

## Keep Your Muscle While Dieting

Dr. Joe Klemczewski

How many bodybuilders do you know who want to add “just a tiny bit more upper body width” or maybe just “a tad more hamstring thickness?” I don't hear those phrases in the gym. I hear the words “huge, freaky, and insane,” along with phrases like, “Now that's what I'm @#%&# talk'n about!!” Being a drug-free bodybuilder means muscle is a precious commodity. There are a lot of WNBF pros trying to win their first title and a lot of amateurs trying to win their pro cards that will do anything in the gym to grow. Dieting to a super-sliced condition is hard enough without having to worry about losing all your muscle and ending up with the physique of an Olympic ping-pong player! Gaining or regaining muscle in the offseason is one thing, but when you're dusting off your treadmill for the precontest diet, will you keep it?

Everyone I talk to has a different concept of how to get from offseason to stage. There are plenty of “experts” to validate every possible plan that you can chose to buy into. Many of them can get you lean enough, but which one will ensure the maximum amount of muscle retention while you diet so you can combine your contest hardness with the most filled-out symmetry possible? You've tried them all no doubt. Low-fat diets, low-carb diets, high-food and high-cardio, lower food and less cardio; they all can get you there by virtue of calorie deprivation, but what you would probably give to know the “secret” to keeping all your muscle!

Let's start with your beginning condition. If you're a rookie to competition, you may not have learned that the harder and longer you have to diet, the more muscle you'll lose. The '60's and '70's offseason approach of pizza, beer, and seventy pounds certainly makes the bench press more impressive and your mass increases dramatically. That is until reality sets in and you have to lose five pounds a week to fit into your posing trunks. As your body weight and body lean body mass increases, so does your body fat. Over-consumption is the quickest way to gain muscle...and fat. The problem is, dieting is the fastest way to lose both as well. I believe going through a couple of serious weight gaining periods when you're new to training is essential to pack on your genetic potential for muscle, but doing it every year will only hurt your chances of winning. Once you've gained as much muscle as you can, it's not a matter of how much you gain in the offseason, it's how much you keep in the precontest season. The slower you can lose body fat, the more muscle you'll retain. I like clients to only have to lose a pound or less per week. That means your offseason has to be very, very effective at gaining muscle without too much fat.

The first thing you may think of is protein. Protein builds muscle. You learned that in the high school weight room. Protein in excess, however, can be used as energy or converted to body fat. Using protein as energy means less body fat is being used as energy. So, having the right amount of protein plus a little extra “just to be sure” you have enough is

optimal, but gross overages of protein isn't going to help you build muscle or retain it.

Believe it or not, carbs are key to retaining muscle. Carbohydrates and insulin have been targeted as the deadly duo in obesity and weight loss for very good reasons. However, even though excess carbs will make you gain fat fast, the silver lining is that you gain and retain muscle through the same mechanism. Even when dieting with a lower than normal carb intake, your carbs can be targeted to help you retain muscle, maintain energy levels, and keep your metabolic rate high. The anabolic effects of carbohydrates have been well documented since a 1940's study showed them to be "protein sparing." Compared to a fasting group, those with carbs (still no protein) lost only half as much muscle as those without carbs. Throw protein in and you get the same effect just at a higher level. Those with less carbs lose more muscle. Protein is certainly still king in the body's anti-catabolism campaign, but carbohydrates are just as important.

The real trick is in the numbers, and as I mentioned, in the timing. Since you have to limit your body's primary source of energy, carbohydrates, to lose fat, but you want as much glucose as possible to spare muscle, where's the fine line? Once your protein intake is where it should be; high enough to retain muscle but not so high to cause body fat conversion, then we can look at fat. Fat and carbs go hand-in-hand while dieting. Your body is typically dominant in one of two types of calorie burning at a time. Both are always happening, but one is much higher at given times. They are glucose metabolism and ketogenic metabolism. Your body is either using glucose (carbs) for energy or fat (dietary and stored) for energy. I recommend keeping dietary fat at 15-20% of calorie intake while dieting and then dropping a little lower as the show draws near. This enables you to eat more muscle-sparing carbs. The more you restrict carb intake, the more time you spend burning body fat, but once again, the more muscle catabolism takes place. This is why I like only a loss of a pound or less per week. Muscle is being spared as much as possible and there are enough carbs in the diet to target workout energy levels and recovery.

If protein levels are accurate, fat is minimal to moderate, carbs can fill the gap. My goal is for every client to diet on as high of a carb intake as possible and still be achieving the goal. For a male ectomorph, this may be dieting on 350 grams per day, for an endomorph it may be 150 per day, but it's a relative phenomenon. The different metabolic rates and different body types dictate different food levels. Rat studies show tremendous differences in the liver's use of protein for energy based on carbohydrate intake. Low levels of carbs will allow non-contractile protein in the muscle and the liver to be used as energy and lower levels of carb intake will start the process of using contractile protein from muscle tissue. Is there anything else on the planet that can cause a bodybuilder faster depression than that?! I mean, take my dog, take my girlfriend, but don't take an ounce of muscle!!

Cycling is one method of walking this fine line. You can only go so long in carb depletion before you not only risk higher muscle loss, but, behaviorally you'll be more prone to binge. It never fails to happen. When you go too low for too long into carb depletion, you'll hit the wall and go way overboard. I've heard all the stories; bags of

Oreos, boxes of cereal, and enough candy to short-circuit your pancreas. If you have to diet on a lower-carb regimen, you have to plan a moderate increase every three to five days so that you can stay on track and do your best to prevent muscle loss.

Targeting your carbs is also essential. Prioritize your carbs so that you have them when they will help you preserve muscle the most. The most important time is your meal before your workout, then your post workout meal, then breakfast, then spread the rest out evenly. If you're unlucky enough to be in a cycle where you're just not getting much, still prioritize them in this manner. If you only have enough for one meal, then have them before your workout, etc. This will provide glucose for energy so you'll use less muscle for energy while training, have more energy to lift heavier so you stimulate muscle growth/retention, and you'll whine less to your training partner about shrinkage.

Summing it all up, you have all the tools you need to maintain the most muscle possible while dieting. Plan your offseason and precontest so you don't have to lose fat too quickly. Set protein levels high enough but not excessive. Set fat levels at no higher than 20% of total calories. Set carb levels as high as possible while still staying on pace with weight loss. Target your carbs to support muscle retention. Cycle carbs if a prolonged low-carb run is necessary.

