Mr. America contest rivaled the AAU's, which had the prestige of having been around since the late 30s. When the current issue of *Muscle Builder* circulated through the gym, there was a shot of me hitting a double bicep pose in the advertisement for the IFBB competition. I wasn't even part of their federation. The Weiders were creating an excitement around their show by putting an unknown in their ad. Winning this show, I could claim the "Mr. America" title the AAU should have awarded me, according to the audience's opinion. I hadn't had any contact with Weider about the letter he had sent me, nor had I taken any photos with him. I had no idea where the photo they used came from, but it psyched me even more about the show and what I interpreted as a second invitation from Joe Weider. Looking at the photo, I could already visualize myself as the new Mr. America.

At this point I thought it might be wise for me to head over to the famous Gold's Gym in Venice, so I'd be in the mix with Joe Weider's stable of bodybuilders. When I asked the guys at Pearl's gym if they agreed, I got a unanimous "no." They told me straight out that Weider was a nice guy to only a few, and that he was really only supporting Arnold. Dave chose not to compete in the Weider's IFBB and remained amateur, staying with the AAU federation. He told me point blank that if I went, it would be like putting a noose around my neck, because Joe had never supported a black bodybuilder, not even Sergio. Their reasons kept me right where I was. But I still wanted the Mr. America title.

By show time, I was ready. The competition was held at the Grande Street Auditorium, in downtown Los Angeles. And it was packed. In my head I was huge, and I believed I was the biggest on the stage. In actuality I wasn't. I was lean and muscular, but not really big. However, when I flexed up on the stage under the lights, people told me I looked bigger than the other competitors. I realized it was because of how

they lit the stage. The lighting created the illusion that we were all bigger than we really were. It worked especially well for the black competitors, and particularly for me. The light created brighter highlights and darker shadows on black skin, giving the muscle more fullness and depth. So size didn't matter as much as the depth of your cuts. That's what I had over the others.

When the results were in, I swept the show, taking first place, as well as all the body part awards and the Most Muscular Man Award. Joe Weider presented the awards to me, and backstage he approached me. He said he wanted to take a few photos of me. After taking a dozen or so, he told me a photographer by the name of Gene Mozze would be contacting me from Gold's Gym.

The Weiders' plan worked; their federation started to take off while the AAU federation became less popular. Joe Weider knew the chance to win his Mr. America title would lure me to enter their show and join their federation. It would make me the next big name in his federation. It's where all the top competitors were and my move created a wave of others who followed. Leaving the AAU caused a lot of animosity between Dave Johns and me, the other AAU competitors, and Bill Pearl.

It was obvious at that time that Weider was taking over bodybuilding. He had all the pieces in place: an international federation controlling the competitions, international distribution of his magazine, and a marquee star who everyone was buzzing about, me. Overnight, I became an international bodybuilding celebrity.

From Pasadena, I made several day trips to Venice. The place suited me from the first day I stepped off the bus at Windward Circle. As I walked down Pacific Avenue towards Gold's Gym, it seemed as if everyone I passed was holding hands and smiling. I could almost smell the love in the air. I thought I was in heaven. If there was a place where racism wasn't apparent, it was Venice. Blacks were with whites, whites with Asians, Asians with blacks. You name it. The freedom to be yourself was perfect for me. I felt like I'd found

my spot in the world; a place where the individual was celebrated.

I thought to myself, if this is heaven, then I can't be too far from where the gods train. Just two blocks from the beach, there it sat - Joe Gold's gym. I had imagined it would have a huge, flashing neon "GOLD'S GYM" sign, reflecting the power and excitement that it housed. Instead it turned out to be a very simple gray stucco box of a building with the words "Gold's Gym" painted on its flat front on Pacific Avenue. Immediately off the sidewalk, double doors led to a few steps which took you down to the gym floor. It was one big open room, no more than 2000 feet. It was a bare-bones type of gym, with mostly free weights and a couple of pieces of chunky equipment for legs.

I played it cool, didn't act like I was important, except in my mind. While I was very respectful, I did wear my little cut-off tee shirt to show my stuff. Other spectators watched along with me.

There they were, all my idols as I'd seen them in magazines. I squatted down by the door barefoot, just like my days back in Florida, and watched them train. I was in total awe. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Ken Waller, Frank Zane, Franco Columbo, Eddy Guiliani, Denny Gable, Roger Callard, Bob Birdsong, Paul and Bill Grant and Pierre Vandesteen. All the bodybuilding stars; all in one room. They seemed huge compared to me, but as with the amateur competitors, their bodies lacked the hard defined muscle that I had developed. This gave me confidence.

I returned for several days and sat by the door, taking it all in. My problem days of getting into gyms were over. Having swept the IFBB Mr. America, I had carte blanche to train in the Mecca, but out of respect and timidity, I waited a couple of days before I walked out onto the floor. On the third day, I made my move.

Of course, they were all checking me out and sizing me up, but nobody approached me or seemed to mind my training there. It wasn't until a couple of days later that Kent Kuehn, who I had competed against came up to me. Back in Florida,

he had told me that I needed more leg size to get into the professional ranks. I listened to his suggestion and put more focus on my legs, working them harder than ever before.

“Congratulations on your Mr. America win. I’m amazed at how you brought up your leg size since we last spoke,” Kent said.

“It was good advice,” I said. “It made me really look at my symmetry. I appreciated your comments.”

“Do you know who that big redhead is training over there?” he asked.

“Of course,” I said. “Every bodybuilder knows Ken Waller.” I even knew he was considered the biggest, baddest one of the group. At 300 pounds, Big Red was the last person you wanted to mess with.

“Well, he’s challenged you to a lifting contest and he’s doing squats today.”

“What are we standing here for? Let’s go,” I quickly replied. Legs were exactly what I always needed to focus on; bigger legs with thicker, more delineated quadriceps.

That day, in 1975, when I was challenged by Ken Waller, my dreams started to become reality. I was in the epicenter of a bodybuilding phenomenon that transcended time and the outside world. It felt as if I were in the Greek and Roman times of gladiators and warriors, wrestling it out with the gods.

I may have walked into the Mecca of bodybuilding, but I came physically prepared. I was 29 years old, had 21 years of athletic conditioning, with 18 of those years lifting weights, and close to 300 competitions under my belt. My experience backed the attitude I knew I needed to enter the highest level of the sport. At 205 pounds, I had 20 inch arms and a 28 inch waist. Having been in the service, I had a never-die mentality and was more than ready to go into this battle.

From the very first time I opened a *Muscle Builder* magazine at Richard Baldwin’s house and saw pictures of how hard the guys were working, I had adopted the mindset that I

would have to work harder to succeed. From my experience in the south with unfair placement, I figured I had to squeeze harder and lift heavier than my competitors to win. However, I never trained to beat anybody; I trained to be the best I could be.

I had solid confidence, because I was good at a young age, and I knew I had trained harder than my idols. I sensed this even though I hadn't seen them train.

Big Red and I each took a turn with a couple of warm-up squats using 135 pounds for 20 reps, then 225 for 15 on the next set. These sets may seem light and insignificant, but I was not taking them easy or rushing their importance. With these sets, I warmed up all my joints, getting a feel for the positioning of my feet, knees and spine in respect to each other. I marked in my mind and body the path in the movement and how far down it was until my quads were parallel to the ground. By contracting and squeezing my quads as hard as I could throughout the entire movement, I pumped as much blood into my quads as possible.

Without a word between us, the next round went up to 325 pounds. Once we got up to ten reps, we had ten more to do. At this point, every fiber in my body was in shock and telling my brain to stop the assault. But bodybuilding is about taking your body past this pain barrier to where growth, both mental and physical, takes place. So I pushed another rep out and really went through each one with intent, pausing at the top to feel the shock and descending in perfect form until my quads were parallel to the floor. After the first ten reps I knew exactly why the bottom of the squat is called "the hole." This is the place where failure or success is decided. It's in the hole where you hold fate in your hands and legs. You have three choices: 1) quit and you'll be on the ground with 325 pounds and some kind of injury. 2) let doubt enter and you'll shift your mind and body off course. 3) succeed with perfect execution and unbroken drive and form. To make sure we went down in the hole, we placed a box whose height was just right, so when our cheeks kissed that box, we knew we were in the hole.

The weight on the next two sets of squats went up to 365 and then 405 pounds, and we both got ten and then eight reps. Our reps pushed us to the point of shaking while we were standing, getting set to go down for another rep.

Until this last set, we were toe-to-toe in poundage and reps, so this final grueling set would determine the victor. By this point, all training in the gym had stopped and all eyes were on us.

We loaded the bar with 505 pounds and I methodically positioned myself under the bar. I had only handled 500 pounds in a leg press, never on my back. Four hundred was the heaviest I had gone at Bill Pearl's gym with Dave Jones. So I pressed against the floor like never before and squeezed out four reps. Big Red managed to get seven. And though I lost this battle, with a nod from Ken Waller, I earned my stripes and was accepted into the gym.

The training regime I had followed for 18 years (working every body part at every workout) was not the protocol in Gold's. Just like at Bill Pearl's gym, everyone was grouping body parts and working a three-days-on, one-day-off routine. They were using three to four exercises for legs on a Monday, three exercises for chest and three for back on Tuesday, and nine total exercises for shoulders and arms on Wednesday. With Thursday off, the cycle would begin again on Friday for their leg workouts. Everyone in the gym was following the same training routine.

When I returned the next day, and Big Red acknowledged me with only a nod, I walked through the gym and approached Denny Gable. Denny was the most welcoming in the group. There was an honesty in his manner. I had seen Denny in the magazines and thought he was the most photogenic bodybuilder of them all. His handsome face, that often graced the covers of *Muscle Builder*, resembled Clark Gable's - so much that he was known within the group as Clark's illegitimate son. He down-played his good looks, which made him seem more humble and sincere. Denny welcomed my company, and within a couple of minutes, asked if I wanted to train with him. This came as a shock, because he

was training with Arnold. When Arnold didn't object, I knew the reigning Mr. Olympia saw me as a good challenge.



ARNOLD AND THE WEIDER BOYS

That first training day with Denny and Arnold was a chest and back day, a heavy workload day. Arnold started the rounds, then Denny, then me. We were each up and waiting for our time, and quickly moved into our set. The pace and intensity was up. Each of us had a show in 90 days. Arnold was preparing for his sixth Olympia, and Denny and I had our sights on the IFBB Mr. World competition, so we all wanted intense workouts that pulled out all the stops. There was more interaction among the three of us than there had been with Big Red, but no small talk, only yells of encouragement to press for another rep. There was intense focus on the muscle being worked. With every rep, we squeezed the muscle and imagined every fiber filling with blood. I followed their lead as we stayed with the five basic exercises to create the look we wanted.

We started with chins and alternated them with the flat bench presses for five sets. The next exercises were the incline barbell press and the T-bar row for our backs and then dumbbell flies and long pulley rows. We finished with a barbell pullover press or cross bench with a dumbbell, to chisel in the wide back taper to a small waist look.

After years of pounding my entire body on every workout day with 70 sets, this workout was somewhat of a break, with only 35 sets. I wasn't doing nearly as many exercises and it wasn't as draining as some of my total-body workouts, but it was brutal, with more intensity compressed in half the sets. This is where I first learned the value of short, sweet, intense workouts.

Putting a group of top bodybuilding stars together in one gym was an experiment that worked. Even though we all desired to be the world's greatest bodybuilder, the passion we shared for intense training over-rode the competition and created a motivational force that drove us to no end. I loved it. You had to be a hard-ass, willing to go that extra rep when you

heard that chorus of voices around you yelling, “One more rep” and “No, I see two.” The gym stopped at extreme moments in each of our sets. We encouraged each other because the better we each looked, the better bodybuilding would look. During our training, it was us against the weight, not against each other. There were moments when egos slipped out, but that only fueled our next set. What makes a great bodybuilder is being able to operate above emotions. When you’re in this world, nothing exists except the task in front of you.

My body responded immediately to the new training and exciting gym environment. Workouts became even heavier than I was used to. But I was already bench pressing 325 back home, without drugs mind you, so I was prepared for the new greater demands. As far as I could tell, I was the only one not yet taking steroids. I think it threatened the group that I was right there lifting pound for pound.

I came to California hoping my talent would carry me financially. The *Tallahassee Democrat* had a retirement fund that motivated me to save, and save I did. I wound up putting large portions of paychecks into my account and living on very little. But this left me short-changed for living expenses once in California. As fate had it, in those first days of training, I met a man by the name of Mike Armstrong. Originally from Florida, he was an aspiring bodybuilder at Gold’s. He hadn’t quit his day job as a teacher in the Los Angeles Unified school system to chase his dreams. He welcomed me to stay in his apartment right on the Venice boardwalk, so that I could be near Gold’s. His kindness went far beyond a roof over my head; if Mike ate steak, Robby ate steak. I was finding out that Florida guys always helped each other out. Mike made me feel like there were no color lines between us.

In the morning, an hour or so after eating my bowl of oatmeal and my six egg whites, I would jog a quarter mile to the gym. I couldn’t wait to train. Everyone came around the same time, nine o’clock. The gym was always electric, pulsing with the enthusiasm and adrenaline of a gladiator’s arena. There were always spectators by the door, as we walked around without shirts and in bare feet. There was a large

calendar on the wall that marked the upcoming contests each of us had.

Every day, by 10:30, the first battle was won and you were ready to shower and head towards food. A group of the bodybuilders that formed around Arnold, would walk down Pacific to Windward Circle and have breakfast at The German Restaurant. After I started training with Denny and Arnold, I was allowed into the group and started joining them for breakfast. There was Big Red, Denny, Eddie, Roger, Paul, Frank, Franco and a couple of others at a long table always reserved for us. When we walked in, the place would stop and every eye would focus on us. We were celebrities. All this was a little bizarre for me. I could actually feel people's envy. I was part of a mob family and Arnold, sitting at the head of the table, with his loud and generous manner, was the Don. He would always be the one to pull out his gold card to pay for our orders of ground beef, eggs and toast.

I was the rookie of the bunch, so I could get away with being my quiet self. Everybody pretty much let me be and I would sit back, listen and observe. Nearly every day that we ate together, the group of us would walk a hundred yards to the beach to lay out and tan. Yes, even I tanned. Not to become blacker, though I did, but to benefit from the effect the sun has of pulling water from under the skin and directing it into the muscles, leaving them harder and more defined. We hung out next to what was known as "the Pit," an area with benches and free weights. Anyone could train here for free, though I never did. I thought it would be putting me out there, too much like a spectacle. The Pit was set up by the city sometime in the 60s. Before that, it had been further up the beach in Santa Monica with more acrobatic equipment, used by the strong men of the late 40s.

Windward Circle was the hub for bodybuilders. Many of them lived in the Windward Village Apartments, ate at the German Restaurant or later the Sidewalk Cafe, when it opened in 1976, and shopped at Venice Health Foods. Denny lived at the Windward so I was around there a bit, hanging out with him. After a month at Mike's, the owner of the Windward

offered me a free apartment until I got my feet on the ground. Another lucky break.

Because Joe Weider had not set up an appointment with me, my suspicion that the invitation from him was more of a form letter than a personal invitation was confirmed when I mentioned it to Eddie Giuliani. He laughed and said, "I see Joe fooled another one." Hell, getting that letter had been like getting a letter from George Steinbrenner or being picked for first draft into the NFL or the NBA. I was so proud of it, I showed it to everybody. I was familiar with draft letters. When Uncle Sam wrote me, I reported for duty, and he paid me \$350 a month, \$50 more for jumps. He made me a deal I couldn't refuse. I now realized Weider's draft was going to be different, at least for me. I was never told to go out to the Weider office and talk to Joe about a contract as he had done with Denny. Though contracts weren't openly talked about at the gym, it was assumed if you won an IFBB competition and you didn't have a day job, you had a contract. I was aware of two exceptions to the rule: Roger Callard, who hadn't won a show yet, had a contract, and myself, who'd won the Mr. America, yet hadn't been offered one.

Having a contract meant more than security or the ability to establish credit that came with a paycheck; it put the bodybuilder in an elite group of Weider favorites. You became someone special in the sport, not just another Joe training in the gym.

When I got a message at the gym from Joe to come up to his office to discuss work, I was a bit taken aback. Since I hadn't been offered a contract yet, I figured I was going to have to prove myself and keep winning before I would get one. It felt like a gamble, but I had come this far and couldn't turn back and face the embarrassment of failure. I called the office and made an appointment with Joe for the following day.

I asked some of the guys at the gym what I should wear. They told me he loved arms so I should wear a short-sleeved shirt and show my body. I didn't yet have a lot of clothing, so I took a long-sleeved brown buttoned down

Banlon shirt, cut off the sleeves, spiked up the collar and oiled up my arms.

Denny drove me out to the Valley for my one o'clock meeting. As we sat in the lobby gazing up at the huge oil paintings of Arnold and Larry Scott, one o'clock came and went, then two o'clock. By now, we'd missed lunch and were parched by the 100 degree heat we had driven through to get there. So, by the time I was called in at three o'clock, I was drained and edgy. His office was impressively big and filled with beautiful antiques. The chair I was to sit in was so huge I had to boost myself up to get into it, and my feet didn't touch the ground. Without hesitation, Joe got right to the point. "So, you're serious about your bodybuilding. What do you want in your future?"

"Mr. Weider," I answered with the same directness, "I want to be the most famous bodybuilder of all time. I want to be known all around the world."

"Don't you think you should go to college and get an education so you can be more than a bodybuilder?"

I knew he didn't have a college education, yet look where he was. I'm now 29 and sitting in the best position any person of any race could dream of being in, and the gate keeper is telling me to go get an education.

All I could reply was, "It's not an option for me."

With this he said, "Well, I'm not going to be able to help you. But I can pay you \$50 for photo shoots and \$50 more to put your name on an article and if you want a job in my warehouse, I can set that up. Call Gene Mozee to meet for a photo shoot." Still baffled by, "I can't help you," I stood up and thanked him for his time and walked out.

In the coming weeks, Mr. Mozee shot me posing with Weider gym equipment for *Muscle Builder*. Gene and I also met in his studio and he photographed me in muscle shots he would use with the articles he wrote and put my name on.

The job in the warehouse, in the scorching hot San Fernando Valley, consisted of packing boxes of Weider

supplement at \$200 a week. There was so much excitement in the 12 weeks between the Mr. America and the Mr. World, that not getting a contract and working in the warehouse wasn't going to discourage me. I was training with two of the current stars, Mr. Olympia, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Mr. USA, Denny Gable, who was slated to be the next Arnold.

Yet the bodybuilders were stars without money. I was working in the Weider's warehouse being paid with checks that would inevitably bounce. Stories circulated around the gym that some of the guys were invited to gay men's mansions for side income. Once every couple of weeks, a black limo rolled into the alley behind the gym and through its cracked window hundred dollar bills were slipped to the line of bodybuilders that had formed. I sat back and watched, feeling confused and alone.

Just when I was doubting that I would be able to make a living at bodybuilding, the guys began talking about starting a union for bodybuilders. We were all excited, because we thought this could really bring some needed changes to our sport, particularly some kind of guaranteed income. Even though *Muscle Builder* portrayed us as a group, we were divided. I started to see how Joe had made that happen. He would give one guy a paycheck and not another. Then he'd tell the first guy, "don't tell the other guys or they will want to get paid, too." So no one dared discuss their pay, for fear of retribution.

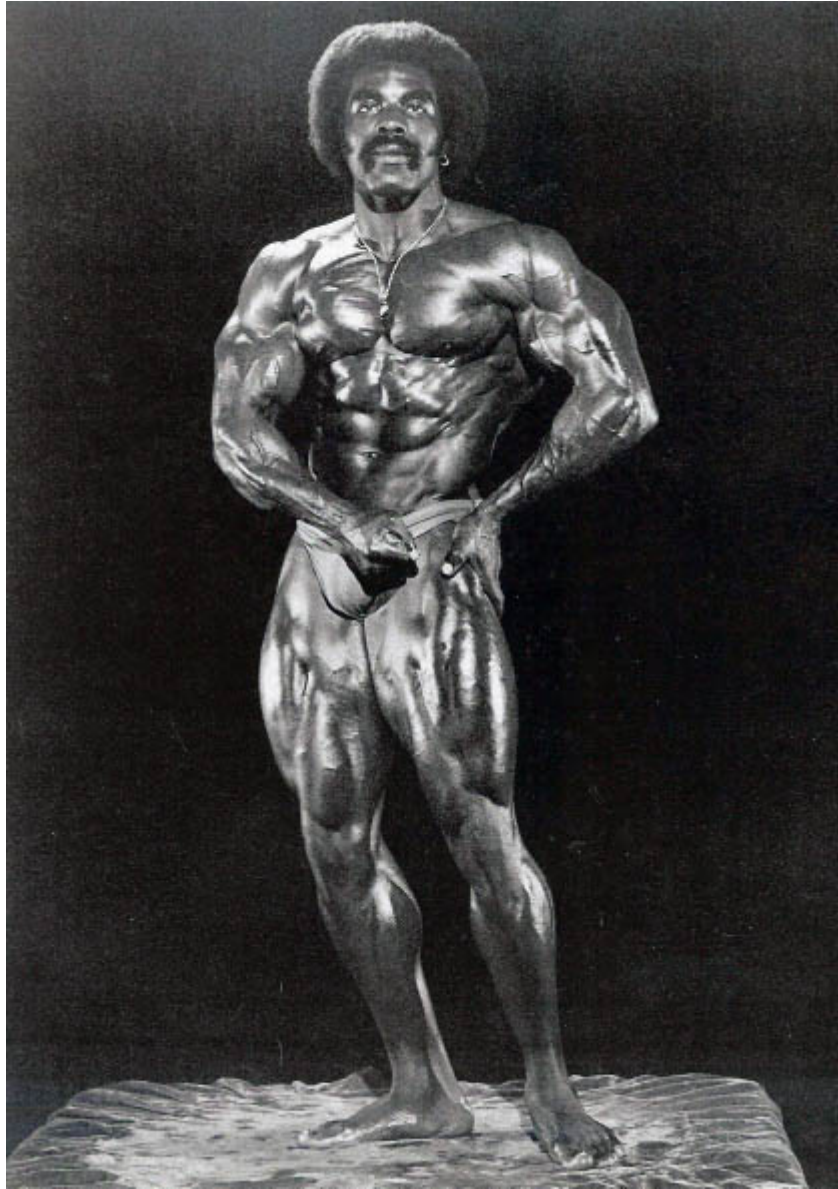
The meeting about forming a union was held at the Holiday Inn on Colorado and Pacific in Santa Monica. We all showed up, including Arnold, and took our seats. I was surprised when Joe and his brother Ben, who was president of the IFBB, walked in and took seats at the table in the front of the room. I thought, "Well, I suppose we have to meet with the heads of the organization to discuss and agree on new rules and regulations."

This was the first time I had seen Ben, probably because he ran the federation from his Montreal office. Ben was stiff and lanky and carried himself with more of an air of importance than Joe who was looser and had more of a

swagger. Whereas Joe had the power to make or break a bodybuilder with his magazines, contracts and influence, Ben held sway over the judges and our placing. I could see he was not happy with the idea of giving up any of his power.

Without any hesitation, Ben stood up and said sternly, "There will be no union," hitting his clenched fist on the table. With that, Arnold stood up, walked to the front, kissed Joe and Ben on their cheeks and walked out of the room. All of our jaws dropped, because we thought we had Arnold's support behind the union. We had all talked about it and agreed that if we came at them as a group, they would have no choice. Now it was clear whose side Arnold's was on. I was amazed at what I was witnessing and thought the Weiders should have been ashamed of themselves. This is how the leaders of our business manage their athletes? With an iron fist? And that was it, the beginning and the end of any possibility of fairness. We would have no control, no say and if we still wanted to compete, we had no choice but to be affiliated with the IFBB.

A couple of days later at the gym, the guys acted like nothing happened. We just lost the possibility of having a voice in our future, and my comrades in arms were indifferent. Did they feel defeated or were they looking the other way because they were getting a little money? When you're on the take, will you go for the ride and keep your mouth shut?



FROM BLACK BOY
TO BLACK PRINCE

Even though I was 29 years old, because I had been brought up in a small-minded rural environment, there was a naiveté and gullibility about me. Even the Army didn't prepare me for mainstream deception and the white business world. It only made me want to fight for what was right and to not back down. Though I was shy and reserved, I spoke out about what was wrong in the world of bodybuilding. The sport and its leaders had not seen anything like me before, on or off stage.

At the gym another phone call came from above. Someone called out, "Robby, the phone's for you."

"Hello?"

"Robby, I want you to train with Roger Callard," Joe crackled in his raspy voice, sounding like the "Penguin" from Batman. "Help him get ready for the Mr. World."

"Okay, Mr. Weider."

I said okay, but I was pissed. Besides not paying me and taking credit in his magazine for having developed my physique, he now wanted me to train a guy he had under contract. I was making gains right where I was, training with Denny and Arnold; it was not to my advantage to train with Roger. But taking the pleasure of working Roger into the ground motivated me. And I did it every day right up to the competition, where we battled it out in the same weight division.

Until now, no one had said anything to me about steroids. Not even Denny. Everybody wanted to win, and with me being their greatest threat, they were not about to let me in on their secret weapon. I heard words like D-ball and Primo around the gym, but I knew they would never say anything to me about them. With two weeks until the competition, the guy working the desk at Gold's Gym called me up to the desk and

asked me if I was taking anything. When I said no, he told me to come back tomorrow at two. I went down the next day and he gave me a 100 milligram shot of Primobolan Depot, after which I immediately went home to my safe haven. As I sat in my chair, my head started to spin and I thought, “Oh, my God, what’s happening? My body was changing before my eyes. Muscles were filling out, looking as if they were swollen. It was as if my 18 years of weight training had compressed my muscles so much, that now they had the room to breathe. At that moment, the ground started to shake underneath me. Ironically, I was experiencing my first earthquake. The jolting ground literally bounced my chair (with me on it) clear across the floor.

When I next went to the gym, I felt stronger and even more solid. I was more assured and confident under even heavier weights. I was more ready than ever to do battle come show time.

Denny’s contract with Weider made him a “Weider Boy” and paid his way to compete in all the Weider shows. Somehow my \$50 dollars an article put me in the group and gave me the same benefits for the ‘75 Mr. World, which was coming up in New York City at Radio City Music Hall; I had a ticket and a place to even stay. But I had very little money for anything else. The group was put up in a hotel within walking distance of the hall. The other part of the deal was that we would pose for Weider photographers backstage after the show.

This time, for my grand entrance, I wore a long black cape over my Adidas sweat suit. My 8-inch afro was glistening in the sun as the group walked together down to the show: Eddie Giuliani, Kent Kuehn, Roger Callard, Denny and I.

As we approached the hall we were greeted by a crowd of supporters. Now you might think it consisted of aspiring bodybuilders. Of course there were a few of them, but the majority of the fans were pimps with their women and flamboyant gay men. Instead of standing out as I thought I would with my cape and afro, I was upstaged by men in full-length fur coats and fedoras with long feathers. The women

sported big hairdos, with mini-skirts and high-heeled boots that came up past their knees. I loved how everyone's richly-colored clothing made their energy almost electric with enthusiasm for life. When the crowd saw us approaching, they opened a path so we could enter into the venue. The pimps and eccentrically dressed gays were on one side, and the ladies of the evening on the other. We had to duck and dodge hands that came at us from all directions. I couldn't help but laugh as I protected my front and back. They were grabbing all over our bodies to feel how hard our muscles (and other parts) were. The event had a flair unlike any other.

Backstage, bodybuilders were given a room where we could warm up before going out on the stage. We quickly picked our spots along the wall and parked our bags. My pre-show preparation was the same as every time before, not out of superstition, but the perfection of a system. The routine began back at the hotel where I oiled up before putting on my sweat suit. I always picked out a quarter-mile route either to or around the venue, which I would walk before I headed backstage. The distance in this case was perfect. Then, still in my sweats, I hit the eight mandatory poses for two rounds, squeezing that last possible bit of water into the muscle. At the 25 minute announcement to show time, I disrobed and massaged another layer of oil in with my sweat. For the next 15 minutes, I used the various weights set up for us, and performed 15 reps of the basic exercises.

That night backstage before the Mr. World competition, all eyes were on me. Next to me was Franklyn Greene, who stopped his preparation to ask me, "What are you taking?"

I responded simply, "Eighteen years of hard work and a 100 milligram shot of Primobolin depot. First time I've used the stuff. What do you think the others use?"

His response was, "Steroids like Dianabol and Winstol-V." Now my eyes were more open and as I looked around, I realized probably all the other competitors had been using different steroids for weeks, if not months before the show. I was impressed that I'd gotten in shape without using

anything until the one shot, which had only enhanced what I had already earned. My physique was worlds ahead of the rest of the guys. I decided then that that would be my approach, to train and build without the anabolic aid, and to save it for just before a competition.

When the show began and we all walked out on stage, I was confident that I'd be called out with the first five to be compared. If you were called out in the first round, it meant one of two things; you would be among the top five to place, or you were a Weider favorite. My name was called after Roger's. Once we were lined up, time seemed to slow down as we hit our seven mandatory poses: front double bicep, side chest, sliding into the side tricep, then the rear double bicep, rear lat spread, abdominal and quadriceps and finally the most muscular (crab) pose. The crowd's screams decided the results and it became more and more apparent that if their demands weren't met, they could very well riot. When they didn't call me out again, I knew they had their winner and didn't need to see me in comparison to anyone else.

The next round was where I caused a real stir. Instead of performing a routine to music, as was done in IFBB shows, I merely came out to a spacey piece of music by Lonnie Liston Smith and hit the seven mandatory poses again, just once, and walked off. The whole choreographed routine thing was new to me, because in the AAU you just came out and hit poses. So I wasn't being totally arrogant, but it came off that way. As I left, the crowd was running up and down because they'd never seen anything like me. I won the middle-class crown, the overall first-place award, and the Most Muscular Man Award. Joe's protégé, Roger Callard, didn't even place.

After the competition, Joe came running after me. It was then that he dubbed me, "The Black Prince." Not many others had a professional nickname to promote their image, only the greats. Arnold was the "The Austrian Oak," Sergio "The Myth," Franco "The Sardinian Warrior," and Ken Waller "Big Red."

By 1975, bodybuilding was still not mainstream in the States or abroad. When I came on the scene, only a small cult

of bodybuilding enthusiasts had heard of either me or Arnold, who had already won five Olympia trophies by this time. Word was he was on his way out, so I knew my timing was perfect. Bodybuilding needed a new superstar to propel the sport. And here I had a physique like Sergio Oliva, with a big upper body and a small waist, but with a rugged masculine face that went perfectly with big muscles. Joe Weider loved arms and he zoomed in on me. At that moment of excitement, part of me held on to the hope of being compensated and appreciated for my hard work, but a bigger part knew better.



PUMP FICTION

Back in Venice, sitting in my beautiful apartment in Windward Circle, I felt I was getting my feet on the ground. My win at the Mr. World put more logs on my fire and kicked my training up a notch. I assumed that after taking the whole show, I would be offered a contract. Instead, I was only asked to do a photo shoot for the magazine. In my confusion and anxiety, I still felt like I couldn't be stopped. I saw it all as a test of strength, stamina and determination.

With Denny, Arnold and I battling it out with the weights, I was training, eating and tanning with the best bodybuilders in the world. Even though my skin was black, tanning helped even out my skin tone, and the camaraderie bonded us together as a group. Mostly I kept quiet and listened to the guys talk about their bodybuilding approaches, particularly what they were eating.

With 12 weeks out until next competition, their meals were simple and bland and dominated by protein. The magazines hadn't started writing about a specific bodybuilding diet, but somehow they got it in their heads to eat a lot of protein and very little carbohydrates, if any at all. They ate beef and eggs in the morning, and more beef, eggs and maybe one slice of toast after training, and yet more beef and eggs for lunch and dinner. There was no fried chicken, cornbread or collard greens on their menus. This was new to me. There was no plan to my eating. I'd never thought there was anything more to a bodybuilder's diet than keeping the foods natural and tasty. At a dinner out one night, Denny looked at the potato on my plate and said, "That's too heavy of a carbohydrate, you'll get fat eating that." The concept of getting fat was foreign to me. But I was curious to give their special diet a try, so I started eating a six-ounce New York steak and three whole eggs, four times a day. Probably the only thing that kept my bowel movements regular was that I kept eating apples, bananas and melons throughout the day.

The plan seemed to work for me, because I was getting more muscular and stronger. So I stuck with it right up until the show, making no changes.

About this time my lady Ashley came west to join me. It took some time to persuade her to follow this new way of eating, and it caused some tension between us. Here, I'm taking away what a Southern girl believes is her power and her way to a man's heart: her cooking. No grits and eggs and toast? I had to take over the skillet until she came around and agreed it wasn't so bad after all. She learned to prepare these new meals as well.

In the gym a couple of days later, I was approached by Arty Zeller, a photographer Joe Weider said would be contacting me. He wanted to photograph me down on the beach for Jan '76 issue of *Muscle Builder*. I met Mr. Zeller on the beach the next day at dawn. This was my first photo shoot, and it was for the cover of *Muscle Builder*. Four months in Los Angeles and I was going to be on the cover. I was floored. Seeing the shot in my head, I thought I should do something new and creative. At the time, most men's posing trunks were still cut four inches wide at the side. I needed a pair that showed more. I decided I could get a higher cut if I went with women's underwear. And that's what I wore. Not bikini cut, but close.

The cover that came out in the States was put on 12 other covers around the world. After a quick acknowledgment of the cover shot, I didn't dare look at any more of my photos. I felt it would play too much with my ego and lessen my drive to work harder. Whether it was warrior instincts or maybe Southern superstition, it just felt right.

When I saw the cover, my thoughts flashed immediately back to my ninth grade biology class. I had borrowed a couple of *Muscle Builder* magazines from Richard Baldwin, took them into school and told everybody that one day I would be a famous bodybuilder on the cover. Later, in the biology class, my teacher, Herbert C. Alexander saw that I was engrossed in something and he knew it wasn't my biology book. He came around behind me, grabbed my trapezius and

squeezed them until there were tears running down my cheek. Then he snatched the magazines up and said to the class, “He will never be like this,” and then in my face, “you will never look like this.”

I was so embarrassed, I put my head down with tears running down my cheeks. As everybody was laughing and making fun of me, I tightened up and let all the put-downs bounce off me. And slowly, as the class quieted down, I felt myself relaxing in my chair and saying to myself, “Oh, yes I will. I’m going to do it and show you all how wrong you are. And I’m going to mail you an issue of me on the cover.”

And that’s exactly what I did. I mailed my first cover to Mr. Alexander. I couldn’t help myself.

When the cover hit the stands in the States and then made it to Europe, I began getting request after request to appear at gyms around the world.

There were six weeks before the Mr. Universe and the Mr. Olympia competitions, both being held in Johannesburg, South Africa. With the exception of one appearance that was basically mandatory, I stayed in Venice and kept to my schedule. I set up 20 or so appearances through the IFBB officials in Europe for after the Universe. Except for the \$200-a-week job packing supplements in Weider’s warehouse, there was still no guarantee of money, contract or support. So I took these appearances very seriously and wrote out agreements for the IFBB presidents and officials in Europe who had contacted me.

Weider arranged for me to do more photo shoots with another of his photographers, Bob Gardner. Given his address, I showed up on time and ready for more formal studio shots for *Muscle Builder*. I was so wide-eyed and dreamy about having my photos in the magazines and the certainty that it would lead to great things, I thought these were the dues I needed to pay for my place in bodybuilding history.

Halfway through one of our breakfasts at The German Restaurant, Arnold introduced us all to the filmmakers George Butler and Charles Gaines. They were interested in shooting a

documentary about the Venice bodybuilding scene. We were all excited about the idea and couldn't wait to be a part of the production. Their cameras would follow us through our 90-day preparation for the Mr. Olympia and Mr. Universe competitions. We all planned to meet at Arnold's apartment building in Santa Monica that night for a party and to discuss the details of the documentary.

At the party, the filming began and they shot us all dancing and having a great time. They told us to ham it up for the camera, but I needed no coaxing, that's how I was naturally on the dance floor. With Ashley at my side, I looked around, surprised that everyone was drinking, when later we were going to discuss business. As I suspected, by the time we started talking about the documentary and compensation, all the guys were loose and ready to agree to anything. I wasn't.

After Charles and George told us what they had in mind for the different parts of the movie, they said they couldn't afford to pay us. I stood up and said, "Hey, I don't think that's very fair. The guys should get something. If you think you can do the movie with just Arnold, then go ahead." With that I grabbed Ashley's hand and walked out. Denny and Roger followed. By the time we got outside, George and Charles were close behind and pleaded with us to come back in. We did, and in the end they agreed to give us contracts plus \$100 a day for the days we were involved.

The next day at Gold's, they appeared with contracts in hand, agreeing to pay us \$10,000 each for our parts in the movie. I glanced over at Arnold standing off by himself with a calculating look, and felt something wasn't right.

There was nothing I could do about Arnold's actions, but I sure as hell could control mine. I had to stand up for what I knew was right. Of course I knew Arnold's influence could damage my chances of success in my bodybuilding career, but I wouldn't be a genuinely strong man if I hadn't stood up. It was important to me and I thought for future bodybuilders.

The Chief, as everybody called Joe, had met Ashley on a couple of occasions and took a liking to her. To my surprise he offered her a job as a secretary for the vice president of

sales at *Muscle Builder*. Though it wasn't in her field of study, graphic arts, we thought a foot in the door could lead to a position in the magazine's creative department. Above all, it allowed us to live with more security, since my earnings were not consistent. Still an amateur, I had not yet received any prize money, and without a contract or product endorsement deal, the only income I had was from the warehouse job and occasional posing job.

The one appearance I did before the Universe was in San Jose at an amateur competition held by Russ Warner. The Gold gym warriors (Weider stable) were signed up to appear at the event. Arnold, Denny, Eddie, Ken, Frank, Ed, Franco, Roger and I were paid \$500 to guest pose at the competition. The cameras started rolling for "Pumping Iron" at the event. We were also scheduled to pose for some studio shots the following day for Mr. Warner, who was a photographer as well as a promoter.

I was very excited about the appearance, because it was the first time I was paid for showing my physique, and I was appearing with the greats. Plus I knew I had an edge. I was in shape. Maintaining my condition 365 days a year was something I had practiced since the Jack LaLanne days. My muscularity had matured, but I was like a newborn when it came to steroids, so I looked fresh. I could see the wear from the steroids in the others' physiques. They looked muscular, but not in what I called "shape" - hard and ripped-up.

The show was a sell-out, with everybody in bodybuilding there to see the big names in the sport. Some were faces I had grown up seeing in the magazines, guys I had dreamed of meeting. One by one we were given the stage to hit our routine of poses. When my condition out-shined the rest, the crowd let it be known with loud screams and applause. I got so much attention backstage and after the show, I was embarrassed. All the promoters were praising me, telling me how good I looked and thanking me for coming in such great shape, because I was really the only one who had. I had wanted to look good, so I'd get their attention and be invited to guest appear at their competitions. It worked.

As I was leaving the auditorium, I was greeted by a muscular man with a head of thick dark hair. It was unmistakably Clarence Ross. Even though he had won AAU Mr. America over 30 years earlier, now in his 50s, he looked great.

“Robby, I thought you looked fantastic up there! I’ve never seen so much muscle. It was magnificent to see a body in such great shape.”

I gave him one of my respectful bows. At the time, I was so in awe of him that his compliment didn’t register until later, when I thought about how that felt coming from someone I had admired for so long.

A show like this, with so many people and a party afterwards was new to the sport, and it turned out to be a major success. It was obvious that bodybuilding had turned a corner and was taking a new, more glamorous direction.

I went back to my room, got a good night’s rest, and shined the next morning for the photo session we were each to do with Russ Warner.

After the Mr. World win, things changed at the gym. I had gone back to training with Denny, but without Arnold, who was training by himself and being filmed. We brought Manuel Perry on board. He was from Massachusetts and also chasing dreams of stardom. He was a big brother with a thick muscle girth on a 6’ 2” frame and impressive calves and arms. His proportions gave him unmatched power to lift heavy, making him a great training partner in my book. His impressive size later landed him a job as Lou Ferrigno’s body double, doing most of the Hulk’s stunt work. Manny was planning to enter the AAU Mr. America. The fact that I wasn’t on steroids was empowering. There was a natural high that came with knowing it was strength and mental tenacity which moved the weights. But that was about to change.

Over the phone, without saying my name, Weider spoke, “I’m sending you out to see my doctor. He knows you’re coming. Call Annalis, my secretary, to get the address

for his office out here in the Valley. He'll give you the supplements you need."

"Okay, Mr. Weider. I'll give 'em a call."

I knew what he meant by "supplement" and I had already gathered that when other guys said they had an appointment, it was with the Chief's doctor. There was no question in my mind about entering the world of steroids. It was clear that was the protocol in the fraternity that held the title of best bodybuilder in the world.

Well within the 90-day mark before the Mr. Universe, the doctor injected my hip with a 200 mg. shot of deca durabolin as well as a B-12 and calcium shot intravenously. He started a file on me, and told me to return in two weeks.

My training went to the moon. The deca durabolin had a much more powerful effect than the primabolin shot I had been given in the gym. The guys in Gold's started talking to me. Some were taken back by my quietness, while others felt they could confide in me since I wasn't a talker. Then there were those that felt nervous with quiet space and just had to fill it. Either way, I started to hear more about steroids. I learned primabolin (the first shot I experienced) was considered a mild steroid used to improve muscularity and appearance, whereas ones like deca, multi-testosterone, winstrol-v and dianabol were more powerful strengthening drugs that made you more aggressive. They weren't getting these from the doctor, but on quick and easy trips over the Mexican border.

With the challenge of even heavier lifting with Manny, I saw a huge transformation taking place in my overall physical appearance in muscularity and strength. I would run the five blocks to Manny's apartment every morning at nine. Sometimes he would be just getting home from his bouncer gig at a club in Hollywood.

The couple of months between the Mr. World and the Mr. Universe seemed to go by in a flash, because so much was happening for me. I was getting a huge amount of play in *Muscle Builder* with articles about me. In addition to the

advertisement of me using Weider equipment, I shot another one for the Weider Stamina Protein Powder with Franco Columbu. They said I was selling magazines like no one before.

Then Joe called down to the gym and told me he wanted a sculptor, known for realistic renderings, to create my bust in clay to be later cast in bronze. “Your physique in bronze will be preserved in bodybuilding history. It will sit in our lobby alongside the paintings of the other greats like Larry Scott and Arnold.”

Joe continued, “Mr. Crawford told me it would take probably six days of you sitting for him. He’s going to do it right here in my office. I think this will be sensational. Let’s do it over several weekends. We can start this Saturday.”

I said okay, but thought it odd that they would grace me with such an honor. Nobody else’s bronze bust was in Weider’s lobby, not even Arnold’s. Their photos were triple life-size, but no bronze busts. My feelings were mixed with reservation and the anticipation that this opportunity would lead to greater acknowledgment and success. Ashley was also skeptical but excited, and insisted on coming along. So for the next three weekends, for four hours a day, we drove out to Woodland Hills and I sat still and flexed, not an easy thing to maintain. While I posed, Ashley asked Joe questions about the project. He said he choose me because he thought my muscularity would translate best to bronze. Content with his answers, we felt more confident.

Joe knew exactly what he wanted, positioning me with my arms crossed and my chest held high. He would leave us to work for a while, and then come to give instructions. “Ralph, make sure you get all the details here in his bicep including the veins you see over here. Robby, keep your chest high. That’s right, great.” He would impress this upon us both.

We would all look at the work after each sitting. I told Mr. Crawford that I admired how the muscles materialized from the clay, and related it to my visualization as I “sculpted” the muscles with each repetition.

The clay bust was finished, and it was as sensational as Joe had said it would be. As we stood around admiring Mr. Crawford's work, Joe announced he would have a big ceremony to unveil the bust. Mr. Crawford said the bronze cast would be finished by the end of the next week.

Two weeks to the day was the big night of the unveiling. We were dressed to the nines. Anxious, we arrived early and sat in the hall and watched person after important person arrive, until there must have been several hundred or so. There up on the stage, under a spotlight, sat the bust on a column under a veil. Ashley was proud to see me recognized for my hard work. She knew exactly how much time and focus I put into my bodybuilding.

The time had arrived. As Joe walked up on the stage, the hall's lights started to dim and silence replaced the party chatter. "Ladies and gentleman, I present to you the new Weider bust to be used on all our products and advertisements throughout the world," Joe proudly proclaimed.

When he lifted the veil I had the shock of my life. I looked at Ashley and saw her jaw drop to her chest. For a couple of seconds, neither one of us could breathe or speak. My head had been severed off the bust and replaced with a replica of Joe's head.

We immediately got up and left. During the car ride home, I had never seen Ashley more upset. As I sat speechless, still in shock, there was a lot of name calling. In the past when we drove through the Sepulveda Pass, it seemed like we flew over the hill. Now the ride out of the Valley felt like a battle just to get over the hill.

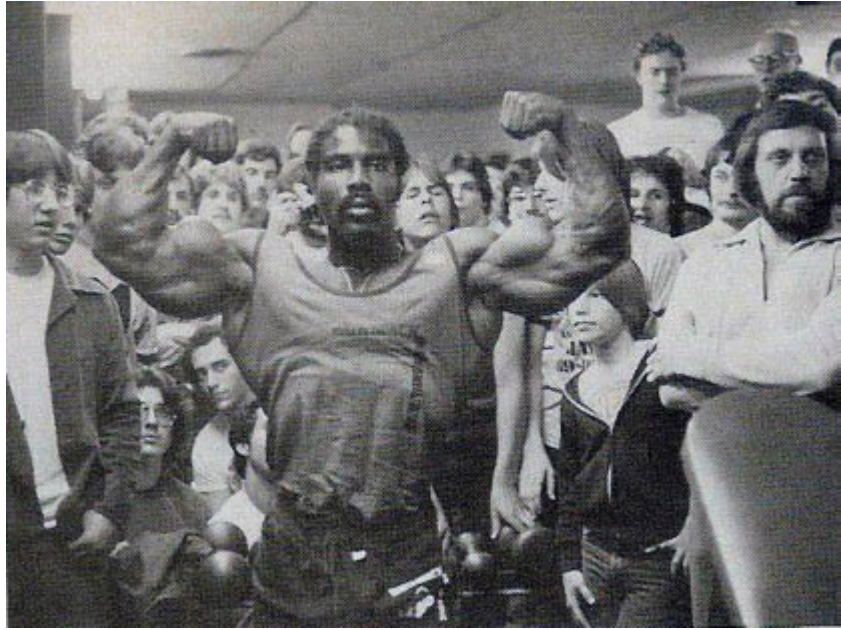
I knew they had me in a position in which I could do nothing. Ashley disagreed, "We have to get a lawyer, like Dave Draper did after not being paid for the use of his image for all those years. If Dave hadn't crumbled and accepted Weider's settlement, the court would have awarded him almost a million dollars." Nobody knew the details of Dave's complaints, except that they had to do with not being compensated for the use of his image.

For a brief moment, it was hard to hear her. I just wanted to disappear into a world above all the madness and not have to deal with it. But I knew that wasn't me. I couldn't let this soulless man put a weakness in me. There was no way I would go along with his lie: that he was a nice guy who was helping bodybuilders and the sport. "Sure, I'll talk to a lawyer, but there is no way I'll back down for a few thousand, because that would be it. I'd be out of bodybuilding and work. Then what?"

Even with the final success of Dave's case, the lawyer we consulted required a \$20,000 retainer. He said it would take a lot more to see the case through. Weider knew I wouldn't be able to do anything.

I hated feeling powerless. Having to let fate take its course was an approach I never followed in my own disciplines. How could I rely on everything working out, if not in the short term, then down the road? Would fate take care of it? Even if I'd had the money or connections for a good lawyer, it would have been the end of my career, as it had been for Dave. I had to continue pursuing my goal. I decided to become a thorn in his side with my most powerful weapon, my physique.

Even though I had conditioned myself to not let circumstances affect my determination, I felt blackness: underprivileged, vulnerable and at a great disadvantage. I talked to nobody and sensed Waller and Arnold keeping a close eye on me, sizing up my gains and accomplishments.



HERE A FIX, THERE A FIX

From that year's winner's pool, a group of us were selected to represent the United States in the IFBB Mr. Universe competition being held in South Africa. I was chosen to be their middleweight representative, "Big Red" Waller the heavy-weight, and Danny Padilla the "Giant Killa" the lightweight. Coming into the competition, Danny had won his weight group and the overall at the Mr. USA. Big Red hadn't competed since the '74 Universe where he took second in his class.

We came in hard, muscular shape, and it was obvious our team would sweep the show. Next thing I knew, Danny was pulled from our group. Did they not want the USA team to dominate the show? Nobody knew the answer to that, but the power the Weiders threw around could not be questioned. Danny had traveled all this way, prepared for months with grueling training, strict eating, only to be told he couldn't compete. Hours before the show, Danny was pulled onto the Puerto Rican team. Because he came from a prominent family in New York, I assumed he was at least second generation American and just of Puerto Rican descent. The incident bothered me not only because I felt bad for Danny, but because rules were being made up arbitrarily with a disregard for the people affected, the people who made the Weiders their money.

In the competition, I took first in my weight group, England's Wilfred Sylvester came in first in the lightweight group, and Ken took the overall. Not winning the overall kept me from turning professional and being able to enter the '76 Mr. Olympia. Instead, I was forced to enter the Mr. International, the amateur show held on the same stage before the Olympia in September. This was the first year the Olympia was being held in Columbus, Ohio. Arnold had retired from competition, and the Chief was letting him produce the event. I had nine months before the contest, but first covers and a

European tour for a couple of months, then back to Venice, California, to train like a mad man. I already knew who I would be up against: Roger Callard. The contest results would decide both of our careers. Not able to enter the Olympia at the pinnacle of my development was the fuel I used to prepare for the Mr. International.

My second cover of *Muscle Builder* (after the IFBB Mr. America and Mr. World) meant worldwide publicity. The IFBB had affiliates in 50 countries, each of which put out their own *Muscle Builder*-type magazines. They included translated articles, plus the Weider equipment and supplement ads with Franco and me. In keeping with the trends set in the States, the European versions would put the same guy on their covers. Before you could say “dead lift,” I was on covers and in ads around the world, giving me overnight recognition in the bodybuilding community. This immediately brought opportunities to solicit work in Europe.

But in South Africa, after the Universe, it was a different story. Reg Park, their IFBB President, wanted nothing to do with promoting a black man. It took a renegade businessman from South Africa named Henri Crowther to seize the opportunity. He had contacted me back in Venice to set up appearances and to chaperone me through the country in a rented bus. After the competition in Johannesburg, Henri, his wife, their small child and I toured Africa. All the while, requests from IFBB presidents all over Europe came in, and before I knew it, I had a ten-month tour lined up, with gym appearances and was able to make a great living.

I had no idea what to expect in my mother continent under apartheid. My treatment in South Africa ranged from the extreme of being treated as a king with my choice of beautiful women, to almost being beaten for walking unaccompanied in Forger State Park. At times it was like being back in the South. I would be the only black in their restaurants and gyms. In many cases, it was obvious I was not welcome. While some people were marveling at my build, others’ faces read, “Who does this black man think he is, presenting himself as God’s ultimate creation.” Because I was treated like a rock star, with

security, escorts, fine dining and accommodations, I was a little too much for many Africans to handle.

We stayed in the homes of Henri's friends, who were either away on vacation or not informed that one of their guests was going to be black. I was already experiencing more than I had even dreamed of, and I felt blessed, so I decided I would be gracious and disregard their looks and comments. Once various gyms in Africa got wind that I was traveling around their continent, I was invited to many countries. I ended up traveling to Tanzania, Ethiopia and Zimbabwe.

My experiences after the Mr. Universe were just what I had seen in my visions. I was contacted through the current host and given offers for other appearances. Travel and hotel accommodations were paid for and I was met at the airport or train station by a chaperone. A security person would remain with me during my stay in each country. These people spoke the language, knew the town and would take me all around, introducing me to high society people. I went to parties, was entertained on yachts, and stayed in mansions. Though I didn't request it, I was introduced to women at every turn. Everything was set up before I even touched down.

Italy's IFBB president, Franco Fassi, became one of my biggest supporters. Il Presidente was a suave, dark Italian man with a head of slick black hair. I could see the obvious lines of a lifting enthusiast under his sharp clothes. As a successful entrepreneur, he created his own Fassi Empire. He had Fassi gyms, Fassi equipment, Fassi supplements, clothing, you name it. With all this, he was still a decent, classy man who kept his word and always treated me with respect. Fassi would field requests from other countries and a whole new European tour began for me. I particularly enjoyed working with him and Jim Leinfield of Holland, appearing at their various stores and gyms.

Europeans appreciated the beauty of a well-developed physique. Aside from the IFBB Mr. Universe, the German Championships, and a Mr. Britain, France and Finland, there weren't any other competitions in Europe. This made Europeans hungry to see beautiful physiques, and they wanted

to see me, support me and hang with me. They treated me like royalty. They made me feel proud of my hard work and talent. What a different experience for a black man.

Yet, I can't say everyone in Europe welcomed a well-built black man. I first suspected this would be the case at a stop in Belgium when I wasn't picked up at the airport as arranged. Not that I expected the rock star treatment of dinners, escorts and entertainment, but the Belgian IFBB presidents, the Blommaert brothers, did none of these. Instead they stashed me in their attic and never even took me to a gym to train. Hard boiled eggs and toast left on the kitchen table was the extent of their hospitality, if you can call it that.

Aside from that experience my tour was exciting, but I was ready to get back to Venice to see Ashley and settle into my training routine. I had everything at stake in the Mr. International competition and it fueled me. Denny and Manny would be there ready to train.

Having by now made a successful documentary "Pumping Iron", word came that Arnold was going to be in another movie, filming in Birmingham, Alabama, and they wanted other names in bodybuilding to be in a couple of scenes. It was to be called "Stay Hungry," starring Jeff Bridges and Sally Field. We are now talking Hollywood. The experience of going to Alabama and being part of the filming of a movie was just about too much for this country boy. By the looks we were getting, I don't think Alabama had ever seen anything like us. The area in Birmingham where we stayed looked straight out of the Old South, with cowboys and dirt roads. The group of us bodybuilders (Kenny Waller, Ed Corney, Eddie Guilliani, Roger Callard, Franco Columbo, Denny Gable) went most places together, so the reaction we got from the locals was incredible.

Bodybuilding was suddenly becoming the coolest, most happening thing around, with everybody wanting to have a cold-blooded, breath-taking body or at least hang around with someone who did. Back in Venice, the group of us were invited to Hollywood parties all the time. There was always something going on. I would find myself partying with people

I saw on TV the night before. I marveled at how a poor black country boy could be dancing with the flying nun, Sally Field, in her house in Malibu.

When I returned to Weider's physician, some not very surprising news came back from my blood test. He told me I had a blood disorder common among black people. That would explain why I was so sickly and sluggish before I started working out with Jack LaLanne at seven years old. I went to the Veteran's Hospital to have the diagnosis confirmed. The final diagnosis was that I had thalassemia, that my blood cells were oddly-shaped. At times I could feel my body getting sluggish. While other times, my entire head ached from the lack of oxygen. The things that helped distribute oxygen to my cells were weight training, cardiovascular exercise and breathing from an oxygen tank. I also knew that not eating on time, airplane travel, and steroids (which thicken the blood) made it worse.

The demands I put on my body in the gym were tremendous, so I decided I should be extremely rewarding to my body in return, particularly with this new information. I started to read about vitamin, mineral and herb supplementation, and the benefits of fresh vegetable juices. California was leading the health conscious boom, so everything I needed was readily available. One Life on the Santa Monica-Venice border was the best health food store in the area. I was forming an intimate relationship with my body, one of love, respect and communication. And my body was responding by becoming healthier and stronger.

I began trying different combinations of exercises and periods of rest between sets. While I always stayed with the basic exercises, I never did exactly the same routine twice. That made me feel more free flowing and creative, like an artist. It also kept the body on its toes, trying to guess what to expect. If I was working back and chest together, I would pick three exercises for both muscle groups, all the time pushing myself to handle heavy weight, working for a great pump. I would flex and squeeze my muscles after every set, then go through the mandatories for one minute, then back through my second cycle of exercises until I completed five cycles. That's

30 total sets of unrestrained intensity. I kept the workouts tight, within 45 minutes, exhausting the body in record time.

Nobody believed in aerobics, because we thought it would decrease our muscle size. Gyms didn't even have cardiovascular equipment yet. Sticking with my great eating plan, and being blessed with good genes allowed me to stay lean without aerobics. Occasionally I would run or walk the 196 steps in the Santa Monica Canyon to challenge my aerobic conditioning. I loved being in control of my weight, always keeping it eight to ten pounds over competition weight.

While Manny's optimism for the future helped fuel my determination, Denny's will was taking a beating. Because he had taken my side and walked out of Arnold's apartment over the "Pumping Iron" contract issue, and because he was still my training partner and friend, his \$400 a week contract was cut in half. His decision took him out of the inner circle and left him with a rocky future in bodybuilding, just like mine. Being black prepared me for this road, but Denny is white, with small town Iowa experience giving him little grit. It was an eye-opening experience for me to see what happens to a white man who goes against the grain and backs a black man. The whole situation saddened me, and our friendship began to suffer. I could see he wasn't putting the same fire into his workouts, and some days he would be a no-show. I thought the worst and turned out to be right. He got mixed up with drugs. Through Denny, I saw how addictive and destructive recreational drugs were and decided I wouldn't get sucked in. I was astonished as I witnessed Denny go from a great-looking, enthusiastic guy, who stood tall, to a man without will or self-esteem. His wife left him, and he moved in with Manny for a while before moving back home to Iowa.

I found it sad to see the whole Gold's scene go on as though nothing had happened. In the army, a whole squad is down when one comrade falls. At Gold's, life went on as usual even though a man's life was ruined because of broken promises and because he stood up for what was right. Denny's fall affected me negatively. I didn't want anybody around me and I became wary of the people in the business. An even

more intense look fell upon my face, and I made it known that I wanted to be left alone to train.

Beyond the Gold's Gym scene, deals and plans were being made. Joe Gold had sold the gym and its name the year before to Ken Sprague. With bodybuilding taking off, Joe was planning to open a new gym on a bigger scale. It would be called World Gym Enterprises, franchised throughout the world. Ken Sprague had his vision set in the same direction as Joe but knew he would have to take a few steps to get there. He sold the original Gold's building for a good price and planned to build a larger facility. In the meantime, he leased an old brick building in downtown Santa Monica. Manny, a few others and I moved downtown with Gold's, where I trained for the Mr. International.

The bodybuilding fans that used to come to the old Gold's found their way to the new gym and watched me train. Because I had a regimented schedule, it was easy for them to figure out my arrival time. I loved giving them a show they would never forget. I always oiled myself up and wore my signature raggedy t-shirts, the more torn the better.

When it was 12 weeks till the show, I started to split my workouts into morning and afternoon battles in a three-day-on, one-day-off cycle. Shoulder work came in the morning and arms in the afternoon, followed the next day by chest and back work and then quadriceps in the morning and hams and calves in the afternoon. With less of a workload in each training session, I could increase my intensity and weights. My tools of choice to craft my masterpiece were still barbells, dumbbells and cables.

My meals tightened up with fish at three meals and beef only early in the day with my eggs and my new food, steel-cut oats. To dry out more, I experimented. Instead of food at one meal, I'd have two scoops of protein powder mixed with water. If on my next training day, my strength had dropped, I would go back to real food at that meal. Keeping my strength up all the way to the competition was all important.

In 1976, I was invited to guest pose for the AAU Mr. America being hosted by Ken Sprague. Ken was a great promoter for bodybuilding and played a big part in its newfound popularity. Ken paid the bodybuilders generously and showed everyone genuine respect. Receiving \$2000 from Ken was the most I had gotten for a guest posing gig. His shows were packed, and included a lot of Hollywood celebrities. His creativity had a flair that came off big, but classy and tasteful. For the Mr. America he hired an entire circus to form a parade that started from his gym on Second Street in Santa Monica and wound up at the Civic Center about a mile away. A group of bodybuilders was hired to walk alongside the acrobats and elephants. The parade and show were a huge success and took bodybuilding to a whole new level of entertainment that was fun and exciting. I felt like a rock star when I came out to start the show with my posing routine. The audience's response was just what I needed to drive home my last month of preparing for the Mr. International.

Going into the show, I knew I had to get solidly into a winning mindset, because Arnold was producing the International show, as well as the Olympia. It was clear that Arnold took care of his friends and since I was not a part of the "Arnold clique," the odds were stacked against me. And even though I would have the best physique there, I would be up against Roger Callard, who was part of the clique. I was determined to make the difference between us so obvious that if they gave the show to Roger, it would leave the crowd in an uproar. I wanted to freak the audience out and give them a body created through hard work. This was always the challenge I placed on myself. I envisioned being the best physique that hit the stage that night, in both competitions.

Everyone knew in advance that Arnold's best friend, Franco Columbu, was going to win the Olympia and behind him, Frank Zane. Franco had not yet won an Olympia and was heading for retirement because of a terrible leg injury. He loved to compete in the world's strongest man competitions, pulling cars with his teeth, dead lifting 600 pounds for five reps, squatting over 500 pounds and benching 495 pounds for

five or six reps. Franco was incredibly strong, but while carrying a refrigerator on his back, he stepped in a dip in the road, snapping his shin bones in two for a compound fracture. From the audience, his injured leg was noticeably less developed than his other one. Could the judges really put Columbu in first with merely an outstanding back? Yes, they could and did. For the IFBB to allow that kind of judging to take place tainted bodybuilding and shamed the whole business. Were we part of a show or an actual competition? If we were just actors, they should have told us and paid us accordingly. Even though I had people coming up to me after the show, telling me I was the best Olympiad competitor that night, I knew I would have a tough road ahead of me.

The Mr. International was still a prestigious show, and some of the greats like Arnold Schwarzenegger, Frank Zane and Ken Waller had won this title. Now it was my turn, and I smoked the competition. Roger Callard, Weider's boy under contract, didn't even have a chance.

So it was back to California and back to the drawing board to see what stops I hadn't yet pulled out. I was training mostly by myself at Gold's. With my latest win and having a second *Muscle Builder* cover, offers came in to appear around the world. I wondered just how many domestic requests fielded by the Weider office were actually given to me. But that was fine because the amount of racism I encountered in the States wasn't worth it. I made sure my contacts in Europe corresponded directly with me. The payments were great, sometimes \$2000 a show. This was the most a bodybuilder had received up until then. I wanted to come in shape, deserve this money so the fans would see a marble statue of a Greek god, an anatomy chart that showed every muscle separated. This is what the fans and promoters loved. The events would be packed, standing room only, with people cheering as if I were some god. I found it exciting. Every appearance was another opportunity to be a little more chiseled and muscular.

Being flown around the world in the late 70s was a thrill, but also demanding on my body. The traveling seriously cut into the consistency my body thrived on. My saving grace was an aluminum steamer trunk with a little compartment

where I could store my first couple of meals, chilled with ice. This way, there wouldn't be such a shock to my system, while I slowly introduced the various regional foods to my body. On the road, I looked for whatever consistency I could find in my eating, like having a hotel room with a kitchen, shopping at the same markets, and eating in the same restaurants.

The 1976 Mr. Universe was held in Montreal, Canada, with Roger Callard not competing, Weider needed a new White Hope to compete against me. It would be the big, thick Mike Mentzer. He and his brother Ray had come on the scene in '75 and trained occasionally at Gold's Gym, but mostly worked out at World Gym, trying to break into Arnold's clique. Mike was handsome with his parted-down-the-middle black hair and thick mustache. The Weiders made him resemble the strong men of the 40s and 50s. He was 5'9", 240 pounds. Just that inch and a half over me brought his physique into a whole different body type, one with more of an impression of size, but with his more blocky hip structure, it wasn't as ideal for winning bodybuilding competitions. Mike came with a heavy-duty training philosophy and a deal with Arthur Jones and his Nautilus equipment. In 1976, he won the Mr. America contest, competing in the medium weight group. The Chief rolled him out on the cover of *Muscle Builder* and gave Mike and Ray a contract. The Weiders sent Mike to the Universe contest, to go muscle-for-muscle with the Black Prince.

I walked away with first, beating Mike in the middleweight division, Egypt's Mohammed Makkaway took the light weight, and Roger Walker of Australia won his heavy-weight division. They announced me as the overall winner without the usual comparison round between the winners of each weight group. This was an odd twist. The fans go berserk for me when I'm onstage, yet I'm denied the opportunity to stand in comparison with the runner-ups, the two guys under Weider contracts. There was a serious love-hate attitude from the bodybuilding powers towards me. There was nothing I could do about it but continue trying to be the best bodybuilder of all time, and try to make a living. My frankness did not make me friends in the Weider camp, and

every aspect of the bodybuilding business revolved around Weider, so I knew I had to tread lightly.

My trip to Montreal ended with a visit to the IFBB's headquarters. I had a chance to see Ben Weider's office and learn more about him. He idolized Napoleon, decorating his entire office with paintings and bronze sculptures about the defeated ruler. All of this seemed bizarre to me.

Having won overall at the Universe, I was now able to battle for the Olympia. In 1977, there were no other shows in which to compete, so I had 11 months to earn money and prepare for the "O" in October. Arnold would be producing the competition once again, and I would be up against his longtime friend, Frank Zane. Zane had placed either second or fourth in his four attempts at the Olympia. Back in 1968 he beat Arnold in the Mr. Universe, Arnold's first IFBB competition. I had seen Zane back then guest posing in Florida, and in my opinion, the late 60s were his best years. The aesthetic shape he achieved with his tiny waist and full muscles was what I had visualized for myself during my early development.

Muscle Builder was fueling the suspense with articles on both of us, month after month. In February and July, I was back on the covers, sharing one with Franco and the other with Zane. The caption under our photos read 'Joe Weider's Superstars.'

Rick Wayne, a former competitor from Barbados, had been editor of the magazine and a great sportswriter for some time and was supportive of me, or so I thought. I felt I could trust him more than other writers not to credit Weider for my development, though at times he came close.

On one visit to his office for an interview, Rick opened his desk drawer and told me all the letters in it were for me. I said, "Wow, that's great, huh?"

But his reply was, "They're all hate letters."

"All of them?"

“Oh, you get your share of fan mail, but I’ve never seen so many hate letters.”

“I thought things would be different at this level, but it looks like nothing has changed from when I was in Florida,” I said as I noticed he was putting the letters back in his drawer rather than giving them to me.

Rick agreed and added, “I guess it only gets worse with success. You know, if you want to put together a training course and print up some pamphlets, Weider’s letting guys put small ads in the magazine.”

“Great, I’ll do that, anything to make money. How about a contract while we’re at it?”

Rick would hear about my frustration of not being given a contract when I saw every one around me, including the people I was beating, getting them. My sentiments were not making it to print, but for better or worse they were making it to Weider’s desk. Instead of giving me a contract, the Chief spread throughout the business a second nickname: “the Bad Boy of Bodybuilding.” I could see that speaking up was not going to get me anywhere except in the dog house.

October rolled around quickly, and Ashley and I were off to Columbus for my first Olympia, competing for the Sandow trophy. The 12-inch bronze replica of Eugene Sandow, the first famous bodybuilder of the late 1800s, was the ultimate award in bodybuilding. After the prejudging in the afternoon where the winner is chosen, I had no doubt I would sweep the show. Except for Zane, I had already beaten all the serious competitors: Boyer Coe, Bill Grant, Ken Waller, Ed Corney and Albert Beckles. I was in even better shape this time around. Zane, with his beautifully symmetrical shape, was shredded, but he lacked the fullness and thickness I had.

At the evening show, the crowd got behind me with cheers. Having seen the show previous year, I knew something else was being played out on this Olympia stage, and there was nothing I could do above and beyond the hard work I had put into my condition. What I had prepared myself for came to

pass. Zane was awarded his first Olympia Sandow, and I was runner-up.

The only thing I said to myself was, next. Unlike Zane, who was under contract, I had to make a living. That was my priority. So I moved on quickly from the show and set up exhibitions back in Europe. Ashley stayed on the home front and handled our mail-order business. We would get hundreds of orders for my training courses and were pulling in some decent money.

In 1978, while I was in Europe, things were changing back home. The IFBB was finally starting to add more pro competitions. Up until now, they had had only four notable amateur events: Mr. America, Mr. International, Mr. Universe, Mr. World, and one professional event: Mr. Olympia. Weider hired Wayne Demilia to introduce the new events. While the competitions gave us the opportunity to earn money, the only way for a competitor to qualify to compete in the Olympia was to win the overall title in the Universe competition. Interestingly, none of the new events would use the word "Mr.," a title which had brought the competitor a certain prestige. The reason for dropping Mr. was because the National Physique Committee (NPC) sued the AAU for the title in Federal Court. The NPC lost and was no longer allowed to use Mr. in their competition titles. The NPC continued to promote bodybuilding shows, but they had to use titles that did not include the word Mr.

The first show added was called "The Night of the Champions" to be held in Manhattan in May. Wayne contacted me and asked if I would come to New York a couple of days before the event to visit gyms and promote the show. He picked me up at the airport, escorted me to the gyms, and put me up in his house in Westbury, New York. The first place I visited was Bath Beach Gym in Brooklyn. The gyms would have posters announcing my appearance and would be packed with two to three hundred trainees and fans. After answering questions about training, diet and steroids, I would pull off my top, drop my pants and flex for the crowd in my posing trunks. Strange as this sounds, I had no problem with the display. Despite my setbacks with the powers that be, I continued to be

quite the showman. I had more than enough confidence about my physique to go around. I knew all that posing and walking around New York would dial in my physique for the show Saturday. So I didn't train except for crunches, pushups, and lots of posing. I must have hit each mandatory pose a hundred times on a hot day in May. I could see myself getting harder and harder, because the flexing was squeezing all the water from around my muscles into the actual muscle. Most competitors used diuretics the last couple of days before a show, but I used posing. I was convinced that sessions of flexing did a better job because a diuretic pulls the water from every part of your body, including muscles, causing them to lose size and fullness and wind up looking flat. A bodybuilder's aim is to drive all his water into his muscles come show time. My mandatories were ingrained in both my body and mind. I looked like a black diamond.

Our local promotional tour was a great success because the show was a sell-out; the Beacon Theater was filled to the rafters. I was psyched about the competition because it was a new show in a new environment with new judges. The competitors (Roy Callendar, Boyer Coe, Ed Corney and Bill Grant) would be up against the show's promotional star, Robby Robinson. I knew the physiques I was up against. Bill was a hard, muscular competitor from New Jersey, about 5' 9". He had already competed for ten years, but had not yet made a name for himself, even though he showed up with one of the hardest, densest physiques. What made the biggest impression on me was how dry he looked. It looked as if he had ripped his skin off, leaving just muscle and veins. But he could never overcome the handicap of high, smaller calves. Arnold and some others mocked him relentlessly about them, giving Bill a mind trip and causing a rift between Arnold and him.

Roy, a West Indian by way of Canada, had met Joe Weider on one of Joe's trips to Canada. Roy was picked and groomed by Joe to beat me. But my mind stayed on one thing: how hard I had worked and prepared. I believed the one with the strongest mindset who had worked the hardest would win. And no one worked harder than me.

This was my first competition against Boyer Coe and Ed Corney. Boyer was from Louisiana and had been competing for some 12 years, working his way up the ranks in the AAU federation and then in the WGGB and the NABBA. In the early 70s, he jumped back and forth between these rival federations and the IFBB, making the final switch to the IFBB with this Night of the Champions competition. Boyer was an entrepreneur early on, selling his own bodybuilding products. When I was 19, I wrote Boyer a letter telling him about my dreams of being a bodybuilder. As many of the top guys were known to do, Boyer wrote me back some words of advice. Then for several years he sent me his protein powder and a pair of posing trunks as a gift. It was not easy to compete against him that night.

Ed Corney was well-known for his posing ability and his beautifully choreographed routines. Along with his balanced muscularity and handsome looks, his posing was winning him titles and had placed him high in the last three Olympias.

I came into the show knowing I would be hard to beat, with my tiny waist and hips, my dominance in the mandatories, and my stage presence. I had come up with a posing routine and set it to a space music piece by Lonnie Liston Smith.

With these new shows, Ben Weider tried an alternate approach to the scoring. The judges would use the number scoring system, as in the Olympics. I thought it was great, right in line with the competitive spirit of the sport, but I think it unnerved a lot of guys when they would see a low round score. In my view, the numbers added excitement, more audience involvement, and a new spirit of honesty to the judging. And after the last Olympia, this scoring came as a relief, because after your mandatory round and your posing routine, you could see just where you stood. So there wasn't any great surprise when I was awarded first, Roy second, and Bill third, Boyer fourth and Ed fifth. I won my second cash prize to date, \$7500.

Next, the IFBB added another new show to be held before the Olympia back in Santa Monica at the Civic Center. They called it the "World Cup" and Ken Sprague was the promoter. It was two months away, and then another two months until the O. Coming off the Night of the Champions, I wanted to give my body a rest for a week. I was tired after all the flexing; it felt like a week's worth of work in the gym. I also planned to give my body two weeks off before going back to the doctor for shots. Then I planned on going twice before the Cup, two more times before the O. There were still just the two shots, 200 mg. of deca durabolin and 1 cc. of B-12 and calcium.

Most of the guys who were in the Night of the Champions competed in the World Cup, so unless someone sprouted wings overnight, the show was mine. If anyone was going to improve it was going to be me, because I believed I had the strongest mindset. When the placing was announced, I came in first, Danny Padilla, the Giant killer, was second, and Callendar third. I loved that they were adding shows, because it gave me the chance to get more exposure and earn more money. The World Cup paid me \$10,000 and the cash equivalent of a car, which was around the same amount. Not bad for 1978.

After the World Cup, Ken Sprague sold Gold's Gym to Pete Grymkowski and pretty much disappeared from bodybuilding. Pete was a rough and rugged character. That's probably why we always got along. He was one of the first monster competitors, coming in huge. His size brought him a noticeable fan base. He had won a couple of AAU junior competitions, but had never placed well when he came over to the IFBB. He sank 90 grand into buying Gold's Gym. The gym's change of hands and move must have been in the works, because there was no down time. Relocated to Hampton Drive, four blocks from the beach and two from World Gym, Gold's was back in the center of Venice. But the gym was now four times the size of any of its previous incarnations, almost half a football field. As new pieces of equipment were designed, Pete would jump at the opportunity to fill up the huge space.

Up until this new Gold's, gyms were always small, with an underground, cult feel to them, intimidating all who were not hardcore. But the size and spectacular appearance of the new Gold's, plus the attention the "Pumping Iron" documentary gave the Venice muscle scene, encouraged outsiders to come in. Anyone and everyone who thought they had a shapely body came to train and strut their goods at Gold's. And those who desired to build a physique of their own wanted to train alongside the masters of discipline, the professional bodybuilders.

The Hollywood set was the first to arrive and hook up with us. Opportunities came for training and acting bits. While I kept my focus on bodybuilding, Manny hooked up with movie stuntmen and quickly became the go-to man for stunt work. Roger Callard took a leap and appeared in a few flicks, one of which, "Sextette," starred Mae West, who regularly surrounded herself in her movies and shows with bodybuilders.

The new Gold's also brought with it an excitement and freshness that spiked my training for the Olympia. For the most part, I trained alone and stuck with 20 sets per body part that I had adopted back at the original Gold's.

The '78 Olympia was almost a carbon copy of the previous year's show, with Arnold at the helm, Frank Zane on the winner's block, and me in second place. This year it came down to a point difference between us, with the last vote to be cast by the head judge, Bill Pearl. In an unheard of move, Bill decided not to cast any vote. By not voting for the promoter's friend, the guy under a Weider contract, he appeared to be taking a stand against Weider and Arnold's power over the show.

But the war went on and I took it to the gym in my workouts. The upset only amplified my determination to win the next battle.

My style of wearing torn and tattered T-shirts was quickly becoming a widespread fashion statement. By the late 70s I'm sure many people, like me, had a bunch of worn-out favorite tees they just couldn't let go of. A few of mine were

so far gone that I had to tie sections together to hold the tee in one piece. I thought the look was great because it revealed parts of the pecs or lats, leaving the viewer to imagine the rest.

Conservative-minded people in the business had a field day with me and this look. Some gyms let it be known that I would not be welcome wearing my tees. There was word from the top that they didn't approve. But in a short time, maybe because ripped T-shirts were all I wore, pictures of me in my tees appeared in *Muscle Builder*. Quickly after that, guys all over the world started sporting their interpretation of the torn tee.

Also the IFBB had just notified its members that they were introducing even more shows this year. It would be a big year for competitions and the possibility of winning a lot of prize money.

The new string of competitions became known as the "Grand Prix circuit." The IFBB added them to fill in the time leading up to the Olympia and take advantage of the growing appeal of bodybuilding. The Pittsburgh Pro Invitational came first and was produced by a new guy on the bodybuilding scene, Jim Manion. This time, I placed first over Mentzer, Boyer Coe and Callender.

The next competition, the Florida Pro Invitational, was held in Miami. I was returning to my home state as an accomplished bodybuilder, and hoping my family would understand why I had distanced myself from them. We were never really close, so I knew time had nothing to strengthen. It had been ten years. With all my traveling and experiences, had we grown even more apart? Would there be the envy, rampant among blacks, that holds us back as a community? Or would they be understanding, supportive and proud? My mother and sisters had never seen me in a competition. I wanted to share my love and my life with them so I made all the arrangements for them to come. Freda had refused my several attempts to communicate, over the years. I did not see any of my kids.

Ashley came with me. When we were backstage, walking past a group of judges, we heard one of them comment, "I didn't know Robby was with a white lady" We

knew we were back in the uncompromisingly forthright Florida south. It just made me want to stick my hard work physique even more in their faces.

They gave Mike first place over me and put me in second place. I figured that life is about learning, and although winning is great, there's surely more to learn when you don't win. I may have been contemplating this after the competition when Mike came up to me and said, "Robby, it was a pleasure beating you."

Mike was known for his trash talking, and I was all too experienced in that area from my years on the football field. But Mike made one mistake, hanging around too long after his comment, long enough for a reply, "You didn't beat me, they gave it to you."

He walked away with his jaw hanging. Since I had the reputation of rarely speaking, he wasn't expecting me to say anything. I was pumped and ready for our upcoming competitions together.

The rest of the weekend was just like the show: a let down. The hurtful words spoken to me as a child, the denial of my dreams, and the discouragement aimed at me because I was so black, were now subtle eye gestures and behaviors. My sisters' disinterested attitudes toward me had not changed. But the feelings between Momma and I were the same as always, sweet and loving. She was proud to see me up on the stage with fans chanting her son's name. While I was taken aback by all the weight she had gained, I was glad to see her, unaware that it was the last time I would see her alive. All I knew was I couldn't get out of the South fast enough.

The second year of the Night of the Champions came in May, and the other rising star up there with me was the "Giant Killer." Danny Padilla looked hard and ripped and would clearly be the one I was up against. Posing to my favorite Lonnie Liston Smith piece, my show on stage was a success, and I was up to a perfect score. But when Danny, no more than 5'2", came out posing to "Short People," a big hit at the time, I thought he would surely win. It was the perfect piece at the perfect time, and the audience went nuts. Because

that tied us, they brought us both out on stage to stand side by side. That's where I won. You could see I was better developed, with more muscle. This was the only time during my career I wished there could have been two winners.

By the fifth competition that year, a new IFBB event called "Best in the World," I was on a roll. Beating out Roy Callendar and Albert Beckles for the number one spot, I added a '79 Seville and \$7,000 to my war chest.

I entered seven competitions in '79, the most ever for me in a year. But come summer and the Canadian Cup, I was starting to feel the stress from competing in so many shows.

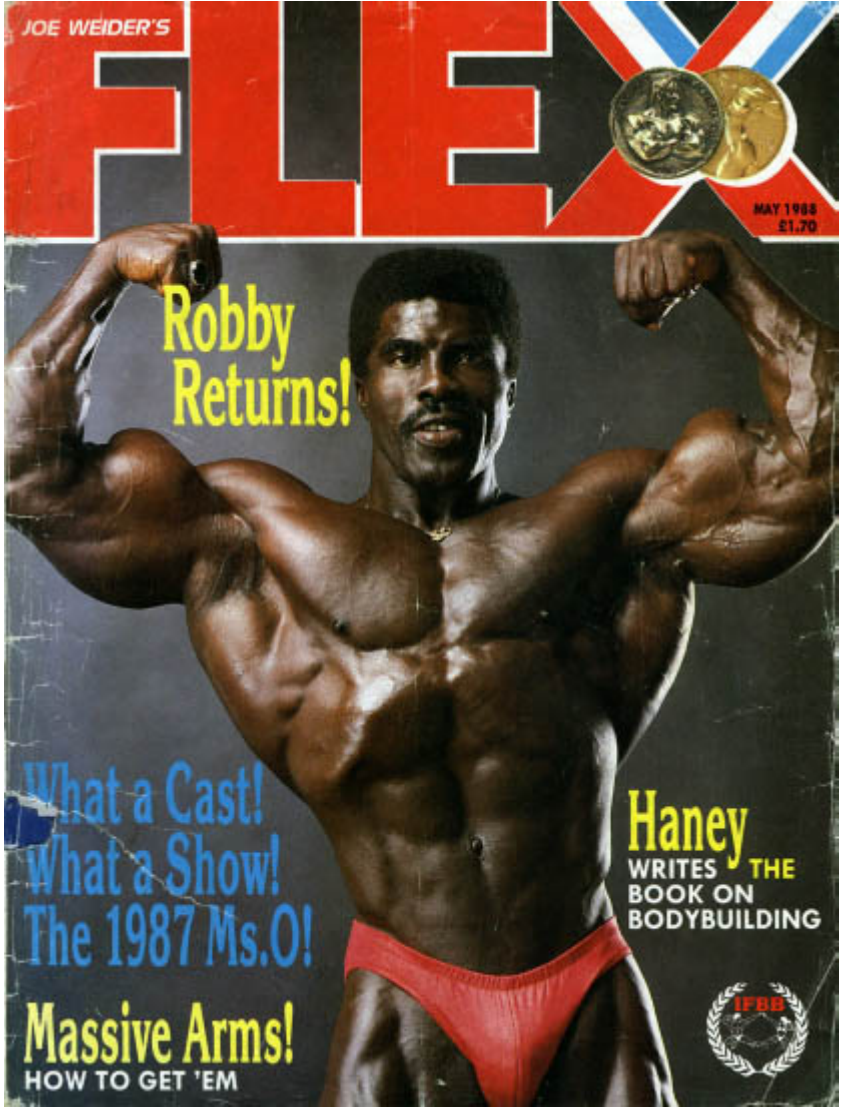
In September, *Muscle Builder* rolled me out on another cover: a shoulder, chest and head shot, just like the pose I held for the sculpting of the infamous Weider bust. Ashley bought the issue, not just because she liked the cover, but also for the interview we had given in our apartment. They included lifestyle photos of us, attempting to depict who I was. While the pictures didn't lie, the article did. It exaggerated my war experience and flat-out lied about my having a father-son relationship with Weider. It claimed that under his tutelage I was a fast learner.

With Ben Weider controlling the competitions, the IFBB and its worldwide affiliates, and Joe's magazine proclaiming himself the trainer of the champion, the Weiders had successfully monopolized bodybuilding. Joe sent me, one of his top athletes, to doctors who administered steroids, just as Hitler was known to have done to his soldiers, and to German athletes before the 1936 Berlin Olympics. Joe's propaganda was convincing people around the world they could achieve the physiques of his stars by using his supplements and following the diets and routines printed in his magazines. The part he left out was that these bodybuilding stars were on steroids, not weight-gaining supplements, and that training and diet protocols for a natural bodybuilder and one on steroids are completely different. Joe and his *Muscle Builder* magazine were misleading fans and aspiring bodybuilders, and I was part of the machine. Yet staying with the Weider empire was the only way for me to realize the

dreams I had dedicated my life to. I thought of myself as a thorn in Weider's side the way Jesse Owens was with Hitler and his attempt to prove the superiority of the white race.

In the last two events of the year, the Canadian Pro Cup and my third Olympia, I didn't fair as well. With too many competitions, I lost size, and in both events, I came in my football weight of 205 pounds, 15 pounds less than I had been competing at during that year. At the Canadian Pro Cup I was given fourth and in the Olympia, I came in third behind Boyer Coe and Zane in the lightweight, with Mike taking first in the heavy, and Zane taking the title for his third time.

When the November issue of *Muscle Builder* came out, Ashley brought it home to show me. Just two months after the cover with my bust, this cover displayed the bronze Weider bust in the exact size and position in which mine had appeared. Held side by side, they looked identical, except for the heads of course. Even the color of the bronze was the same as my coloring. From that issue on, a photograph of the Weider bust appeared on the index page of *Muscle Builder*, accompanied by a quote by Joe, "Strive for excellence, exceed yourself, love your friend, speak the truth, practice fidelity and honor your father and mother. These principles will help you master yourself, make you strong, give you hope and put you on the path to greatness."



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BANNED FOR TWO LIFETIMES

Weider's photographers kept coming to me in the gym. At this time, I was the most sought-after bodybuilder to photograph. Every time I came out of a set, it seemed like there would be someone photographing or filming me. I would spot them scoping me from long distances, hidden behind a piece of equipment or pretending to be shooting someone else. Ashley had contacts in San Francisco for window display design (something she was interested in pursuing) and suggested we move up there to give the place a try. We decided we could use a break from the Mecca of Bodybuilding. San Francisco would be more than an escape, it would remove me from everyone's microscope.

We settled in Oakland in a large two-story warehouse space tucked in its art district. The sheer size of the place made it feel like a real home to me. I started buying antique furniture, Oriental rugs and everything else I had loved. San Francisco was the place to realize these dreams, because there were scores of inexpensive antique dealers.

I was happy and felt grounded. While Ashley was at work, I would take the train five stops to Alameda to work out at the Iron Island Gym. The bare-bones set-up and hardcore atmosphere of this small gym, made me feel right at home. Best of all I was left alone.

Every gym has its own unique atmosphere and training style based on its equipment, location and clientele. Newer gyms were just starting to open with Nautilus equipment and Universal systems. I was amazed the first time I saw a Universal set-up. I would have killed to have had an all-in-one piece of equipment when I first started working out in the closet back on Wales Street. Even at this point in my training career, I would occasionally create a workout on the Universal machine. It fit the body perfectly and delivered a different stimulus and welcome change to challenge my body. But I still preferred free weights and a couple of leg machines in an old

worn-in gym. Iron Island was one of these gyms, and power lifting was big there, so that's what I worked on. It had been ten years since I really focused on power lifts like the clean and press, and using weights I could only handle four to five reps. Instead of the five sets we all did back at Gold's, I boosted mine up to Vince Gironda's lucky number seven, and sometimes back to my original ten. I focused on my squats, clean and presses, dead lifts, standing presses and shrugs, but also mixed in my basic bodybuilding exercises.

As 1980 rolled in, *Muscle Builder* took on a new look and name to appeal to a broader audience. Revamping the magazine with a new name, *Muscle and Fitness*, it still appealed to the muscle fans, but now the brighter, flashier covers with a sexy woman rubbing up against the bodybuilding superstar, would entice the growing number of female enthusiasts and even guys just wanting to gawk at women in bikinis.

Up until 1979 England's National Amateur Bodybuilding Association (NABBA) was the only competition in the world for women. With the Weiders planning to give women their own Ms. Olympia competition in 1980, amateur competitions for women to qualify for the Olympia were quickly popping up around the country. Rachel McLish was their first winner. The leaders vowed to keep steroids out of their division.

There were rumors Arnold was making a comeback on the stage, his stage, the Olympia. It had been five years since he had competed and he was now hosting two shows: the Pro World Championship (which later became the Arnold Classic) and the Mr. Olympia. As far as I knew, Arnold was still promoting the Olympia, which would have excluded him from competing in it; but I suspected he was planning on entering when I saw his appearance at the Pro World. If he did enter the Olympia, my placing would not be high with Arnold set to win and Zane returning for his fourth Olympia title. The bottom line was, I had to make money. And with the expectation of size at the O, demanding as much as twice the quantity of steroids than the lighter Grand Prix competitions, it wasn't a difficult decision for me to opt out of the Olympia and instead

do a series of Grand Prix shows. I decided on four, starting with the Grand Prix California back in Los Angeles.

I didn't know where I stood with the IFBB and the Weiders, having left Los Angeles and continuing to voice my opinions about the corrupt judging. I started thinking about the long haul in a career of bodybuilding, how I would have to take care of myself and find my own way in the business. It became more and more clear that I had to work around the edges, making my own rules. Keeping my name out there was a crucial component to getting appearance requests. Doing that without Weider having free reign over my image was going to be the hard part. Thank goodness there now existed the Grand Prix circuit and a Europe that loved me, because five years earlier it would have been a different story. Living in San Francisco began to give me perspective. I felt like I was outside the bodybuilding scene, looking in at it, entering only to engage in the battle of the competition.

Having to beat the other competitors was not my mindset. Only looking at the magazines occasionally, when Ashley insisted, helped me keep my focus. I always challenged myself to be better than I had been in my last show. This attitude kept my mental state strong and independent of outside influences. To be at my best, I used visualization. I could see exactly what I wanted to look like: freaky. I wanted people to gasp when I pulled in my vacuum abdominal pose and spread my lats.

It turned out to be a strange year for me on stage because two sets of my four competitions were identical in the placing. Chris Dickerson was making a comeback under the training and guidance of the top judge in the IFBB - Bill Pearl. Casey Viator had just come over from the AAU. They were not great challenges to me as a bodybuilder, but they had the advantage of newly-acquired Weider contracts. They entered every Grand Prix, and placed above me in the four I entered. Because of this, I started looking at the reality of the competitions, what factors determined the placing, where I stood, and what options I had. I refused to let myself be written out of bodybuilding because of the Weiders or because

by now they had stopped giving me top billing in their magazines.

As it turned out, Arnold did compete in the Olympia, but not until the day before the event; leaving the other competitors no choice but to go through with the competition. Given a couple of months leeway, some may have decided to sit this one out as I had. Leaving them no time to back out, Arnold would be up against the greats of the time. Arnold's unprecedented move caused an altercation backstage with Mike Mentzer. Mike was convinced he was going to win. Not only had Weider pumped him up with a cover and a slew of articles about his training approach, bigger, more muscular bodies were starting to win shows. This gave him an advantage over the reigning Mr. Olympia, Zane, who was smaller and tighter than ever. And even though Arnold's physique had no business being up there, looking skinny with just biceps and a chest, he ended up winning, while Zane came in 3rd, behind a returning 40-year-old Chris Dickerson. Boyer Coe was given fourth, and Mike was put in fifth. I felt that it was Mike's year, but there was too much at stake with Weider's greatest superstar on that Olympia stage. Arnold represented Weider's high-volume training system and Mike was toting his own "HIT" (high-intensity technique) system. They couldn't let Mike win or his system would have discredited Weider's. Arnold hadn't just entered for his ego, he was also protecting Weider's system and empire. The whole spectacle was an embarrassment to the sport. Mike never competed again, and Arthur Jones and his Nautilus equipment, which had endorsed Mike's HIT system, faded out.

As a result of this event, the IFBB had to create stricter rules for competitions to not lose all faith in the fan base. The judges would now be selected by the IFBB, rather than by the promoter. Promoters would be required to invite competitors at least three months prior to the show, and competitors would have two weeks to reply.

It became more and more obvious that the powers that be in bodybuilding were solely a money-making franchise - nothing more. Fairness didn't work into the equation. Magazines were advertisements for supplements and IFBB

competitions, competitions favored bodybuilders under Weider contracts, and all bodybuilders, whether under contract or not, were merely the wheels that kept the machine running. The Weiders made their own rules to serve and maintain the machine, while no regulations were established for steroid use. The magazine ads for protein powders and supplements, the diet advice and training routines were leading young trainees to believe that with proper diet and training alone, they could look like the superstars of bodybuilding. They left out the fact that the superstars had all unlimited access to steroids and used them extensively to cosmetically enhance their physiques. They deceived many enthusiasts, who must have become frustrated when they didn't see the results they desired. When you're taking steroids, it's a completely different game.

Shortly after I appeared with Franco in Weider's supplement ad, I received a letter from a young fan asking me if I actually used the product. I didn't even consider lying to the kid; I, too, had been deceived by Weider. So I wrote him back and gave him a few training tips along with the truth that I did not use the product. I thought that would be the end of it, until I found another letter from the 13 year-old in my box, telling me that he'd written Weider to give him a piece of his mind. I was proud of the kid, but his whistle-blowing didn't help my position.

At the end of the Grand Prix circuit, back in Oakland, Ashley and I met a woman training at one of our gyms who was a nurse at San Quentin Correctional Facility. As we learned about each other's lives and work, we came up with the idea of hosting a bodybuilding show over the prison's TV station to assist the inmates with their training and understanding of nutrition. Everybody at San Quentin, including the warden, agreed that it was a great idea and wanted to support it. Within a couple of weeks the filming began. We did all the shooting inside a studio at the prison where I would bring in dumbbells and a barbell. I demonstrated the proper form and technique for all the basic exercises and gave my usual motivational talk.

The half-hour live program quickly became wildly popular among the inmates, and the warden of San Quentin

loved the project. Above all, I felt great about sharing the thing I held dearest, the thing that had kept me out of trouble with those who'd gone down a different path. Sadly, and as I'd seen with so many well-intentioned causes, someone sees an opportunity to get something for themselves. That someone was the nurse. I suppose I should have been more leery of her after she tried to initiate a threesome with Ashley and me by completely disrobing in our living room. Being blessed with a great body did not mean I was promiscuous. I was never that.

Ashley and I were suspicious after that, but didn't tie everything together until the afternoon Ashley came down to the prison to see a broadcasting session. While I was in the taping room, Ashley stepped out to use the restroom, only to walk in on an inmate having sex with the nurse. Not only that, on Ashley's way back to tell me, she realized that the inmates lining up in the hallway were waiting for their turn.

We were mortified when we realized the nurse had set the whole thing up as a diversion for her sexual exploits. It felt like a slap in the face. Here I was thinking I was doing a good deed, encouraging and uplifting a beaten-down group of men only to realize the truth. Not only was I used as a front for her perverse tastes, I could have been implicated in the scheme. I was devastated as the facts unfolded. How was I going to handle this? The warden was holding a meeting in 20 minutes. I couldn't tell on the nurse because of her position, and truth be told, because she was white. While I, like most of the inmates, was black. Who did I really think the warden would believe?

I didn't know what to think when I walked into the meeting with the warden. We had gotten along well. I imagined he secretly longed to lose the extra 50 or so pounds he carried on his short frame and hoped that because he was Hispanic, a minority like me, he'd be on my side. Any alliance I had felt with the warden quickly evaporated when I walked in his office, which was filled with a dozen white guards all looking at me as if I were a criminal. Nobody was smiling. The guards were enormous white men. They all stood a foot or so over me and outweighed me by a hundred pounds. There was silence as I stood in awe of the sheer magnitude of their

heads. Their size, along with the pink tone to their complexions, led me to wonder whether they possibly could have been on steroids. After seeing what some of the inmates looked like, I wouldn't blame them.

The warden spoke, "Mr. Robinson, the guards are telling me that your program is starting to rally up the inmates in a direction we don't see as positive, so we are discontinuing the show."

"No problem, sir, I can understand the situation," I said, and without any hesitation, I got up and excused myself. Never in my life had I left a place so fast. I could understand how the guards felt. It was a competition between them and the inmates to see who could be bigger, more powerful and intimidating. I was just glad to get out of the scenario, and even more determined to avoid the possibility of incarceration.

Except for my training, not much else was going my way. Circumstances like this last one drove me closer to the one thing that I could control, the one thing consistent, rewarding and positive: bodybuilding. Even my relationship with Ashley was starting to deteriorate. There were more arguments and less trust when I returned from tours. Her jealousy and suspicion hit a breaking point when women around the world wrote me suggestive letters. She believed I was having relationships with them. Neither of us realized many bodybuilders had groupies like rock stars. Between that and my ongoing battle with Weider, she was becoming increasingly unhappy with this life. Yet we both knew bodybuilding was my life; I had no choice. I had nothing to go back to and everything to lose, but Ashley had options. She could choose whether she wanted to endure my battles. She was educated, attractive, and being mulatto, she had at least one foot in the white world. She had a future to fall back on. Having been with me since she was 19, her life had been shadowed by my work and success. Now, she needed to find her own. I could see her sights shifting away from me. She left for work one day and never returned.

After five years in Weider's bodybuilding world, I hit a wall. I had believed that if I kept being professional and

showing up to photo shoots with my incredible shape, I would be eventually rewarded with a contract. Now I was tired of the lie that I was under contract as a Weider superstar, while they made millions off me in advertisements for competitions, supplements and magazine subscriptions. The reality was I was having to hustle work. The traveling was hard, and I knew it ultimately affected how I looked on stage and therefore my placing. And then there were the politics behind the contest placing. Weider boys were winning and placing highest.

Even though the cards controlling my future in bodybuilding were in their hands, I refused to let them take away my self-worth. Since quitting was not in my vocabulary, I took a stand and did the only thing I could do, which was to do nothing. I stopped showing up to arranged photo shoots and refused to do their interviews. I knew this would have repercussions, because they could write whatever they wanted in their magazines, limit photos of me and even place me low in competitions. If this turned out to be the case, I could continue to compete in unbelievable, blow-their-minds shape so they couldn't deny me some kind of placing and at least some coverage in the contest section in *Muscle Builder*. Then I could keep up with the contacts and fans I had already created, particularly in Europe, and continue with appearances and seminars.

My "Bad Boy of Bodybuilding" label was spreading now through the bodybuilding community. And sure enough, without worldwide exposure, requests for exhibitions and seminars leveled off equally as fast and made a huge difference in my income.

Everything was coming to a head, and I needed a change to break from my dilemma with bodybuilding. That was when Jim Arden called with a proposition.

I had met Jim after the previous year's Night of the Champions competition when he came up to congratulate me on my win. Jim was an assertive, well-educated, fair-skinned black man. I could tell he worked out from how his clothes fit. We quickly took to each other, and that next week I was visiting him in Greenwich, Connecticut, on the grounds of the

Country Day School where he taught middle school science. Jim was a bit of a hippie throwback who enjoyed talking for hours about spirituality. But his greatest passion was martial arts. That week, he had me winging around a bamboo stick as he demonstrated how to beat a man to death with it.

Now, a year later, Jim proposed hosting a bodybuilding camp at his school's campus during that coming summer. I didn't hesitate for a moment in agreeing to do it. This would be a welcome change. Jim was extremely upbeat and encouraging. The time I would spend teaching with him would help clear my mind so I could come up with a solid plan for moving forward.

The camp turned out to be a great success and the participants went away in better shape and with a greater knowledge of training and nutrition. What I found most interesting was the "macho how-much-weight-I-can-lift" approach to training. I'd be the last to deny I live for the feeling of heavy weight and to push the envelope of my potential, but in my beginning years, weight increases were incrementally made over a long period of time. I started out with good weight, but not heavy. By using the same weights over and over with the basic exercises, I developed a solid frame and a sharp muscle-mind connection. So that when I did have a chance to lift heavier, I could hold my form better and isolate the weight on the muscles more intensely. In the long run, this develops a more aesthetically pleasing physique with fewer injuries and less wear and tear on the joints. The trainees left with an understanding that it wasn't so much the amount of weight you lifted, but how well you felt the weight and the form you used. The irony in bodybuilding is that the better you get, the harder it gets, because you're able to feel the weight more and use it more efficiently and effectively.

While in Connecticut, I agreed to do an interview with *Muscle Digest*, a non-Weider publication. John Williams did the interview and his introduction to the article didn't paint a pretty picture of the Weider and IFBB organizations. I then talked about their biased judging and treatment of the athletes, particularly how little money we were able to make.

Within weeks of the issue hitting the stands, I heard through the grapevine that I had been suspended for two lifetimes from the IFBB and their competitions. Two lifetimes? Were they afraid I'd come back after death to haunt their shows?



UNDERGROUND

There were others before me who had received one-year suspensions, but two lifetimes? My chance of winning the Mr. Olympia and competing in other IFBB competitions was over. It was clear the suspension would be the turning point in my bodybuilding career.

The circumstances may have changed, but not my determination to keep myself in the public eye. The suspensions made me even more independent and willing to stand up against what I saw: biased treatment and lack of concern for the bodybuilder's well-being. I felt sad about the direction bodybuilding was heading and powerless to change it. The Weiders banked on the fact that the bodybuilder's ego was so big all he cared about was seeing himself in the magazines. His competitive drive would keep him separated from other bodybuilders and willing to take the crumbs thrown in his direction. When the Weiders saw us mobilize to create a union, they quickly had Arnold disembowel the movement. And without a union, the Weiders had total control over the sport and its athletes and could treat them as they pleased. I was disappointed with the bodybuilder community for not standing up for itself. The group of us that Weider had invited to train at Gold's was nothing more than an image that sold magazines. I would have preferred dying to lying down for the Weiders. And now I would not go away, which they had obviously wanted. They had a portfolio of photos of me they believed they could use for years to come, just as they were doing with Arnold's image. But we had no agreements, nor did they have signed releases from me with any photographer, because I had always refused to do so. And yet they used my image relentlessly for years, without the slightest compensation.

Knowing there were those who wanted to support my work, I kept right on doing what I did best. Luckily, the timing couldn't have been better for me, because bodybuilding was

starting to build momentum in Europe. I had already made several trips there, and when the news of my banishment hit, I already had a year's worth of exhibitions lined up. With racism less of an issue there, Europe was an ideal place for me to live.

With no hesitation, I packed my duffle bag and trunk and was on my way across the Atlantic. Amsterdam, with its overcast weather and underground nightlife, was the place that would suit my current frame of mind. I would give myself some time to relax, recover and then work the European circuit.

My good friend Segni picked me up at the airport and put me up until I could find my own digs. We had met while training on a past jaunt to Holland. Segni was a tall, lean brother from Curacao in the Caribbean Islands. He trained hard and competed on the Dutch amateur circuit, but his height made it difficult for him to put on size naturally.

What impressed me most about Segni's approach to developing his physique was how he held himself during an exercise. His natural awareness of posture gave him the appearance of dignity. It also built an incredible foundation for lifting, because chest up, puts one's mechanics in a better position for lifting the weights. I also discovered that whatever posture is held under the weights, whether good or bad, will be reinforced. Bad positioning under weights may not cause an immediate injury, but when used over and over, will lead to problems later in life. It all starts with the first resistance humans are given to work against: gravity. We have the choice to either use gravity to build good posture or let it take us down and suffer the consequences of using our mechanics incorrectly.

Segni lived an hour from Amsterdam in the city of Zoetermeer, close to Den Haag. I liked to train at Willem Yougmon's gym, so I leased a suite not far from it.

Knowing I had work I could start relaxing, settling into a life that was more comfortable and enjoyable. Europe's old country spirit helped shift my mind from the ordeal I had left behind in the States, but also reminded me of how I'd grown up. The small butcher shops where I could get fresh lean beef

and poultry for the day suited me perfectly. There was always fresh cow tripe and other organ meats, great for their high iron content. I felt best when I stayed close to the diet I ate growing up on the farm. Back in America, I had a hard time accepting the cellophane-wrapped packs of chicken thighs on the shelves that looked like they'd been sitting there for days, being picked up, poked and squeezed. There is something so authentic about walking to outdoor farmers' markets and buying just a few days worth of fresh vegetables, fruits and breads.

When you're down to lean muscle, you can see the subtle effects that each and every stimulus has on your body, particularly with food. Some sources in bodybuilding said that a calorie is a calorie, but my experience told me otherwise. The freshness and quality of foods would leave a different imprint on my physique. Handmade pasta in Italy would leave my muscles pumped without bloating my stomach, like packaged pasta did. I could see a difference in how I looked if I prepared my meals, versus having a restaurant prepare them, even if they were cooked exactly as I requested. My take is that while the body watches the preparation, it prepares itself for the ingredients, triggering certain reactions.

When I looked back to my rural beginnings, I realized that it came close to the natural ways humans were designed to live: eating the harvest of the land, doing physical labor and walking to get places. Humans, like any other organism, have been given all the natural resources needed to prosper and to heal. The further we move away from that, the more problems we will have. Zoos ask people not to feed the animals because nature has designed them to eat a certain diet. Why would we believe that synthetic, hormone-induced or processed foods wouldn't cause problems? Because the body's first and foremost concern is survival, nothing goes unnoticed. There is a reaction to every action. With every decision, a bodybuilder considers the big picture: life, not just his current state, but his longevity as well.

I was starting to see the body as a separate entity with its own character, way of communicating, and reaction to everything it takes in, emotionally and physically. My body

and I had developed a trusting relationship. We listened to each other. I always had internal words of encouragement. It put across feelings and sensations. With this kind of relationship, there is a greater sense of a oneness between mind and body.

I had a powerful edge with the way I ate, and the gap was growing. Before I moved to Europe, I started seeing bodybuilders buying frozen chicken breasts in bulk, vegetables in cans, and Quaker Oats by the tub. They were packing a day's worth of meals in Tupperware containers and drinking protein powder mixtures from Beverly International, Hoffman and Weider. Off-season, they were starting to blow out their physiques on junk food. Then 12 weeks out from the contest they would switch to restricted, bland diets, using thyroid and other cutting drugs to get them back into shape. I could see their bodies working harder for energy. I never felt restricted because within the world of quality natural foods, there's always been an abundance of exciting food open to me. During my off-season, I always practiced eating more of these foods. I would have my treats, but they would always be natural and sugar-free, my favorite being a homemade carrot muffin.

Anything not in its whole, unprocessed, natural state I consider an insult to my life force and not in my best interest. I knew exactly what we were supposed to consume, and nobody could persuade me to eat out of my set, because I loved the way I ate. I have always just said, "I'm not even gonna start." No doubt I was this way because of Charlie Mae and the special care she took in preparing our meals. It's been observed by biologists that the stomach has its own brain that works with a memory or library of experiences. Through my growing years, I was unknowingly conditioning my digestive system to know one way of eating and associating it with the feeling of nourishment and love. The average person might view my attitude as extreme or obsessed. To me, it's just taking care of myself in a respectful, loving and concerned way. Not to put anyone else down, but I see most people's diets as abusive, destructive and disrespectful to our gift of life and creation. They, too, are a product of their early

conditioning, and it is ultimately difficult to change that. People can be on an extreme diet for a certain amount of time, but diets always fail and people inevitably return to what they had conditioned their body to. Conditioning has the power to make or break us.

Our body systems work in alliance with repetition. From the revolution of the earth and the cycle of days, to the beating of our hearts, the pulsing of our blood, and the duplication of cells, the body looks for patterns created by repetition. The familiarity of the routine builds trust and confidence in the body. Just as in any strong relationship, trust is paramount. My body feels its best when I organize my sleeping, eating, supplementation, work, physical activity and rest into a planned schedule.

I was aware my power laid in the strong connection I had made with my inner self. I started working on our relationship back when I would lay on the floor of my closet gym. If this inner self is my subconscious, then undoubtedly I was working on the other 90% of the brain they say we don't use. The more I observed and honored this self with healthy choices and wise decisions in my life, I strengthened the power of my will. A balanced center equals a balanced life. If I find myself pulled out off my center, I always try to get right back to this place as quickly as I can. This holds true on a mental, emotional and physical level. It feels like a neutral state in my heart field, with no dualism, no conflict. But, peace.

Since the body is always changing, I check all the parts of my plan regularly, and make adjustments when I notice something off or not moving in the direction I want. These parts are the details and building blocks that make up the big picture of health, happiness and a sense of well-being. Because old habits are imprinted in the mind and body, in the beginning it takes discipline to stick to a new plan, but in time it becomes second nature and starts to replace the old recordings. If you slip off, don't beat yourself up. Just get back on track. All your body's systems will become regular and balanced with a schedule.

That said, at some point, the body, like the mind, gets bored when a routine becomes stagnant. With variety and creativity I tweak both my eating and training routine to excite my body and mind. I'll make waffles with maple syrup and have them with my eggs instead of toast. In the gym I'm always shuffling exercises and their combinations, varying muscle groupings and repetition schemes. There is a rotating pattern within the big game plan. My main goal working out is to have fun, because fun is never boring.

While my mental conditioning never allowed me to let outside influences affect my resolve, working out like a maniac didn't dissolve my issues with the Weiders. I couldn't control Weider or change the situation; I had to deal with it within myself. This was difficult at times because it made me feel powerless over my future. My tendency during times like this in my life was to disappear inside myself.

I took to walking. The adventure of exploring the streets of Amsterdam late into the night appealed to my dark feelings. It was 1983, and the pornography industry was gaining steam. Curious about the underbelly of life, I would play in it up to a point by observing and letting people talk about their experiences. Past that point, I would risk losing my power of self and be pulled over into someone else's agenda. That voice of wisdom in me had to talk me out of what could easily have been many life-damaging situations. I figured the more I saw in life, the better prepared I'd be for anything.

Amsterdam was teaching me that the world was a big mysterious place with a lot going on under the radar, another life happening at night. Fernando Sam-sin, the owner of a De Haag gym called Intersport and a good friend of mine, had a great love for training and promoting bodybuilders, and fortunately for me, The Black Prince was his favorite. Originally from Surinam, Fernando had a passion for dancing and nightlife, so a few years back, he had introduced me to the Amsterdam underground. Along these passageways, literally underneath the sleeping Amsterdam, there was another world that never slept, where you could find a little bit of everything. There would be stores and restaurants next to an alley with

nothing but smoke shops where people toked on hash or weed or even opium. There were bars and nightclubs where you could dance, and because prostitution was legal in Holland, girls from every corner of Europe displayed their wares in windows. But the strangest sight by far was the bars with sex shows and orgies for all to watch. I would walk for miles taking in the extraordinary feel of the underground.

I met so many interesting people in Europe all with compelling stories. Because of my fame, people approached me constantly with money-making opportunities of the illegal variety. It seemed being black attracted more of these sorts of jobs than good ones. It was as if there was an assumption about my character based on the color of my skin. The offers always came from people in high positions who tried to portray themselves as nice people with my best interests at heart. They loved to be seen with me because it made them feel cool and attracted more women their way. They were often involved in moving diamonds, gold and women from one location to another; they were looking for security to oversee their traffic. They quickly saw that a bodybuilder made a perfect candidate for the position. I decided not to gamble with fate by getting pulled into the easy money. I knew justice wasn't colorblind, and I loved my freedom too much.

Because it was legal to buy steroids in Europe, anyone could walk into a pharmacy and buy almost any steroid without a prescription. Deca durabolin was one that needed a prescription to buy, so by the late-eighties, it was replaced by ones that didn't require a trip to a doctor. These were parabolan, primobolan acetate, and winstrol-v. As the times changed, so did the steroids.

There were two amateur federations in Europe I could compete in; newer was the National Amateur Bodybuilding Association (NABBA) and slightly older was the World Amateur Bodybuilding Association (WABBA). Except for a couple of professional WABBA competitions, the events didn't pay, but wins kept your name in the mix.

The competitions were held throughout Europe and in 1981, WABBA's Pro World Cup in Paris hosted a great show

down between the top three black competitors of the previous decade; Sergio Oliva, Serge Nubret and the Black Prince. We each had our edge. Oliva had pure size, the title of Mr. Olympia and years of world recognition and success. Nubret's physique was known for its beautiful sweeping lines. That night in front of a adoring crowd of four thousand, Serge was chiseled. Unmatched from the front and side, Nubret came in strong. I had built a good fan base but not like the others, so my only edge would have to be my physique. I was sure I had the total package and came in the best shape.

All three of us had similar stories. Oliva had left the IFBB and went to Europe after Arnold took the Olympia title from him back in New York. It was known in the bodybuilding community that Oliva didn't have the best relations with the Weiders but that event pushed him over the edge. He also concentrated on Europe and had been doing exhibitions, seminars and competing in WABBA for the last dozen years, building up a huge European following. He was the crowd favorite and a bigger name competitor.

Serge had had his own run-in with the IFBB when he was president of their European federations. All hell had broken loose in the IFBB when he'd shown up at the '75 Mr. Universe banquet with a white woman on his arm. The competition was in apartheid South Africa. Whether he was let go or stepped down voluntarily, Serge left the IFBB totally and became the head of the WABBA organization.

The Paris show was a beautiful display of muscle mastery. Knowing I was in my best shape was the most incredible feeling I could know. The look of being in shape is tight and hard. On stage, the abdominals are clearly visible from top to bottom, with the serratus prominently feathering down like wings and vascularity that runs evenly over the entire body. Being on that stage in Paris with these men was historic to me. I was proud to be right there with the best, knowing the placing could go either of three ways. But it was just an exhibition, so we all won. It was a 3-way tie.

A highlight during my week in Paris occurred at a new gym in the heart of the city. The beautiful gym, with a French

name I can't recall, had a circular room at its entrance that lead to a stairway to the main weight room. What was astonishing was that the gym was dedicated to me. Each room, including the entrance, had nearly life-size black and white photos of yours truly. It was a defining moment for me. I had accomplished my dream. I truly was considered one of the best bodybuilders in the world.

I participated in two other European competitions that year, placing second in the World Championship and winning the Universe Pro. I felt great. It meant lots of exhibition and seminar work. Back in Amsterdam, Fernando offered to set up an exhibition tour and drive me to the European destinations. We received offers from some remote spots that you wouldn't have thought had even heard of bodybuilding.

I did a lot of touring that year along with two more shows. I won the first show and placed second in the other. European competitors were still relatively light with their chemical use so the pressures I had felt back home were absent.

Because I never deviated from my hard training and eating plan, my body was always ready for exhibitions. I gave the illusion I was always the same size. All I needed was one week of hard, intense work in the gym, following my same simple process of manipulating my calories, water and sodium. Each time out, I would look bigger, fuller and harder because I was only manipulating my body for that one week with nothing too extreme. Because I only used anabolics right before competitions, I could look sharp, in-shape, with less water, year 'round.

What was strange for me was the attention I got from the women in Europe. All during my amateur years, bodybuilding had been the only thing on my mind. I was truly astonished by the come-ons I was getting from gorgeous women, the majority interestingly, were from prominent families.

What was also strange was that the most beautiful women I encountered throughout Europe were in Amsterdam, sitting in display windows prostituting themselves. The body

on display I could certainly relate to, but the pimping and prostitution bothered me. But I was fascinated and wanted to understand this choice they had made in life: I often walked the red light district. I heard stories of physical and sexual abuse. Many of the foreign women in Amsterdam or Germany were earning money to send home. Others had been sold into the life by their families and were obligated to pay back their owner what he paid plus interest. Generally, they stayed once they were even and continued to help their families that had sold them. They seemed to accept their lives, and because they were making very good money, in their minds, their work had status. Usually, there was an unmistakable sadness in their voices.

Like the prostitutes back in the States, these ladies were into the bodybuilding scene and recognized me. It quickly became the norm for the women in the windows to flex and pose as I passed. They would tease me and try to get me to come around the back. But something in me wanted to counsel these women and encourage them to feel better about themselves by treating them like ladies and not prostitutes.

A friendship began after one such woman, Marguerite, started a pose-down contest, with her in the window and me in the street. Marguerite was happy to have someone who listened with compassion. We respected one another. Our platonic friendship was a chance for me to understand women better and learn how they liked to be treated. She was a striking 6" blond with a seven-year-old daughter named Sebrina. The three of us would take long walks with their dog, John Henry, a young tan pug with a solid muscular build like a bodybuilder. I found it so fascinating to watch his muscles pump up on our long walks that I came up with the idea of strapping a little cart on him. As his strength developed, we added weight to the cart, little bit by little bit. By the time John Henry got up to pulling 80 pounds, he was buffed. He loved it and you could tell he had a bit of an attitude about his pumped physique.

After mentioning to Marguerite that I would love to live on the canals, she found me a houseboat to rent. Living on

the boat was unlike anything I had experienced. I felt like I was on my own island in a far removed world.

I trained hard five or six times a week, as if I was preparing for a show. My eating also stayed the same: clean, healthy, quality food on a schedule. The only food I would eat, aside from what I cooked, was an order of chicken satay and jasmine rice, always from the same Thai restaurant.

If I didn't go by the red light district or see Segni, days would go by without my talking to a soul. This was just fine with me; I enjoyed my solitude. My life was predictable and calm and I loved it. However, I knew Marguerite was concerned about all the time I spent alone because she started suggesting I get a pet. She knew a man who trafficked in exotic animals like parrots, iguanas and monkeys. "I think it would be good if you had some company. Don't you?" Marguerite asked.

"I've always wanted a monkey." I said "But I swore I would never own another pet after I lost my dog, Five Cent, when I was 13."

"A monkey would be great. Perfect friend to have on that boat with you. Let me see what I can arrange."

Two weeks later, I adopted a monkey and named him Bubbles. He was very loud if he didn't get his way, which was most of the time. As inquisitive as the storybook monkey, Curious George, Bubbles mimicked everything I did and ate. But he was very trainable and clean and did turn out to be great company. Bubbles went everywhere with me and was even allowed in the Thai restaurant. Segni was always willing to watch him when I left to work throughout Europe.

One appearance I'll always remember, was in Germany in a town called Elsdorf. It was my first appearance in that part of the world. The drive through Germany was calming, with its astonishingly beautiful miles of valleys and small to medium towns. But Elsdorf was one of those small towns that had been obliterated by American forces during the war. So little was left. What blew my mind was that practically everything had been wiped out except for the church at the

address given to us. After seeing these conditions, meeting the priest that had invited me, and learning this was an orphanage, I knew I would perform gratis.

Father Rainer Kalina led us to the basement, to a room full of rubble with a stage at one end. I was unsure of what to do or expect as I sat on the stage in front of an empty hall. Hell, I had expected a big gym full of fans. Then, one by one, the orphans appeared out of nowhere, entering the room from different doors. They were little boys under ten, pale as ghosts, all dressed in their school uniform: blue blazers, grey shorts and bow ties. They were so pale and gaunt it looked as if they had been locked away from the sun with little to eat. There was only the rubble for them to sit on and within minutes, the place was full and there wasn't an empty stone in the room. Even though the boys didn't understand English, Father Rainer asked me to talk to them, so I spoke about bodybuilding and how important their health was. They were captivated with me undoubtedly because I was probably the first black man they had ever seen. Once I oiled up and stood before them and began to pose, their expressions turned to amazement. Their jaws dropped and their eyes grew larger and larger. As if in shock, their hands were frozen in space about to clap but unable to. It was, to say the least, a surreal experience.



WHEN BIGGER GOT BETTER

I wasn't surprised when in 1982 I was reinstated into the IFBB and allowed to enter the Night of the Champions being held in the Big Apple. My first thought was that someone had told the Weiders my suspension was wrong, probably Wayne Demilia, who could have reminded them that I helped him put the Night of the Champions on the map. But then I thought, no, the Weiders don't care about doing the right thing. The real reason was, no doubt, my non-participation didn't look good to bodybuilding fans.

That year, the Weiders brought Jim Manion on board to start an amateur branch of the IFBB called the National Physique Committee (NPC). Young athletes looking to rise into the pro ranks would undoubtedly choose the path that was affiliated with the IFBB. The Weiders now had their tentacles in all aspects of bodybuilding.

I was 36 and had maintained my condition without zero anabolics for the last two years, so when I went into my 12-week contest preparation and returned to the same low, infrequent dose of anabolics, my body was fresh and responsive. Knowing that the transatlantic flight would leave my muscles flat, I allowed myself several days in New York before the competition to re-adjust.

Even though most of the competitors were guys who I had beaten before, this time I was up against other factors. I knew the IFBB was not going to welcome me back with open arms and might reprimand me with low placing. The other factor was that the guys were now bigger. Both the winner, Albert Beckles, and runner-up, Bertil Fox, had a fullness I'd never seen on them before. I came in 11th. Having been away in Europe, I could clearly see that the physiques were changing.

The next year, Weider introduced a more hardcore bodybuilding magazine, *Flex*. Big was in. Samir Bannout, from Lebanon, who in nine years of competing had only won

one amateur contest in 1979, won the Olympia. He had a wonderful physique, but always seemed to have a hard time getting it in contest shape, until now. He had a new look I was starting to see, in which the skin resembles glass, shiny and translucent. The cuts in the muscle were so clear, it was as if someone had gone in with a laser. I suspected immediately that he had found growth hormones and, apparently, they worked for him.

I entered one show, the IFBB World Pro Championship, where I placed fourth behind the up-and-coming, larger-than-life, Lee Haney, then Greg DeFerro, while Egypt's Mohammed Makkawy took first. Makkawy was in his all-time prime development, having recently worked with the trainer, Vince Gironda. Vince owned a gym in North Hollywood and trained bodybuilders, actors and athletes, both male and female. He was vocal about avoiding steroids. Vince had his own style, not only when it came to training practices, but also with his flashy fashion sense and big pompadour hairstyle. I remember Vince best as wearing a suede, fringed Indian jacket and knee-high moccasin boots, standing in the middle of a crowd of people who listened in awe as he equated sculpting a physique with creating a work of art.

Makkawy had competed for some years and had won the Mr. Universe before submitting his muscles to Vince. He became Vince's star pupil. It was easy to see why Vince was attracted to working with Makkawy: he had wonderful symmetry and development, with a tiny waist. Plus Makkawy's physique didn't have the appearance of steroid use. I could tell his hard look, with deep cuts and separations between the muscles, was built with intense work in the gym and the right nutrition. It was only with this preparation that one could handle Vince's grueling workouts. Using his magic number seven (seven sets of seven reps) the workouts were known to be brutal. Vince used the basic exercises, but loved to throw in unconventional ones like Roman chair squats and lying back-leg extensions. He'd also do exercises at odd angles to bring out the muscle shape. Their partnership came at a turning point for bodybuilding, when the classic physiques were just starting to see their day fade away. Makkawy did win

that night, with his tight muscular shape, but Zane slipped into the third place slot at the Olympia, and Lee Haney was on the rise, looking bigger than I had ever seen him.

The following year, Haney won his first Olympia title and would go on to win seven more consecutively. We all knew then that the judges were placing the big guys at the top, rather than the refined, muscular, and in-shape bodies of the seventies. That night in New York, the old guard, those who held fast to the former look, were myself, Bob Paris, Roy Callendar, Makkaway and Sergio, to an extent. But I could tell, Sergio was changing his formula and was uncomfortable with the flat results. I went into the show feeling that I was big and muscular and ready. But when I walked out of the basement dressing room and couldn't see light down the long hallway because Haney's back was blocking it out, I knew I was in trouble. I had one of the best backs in bodybuilding, yet I was astonished to see the size of his back and shoulder development, stacked on top of an itty-bitty waist. His skin looked like glass. I thought, Oops, Robby, you're not ready for this one. I came in 17th, Sergio eighth, Paris seventh, Makkaway second. All the other guys had grown enormous. Bob and I looked at each other and shook our heads. He had a beautiful physique and face, but it wasn't enough.

I was uncomfortable and confused about the direction bodybuilding was headed. The drug use had increased beyond anything I could have imagined. I thought they must be taking more, experimenting with different combinations, as well as using something I was just hearing about, a growth hormone. And most of it without the supervision of a doctor. Many doctors were long gone after one bodybuilder's doctor was prosecuted for steroid distribution. Now, the sky was the limit, with no guidelines on how to take steroids. The IFBB still hadn't set up any regulations, nor were they drug-testing at competitions. It was a dangerous mix: no restrictions and the judges picking the biggest guy.

I'm sure, growth hormone or "GH," as it's known, had its early users, but it was now being used much more noticeably, in both male and female bodybuilders. If you ignore the many hazards of injectables, then GH looks like it

should be a bodybuilder's dream: it speeds up your metabolism, while stimulating muscle growth. With GH, you don't really have to diet to get ripped up. You can pretty much eat what you want. And that's what everyone started doing. They just had to keep the weights heavy, and the GH would get them in contest shape.

But what they didn't take into account was that everything in the body grows, from organs and bones to facial features, feet and waistlines. With a sped-up metabolism, the body uses up more water, which in turn dehydrates the body. Not a good thing. Worse, if you have a pre-existing disease dormant in your body, it may grow. From a financial perspective, GH was a disaster for any bodybuilder who wasn't well-off. They had to go through underground channels and pay thousands of dollars and up for a supply that would maybe last them a couple of months.

In the ever-changing game, I knew I had to go back to the drawing board. My plan was to return to my basic exercises, train twice a day and lift heavy, all over again. With that, I needed to increase my calories and protein.

As far as steroids were concerned, I decided to stay with what I knew and only decrease the time between shots to a week and a half, down from two weeks. Then, several weeks before a show, I planned to taper off, so there would be no shot in the last week. That is the time period that determines how a bodybuilder looks under the stage lights. Basically, his appearance comes down to how well he manipulates the water in his body. Steroids hydrate the body, giving the illusion of big muscles. The mastery comes in directing the water into the muscles from within the skin and under the skin, so muscles are full, with deep definition and clear delineation under the stage lights, while leaving the skin looking paper thin, moist and radiant. The doctor I visited back in the 70s had taught me how to manipulate the water in a subtle, controllable way using sodium and potassium. The method starts on Sunday evening at six o'clock, the week before the competition. I would consume small amounts of sodium (an eighth of a teaspoon) with each meal and increase my water intake to a gallon a day of spring water. Sodium increases the water in the

cells, so over the next three days, my muscles would inflate like the Michelin man. Then come Wednesday evening at six o'clock, I dropped the sodium, replaced it with fifty milligrams of potassium at each meal, and switched from spring water to distilled water. Since potassium causes the cells to release water, it triggers a flushing. For the muscle cells to absorb this water (from within and under the skin), my body fat going into this process had to be low enough - three to four percent. I would end up with dense, full muscle, sliced to the bone and paper thin skin. This manipulation is subtle and doesn't weaken the body, so I could handle the heavy weights right up until the competition. This, in itself, squeezed every last drop of water into the muscle and acted like a natural diuretic. Mastering this process was a huge part of my concept of bodybuilding. But this art of sodium and potassium manipulation was lost by the mid-70s. I don't think any other bodybuilder used this technique, because the thought of consuming sodium and holding water was considered taboo, particularly the week before a competition.

Diuretics are what were commonly used, particularly cytomel and clenbuterol. Cytomel is a synthetic form of one of the hormones secreted by the thyroid gland, which is responsible for controlling the metabolism. Clenbuterol has the same result, but is an adrenergic agonist with similar effects to ephedrine. It increases the body's temperature, but it's more potent and longer-lasting. These are essentially the easy ways to get ripped up. The problem with diuretics is that they're unpredictable and potentially dangerous. Often, guys would miss their mark and look great a day or two after the show.

Combining these drugs with steroids, many bodybuilders were becoming self-prescribing chemists, using their bodies as lab experiments. They began to use drugs year round: steroids to maintain their size, and either GH or clenbuterol to be able to eat whatever they wanted.

If I had hung out more with the other bodybuilders or had come on the scene ten years later than I did, I probably would have followed their methods. I had committed and dedicated myself to be a success in my chosen profession; and

I, like many athletes, was prepared to make sacrifices for that success. When you're young, you often feel invincible. You are apt to make rash choices you would not with age and wisdom. I was fortunate enough to learn, by teaching myself about the long-term effect of altering the chemistry and natural functions of the body.

Larger amounts of steroids for longer cycles decrease the bodybuilder's normal production of testosterone, leading to a lowered sperm count and impotence, not a good combination, particularly for the lady in his life. The imbalance of hormones causes an estrogen effect that in the bodybuilding community is known as "bitch tits" - fat nodules have to be surgically removed.

I kept my anabolic durations short and only combined them with rejuvenating foods. After a show and the eight- to ten-week cycle of steroids, I would use natural herbs to counteract their side effects. Dandelion root detoxified and strengthened my liver, built back my immune system, cleaned my blood, and acted as a natural diuretic to flush the water left from the steroids. I would use milk thistle to help strengthen and restore my liver by stimulating new cells, and hawthorne powder to keep my blood vessels flexible. Other herbs, like sarsaparilla, fo-ti and hawthorne berries naturally triggered my body's own testosterone and balanced my hormone levels. This also helped me when I pushed myself to lift the same weights I had reached while on the steroids. My course of action seemed to be keeping my blood condition in check.

With each passing year, the bodies of the competitors in pursuit of the all important Olympia Sandow trophy grew larger and larger, and Weider, who loved to pit competitors against each other in his magazines, was scouting his next prospect. Sadly, most often, it was black against white. He would give the hopefuls contracts and tease their egos with covers predicting they'd be the next Mr. Olympia. With the current one, Haney, being black, Weider set his sights on Rich Gaspari, a 20-year-old Italian from New Jersey, who came on the amateur scene in 1981. This new, larger look of bodybuilding was epitomized by Rich. When he turned pro in '83, Rich had an average physique. Two years later, as we

stood on the Night of the Champions stage, he had in my eyes, a huge, overly vascular physique. I knew that this young man (15 years my junior) had taken the bait and would do whatever he had to do to beat Haney. He placed second that night and third at the Olympia. Over the next seven years, he would grace more covers than Haney. As Weider once told me, blacks on the covers don't sell magazines. Hence, Haney never enjoyed the Olympia fanfare others before him had received. I felt for Rich. He would never claim Mr. Olympia, but would get bigger and bigger in the attempt. Nobody won but Weider.

Another bodybuilder who had strong opinions about anabolics was Tom "Quads" Platz. In his early 20s Tom had come on the California scene and had quickly leapt from winning his weight at the IFBB USA World competition to entering his first Mr. Olympia in 1978. I was taken aback the first time I saw his legs at Gold's Gym in the early 80s. They were huge beyond anything I had ever seen, and every muscle in his quads stood out like its delineation was etched with a laser. I watched him train relentlessly with the same intense, don't-bother-me attitude I had when I trained. Seeing Tom bomb and blitz each body part rekindled my love for the game. I watched him squat over 600 pounds for 20 to 30 reps. And I'm talking deep squats. It was obvious his muscles were built with hard work and a love for bodybuilding that ran deep in every fiber of his soul. He had a glassy look to his skin. He was pulled in young with a contract, but realized early on he couldn't rely on that contract and competitions to make a living, so he held gym-setting seminars. He averaged a hundred appearances a year. While Tom only had two amateur wins, his charisma, sincere love of the sport, and his outstanding leg development, attracted a huge following worldwide. Fans were drawn to him because of how passionately he spoke of bodybuilding and the future he saw for it. At his appearances he spoke honestly about the-out-of-control steroids abuse that was tarnishing the bodybuilding community, as well as his own steroid use. He claimed that Europe was more honest about its athletes' drug use and was seeking ways of making them safer, while America was in denial. Not coincidentally, in 1987, after Tom's seven Olympia attempts, Ben Weider said he would have to qualify again for

the Olympia by placing in the top five in a pro show. When he placed sixth, he left the competitive scene for good. A great loss to bodybuilding.

I was living in Venice again, going back and forth to Europe. My passion and love for bodybuilding were running full throttle; I felt that nothing could stop me, not even the growing use of steroids. I figured that if I trained hard and honed my craft, my results could not be overlooked. And as long as I could place in the top five, I could stay in the mix. In May, at the Night of the Champions, I did just that. Fifth place qualified me to enter the Olympia in September, where I ended up with the same placing. The timing of competitions is laid out so that bodybuilders can ride on the exposure of these two big events to spring into the European Grand Prix shows. Usually a competitor would remain in that fifth slot throughout the European tour, but I progressively moved up to earn four second places.

During our European tour together, Rich Gaspari and I happened to train together in the south of France. Rich didn't merely slack off in his workout, he said that he didn't need or want to train hard. I was amazed. We watched each other train like we were from different worlds. I was seeing that the new breed of bodybuilder had not developed the ethic of hard work. The bodybuilders from the late 50s, 60s and 70s were ball busters.

Rich placed over me for several years, but it was the very first Arnold Classic in 1989 that stands out most in my mind. It reminded me of my early competitions in Florida, where even though I received all the body part awards, I did not get first place. More than 7,000 fans packed the auditorium in Columbus, Ohio, and chanted as we went through each mandatory pose, "It's yours, Robby!" I felt proud because I had worked for just that response. I wanted the fans to see that no one could develop a physique as astonishing as mine. No matter how many more drugs they were willing to take, it could never add up to what I'd achieved with hard work.

Wrapping up 1989 in Cannes, after I placed second in the France Grand Prix, I ran into one of my British supporters,

Chris Lund. Chris was a photographer and also the head of England's *Flex* Magazine. When he saw my steadfast determination, he defied a Weider policy and put me on his cover, while back in the States, Weider was pushing Rich, insisting that he be on all the *Flex* covers around the globe. Chris's move was unheard of, but he had his own power in Europe and knew he could get away with it. The May '90 cover of *Flex* included the subtitle, "Robby Returns." Financially, the timing couldn't have been better for me. The much-needed European exposure set up a slew of requests for appearances all over Europe. But the moral support from Chris was what reassured me there was a place for me in the changing world of bodybuilding, and that there were people who would support my efforts.

In 1990, when preparing for the year of competitions, I used the exact same eating, training and steroid regime I had the year before. But there was one new ingredient: an unhealthy relationship. It would be the first and only time I was involved with a woman competing in bodybuilding, and taking steroids. Over the last ten years I had seen and heard how steroids affected women. Their faces took on a more masculine appearance, they got deeper voices, thinning hair, as well as facial hair, all irreversible. Because the steroids throw off their hormonal balance, they'll have menstrual problems and difficulty conceiving. Even though I was adamantly opposed to her using steroids, she was able to get them at the gym. Her moods would swing from depressed to combative. It was a disastrous relationship. While I've never become verbally or physically abusive in a relationship, my reaction was to walk out, sometimes staying as long as a week at the Bayside Hotel in Santa Monica. Today, I can see how abusive that was as well. Chances of a strong relationship are doomed when steroids are involved, particularly with both parties using. Later, I would learn of many horrifying professional bodybuilding relationships, like the marriage of Sally and Ray McNeil. After years of his physical and emotional abuse, well known throughout the bodybuilding community, she killed him.

I started out that year successfully, with a win at the Niagara Falls Pro Invitational, a second in the Night of the Champions, and a couple of third places in several other U.S. competitions. By the Olympia, where I placed 17th, the tolls of the turbulent relationship had mounted to the point that I was emotionally fragmented. Without a clear state of mind, success was fleeting. No matter how hard I pushed myself, my body wouldn't respond the way I wanted it to. In my stubbornness, I continued to tour Europe in an attempt to improve my placing and make money. We separated for good, but it took me the rest of the year to correct the imbalance in my life and become successful again.

What I learned from that devastating relationship, saved my life later that year in Zimbabwe. I was invited to guest pose at the IFBB International Zimbabwe Championship. With the notoriety I had in the sport, I was offered many perks, which, again, included women. The promoter of the event offered me my pick of three women, one more beautiful than the next. I jokingly answered that I wanted all three, but I ended up choosing Patricia Amechi to be my escort for my two-week tour through Zimbabwe. Patricia was a striking, extremely lean and statuesque African woman who was always wrapped in her native dress. We hit it off immediately. She escorted me in the back of a Jeep on safari through an animal reserve, and in a Bentley that took us on day tours through the dusty roads. Patricia marveled at how well I was treated and was proud to be on my arm. However, I couldn't help but look with amazement at the devastated conditions throughout the country. The disappointment and helplessness of the people was unbelievable to me.

During the banquet held on my last night there, Patricia and I talked, laughed and danced until the hall emptied and everyone had gone home. We had such a wonderful time together we didn't want the night to end, so we went back to my villa on the promoter's family compound. From the outside it looked like an ordinary African hut, but inside, its walls and furniture were adorned with richly-colored native fabrics. With a television and bathroom, it had all the amenities. We talked about my leaving in the morning and how she wanted to come

with me. She had never been out of Zimbabwe and wanted to see the world with someone treated like royalty.

That night, after a couple of delicate kisses, I told her I thought that we should stop. All week she had had a cough and that night, she was sweating profusely. Concerned, I suggested she go to sleep, but in fact, something deep within me shut off my arousal and said “stop.” She didn’t try to persuade me otherwise, and without hesitation rolled over and went to sleep.

In the morning, after her tearful farewell, I headed back to Amsterdam to prepare for a tour in Belgium happening a week later. I thought a lot about Patricia and called after a week, as promised. When I asked to speak to her, one of her male relatives got very annoyed and said he didn’t think well of the game I was playing. After I assured him I had good intentions, he somewhat bitterly told me she had passed away the day before. Reluctantly, he confided that Patricia had died of AIDS. My thoughts were conflicted: sadness over her passing and momentary fear that I might have contracted the virus. If I hadn’t believed in divine intervention before that moment, I did then. My life became even more precious to me.

In contrast, many bodybuilders were abusing their bodies more and more, and by 1990 bodybuilding was all about drugs. The classical physique was gone, and the race for size created a physique from another world. Women followed suit. The bodybuilder’s routine became about training with heavy weights and eating thousands of calories to feed the appetite caused by growth hormone and steroids. With the overuse of steroids, guys were starting to bald prematurely and cases of spousal abuse were popping up all over.

Ironically, during this competitive campaign for size, when I returned to the Arnold Classic in 1990, I faced the first and only drug test during my career. I passed, along with the group of guys who were the less obvious ones in the group. But in all honesty, because many if not all of us had some degree of steroids in our blood, we should have all failed. I came in fourth place behind Mike Ashley in his best year of competing, then Mike Christian and Andreas Munzer. Six

years later Andreas would die at the age of 31 of multiple organ failure, only ten years after his first competition. The same year I placed fifth behind Mohammed Benaziza and Dorian Yates at the Night of the Champions. Mohammed would die of a heart attack in his hotel room the following year after winning the Holland Grand Prix. Dorian had disappeared from competing five years earlier after placing seventh in the World Games. At the Night of the Champions, I barely recognized his physique; he had doubled his size. Lee Haney and Gary Strydom may have been the originators of astounding size, but it was Dorian who pushed the look into a whole new zone. Dorian, I noticed was a man with strong work ethics. Although he was competing ripped to the bone and in shape, he lost the aesthetic lines and beauty Lee and Gary maintained. The next year, Dorian would win the Mr. Olympia title and continue his reign for the next five years.

In 1991, Vince McMahon, owner of the World Wrestling Federation, tried his luck at creating a new bodybuilding federation. He put the word out that he was going to sign on 13 bodybuilders. The World Bodybuilding Federation events were to be shows, not competitions with a pre-determined winner. Each bodybuilder would be given a persona, like the wrestlers had. By awarding generous two-year contracts, the WBF drew the big IFFB stars of the moment and a few rising hopefuls. Weider made it clear that those who crossed over to the WBF could no longer compete in the IFBB or have Weider's exposure. Rumored among bodybuilders was that Lou Ferrigno, who hadn't competed since 1975, but had the Hulk fame, signed a two-year contract only to later back out. With the pressure Weider put on the guys, no doubt he got to Lou. With Lou out, Gary Strydom was on top with Mike Christian, Berry DeMey, Aaron Baker and nine others. Even Danny Padilla signed up. I was glad for the guys. Managers or agents had never really been used by bodybuilders. But this was the year of the contract. I hired a lawyer to negotiate a deal for myself; the lawyer took the money and did nothing. In the meantime, I was contacted by a talent agency Weider had just set up, which coincidentally only lasted as long as the WBF. He was trying to make the process of granting contracts look more professional and fair to prevent the big names from

going with the WBF. So Physique Productions offered me a contract for the first time in my career: \$8,550 a month for two and a half years. I took it.

Under my contract, I was back in the studios posing for Weider's photographers and making guest appearances at shows where Weider had supplement booths. They were eager to have me appear at the FIBO, the leading international trade show for fitness and wellness, held annually in Essen, Germany. The weekend event showcased hundreds of supplement companies and attracted thousands of fans, bodybuilding enthusiasts and everyone who was someone in bodybuilding or fitness. Anybody unfamiliar with the extent of bodybuilding's popularity would be amazed at the numbers this event attracts. At Weider's booth I could make a couple thousand a day signing photographs at twenty dollars a pop. Every company in the world, from old established ones to instant companies, had a booth on one of the many floors of the convention center.

One of the first protein powders I used was put out by Bob Hoffman in the late 50s. I tried Hoffman's nutty coconut protein powder, but after an upset stomach, gas and bloating, I stayed away from them. Weider's Crash Weight followed shortly thereafter, and was the first to go big by putting bodybuilding stars in advertisements with his products. Revamping for the 90s, he introduced a new line of supplements, called "Victory." By this time, companies were coming up with energy drinks, meal replacement bars, sulfates, vitamins, compounds, powders and pills, you name it, to bulk you up or to rip you up. *Flex* doubled in size with the influx of advertising revenue. I was back being used in Weider advertisement without a contract, maybe not directly as in the advertisement days, but by association by placing me on the opposite page from the ad. Weider didn't dare ask me to pose in advertisements with his products again. While the multitude of new supplement companies did start paying handsome contracts to the underpaid and often unpaid bodybuilder, putting them with products that tout miracle gains only confused the struck masses who were buying into the hype. I can't blame the bodybuilders. I, too, had several contracts over

the years. But it was helping to paint a misleading picture in peoples' minds of bodybuilding and what it takes to develop a strong, aesthetic body.

The WBF lasted only eighteen months, holding only two shows. The federation was doomed from the start without Weider support, but to add insult to injury, word was put out in the press that the competitors were taking steroids. And what about the IFBB competitors? Predictably enough, when Weider heard the WBF was defunct, he called me in Amsterdam to inform me my contract had been terminated.

It was about that time, while I was in Amsterdam staying with Segni and Bubbles, that Momma passed away. I learned that Momma had become diabetic and had had one of her legs amputated. Sometime after this, she experienced complications due to a poorly administered injection. When she couldn't combat the infection, she died. Her last days came on her without warning. I regret not being there to say goodbye and thank her for giving me my heart and sensitivity to the world around me.

After years of being refused to see my kids by Freda, I chose not to contact them because I didn't want to create a negative situation for them. This was one of those times it felt best to "leave it alone."

When I was leaving after her funeral, who did I pass on the tarmac at the Tallahassee Regional Airport, but Dr. Hubert Alexander, the teacher to whom I had sent a copy of my first cover, in response to his cruel remarks. Our eyes met, but all he did was nod his head and look down. I laughed to myself. Never say never.



BLASTING THE MASTERS

From Amsterdam, I received several appearance requests for the first time in Oslo, Norway. I fell in love with the country and people and stayed for three years. The Norwegians I met were warm and sincere, not afraid to stand up for what they believed. I liked the fight in Norwegians. At one of the first gyms where I appeared, I met Mr. Norway, a big warrior named Jostein Odegarden. We became training partners. We handled heavy weights, and as always, stuck to the basic exercises. Twelve weeks out from a contest, and now starting back to my normal 200 mg of deca durabolin and B-12 and a calcium shot once a week, I was able to increase my training frequency to a three days on / one day off schedule, working two sessions a day. We moved quickly in between sets as we hammered out 20 sets per body part, breaking that down into five sets of four exercises. Off-season I tried to maintain this schedule, but trained at a slower pace and with possibly an extra day off if I felt like my muscles had not recovered sufficiently. Those were great training days.

When I left Florida, I didn't look back. But the way my life was playing out, I saw how impossible it was for me to escape the legacy slavery had left on people of color. It explained why I moved like a gypsy into fresh surroundings so people wouldn't know where I lived. And why I was secretive and had often had no desire to deal with people. While these typical black qualities lent themselves to the solitary, transient way of a bodybuilder, part of me longed for the cultured and secure traditions I saw in the white world. Besides not feeling accepted into mainstream society, I wasn't given the tools to feel able to operate within the established social structures. My lifestyle was stable from my bodybuilding discipline, but translating it into a settled home life with a wife had not yet worked. Yet, that had always been my dream. I straddled two worlds, and my relationships were failing.

Training with Jostein, served me well. In 1992, at the age 41, I placed second behind Vince Taylor in the Ironman Pro Invitational, a prominent IFBB contest in its third year. I came in third at the Night of The Champions, behind Kevin Levrone. With Vince being ten years younger than me and Kevin twenty years my junior, I was happy with my placing. Each would go on to win more competitions than any other bodybuilder, but neither ever won the Olympia. Because of my high placing and my popularity in Europe, I was given a contract with a French supplement company that paid me \$10,000 a month for four years. I felt lucky - it was a lot of money for a black man, especially an older black man. It allowed me to take time off steroids and away from the competitive life to simply travel for the company and make appearances. The following year I decided to do one competition and sent in my entry form for the Ironman.

Whenever I've come to a time in life when I'm unsure of my next move, an offer has come. This time, the messenger was Jostein, and the offer appeared in an issue of *Flex* near the beginning of 1994. Wayne Demilia, then president of the pro division of the IFBB, printed a message in *Flex* asking me to come be a part of the first Masters Mr. Olympia to be held in August. I was thrilled. I wasn't surprised to be the one the Weiders called on for this first Masters Olympia. They needed their guy, Lou Ferrigno, to beat someone of notoriety, and who better than the Black Prince? They knew I was the type of competitor who wouldn't turn down a challenge. They believed that ending Lou's bodybuilding career with a win would launch his movie career, as Arnold's had taken off with his Olympia titles. After his brief association with the WBF, Lou competed for the next two years in the Olympia, placing 12th and then tenth. But now everything was in place for Lou's win: worldwide appearances, a movie in the works, a big Weider contract, magazine articles and photos already set to print.

After being in Europe for a year and a half, I had to recite the pledge of allegiance to get back into the United States (even with my passport).

I was in the best shape of my life and psyched for this competition. I loved the fanfare of the event. Everyone knew Lou was going to win, me included. But if it was based on depth, separation, definition and muscularity, and if the IFBB judges had the courage, I would be the first Masters Mr. Olympia winner. Lou was big, as always. I'll give him that. But I saw one detail before the prejudging (where the winners are selected) that I knew would help me. Someone must have told Lou to slather on Tan Accelerator Lotion, because he was as black as me. Just as I anticipated, the lights had the reverse effect on him than they had on my dark skin: they washed him out. By the evening's main show, he had rubbed some off, but it was too late. Though Lou towered eight inches over me, I used a tactic I had often used: taking a half step in front of the other competitors. Just that little step, not enough so my competitors would notice, created the illusion of greater size. I knew my posing routine with its artistic flare, smooth moves and dance steps would be the winning combination. Plus, I didn't look my age.

The other name that night was Chris Dickerson. Though Chris had beaten me twice back in the late seventies, I didn't see him as a threat. He was 55, had been competing since the 60s, and already had a Mr. Olympia trophy. But somehow his years of training made his elbows protrude, losing some of his symmetry: his body was not there that night. Boyer Coe was there and in great shape, but he didn't have abs.

It came down to the last two competitors, Lou and me, with the whole crowd calling out equally, "LOOOOOOUUUU" and "ROBBY," I looked over at Lou, who was smiling, as if he had already won. The MC paused a long time before announcing, "The second place, winner of the silver Sandow medal, goes to.....Lou Ferrigno."

Hearing the announcer call out, over all the screaming fans, "And the winner of the first 1994 Masters Olympia is Robby Robinson" gave me goose bumps all over. Turning to my right, I saw Joe and Ben Weider hesitate before walking out on the stage, wishing they could disappear. Joe looked so totally disappointed, with his shoulders down. He couldn't

believe what had just happened. At that moment, I felt I had the last victory.

After every competition, they would hold a winner's banquet that the Weiders, sponsors, judges and IFBB officials would attend. Joe and Ben came in, saw no one else had come, said nothing to me, turned around and left. Back in my room, holding my heavy, bronze 15-inch trophy of a muscular Sandow holding a barbell by his side, all I could do was laugh at how surreal this night and, really, my entire career had been.

Was it over? Nah, I was on a roll. I came back and competed in the Masters for another seven years. I could say it was a way to ease my body off steroids and remain a thorn in the Weider's side, but I loved competing.

After the first Masters, an admirer of mine at Met-rx supplement company, encouraged the company to give me a two-year contract and I moved back to Venice.

Shortly after, as I was getting out of a friend's car, the tails of my long coat became caught in the car's door. I was thrown, as the car drove away. I went airborne, landing ten feet away. I landed on my side, but unable to stop my head from bouncing off the concrete. The next morning I suffered my first grand mal seizure. It was the whole nine yards: convulsions, biting the inside of my mouth, loss of consciousness and bladder control. Of course, I went right back to training two days later believing everything was okay, but it wasn't.

I had no indication that training would bring on a seizure and if it did while I was squatting 400 pounds, I thought, let me die doing the thing I loved best. Competing wasn't yet out of my equation, and even after waking up a couple of times with my face in my bowl of oats, taking anti-seizure medication was not going to happen. The attacks were so far apart, I was able to avoid medication altogether for the first five years. I could manage competing in the Masters once a year and for the next three years I started cutting down my shots of steroids. Could I get away with two months a year on, and the rest of the year off, to detoxify, lifting heavy all year-round? Life became a little more sacred after I would wake out

of a seizure, not remembering having had one, with my face busted up. Yet, somehow, I still felt invincible. I attribute half of that attitude to my own character and the other half to steroids.

I continued to enter the Masters and place high and win in the Over 50 Masters. After 27 years of competing, I retired in 2001 having had my fill and thankfully not because of health issues. I enjoyed the idea of retirement as much as I enjoyed competing. The future held possibilities of doing something else for the sport and me.



AT SIXTY-FIVE

I felt I had been drawn to Los Angeles, back in 1975, to train with the bodybuilding stars, believing that we were destined to be a part of greatness. As dedicated male athletes, we were reaching our optimal physical condition, and I knew we could have a profound effect upon the world. We could change the way people took care of themselves by spreading the practices of my interpretation of bodybuilding, that is, building on the strengths of the human spirit and body through organizing a healthy regime of weight training, cardiovascular work and nutrition. It didn't happen to the extent I dreamed. It couldn't, with the presence of steroids.

Now, it is as if I have come full circle. I went from bodybuilding enthusiast, to competitor, to drug-free champion, to moderately chemically-enhanced professional bodybuilder and now back to the bodybuilding enthusiast.

The subject of my study is now at the tail end of my life span. I am focused on achieving longevity, detoxification and better health. Even though I have always been natural-based in my approach to building a muscular physique, and only used steroids to enhance my work for competition, I'm so glad to be back to studying and practicing entirely natural bodybuilding. At 65, I feel more healthy and youthful than ever before. I believe the attention I paid to my body throughout my life helped minimize my blood disorder and seizure problems.

I never thought I'd be grey, but I'm enjoying it. Because I have enough hair for five people the grey has become my friend. Having never strayed from my eating routine, it's been easy to maintain a nearly contest-looking shape naturally. I'm probably about three to four percent body fat, but I've always been naturally lean; my body knows no other way. My weight is back to where it was when I first arrived in California, 205 pounds. My heaviest during my competitive years was 230. Because the body changes

throughout a life, learning about my body will not end until I die. How I feel when I'm doing an exercise is completely different from when I was 20, 30 or 40. I now have even more of a fine-tuned connection to my muscles, and my execution of the exercise is so ingrained in me, I move like a machine. I'm still lifting heavy weight in all my basic exercises.

Last month, *Ironman Magazine* filmed me squatting 545 pounds and 1,350 pounds under the leg press machine. That's more than I've ever lifted, even while on steroids. It mostly comes down to my consistency at practicing all the parts and my highly-developed microscopic vision of muscle play. But, the clincher is, over the last ten years, I have learned more about the mechanics of lifting. Good fortune blessed me when I was introduced to Dean Murray. His genius is that he knows the body's mechanics and the role of our different tissues. His ground-breaking ideas about the fibrous tissue that permeates the human body and his bodywork technique (which manipulate this fibrous sheath) have put my bones in the perfect geometry to better mechanically move heavy weight.

I'm grateful to be building a relationship with *Ironman Magazine*, a publication that has been around since the 80's, giving *Flex* a run for its money. The publisher, John Balik, top photographer, Mike Neveux and their writing team have been in the business for forty years. Many of them started as bodybuilders. So they all have a heart for the classic physique and want to see bodybuilding move in that direction. But, it takes time to undo things.

Even though I used steroids off and on throughout my career, 27 years is quite a long time. I wasn't sure how long it would take for the remnants of the steroids to be cleansed from the body's tissue. Looking at pictures of myself taken ten years ago at the end of my career and comparing them to how I look today, I can see an entirely different person, one that I admire and respect even more. I understand now how steroids cause a thickening of tissue, not only on the surface but internally with organs as well. They gave my skin a hard look with what appeared to be permanent creases. It's as if the cells were congested. When I look around the gym, I can see this look on

all the long-time steroid users. I would bet all pharmaceuticals have the same effect. The process of cleansing all my body's systems has been amazing because it proves to me that with the proper diet, exercise and dietary herb and supplementation, even at 65, the body has the capability to heal and regenerate itself. Now the softer look to my skin tells me there is activity permeating through my layers of tissue and cell walls. My hair has even slowed its greying.

I have taken on the roles of mentor and coach, so that others can benefit from my experience. I enjoy working with trainees of all ages from all parts of the world who come to Venice for my four-day Masters' Class. They journey into my bodybuilding world: training with yours truly, shopping at farmers' markets, meals at healthy restaurants, a couple times up and down the Santa Monica stairs, and a visit to Murray's massage table. Arden Nutt, my teammate, films the different parts and edits a movie for them. She's been responsible for making all this successful. Many of our visitors are coming back for their second and third time, some even bringing their teenage kids. Once a year, I present my RR Crystal Globe Award to the trainee who shows the most improvement and has inspired others to be fit and strong. Since I'm so serious about my bodybuilding, my trainees have to be too. It doesn't mean they have to be a professional, just serious about taking care of themselves and making changes in their life.

I felt empowered when I read a quote about me in Flex magazine last year. They ran a pictorial on the greatest backs of all time in bodybuilding. Next to my photo (the only current photo used of anyone in the spread) they wrote, "Robby was so ahead of his time, he is still modern today." That's just how I feel. I think it comes from the excitement and curiosity I have for life every morning I wake up.

James "Lincoln Red" Mobley, the quarterback from my high school football team, recently reconnected with me after 45 years. He reminded me of how I used to recruit guys from the neighborhood to go out for a run. You know this must have been strange to see back in the sixties because a woman in the hood shouted out to us as we passed her house, "Hey, if all y'all ain't got nothin' to do, y'all can come mow my grass."

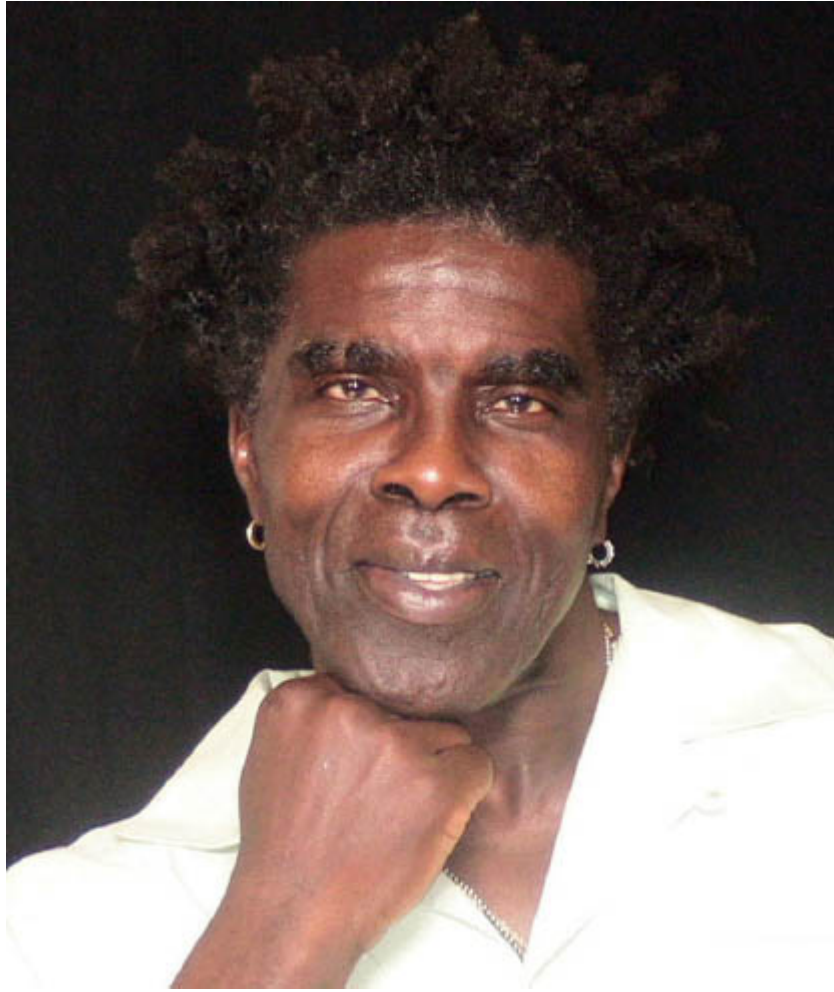
Red also said I once asked him to sniff my forearm and tell me what he smelled. When he replied, “carrots,” I said, “exactly.” I was so clean with my eating then, all you could smell was vegetables.

James has put me in touch with several high school classmates and teammates. I’ve even had the opportunity to speak with Miss Estrasas from high school, and recently Coach Oliver, who is 86 and doing well. He said, at the time, he wanted to prepare us for a world that didn’t favor us. He wanted to make us men. I thanked him for being a father figure to me.

The internet has brought me in contact with my kids. I’m glad for our phone calls and look forward to spending time with them. Even Freda and I have had lengthy conversations. I’ve owned up to what I feel was my part in our split. My mind was focused on a picture of something bigger than Tallahassee. I could see this parallel life of fame and traveling, and knew I had to get out of Tallahassee for it to happen.

People ask me why I am still training and how I can be in world-class shape, drug-free, at 65 years of age? I tell them it is because I am faithful to the image that I had of myself as a bodybuilder in Tallahassee Florida in 1950s and 60s. Despite having won numerous national, international and pro competitions, I am still that 12-year-old boy pumping iron in his parents’ closet, I am still the 18 year old who stole workouts at Florida A&M and I am still the G.I. who carried 110 pounds of weight around with him in a duffle bag. I am still faithful to the image that drove me onwards. I have not replaced it with the hype and praise, insecurities and doubts that other people have offered me over the years. I am still bringing into this world the image that I had way back; maintaining a perfect physique. This is the key to bodybuilding longevity. It is about loving your sport with a deep curiosity and innocent intensity. The human body will always fascinate me because of its subtle workings, and the incredible influence our minds have over our bodies and vice-versa.

I enjoy life in a peaceful state of mind and body. I believe an honest relationship with oneself keeps the mind centered and not easily pulled into dualistic patterns of thoughts and actions. That's like having hate, self-doubt, negative-talk or telling yourself you shouldn't do something and then doing it. In a fragmented, polarized world, the challenge is to not allow our inside world to mirror the outside world. But, discipline keeps the mind in check and daily meditation is the gateway to developing your own cool approach to life. Continue to perfect your self-image and you will be training and loving this art into your old age. The great thing is, hard work and maintaining a healthy lifestyle helps you stay young. It feels like you never grow old. In fact, I am pretty sure you don't. I put joy into taking care of myself, every day. Ego aside, self-love is principal to our health, strength and peace of mind. If people want to call it vanity, then okay, let them. But, what I know as true is, that if human beings have conviction in their hearts for something positive, they enter the realm of miracles where anything is possible. You got to believe. That's what I did.



TITLES

1974

MR SOUTHEASTERN USA - AAU

MR SOUTHERN STATES - AAU

1975

MR AMERICA - AAU AND MOST MUSCULAR

MR AMERICA - IFBB

MR FLORIDA - AAU

UNIVERSE - IFBB

MR. WORLD - IFBB AND MOST MUSCULAR AWARD

1976

MR. INTERNATIONAL - IFBB

UNIVERSE - IFBB

1978

NIGHT OF CHAMPIONS

1979

BEST IN THE WORLD - IFBB

NIGHT OF CHAMPIONS

1981

UNIVERSE - PRO - NABBA

1988

NIAGARA FALLS PRO INVITATIONAL - IFBB

1994

OLYMPIA - MASTERS - IFBB

2000

OLYMPIA - MASTERS - IFBB, MASTERS 50+1



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- .194: Photo by Arden Nutt
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