



The pursuit of the 'perfect' body

The personal account of a 51 year old fitness fanatic's journey onto a bodybuilding stage

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Part 1:

Why did I enter my first body building show at the age of 51?

Part 2:

What body building training involves, how I felt and did I deliver on stage ?

Part 3:

Reflections on my time as a bodybuilder, were the negative pre-conceptions true and would I recommend the training for the over 40's

Part 1:

Why did I
enter my
first body
building
show at
the age of 51?



Reason one:

Curiosity / could a more
mature 'fitness fanatic' make
it in the bodybuilding world?

Having experienced the physical and mental health benefits that being fit and healthy bring, in 2019 I decided to leave the corporate legal world behind me, qualify as a personal trainer and set up Personal Best, my personal training business

Focussing mainly on those in their 40's, 50's and 60's, I wanted to earn a living doing something I loved – help people get fitter and live longer more fulfilled lives.



I am, I confess something of a fitness 'challenge fanatic' I like to push my fitness to the extreme and revel in the way it responds to adversity. I advocate the many benefits of fitness which now increasingly includes elements of weight/resistance training.

I find the toughest of events including for example an iron man triathlon, climbing Mount Kilimanjaro and most recently completing a Royal Marine led 'Hell weekend'. I choose these events because they are designed to test and push fitness and mental strength to their limits. I hope to inspire the older person into believing that age really is no barrier.

Most clients come to me for help because they want to feel better about themselves by getting fitter and future proofing their body. For some however improving how they look is also important, maybe they have a beach holiday on the horizon and losing a few pounds, toning, firming or building muscle is a goal they need my help in achieving.

I confess I have for some time been curious about those who commit their life primarily in pursuit of what they consider to be the 'perfect physique' and then presenting it to be judged in public at a show.

Could a self confessed fitness fanatic make it in the bodybuilding world and focus wholly on look rather than fitness and health?



Reason two:

Get first hand experience and test the common pre-conceived judgments of bodybuilders and their training

I confess that despite my curiosity and ongoing thirst for new and different challenges, deciding to enter a bodybuilding show was a difficult one for me to make. I asked myself why I was prevaricating so much?

This led to some self-analysis. If we are honest, for better or worse, many of us have been influenced by the 'body beautiful' (whatever that might be) that we see on the front cover of magazines, social media or shows like 'Love Island' and want to attain that 'look'. Entering a bodybuilding show is simply an extension of getting that beach body just more extreme – I'm used to extreme goals. I like new challenges and proving age is no barrier. So this should have been an easy decision for me!



The reason for my hesitancy I decided was I was afraid. Not of failure itself but of my expectations of other people's reactions to my decision. You see in my mind many people have prejudices /pre-conceptions about the bodybuilding world and those in it. I felt I would be judged poorly if I embraced this world.

Also of course putting your body through an extreme regime whose goal is solely to attain a certain look, was in conflict with my brand values of striving for fitness and future proofing the older my body.

Possibly by tapping into the legal part of my brain I reconciled my reservations with a realisation that there could be no better way to test these perceived prejudices than by using myself as a 'case study', to them first hand and then report back my findings.

So this is what I decided to do. What then are the negative prejudices I held or I thought others held that I will test?

Hyper-Masculinity, vanity and of lower than average intelligence

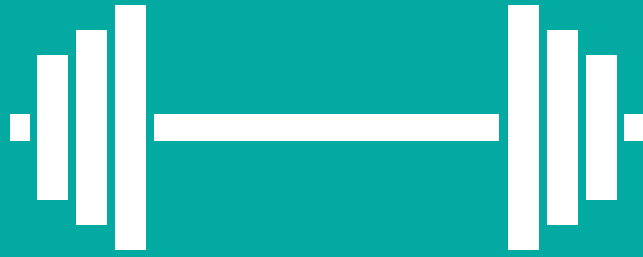
Bodybuilders are sometimes stereotyped as overly masculine, self-centred, or vain due to the total focus on their appearance, this leads to a description as 'meatheads' i.e. they are perceived as having no other interests and are under-educated.

Showing off, a bit of a 'poser'.

When I was young calling someone a 'poser' was something of an insult. Not being a natural extrovert the thought of taking to the stage and holding an unnatural body position was not something I relished.

Intimidation

The sheer size and muscularity of some bodybuilders can intimidate or alienate others, especially those who are new to fitness or less confident in their bodies. This is very much against my brand and the reason why I have hitherto be careful not to promote 'perfect body' image on my website. I want to encourage everyone to engage in fitness and healthier lifestyles and not be put off by unrealistic body images



Unnatural or Steroid Use

There is scepticism about the use of performance-enhancing drugs, leading to a perception that some physiques are "unrealistic" or "artificial." This is very much against everything I stand for. I am speaking to you as someone who has never even smoked a cigarette. Just to be clear even though I am happy to use myself as a 'test case' I did not, use nor do I condone the use of illegal performance enhancing drugs. For this reason I ensured I entered a 'natural show' which tested entrants for banned substances.

Health Risks

Concerns about the long-term health effects of extreme dieting, supplementation, dehydration and steroid use contribute to a perception that bodybuilding may not be as healthy as it seems.



Before sharing with you my conclusions to these prejudices, part two will first cover:

- What the training for a body building shows entails?
- How I felt during the process and how it changed me?
- Did I deliver on stage ?

Part 2:

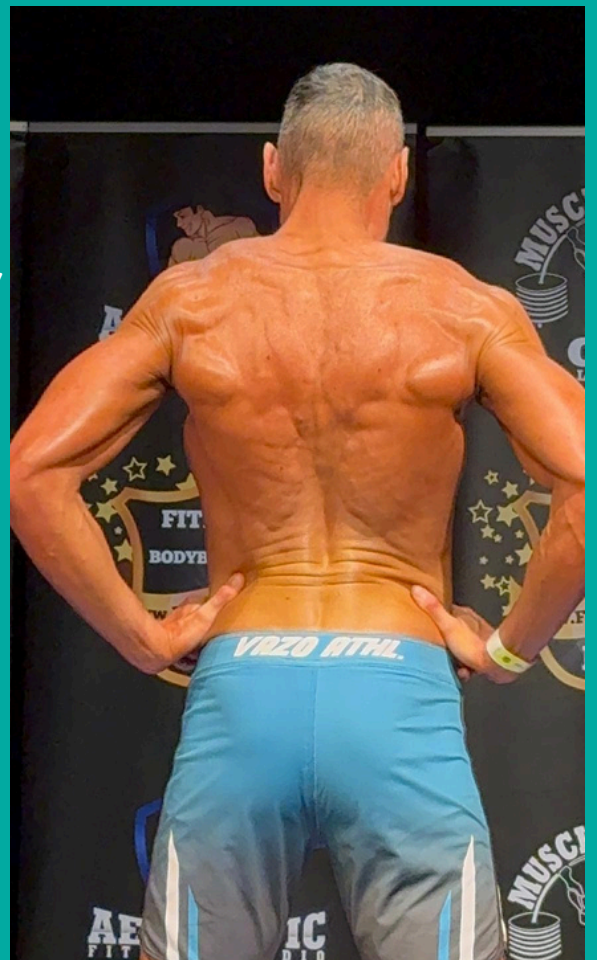
What the training for a body building show entails, how I felt during the training and did I deliver on stage?



What the training involved

I have taken my fitness to its limits by entering extreme events, I decided it was time to do the same with my appearance by entering bodybuilding show

I was un-comfortable, the thought of appearing on a stage in fake orange tan, wearing just shorts, striking unnatural poses was outside my comfort zone. Bodybuilding from the outside has a negative stigma that I would test first hand. It is seen as a place for aggressive steroid users, very alpha male dominated and for many an unhealthy intimidating pursuit.



I recently completed a gruelling fitness event, 'Hell weekend', run by Royal Marines, I was one of only six that finished. I trained hard, lost weight and was seriously fit.



Not long after this event I entered a bodybuilding show, employed a specialist PT and started serious bespoke training and dieting to get me to stage looking the part.

Why I needed a personal trainer – could you not train yourself?

Preparing for a 'show' needs specialist help from someone with experience and most importantly someone to hold you to account. A PT provides a uniquely effective discipline to ensure you follow the plan, don't take short cuts or damaging diversions.

So what did the training entail?

Well, broadly three elements:

- **Food and drink:** A prescriptive c2000 calories a day diet spread over 5 meals. I also took supplements (nothing you couldn't buy at Holland and Barret!) Chicken, Rice and green veg became something of a staple!
- **Weight training:** I undertook at least an hour, five days a week (5 different routines)
- **Cardio:** Daily steps of 12,000 and between 20-45mins on the Climb Mill.

Fitting it all in is a huge undertaking. It takes time to do the work-outs but also 'meal prep', buying and clearing away. I have never used Tupperware so much!

Even when I was not 'doing' I was thinking about what I needed to do and planning. It became all consuming. Like an addiction but the weekly weigh-in and check-ins with my on-line PT and seeing visually the changes my body was undergoing kept me to the programme.



Visual check-ins even while on holiday!

How I felt



Like training for all my previous events I started off feeling energised and excited. Hungry quite a lot of the time but having a strong end goal kept me more or less on point. After a few weeks in calorie deficit (I was burning more calories than I was consuming) it got difficult. My energy levels were low, I felt sluggish and as my body fat percentage started to fall to near 10% I started to feel the cold, experienced cold sweats as my body found it harder to regulate my temperature.

What was more dramatic was my drop in fitness. My appearance was changing at the same time too as my cardiovascular system was suffering. In nine weeks I had gone from 'fit to physique'.

Also although I did not really recognise it at the time I have subsequently told that I was more prone to 'moodiness' and was less alert! Social gatherings were more challenging, meals out were (except towards the end) allowed but I had to cut out planned meals and choose the lowest calorie options from the menu.

Sadly when you reduce bodyfat, you can not target specific parts of the body (this surprises my clients when I tell them) Fat cells are present across the whole body, so while my appearing abs were a welcome sign it came at the same time as my face started to appear quite gaunt. So noticeable was the change that I felt compelled to tell those near to me for fear they might be worried I was ill.

The monotony of the training was tough. Mindset and discipline became all important, 'must dig deep and keep on going' – here there were similarities to some of the endurance events I have completed



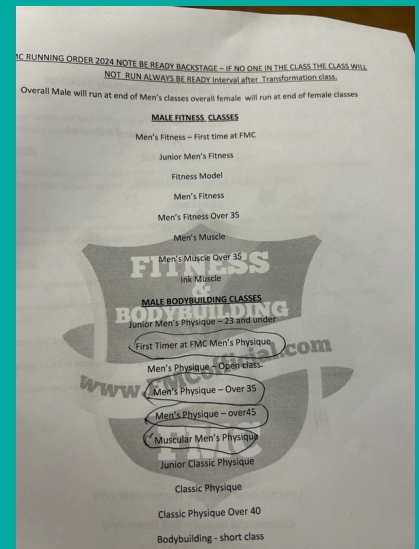
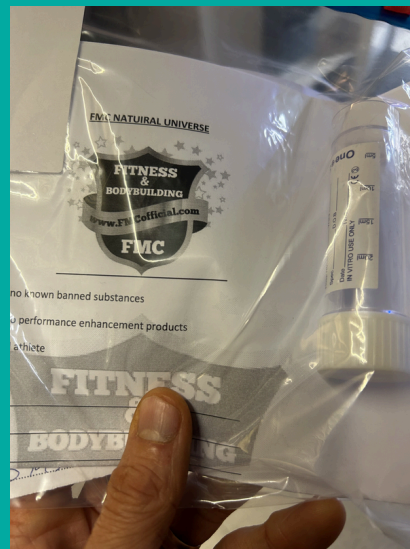
Did I deliver on the stage?

And so the day of the show arrived. I was excited and quite nervous but satisfied! Before entering the show my goal was not to win but to walk onto the stage and present a body that did not look out of place. The previous night I trained with my PT, the before and after photos demonstrated to me I had already achieved my goal.



Arriving at the theatre was a little disappointing the Palladium it was not. It had seen better days (and those days were back in the 1970's) it was very small, I convinced myself this was less intimidating than a larger more prestigious venue.

The entry to this natural show was low. Was this indicative of a 'drug focussed' industry? Within the Physique athlete category there were multiple sub-categories and like each competitor I entered four. The low numbers meant that the running order was rapid and chaotic.



Walking onto the stage for the first time was quite a shock, not having really graced a stage since I was Joseph in the school nativity, I was not really prepared. Firstly the lights pointing into the stage were severe, I could not see the audience and then came the next shock. I had been wrongly told that I only needed to deliver 2 poses – a front pose and a back pose.

There I was standing at the front of the stage at the end of the line when the judges asked us to undertake a quarter turn and display a side pose – well immediate panic set in. I did the turn and realised I had no idea what to do next and because I was on the end of the line had no one I could copy. I felt like a deer in headlights! All I had learnt with my posing coach seemed to desert me but fortunately before long it was time to leave the stage. Amazingly despite my inept stage presence I finished third.



The other categories followed and amazingly I came away with a first and two thirds.

It was a very surreal experience. While I felt I had let myself down with my lack of stage craft I did quite enjoy the experience and was happy with the physique I brought to stage.



There was however to be a big disappointment yet to come... I had been dreaming of my first post show meal, a juicy burger and chips. Sittingbourne could only offer me a 'greasy spoon; cafe – the burger not quite the taste sensation I had hoped for. Fortunately the Toblerone I had in my bag quelled some of my disappointment.

On the drive back I reflected on the day and the journey. I could now call myself a body builder. But what did I conclude?

- Was it a positive experience?
- What did I learn and what of those pre-conceptions?

**Part 3:
Reflections on my
time as a
bodybuilder, were
the negative pre-
conceptions true
and would I
recommend it for
over 40's?**



For nine long weeks, after proving my fitness with the royal marines, I dedicated myself to something of an experiment. After following a focussed and intense PT led training programme, at the age of 51 I stepped onto the stage of a bodybuilding competition for the first time.

One of my reasons for entering a show was to test first hand some of the negative pre-conceptions people (including myself) had of the body building industry allbeit the drug free part. Now I have been part of that industry I will share my conclusions.

Since qualifying as Personal Trainer I have advocated and embraced a lifestyle promoting the importance of fitness particularly for the over 40's. Weight training is an important element but building fitness is more important than simply training for an aesthetic look. Reflecting now on my first hand experience of the body building industry I will also report back on whether I still hold this view?

Pre-conceptions considered

1. Hyper-Masculinity, Vanity and lower intelligence

There are various categories within BB, I entered the Physique category which rewards a beach body look and penalises competitors who are over muscled. There can be now doubt that the classic category does reward hyper-masculinity.

It is certainly true that bodybuilders are more obsessed with appearance than most and on this measure could be considered vane. Whether this is a bad thing or not depends on the individual.

The competitors I met came from all walks of life and intelligence. The science and dedication behind the sport does require a high work ethic and understanding of the human body and nutrition.

2. Showing of, being a poser

Yes this is kind of the point really. Is it really a negative? The same charge could be levelled at actors and other sportspeople.



3. Intimidation, Unnatural, Steriod use

The size of those particularly of the 'classic category' can be intimidating to more normal sized people. The physique category look is more attainable and less intimidating. There is however a danger of glorifying the 'perfect physique' and encouraging mental health issues like body dysmorphia. This is probably a charge better levelled at the fashion industry, it is though apparent that there is pressure for classic category athletes to assume huge unnatural proportions and this is likely to fuel the use of substance abuse.

4,. Health Risks

These are certainly present owing to the extreme dieting and training required particularly for those who enter multiple shows and do so over a number of years. These risks can be minimised by employing an expert coach, not entering the classic categories, entering as a natural athlete and reducing the time under training.

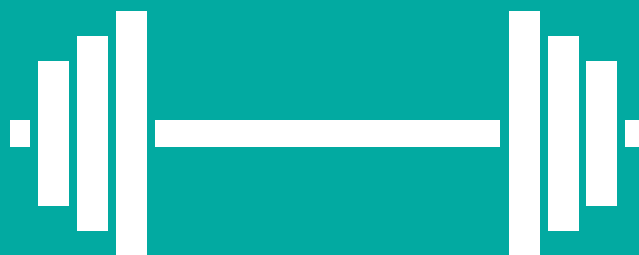


Fitness or Physique for the over 40's what would I recommend?

While the idea of sculpting a stage-ready physique can be enticing, the intense demands of preparing for a bodybuilding should not be under-estimated. I am still of the view that the focus should remain on enhancing overall fitness as this improves strength, endurance, flexibility, and metabolic health all supports longevity.

Aesthetic goals, while important, are still best achieved as a result of balanced training and nutrition rather than extreme measures that prioritise appearance over health. In my opinion this is why a 'fitness first' approach makes more sense:

- **Health Comes First:** Maintaining a healthy weight, preserving joint health, reduces the risk of chronic diseases like heart disease and diabetes which become more critical as we age.
- **Aesthetic Improvements:** Building muscle and reducing body fat through sustainable methods will naturally enhance your physique without compromising your health.
- **Mental and Emotional Well-being:** A focus on health rather than body perfection (whatever that may be) fosters a more positive relationship with your body, reducing the pressure to achieve an unrealistic ideal.



The benefits of 'Bodybuilding'

For those who want to challenge themselves, training for and entering a bodybuilding show can however still be a worthwhile pursuit provided you are aware of the process in advance.

Motivation and Discipline

Training for a competition provides a structured and fixed time based goal. Focusing on improving muscle definition should ,providing you engage an expert PT, still lead to fitness gains but not to the same extent as setting yourself a more fitness based goal.

Muscle Retention and Growth

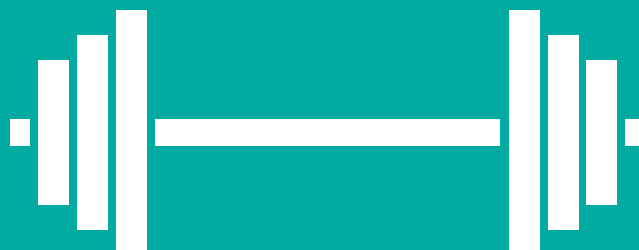
Strength training is vital for maintaining muscle mass and bone density as you age. Preparing for a show can keep you disciplined in these areas, helping combat age-related muscle loss (sarcopenia) while improving balance and functionality. Again though this can be achieved by including weight training elements into a more fitness focussed training regime.

Community and Support

Participating in bodybuilding fosters camaraderie with like-minded individuals. Sharing your journey with others who value health and fitness can provide motivation and encouragement. Be sure though to ensure your community are 'natural athletes'.

A Confidence Boost

Seeing physical improvements and achieving fitness milestones can boost your self-esteem. Especially when as I experienced you are complimented by strangers on how you look.



The negative elements of ‘bodybuilding’

While bodybuilding training for shows can be motivating, an aesthetic-first approach often comes with risks, especially for over-40 athletes, these can be lessened by employing a good coach but you need to be aware of the following health risks

Hormonal Strain: Extreme calorie deficits and dehydration methods can disrupt hormones like cortisol and testosterone.

Joint and Muscle Strain: Heavy lifting and repetitive movements can lead to injuries, especially if recovery is not prioritized.

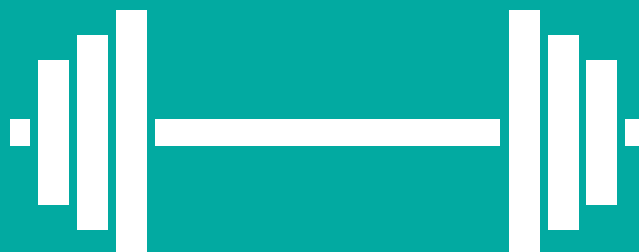
Cardiovascular Stress: Rapid weight fluctuations and dehydration can harm heart health, which becomes more critical with age.

Mental Health Challenges

Fixating on appearance can lead to body image issues, particularly if your post-competition physique doesn't align with your “stage-ready” look.

Unsustainable Practices

Extreme dieting and overtraining can lead to burnout or a rebound effect post-competition, making it harder to maintain a balanced lifestyle..



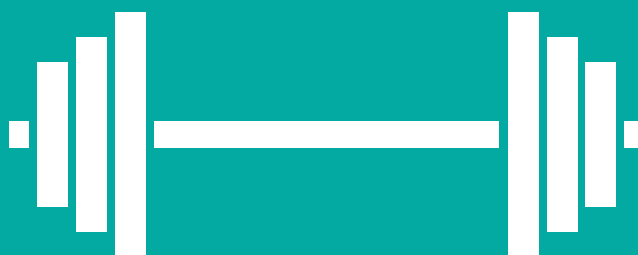
Concluding reflections

I began this challenge with a degree of scepticism but a fairly open mind. Looking back although the process was tough I am pleased I did it -there were benefits. From a professional point of view I certainly learnt more about the human body, its reaction to prolonged calorie deficit and it reinforced my belief in the effectiveness of setting goals and having a personal trainer holding you to account.

There is I feel a fair degree of vanity in us all – looking good in the mirror and being complimented by others is uplifting and ego boosting. I was however made all to aware (not least by my wife) that beauty is very much in the eye of the beholder. Not everyone finds the muscular, vascular look attractive.

I would not take to the stage again however. Achieving the benefits is tough and not all together healthy (although as I have said the risks can be minimised by an expert coach). If like me you are curious and you really want to enter a show then I would not say no but urge you to be aware of the downsides, the sacrifices and ask why you want to put yourself through the process.

Post show It has become apparent that the look and lifestyle is really difficult to maintain. I have certainly put on a few pounds and the stage look dissipates quite quickly as you unshackle yourself from the training and the goal has been ticked off.



In my now informed opinion it is still better to find a 'healthy' sustainable balance. I remain of the view that fitness first often brings a pleasing but sustainable aesthetic as a by-product and for most people this should remain their priority to future proofing their bodies for older age.



Fit, attainable and
maintainable



Inspirational?
not easily maintained

If you would like to discuss my findings, opinions or talk to me about personal training please contact me

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