

Drug-free bodybuilders show their stuff in Venice

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Survival was a day-to-day proposition for Francis Sequeira when he was a refugee in Macao. Forced to flee Hong Kong during World War II, holed up in refugee camp wondering where the next meal was going to come from, he was just looking for a way to stay alive until the world order would return to sanity.

That's when a fellow refugee introduced him to the sport of bodybuilding. "I said I needed food more than exercises," Sequeira said, but the training regimen gave a purpose and structure to his life. "I did it mostly for my health, but it felt so good I never wanted to give it up."

Forty-five years have come and gone, and bodybuilding has undergone revolutionary changes in nutritional concepts and training techniques, but Sequeira, now 70, is still devoted to the sport.

"When I started, we didn't even know what vitamins were," he said. "We just worked hard in the gym. They started bringing in protein powder. I can remember the first time I tried that."

Late '60s or so, he heard about something new some competitors were taking: steroids. The magic pill that was supposed to help grow muscles. An instant edge that could give a guy just a little more critical mass than the next guy.

"Steroids never appealed to me," said Sequeira, a compact 5-foot-2 and 135 pounds. "I don't like to get involved in taking drugs. That's against my principles."

Steroids have taken root in the sports world during the last 20 years. Through medical prescriptions and black market outlets, anabolic steroids have made their way into the tissues and organs of athletes from football to power lifting, from track and field to bodybuilding.

Only recently, after years of exposés on the multiple health risks involved in the use of steroids, have organizations widely begun fighting back to drive steroids out of their sport. The NCAA tested for steroid use before last season's football bowl games for the first time and banned players who tested positive. The major national power lifting federations do not test for drugs, but drug-free events and national championships have sprung up in recent years.

Although steroid use is conceded to be commonplace in professional bodybuilding and most amateur events have not tested for the drugs, increasingly events are beginning drug testing.

The 1987 Mr. and Ms. Los Angeles competition, for example, being held today in Mark Twain Auditorium in Venice, marks the first time that competition will test all competitors. Entrants were given lie detector tests when they registered, and officials can demand urine tests if they have any uncertainty about an athlete's drug-free claims.

Until competitors are tested in all events, the decision on whether to take steroids is up to the individual. Among the entrants in today's competition, some say they opted against

steroids because they don't like the idea of achieving their goals through artificial means, and some say they wanted to avoid the health risks, which range from impotency, baldness and feminization of men's breasts to liver and heart problems and abnormally aggressive or depressed behavior.

"I'd look around in the gym and I'd see real bad acne, or water retention, or the guys developing nipples, or bad attitudes," said Jerry Anderson, a guest poser in today's meet. "I'd read the articles about it, then go in the gym and actually see it."

That was enough to keep Anderson away from the steroids. "It's totally out of hand," he said. "The majority of the guys are using something because they lack the mental desire. If you put something in your system before you find out what you have naturally, you'll never know your potential.

"I used to be offended because people asked me if I was using drugs. After a while, I took it as a compliment because I was getting the same results."

The bodybuilders who decide not to take the steroids are not a bunch of naive Pollyannas beyond temptations. Dan Moser, a 24-year-old originally from Wisconsin, who has competed since his teens, also has seen the effects steroids have had on users. "I've seen aggressiveness in their behavior," said Moser. "It isn't bad for training, but just try to keep a girlfriend or live at home with your parents."

Still, Moser wanted to get ahead in his sport, so he gave the stuff a try.

"I tried them once about a year and a half ago," he said. "I took testosterone to increase my body weight.

"My body weight increased, but it was all water. I looked like I was fatter. I lost tone.

"I changed over to something else. I competed on it and just couldn't get cut. Don't get me wrong – they do work. I just didn't know how to use them."

During the time he used the steroids, Moser said his body weight leaped from 200 to 230 pounds.

"I gained 30 pounds," said Moser, "but it wasn't just from the steroids. Maybe 12 to 15 pounds was from the steroids."

Moser said he didn't notice any side effects and that procurement of the steroids was not a problem. "I got them from a friend," he said. "If you're in bodybuilding, they're as easy to get as buying a gym bag."

Moser's decision to drop the drugs was not a dramatic turnaround in thought. "It was a decision I had not really made," he said. "I just didn't use them. I'll probably stay natural as long as I compete. As you get older and get a family, you have other responsibilities to consider."

Moser said he believes only about 30 percent of competing bodybuilders use steroids and that their use should not be banned.

"I think it's a personal choice and I think meets are going to have to be run that way," Moser said. "They can ban them from competition, but as long as steroids exist in the world, they're going to be used.

“I don’t condemn those people. That’s their own choice. I just don’t want to compete against them.” Like Anderson, Moser believes he can develop his physique effectively without drug use. “It’s going to improve your physique only 5 to 10 percent at the most,” he said. “I’ll take my shirt off at the beach and get asked, ‘Do you use steroids?’ Hey, it’s the four hours I spend each day at the gym working out that they see.”

Others are more adamant about wanting the drugs banned. “I would like to see drugs banned from all sports,” said Sequeira. “It’s like you’re pole-vaulting with a wooden pole and everyone else is using fiberglass.”

Jeanette Scott, 26, who will be judging at today’s meet and competing in May’s Ms. California meet, understands the temptation to use steroids, but supports their ban.

“I refuse to take steroids for health reasons,” Scott said. “I’d like to take them if they perfected them to the point they had no side effects because I tend to be on the thin side. I’d love to put on mass to be able to compete professionally.

“I think it’s becoming more prevalent among women’s bodybuilding. (Steroid users) leave everybody who chooses not to take them out of their league. I’ll never be able to progress to their level naturally.”

Tami Stark, 26, stopped bodybuilding for a couple of years before resuming last year. “I competed in the other contests before I quit,” she said. “Towards the end of that time, the women were just too big for me.

“Steroids defeat the purpose of what bodybuilding is all about. When someone comments on my body, I feel I did it by myself. My own dieting, my own energy, my own motivation.”

For those competitors, drug-free meets provide a haven from having to compete against what they see as a drug-aided edge. But for James LaRue Mack, 31, frustrated the last two years in open meets, the spectre of those meets still looms. “I feel kind of cheated in a sense,” Mack said. “I think if I were competing against people in my own group, I think I could have won.

“I’ve competed in open contests and the best I’ve finished is second place. My one ambition is to go into an open contest and take it away from the drug people.”