You So Sexy

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Council Bluffs, Ia. — Under lights, under layers of tanning oil, Michelle Meyo's muscles are on stage flexing. They cut through her skin — ripple. In her two-piece, black bikini, Meyo blows out a quick burst of air. Her muscles shiver anew.

"Rear lat spread." Shiver again after "right side tricep" and "leg of your choice, flex and rotate."

Meyo knows bodybuilding is beyond muscle mass. It is muscle definition. Invisible strings slightly parting the skin in between the muscle. That's definition. It's not the bulging muscles. It's the shivering ones.

"I'm used to looking as such. She started lifting 20 years ago as a shot putter on the high school track team. She graduated from the team, but not the weight room. This is not to say that Meyo is overly masculine. She is feminine. Her figure is slim, and years of weight lifting has made it taut. Some would say years of pumping iron have rendered her too taut, too muscular. Meyo doesn't listen. She says when society sees her in a dress, it does a double take. She doesn't mind.

Michelle Meyo is why I'm in Council Bluffs for the Bluffs Natural Bodybuilding Classic and XTREME Fit Championship. I've never seen bodybuilders — regardless of sex — in competition before.

Meyo and 16 others peed in a cup or, while strapped to a polygraph, said they hadn't taken any illegal substances. Peeking or truth telling is a requirement before competing in any North American Natural Bodybuilding Federation (NANBF) competition. An 18th person was scheduled to compete. It is not disclosed why he or she did not.

No steroids are allowed, and on some, it shows. Since no prize money is taken home in any NANBF event, the competitors range from shivering to shuddering.

Take Bill Gardner, a roofer from St. Louis. He started lifting four years ago because "I woke up one morning, and something needed to be done." He was 254 pounds. "One thing leads to another, and I said, 'I might as well do the diet thing.'" He's in great shape for 46. His body is shorn of any chubbiness. He'll begin training for a marathon in December.

But skin hides his muscles. You root for Gardner onstage, but he looks as though he doesn't belong. Some men half his age look wrong, too. The ones with under-developed arms and over-developed egos. NANBF is for the "Hey, I'm pretty big already, I'll try it" people.

Assuredness aside, trying it isn't easy. Bodybuilding means a 16-week program, five days a week, two to three hours a day. It means dieting. It means no dairy, sweets or red meat. It means knowing rice cakes raise blood pressure. It means eventually eliminating carbohydrates and water. That's right, no water the week before the competition. The body must dehydrate so the muscles, and hopefully, stripes, come to the fore more prominently. "How is your stewed broccoli with ice chips, sir?"

In those final days, the ego is all there is to feed.

But, if you do it right, when your performing music plays, your biceps and deltoids and abs jump at your beck and call. Hopefully, the jumps are timed to match the crashing cymbals. Everyone onstage does the jagged dance set to the pre-selected tunes. It is a step, flex-a-muscle group (a ripple if you're defined, an indifferent jiggle if you're not), a grimace, and then relaxing before repeating.

Relaxing is a funny thing. "From toes to head, you want to remain tight," Gardner says. Chris Heim, the head judge and seven-year bodybuilder, drops out the second vowel in "relax" while fading ever softer from the word the during the mandatory session, the session where no music is played. Heim drags out "relax" so much, he actually fails to finish it in some instances: "Relaaaas." The effect is hypnotic for all but those onstage. With shoulders bunched, the competitors look as if a dog is sniffing them in places it shouldn't.

"You want to look presentable at all times," Gardner says.

It looks incredibly self-conscious, however, this constant state of flex. It's as if the pretty girl is forever walking by the guy trying to impress her with his Speedo. Confusing as well because the impressing is for the eight judges seated...
below, and competitors are unsure whether a grimace or smile is appropriate. A grimace correlates more with flexing than smiling does. But the men and women onstage want it to look effortless. And what says effortless more than a smile. So most competitors spend their time varying between the two. Grimace. Smile. Grimace. Smile.

Looks are important, but they are not the essence of bodybuilding, "I compete for the personal victory," says Ken Fagan, a 31-year-old bodybuilder from Olathe, Kan., who took on stage: The sexual undertones of bodybuilding, the money's every competitor, exposes a muscle group.

Federation of Bodybuilders (IFBB). Bluffs.

through home the Overall Men's trophy in Council

not that able. The central scene. It is worse here. In bodybuilding, flexing and focuses only on the flesh. A whole body is taken in with the eyes, completely uninhibited. The competitors ask for you to study them in these sometimes compromising positions. It can make spectators uncomfortable.

One thing is certain, whether flipping through Flex magazine or peering at those onstage: The sexual undertones of bodybuilding are poorly masked. Every maneuver, from every competitor, exposes a muscle group. There, one is free to forget about the person flexing and focuses only on the flesh. A whole body is taken in with the eyes, completely uninhibited. The competitors ask for you to study them in these sometimes compromising positions. It can make spectators uncomfortable. The central attitude of the event, "This is my flesh, pour over it," hints at what he or she could do with you in bed. The lack of clothing only accentuates the utter appeal, the utter domination, the utter ... lust.

Which is where the fitness people enter the scene. It is worse here. In bodybuilding, flexing to music in skimpy clothing at least veils the sexuality, whereas a fitness woman's performance begs a tip afterwards and shouldn't begin with a dollar onstage. The sexuality in fitness championships is more prominent than Michelle Meyo's muscle definition. But enough with the sex.

Fitness routines combine flexibility, strength and aerobic stamina with dancing set to techno music blaring from speakers. Energy is a key. Good routines combine these features effortlessly.

Like her bulkier contemporaries, Babette Mulford's diet is gruesomely stringent. "I haven't had a glass of milk in I don't know how long," says Mulford, one of three fitness competitors here. Her allowed meat is chicken. Her fruit, grapefruit. Her liquid, wine. Water hydrates the body. Hydration is bad.

Most of the judging for the fitness and bodybuilding competitions took place in the morning session. When Mulford begins stretching for the evening one in a side room, the smells of tanning oils attack the nostrils with a vigor. It is a thick smell. You can taste the chalky, Magic Marker, emergency-room mix long after you leave the room. You can taste it so much, you cough.

This side room is where the competitors gather. Four layers of tanning oil are coated on one female bodybuilder. The darker the skin, the more the cut is accentuated. Some fairer complexions apply the oils to their face, giving them a "Dick Van Dyke fresh from the chimneys in Mary Poppins" look.

Michelle Meyo walks through the room. Her 10-year-old daughter, Raquel, enters. Meyo is 36 and has three other children: 5 years, 4 years and 10 months. When her offspring was mentioned onstage earlier, the fans whispered, "She has four kids!"

Meyo unleashed a small grin.

Raquel is the only child who enters the side room, however. A conversation is struck up between the elder Meyo and Reuben Rabanal. Meyo tells Rabanal how gross Raquel thinks she is. "Go on, honey, tell him. You think I'm gross. Mom, you're gross. You're gross, Mommy," she says, in a mocking, nasal pitch. Meyo says Raquel says this all the time. Rabanal tells Raquel to be honest. Is that really the way it is?

But the child says nothing. She stands in the middle of the room, unable to keep the red in her cheeks down, unsure whether to smile or grimace, the onstage version of her mother.

The night belongs to the two bodybuilders coaxing Raquel to speak. Meyo takes home the two biggest prizes: Best Female Poser and Overall Female Winner. Rabanal, who trains as a release from his job working with terminally ill children, has the most ripped body here. During the final pose-down, even some hardcore enthusiasts gasp at the bulging and shivering.

Afterwards, fans and competitors gather in the lobby. Meyo said before the finals how she drives down the street, and guys want to see her flex. People come up to her and ask if she's Michelle Meyo. "It's like I'm a movie star," she says. People stand in line to congratulate her. She soaks it in. Smiles radiantly.

When the people file out, she follows them into the night. Michelle Meyo, the movie star.

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