

FROM FIT TO FAT & THE POST-COMPETITION BLUES

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I thought it only appropriate that my first article for NB&F would be about the descent from the high that is the bodybuilding stage. May 10 I earned two pro-cards- an accomplishment that I was determined to achieve before turning 30. I did it! Nothing can compare to hearing the words of the show promoter announcing those awards....all the tears (yes I cry when I train), the pain, the days of soreness, the screaming, the weighing, measuring, hours of sweat on the treadmill. You know what I'm talking about. And yet two weeks earlier I was already contemplating how I was going to handle the "let-down" to follow.

You see, after every competition- even the first when I didn't know that bodybuilding was going to be a permanent pursuit- I was overcome with feelings of sadness, listlessness, and disappointment. At least 12 weeks of build up.....and it's over in a day. I wanted to be idle, to be able to relax, to bask in the glory of my achievements, but all I was driven to do was continue pushing...pushing....pushing! And toward what? I felt out of control, not knowing what to do with myself or how to respond.

I recall coming home from a regional competition in Denver a couple years ago, at which I received overall honors in both bodybuilding and figure. Ecstatic and wanting to share my wins with friends and family, I unpacked, found conspicuous places to display my "ladies," and in a frenzy, I just sat. I had no direction. I was blank. I could eat I thought. I really could...and not have to measure or count. I could stay in my pajamas and not go for my morning run. I could call some friends....it had been a long time since I'd been out with them. But I did none of these things.

In a fury of anxiety, pulled into mental positions that I didn't feel flexible enough to handle, I hurried to the computer and composed an article to submit to various fitness magazines. I had to recapture the stage, solidify the legacy of my achievement, use it as a source of inspiration for future competitors. People needed to know who I was, and if I chose to wait, the opportunity would somehow pass me by. I would gain weight and no longer look my sculpted, statuesque self. In the blink of an eye I would go from ultra fit to fat, and no one would notice me. I scheduled a photo shoot.

Frantic and almost euphoric I answered the screeching phone and yelped at the sound of my boyfriend's voice, "Are you ready to go to breakfast?" he inquired excitedly.

The moment I felt a lurking disappointment and a temptation to avoid him, I stopped and took a deep breath. What was I doing?

The months leading up to a competition are saturated with planning, discipline, perseverance, anticipation, challenges, a welcoming of struggles overcome with the engagement of strategy and analysis. I relish the satisfaction that comes with a sense of deprivation and subsequent rewards. As such, when the competition is over, I'm left asking myself, 'now what?' It's a scenario similar to a wedding, the birth of a child or

the running of a marathon. Each moment is planful, every action has a reason, each morsel accounted for, workouts based on energy levels and strength. The week prior becomes even more calculated, careful scrutiny being employed with macronutrient ranges, water intake, salt consumption and exercise to affect hardness, fullness, separation. You are consumed.

I understood going into this sport that it would require a determination not possessed by many. No problem. I was not prepared; however, for the mental fortitude that would be required post-competition and during the “off-season.” After each show I learn more about myself and how to use the post-show experience to concoct a strategy for a successful re-acclimation into the world. I’ve spoken with many other competitors who experience the post-competition depression I speak of, and these strategies have helped them as well, preventing them from going from fit to fat both mentally and physically:

1. Develop a strong support system- surround yourself with like-minded individuals who can relate to your determination and desire to compete. Leave behind those people who criticize your strict eating and exercise regimens; recognize that they do not understand your goals. Do not take their words personally. Get involved in bodybuilding forums, post progress pictures, and ask for feedback. Ask others for what you need, and be specific.
2. Anticipate what you might need AFTER the show. If you have been in this place before, feeling down and lost, brainstorm what others can do; what you can be involved in; and how you can ‘extend the show’ for a little while longer so it does not suddenly disappear. For example, post competition pictures on the forums; get the judges’ feedback and ask for your support group’s opinions; take time to critique your posing, color, make-up, hair, suit, walk, etc. with others who will give you honest feedback; develop a plan for perfecting the areas you recognize need work.
3. Begin planning your next goal BEFORE your show is over. This may seem presumptuous; however, having short term goals will keep you centered and help to prevent a lack of direction. Consult your nutritionist, your trainer, your support group and brainstorm ideas for your next achievement. For some this may be hitting a certain weight on their squat; for me it was planning my pro debut should I receive my cards OR my next amateur competition to try again. In addition, it meant securing my macronutrient numbers from my nutritionist to get right back on track following that post competition meal. It’s very easy to fall off the wagon and let yourself go, eating everything you have bypassed for the last 3 months.
4. Finally, give yourself something to look forward to post-competition. Many competitors plan a mini-vacation. The costs of competing are high, so this may not be feasible, but planning a reward for yourself to celebrate your accomplishments and the months of dedication and perseverance will be in your best interest. Mentally and physically, we need a break from the constant pressures that come with competition prep as well as recognition of our efforts.

As natural athletes we spend the majority of our time preparing physically for our sport. To reach optimal performance and compete within our ultimate zones, we must prepare mentally and train our minds to reach our full potentials! This means prepping for the before, during, and after events of our sport. Alex Shaffer, alpine skier, said it well, "People don't win because they're physically stronger. It's because they're stronger between the ears!"