

Guide to Contest Preparation

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Originally posted at www.bulknutrition.com The Mind-Set

It's written that , “...many are called, but few are chosen.” (Matthew 22:14)

This is true when it comes to competitive bodybuilding. Changing your physique to make it better is one matter, but preparing to place yourself at the scrutiny of others (in a public setting) is another. Not only do you have to be physically ready, but you have to be mentally ready as well. A person who competes in bodybuilding has a special mind-set. It’s a mixture of pride, confidence, the desire for approval, the need for recognition and some will argue, a morbid obsession with suffering. Speaking from personal experience, I found that the hardest part about competing was not lifting weights and going to the gym 5 days per week. Going to the gym (even when I didn’t emotionally feel like it) was easy compared to the rigorous discipline that is involved when preparing for a bodybuilding contest.

To be successful at competitive bodybuilding, you have to be at your best on the day of the show. This takes planning from the day you make that fateful decision to compete, all the way up to the hour before you go on stage. The “contest highway” is littered with the roadkill of those competitors who didn’t plan their dieting or aerobic activity prior to competition. They will either hit their peak days before the competition (forcing them to maintain their condition or risk looking “smooth” on stage) or worse yet, they will time it incorrectly and peak a day or more AFTER the competition (leaving them looking “flat” on the day it counts). It is my hope with this article that I can point out the areas that you can focus on to make your competition experience a rewarding and successful one. Making the decision

Making the decision to compete is a tough one. I’ve encountered many people (men and women) at the gym who have outstanding physiques, both in density, and muscular balance and symmetry. They say they want to compete, yet they always shy away from it. They sometimes give the excuse, “I want to be bigger before I compete.”, or “Maybe next year when things are going better for me.”. These are valid reasons not to compete, however we all must remember that by being a bodybuilder / bodyshaper it requires us to be our own worst critic.

We’re in the gym because we’re not satisfied with our current condition, and we want to improve it. For some people, this dissatisfaction can be crippling when it comes to making the decision to compete. Of course, competing is not for everyone. When you look at the general population, only a small group routinely exercises, and of those who exercise routinely, only a small group does something above and beyond the “call of duty”. Some people will participate in triathlons, or possibly compete in some sort of competition that is related to their fitness regimen. In the world of bodybuilding, competing on the amateur level is how we express ourselves. As I’ve often said, “Competing is where the rubber meets the road when it comes to bodybuilding.”

My first experience with the “decision” making process was with my workout buddy, Phil. He come up to me one day at the gym and told me he was going to compete in our local bodybuilding competition. When he told me, it was January and our competition isn’t until November. So two things occurred to me.

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You have to make the decision early (in some cases almost a year in advance).

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You don’t have to be super-human to compete in bodybuilding. After all, this was my buddy Phil, and Phil was, well… human (and still is).

As I was growing up, I became fascinated by competitive bodybuilding when I saw the documentary “Pumping Iron” (featuring Arnold Schwarzenegger and Lou Ferrigno – among others). I thought to myself, “It would be cool to do that one day!”, but being very thin as a child, I never believed that I would one day be able to get on a stage and pose in front of hundreds of cheering on-lookers. Nevertheless, my dream became a reality in 1995. It wasn’t until I had been weight training for 10 years that I felt my physique was competition ready. Thanks to the encouragement and support of my friends, I decided to take “the plunge”. Just to show you the difference in timing, my first competition was on the same night as the 1995 Olympia. Furthermore, I was competing for my first time at the same age Arnold Schwarzenegger was when he retired from competitive bodybuilding (a modest 28 years old). So it just goes to show you… WHEN you compete is not as important sometimes as making the decision TO compete.

To make the decision to compete, there are several factors that you have to be ready to evaluate:

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Are you comfortable with your physique? Positive body image is very important.

Are you disciplined enough to follow the strict training and dietary requirements involved? The road is long and difficult, but the rewards are outstanding.

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Are you humble and teachable? You will need help from someone who is more experienced than you are, and you may have to be flexible when it comes to criticism.

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Can you afford it? Proper nutrition off-season and pre-contest is expensive.

All of these factors can be overcome, and it is in the journey that you grow as an individual. Life will continue to throw challenges your way during your contest preparation. It is how you cope with (and push through) those challenges that makes the journey worthwhile.

Click here (or on the link below) to find a competition near you.

- <http://www.bodybuilding.com/fun/bbcompsearch.htm> - Bodybuilding.com's Competition Locator Off-season

The fascinating thing about bodybuilding is that you can change your physique, almost like a sculptor carving a statue. We are limited in some respects by our genetics, however with enough detail and focus placed on weak areas, the most unlikely person can improve a previously lagging muscle group in less than a year.

The 6-months to a year before competition is often referred to as "the off-season". This is when competitive bodybuilders often focus on improving muscle density and shape. We often refer to this period of time as "bulking". The diet is less rigorous than during pre-contest, however to successfully build quality muscle, you must be disciplined in your eating habits. Many bodybuilders will use the off-season as an excuse to throw caution to the wind and eat anything that comes within 5 feet of their mouth. As with everything, you will pay a price. If you're undisciplined in the off-season, you will pay the price with extraordinarily disciplined dieting and aerobic activity during pre-contest preparation. However, if you maintain a disciplined meal plan in the off-season, making sure that your caloric intake and nutrient balance is optimal for muscle growth (without adding significant bodyfat), your pre-contest journey will be much less stressful.

When you decide to compete in bodybuilding, think of it as your primary responsibility to be your best. Your training and dietary habits must be consistent and disciplined in order to be successful. Due to the complexity of the muscular system, it takes time to build muscle tissue, and to do it well you must do the following:

- Weight train consistently and with intensity
- Proper nutrition frequently throughout the day
- Sufficient rest to promote muscle growth.

If you leave out any of those 3 factors, your ability to improve your musculature will be significantly impaired.

By weight training intensely during the off-season, you cause microscopic tearing in the muscle fibers, prompting them to repair themselves and grow. Muscle is unique in that the more you try to tear it down, the better it becomes. It is this adaptive quality that makes bodybuilding possible. If we did to other body systems what we do the musculo-skeletal system, we'd fall apart.

Since the muscles now need to repair themselves you have to give them the material they need to make those repairs. Building muscle is like building a house. The foods you eat are the bricks and mortar in building that house. If you give your body inferior materials to build with, you will achieve inferior results. The old saying "you are what you eat" is extremely poignant in the realm of competitive bodybuilding. If you eat junk, you will look like junk. However, if you put time and energy into your meal plan, you will look a champion on the day it matters most.

There are many ways to structure your meal plan for optimal muscle growth and performance. Many people choose a caloric balance that is based on the 40/40/20 principle, where 40% of your daily calories come from carbohydrates, 40% come from proteins, and 20% come from fats. The carbohydrates you choose is very important, as is the type of fats you consume. Not all carbs provide the same nutritional benefit and the same can be said about fat. Fat is essential for your body's normal operation. However, if the wrong fats are ingested in excess (particularly animal fats), clogging of the arteries can occur and deposition of bodyfat in the problem areas can result. The bodyfat "problem areas" for men is the abdomen and lower back, and for women it is the hips and thighs. Most of a competitive bodybuilder's pre-contest time is spent trying to shrink the fat cells in the problem areas. If you choose your foods wisely in the off-season, you won't have to be a "24 hour cardio-zombie" during your pre-contest.

The third area you must focus on is rest. It takes time to build muscle and in the analogy of building a house, it takes time to make the repairs and make the house stronger. The rest will come in two forms:

- rest between consecutive workout sessions on the same muscle groups

- daily rest.

You want to give your muscles a good 48-72 hours of rest between strenuous exercise sessions. This will give them time to repair and grow. Many young bodybuilders will overtrain popular muscle groups (namely the chest and biceps) in an attempt to quickly make them bigger. Unfortunately all this effort is wasted. By training a muscle group within 24-48 hours, you tear down the muscle as it's being repaired, thus keeping you in a perpetually torn down state. So in regards to weight training frequency, more is not better. Consistency has much more impact on your physique than frequency.

You also want to get a good night's sleep. Studies have shown that your body releases growth hormones about 2 hours after you enter REM (rapid eye movement) sleep. Therefore it is very important that you reach this deep level of sleep and maintain it so that you can get the most "bang for your buck". Getting a good 6-8 hours of uninterrupted sleep per night is powerful when trying to build muscle tissue. Ever wonder why teenagers sleep so much? Their bodies are going through a tremendous growth phase and your body does its best repairs while you are sleeping. So if anyone ever tells you "Hey, I don't need to sleep! I'll sleep when I'm dead.", they obviously are not aware of the power of sleep. Pre-contest

You are now within 3 months of your competition and you can see the light at the end of the tunnel. Your off-season mentality now must shift gears to get you ready for your contest. The areas you will be focusing on for the next 12 weeks are as follows:

- Reduced caloric intake
- Modified workout routine, including more aerobic activity
- Preparation for the contest itself (choosing a contest, posing trunks, music, posing routine, etc.)

If you organized your off-season meal plan diligently, changing it to the pre-contest mode will be fairly simple. There are several techniques that are used to get a person contest-ready. All of them however have a common theme; reduced caloric intake. You should already know what your daily caloric intake is, if not; keep track of everything you eat for a week and count the calories, including the proportions of carbs, proteins and fats. This will then give you a place to start.

To safely lose weight before a contest (without sacrificing muscle mass), it is best to reduce your caloric intake by 10% below your maintenance level and hold it there for a period of time that is dependent on your metabolism and your level of aerobic activity. If you balance your aerobic activity just right, you can safely lose about 1-2 pounds of bodyfat per week. Anything faster than that is water, glycogen and possibly muscle tissue. Glycogen is the fuel that muscles use for energy. All your systems use it, however the muscles and liver store a great deal of it. When people go on fad diets, most of the weight they lose in the first week is all water and glycogen. The problem with those diets is that they aren't sustainable, and after they get tired of eating only ice chips and celery stalks for 3 weeks straight, they go back to eating normally and put all the weight back on. Sadly, during that diet they will have lost muscle mass and now don't have the muscle tissue to burn the calories they took in regularly before the diet. Thus, they end up gaining back more weight than they lost. Therefore, it is in your best interest to monitor your bodyfat percentage, bodyweight, caloric intake and caloric distribution (carbs, proteins and fats) during your pre-contest preparation.

In addition to planning out your meal plan, devise an aerobic activity (i.e. cardio) that is enjoyable yet effective. I found that adding cardio after my weight training session was more effective. Doing cardio before lifting made me feel much weaker and my workouts were less productive. In my experience I found that group fitness provided the best results (classes like step aerobics, studio cycling, "kickboxing", etc.) for losing bodyfat. Occasionally I will use the treadmill or stair-stepper, however I get bored very easily and having an activity where I can "lose myself" really helps. Everyone is different and preference, frequency and intensity of aerobic activity can vary dramatically. The common thread between them all is that you want to do between 30-45 minutes of sustained aerobic activity 2-3 times per week. The frequency of those sessions depends on how much time you have before your competition and how much conditioning you have to do prior to your contest. Be aware that aerobic activity is a tool by which you can rapidly reduce your bodyfat and improve your conditioning.

Being diligent about your meal plan is imperative, and cardio helps you achieve results faster. Frequently monitor your progress as the days pass. Doing so will reduce the risk of "runaway weight loss" and allow you to hold on to more muscle tissue during pre-contest. Countdown to the show

I'm going to break the final 30 days into the following categories:

- Practicing your posing
- Choosing your music
- Your meal plan during the weeks before your contest
- One week out checklist
- The night before the show
- Showtime! Practicing your posing:

When you compete, the judges will more than likely judge you on the following:

- Muscular density and fullness. (how thick are the muscles)
- Muscular symmetry and proportion. (how do the muscles look compared to nearby groups)
- Muscular balance (upper body vs lower body)
- Muscular conditioning (how visible are the muscle separations)
- Presentation

Muscular density, symmetry and balance are all developed and improved during the off-season. Muscular conditioning is taken care of during pre-contest through dieting and aerobic activity. Presentation is something that you work on in the last 4 weeks before the show. In order to place well in a competition, you must show off your physique at its best. Therefore, it's important to learn what the mandatory poses are for your competition and to practice them without fail all the way up to the competition. Practicing your posing routinely has not only the benefit of making you comfortable on stage, but it also hardens the muscles. The routine flexing and holding of a pose teaches the muscle fibers to flex in unison and stay flexed. Over time the motor pathways are established to such a degree that almost every fiber will participate in the flex, making the entire group harder and harder to the touch as time passes. I will often practice my posing for 10-15 minutes immediately after my workout, holding each pose for approximately 5-10 seconds. As you practice your posing, try to extend the length of time you hold a pose by an additional 5 seconds every few sessions or so. In time, you'll be able to hold poses close to 15-25 seconds with no problem. This will improve your stamina so that when you make it to the overall posedown, you'll have no problem staying flexed on stage for long periods of time. Choosing your music:

Most competitions will have an evening program where they will allow you to perform a posing routine to music. Your choice of music should fit your personality. In my first competition I chose an often played popular tune from the radio (Janet Jackson's "If"). For my second show, I went for a more techno approach (Prodigy's "Firestarter"). My most recent show (where I won 1st place and overall in my division), I used an orchestral piece that had a good beginning, bridge and ending. This sort of music doesn't suit every physique or personality. I basically chose something I liked, and I choreographed my posing to the music so that at each significant pause or beat, I would either hit a pose or transition from one to the next.

You don't have to be a professional dancer to choreograph your posing. Choreography is simply timing your posing to the music. More experienced bodybuilders have more grace and stage presence when they pose, which is probably why I placed higher in my most recent show. Here is a link to a routine that I helped choreograph for my friend Max Citrin. He ended up winning the overall title in this competition.

To get your routine perfect, I recommend practicing it at least 10 times each night for a minimum of 2 weeks prior to the show. If your routine lasts the customary 60-90 seconds, it should only take a half hour to practice. Have someone experienced critique you on your posing. Foot placement, arm placement and the direction you're looking has a surprising effect on how you look on stage. The poses you can do will have subtle variations depending on whether you're a man or woman. You'll also want to practice in front of a large mirror (at a gym for example), as well as practicing without. Practicing in front of the mirror allows you to see which poses work best for you, but if done too often, can give you a false sense of presence. When you're on stage, you won't have a mirror to pose in front of, so you'll want to make sure you can pose easily without it. Your meal plan two weeks before the contest:

During the last two weeks before the competition, your adherence to your diet is going to be critical. Any minor "cheating" you may have done is no longer allowed. The slightest change in your meal plan can dramatically effect how you look. Most books on bodybuilding and nutrition will give you detailed advice on how to structure your meals in those last two weeks to get the most dramatic effect.

One of the best pre-contest preparation books in my opinion is "Sliced" by Bill Reynolds and Negrita Jayde. One technique they discuss in their book is carbohydrate cycling. By eating more fibrous carbohydrates for 3 days (carb depletion), then switching to starchy carbohydrates for 3 days (carb loading), you can accelerate the depletion of glycogen in your muscles, allowing you to uptake nutrients and subcutaneous (under the skin) water into your muscles during your carbohydrate loading phase.

The book "SLICED" outlines the science behind carbohydrate depletion and loading by using fibrous vs starchy carbohydrates. Here's briefly how they describe the difference between starchy and fibrous carbs: "Starchy carbs are entirely different from fibrous carbs. All complex carbohydrates are composed of carbon, hydrogen and oxygen, but the size of the molecules and the ways in which the atoms are joined differ from one specific carbohydrate to another...the most familiar of these is starch, a massively built carbohydrate that actually contains two components, amylose and amylopectin. These two components are distributed throughout the structure of plants in the form of granules, and that mixture is simply referred to as starch." "Fibrous carbohydrates, or cellulose, are also polysaccharides like starch. However, the distinct difference between cellulose and starch is in the way the glucose units are linked. This difference gives the two polysaccharides their unique characteristics. The linkage found in fibrous carbs is called a beta linkage, while the type found in starchy carbs is an alpha linkage." (1)

To summarize, fibrous carbohydrates are great for cutting because our body doesn't absorb the food energy in them due to the way the molecules are linked. Our enzymes can't break down cellulose, so fibrous carbohydrates simply pass through our system. So foods like broccoli, green beans, etc. are great for using in your diet as you cut.

I follow Negrita Jayde's carb cycling technique, whereby I carb deplete with fibrous carbohydrates for 3 days to allow my muscles to glycogen deplete, then I carb load with starchy carbohydrates for 3 days to fill my muscles back up with glycogen and as an added bonus, the technique pulls most of the subcutaneous water into my muscles (giving me a more shrink-wrapped appearance). This effect is accentuated by having my potassium:sodium ratio at 2:1. Potassium has the effect of helping the body store water within the muscles (rather than mostly under the skin as sodium does). Some foods that have surprisingly high potassium levels for their size are raisins, potatoes, molasses and broccoli. The week before your contest:

During the final week before your competition you'll go through numerous emotions. The level of anxiety felt often varies from person to person. Just before my first competition, I was always worrying whether I would come in too smooth, or too flat. Thoughts kept going through my mind, "Why am I doing this? All this work and for what? I'm only going to be on stage for a few minutes. Maybe I should quit now." Those pre-contest doubts will haunt you up until the day of the show. The worst day though is the Wednesday before the competition. Wednesday is your 3rd day of carbohydrate depletion and as a result, you'll have the lowest energy levels you've experienced, and you'll go through a more intense emotional rollercoaster due to your low carb levels.

Your last day to train legs should be Monday, because training them after this time may cause you to hold more fluid in your legs and blur your definition. You should shave excess body hair the Monday night before the show, and start applying coloring agent to your skin on the Tuesday before the show. Depending on how fair skinned you are, you may want to start sooner than Tuesday. You will apply coloring agent up to the Thursday night before the show and do any shaving touch ups on Friday afternoon.

Wednesday night should be the beginning of your sodium depletion. By this, you will bring your sodium intake to minimum levels (less than 500 mg per day if possible). This will accentuate the potassium:sodium ratio and force more water to be held by your muscles. You should also during the last week, drink large quantities of distilled water up until sunset the Friday night before the competition. You don't want to deplete your sodium for longer than 3 days, because after 3 days your body releases aldosterone which helps you hold water. So, if you time it correctly, you'll deplete subcutaneous water to just the right amount that your skin has a thin appearance. The day of the show you will drink water occasionally as needed to keep you hydrated.

I often take the Thursday and Friday before the competition off work so that I can stay home and load my carbohydrates. Carb loading is very critical for me so I want to make sure I get all my meals in, and don't deplete any of the carbs I take in by doing excessive walking around campus where I work.

If your competition is away from home, make sure you have all your hotel reservations made in advance. Usually the contest promoters will give you a list of nearby hotels that will offer discounts to contestants. You'll find it most convenient if you reserve the hotel room for the night before the show and the night of the show. That way you have somewhere to go and take a nap between prejudging and the evening show. Plus, you won't have to drive all the way back home right after your contest. You can hangout and celebrate with your friends and family. Showtime!

Prejudging is where most of the decisions regarding how a person will place are made. Many promoters will want the contestants to arrive at a predetermined time before the prejudging for a meeting. Make sure you wake up on time, and arrive early. Driving to the contest location the day before is a good idea if you've never been there before. That way you won't be stressed out the morning of prejudging, and you won't get lost.

Things you'll want to take with you to the contest location are:

- A duffle bag
- A towel
- A container of moist towelettes for cleaning up excess coloring/bronzing agent.
- Paper towels.
- A container of water and a container of Gatorade (to sip on and keep you hydrated).
- Any "carb-up" food you have.
- Your posing suit.
- Your music on CD or cassette
- An extra copy of your music on CD or cassette.
- DreamTan (#1 or #2 - 1 is more bronze and 2 is more copper colored) or some form of posing oil (like almond oil or olive oil).
- Olympic Sun Competition Color (used this in my 2004 competition and it's very good, and not as messy as DreamTan).

Dress warmly (preferably in dark, baggy clothing) – most contest auditoriums are cold and since you'll have low bodyfat, you will find it to be very chilly. Most coloring agents rub off easily (i.e. DreamTan, JanTana, etc.) and if

you have light colored clothing, it may stain your clothing permanently. Wearing a dark sweat shirt and jogging pants is usually customary for competitors. It's comfortable, and temporarily hides your physique from your competition.

Between pre-judging and the evening show, you can go back to your hotel room (or home if your contest is local) and continue to carb load and take a nap so that you're rested. After the competition

Ironically, on the day of the competition your friends will think you look "lean and sickly", but you'll look great on stage. The day after the show, your friends and family will think you look fantastic, but competition-wise, you'd look smooth and washed out on stage. This change is due to a change in water balance.

Immediately after your competition you will be tempted to binge. This is a tradition for most competitors, however if you don't go completely nuts you won't suffer from the "explosive" water weight gain that a lot of us experience. Within 24-48 hours after the competition, you can expect to gain between 5-10 lbs. Within 72 hours you can gain almost 15-20 lbs. (depending on your height). All of this weight is water. It will take a few more days after that for your body's water balance to return to normal.

Lastly, you'll want to take 1-2 weeks off from weight training. Your body has been through a lot and you'll need 7-10 days worth of rest to recuperate. Once you start training again, your muscles will surprise you with how well they respond. Most competitors will experience an enhanced increase in muscle mass during the 2-3 months after their competition. This is due to the uptake of nutrients by their muscles after such a long period of deprivation.

Well, I hope you found this article useful. Make sure you read some more books on bodybuilding and nutrition to help you. Here's an even more informative article on contest preparation written by my friend Layne Norton. The article goes into even more detail about macronutrients and how to successfully diet down for competitions.

Competitive bodybuilding can be a rewarding endeavour both personally and physically. Educate yourself and get the most out of it that you can. Applied knowledge is power!

Feel free to contact me if you ever have any questions: abdominator@skippypodar.net