

# Bodybuilding as self-actualization

*Bay Area Reporter, November 21, 2019*

I've always had a somewhat ambivalent fascination with the sport of bodybuilding that transcends the obvious erotic appeal and focuses on the sport's artistry and discipline.

I've always admired those who were willing not just to put themselves on display, but deliberately put themselves out there to be judged. I have respected the vision and the discipline it takes to sculpt and build out of one's own flesh a beautiful display of symmetry, proportion and elegance, and mourned the deaths and ailments so often triggered by those who use chemical crutches to cheat their way to their goals.

Now, transgender bodybuilding is giving me an entirely different reason to enjoy the sport. In this context, even scars are beautiful, reminders of the physical and psychological challenges for the athletes to lay claim to their own bodies.

Frameline hosted last weekend in Oakland a free screening of "Man Made," an award-winning 2018 documentary focused on four transgender male bodybuilders who competed in Trans FitCon, an annual all-transgender bodybuilding competition in Atlanta. It is a compelling film that goes past the headlines and political lenses through which so many of us gain our knowledge of transgender issues; and delves into the pain, the joy and the journeys of self discovery necessary for some individuals to navigate to free themselves from the grip of the imperfect gender binary.

After the film, I got the chance to chat with one of the competitors from the film, Dominic Chilko, and what bodybuilding meant to him as a transgender man.

"Bodybuilding gave me the opportunity to build the body I always dreamed of before I was even able to be on hormones as well as throughout my transition," Chilko, 28, said. "I learned what my body is capable of through body building. I learned patience and how to push myself past my usual comfort zone to achieve my goals."

During the course of the film, Chilko meets his biological mother and has his breasts surgically removed. It is the loss of the breasts rather than the finding of a mother that seems to have the more emotional punch; the moment Chilko sees his new reflection, the first time he sees himself with his eyes the way his heart has always seen him – well, it is a gut punch that is the emotional peak of the film.

And then he and the other builders put themselves in display for all the world to see and judge.

"It is strange because the way you see your body may not be the way the judges see your body," Chilko said. "It takes a strong individual to stand up there and be judged in front of a crowd of people. It's not for the light hearted."

The film is available through Amazon and iTunes. For more information on the documentary, visit [www.manmadedoc.com](http://www.manmadedoc.com). For information about this year's Frameline, visit [www.frameline.org](http://www.frameline.org). Films with sports themes in this year's festival include "Butterfly," "Changing the Game," and "Zen in the Ice Rift."