

The Feminine Physique

The female bodybuilding community remains small, but more women are being driven into the sport -- and changing the definition of feminine beauty

By: Rose Hansen | [May 2012](#) | From the print edition



From left to right: Anne Brust, Kayce Hunt, Sara Lassig, Jordana Koja-Volk, Mary Beth Larcom.

Image credit: Eliesa Johnson

Sara Lassig arrives at the National Physique Committee Upper Midwest Meet with her makeup set, her cheeks bronzed and her hair loose and flowing. Her bag is heavy with bungee cords and pre-measured containers of chicken, rice and sweet potatoes. She glues her tiny, glittering body suit into place, then sips water while keeping her feet elevated to preserve muscle tone. Finally, she slips into five-inch heels. Backstage is filled with nervous talk;

terms like “bikini bite,” “dialing it in” and “hard body” are thrown around. Perhaps a little self-consciously, Lassig flexes, considers her own reflection in the mirror and reminds herself that she’s not just here to look pretty. She’s an athlete. This is a sport.

PHOTOS: THE FEMININE PHYSIQUE

The female bodybuilding community is still a relatively small one in Minnesota, but show registration numbers point to its growing popularity. For the state’s largest female bodybuilding competition, the Gopher State Classic, 84 women registered in 2012, up from 51 in 2010. Those numbers actually exceed the men’s side; 74 male competitors registered for the Gopher State Classic in 2012. Despite the growing desire of some athletic women to push a weightlifting passion far beyond a gym membership, some competitors still feel that the perception of bodybuilder women has not shifted. They feel that men competing in the sport get more respect and their reasons for joining the niche ranks of bodybuilders are better understood by the general public.

“Male bodybuilders are seen as ‘Wow! That’s a real man!’ and women bodybuilders are not seen as ‘Wow, she’s beautiful!’” says Karen Johnson, 47, a trainer, competitor and mother of four. A muscular female body elicits strong reactions and, according to some of the women involved in the sport, sometimes that includes disgust or claims that female bodybuilders look like men. Not surprisingly, along with a greater cultural acceptance, male bodybuilders tend to receive more press, endorsements and positions as guest posers at competitions—thus, more money. At the professional level, the prize money for men is often five times more than what female competitors receive.

Some competitors think that the newly added Physique category (recently introduced along with the existing Figure, Fitness, Bodybuilding and Bikini categories) may address some of the issues—at least the ones surrounding the idea of “beauty”—in the female bodybuilding community. In that division, muscle tone and definition is still judged, but facial beauty and the grace of a competitor’s movements are also considered.

What seems to drive many of these women into the sport is a desire to broaden traditional definitions of feminine beauty.

“Women can build muscle naturally, but they’re not grotesque,” Johnson explains. “Muscle can be beautiful.”

“I have always appreciated strong, tenacious women. This sport is full of them,” adds Anne Brust, 46, a working mother of two who began weightlifting in 2009 and started competing last year. “Many Figure athletes overcome self-doubt, huge weight loss or personal challenges to have the courage to get up on stage in a tiny figure suit. They may not have the gold medal at the end, but they have courage, which is worth more to me than gold medals.”

That encouraging spirit also seems to be a draw for the women involved, who speak fondly of bodybuilding’s welcoming community. While it’s an individual competition, they say it’s a team environment off-stage: Athletes exercise together, divulge routine secrets and share recipes.

“Four out of five people don’t make it,” says Johnson. “In the face of adversity, what gets you through is a support system in the bodybuilding community. Not just family and friends—they might not support your goal to be on stage, because they don’t know what it takes.”

Such camaraderie is crucial in a sport that isn’t exactly revered by outsiders and that demands so much time and energy—much more than many pastimes people take up.

“While training for a show, I’m in the gym two hours a day, and average 60 hours at my job each week,” says Lassig, 32, a full-time medical social worker and part-time instructor at the University of Minnesota who began competitive bodybuilding in 2009. Many competitors start and end their days while it’s dark, hitting the gym before work, heading to a full-time job, taking care of kids, making dinner, then trying to squeeze in a few hours of sleep.

“Balancing act’ is probably the best wording to describe work and competing,” says Kayce Hunt, a 23-year old fraud analyst who competes in the Figure division. “I plan out all of my workouts in my workout log about two weeks in advance.” Despite the intensity of their schedules, bodybuilders remain adamant that the exercise is a stress reducer in their lives. Jordana Koja-Volk, 30, an attorney for the Minnesota Department of Human Services who has been competing for three years, calls it her “zen.”

No matter their reason for bodybuilding, one thing seems to be clear among these athletes: They have no desire to lose their femininity in pursuit of larger muscles, a common misperception. “Everybody thinks of bodybuilder women as manly and tough,” says Johnson.

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