

Psychological Aspects of Competition

Tina Smith, M.A, Professional Natural Bodybuilder

PRE-CONTEST

Competitive bodybuilding is extremely demanding. The long hours of training, the mental concentration, and restricted diet are seemingly "obsessive" characteristics to those around you. Along with normal life pressures; money, family issues, and job responsibilities, your new obsession can easily lead to additional stress causing injuries and burn-out. There are warning signs which you should be aware of. If you're tired, run down, on edge, or if you're not sleeping well, then back off from training. Listen to you body! Use common sense in terms of not looking for an excuse to miss a workout, but being wise enough to rest when you need to. If you can avoid injury and burn out, you will improve.

As you go through the course of several weeks prior to a contest, your mental tenacity will sometimes wane. Expect this to happen, and be prepared for it. As you're frustrated from work, starving for carbs, and patiently awaiting an open treadmill for your beloved second hour of cardio, this question will arise: "So why am I doing this?, Is it just for that trophy?" You must remember your goals, and commend yourself for progress thus far.

Goal Setting: You must set reachable goals.

To be the *best* at any sport is usually expecting too much. To improve yourself is much more realistic, and a goal that you can certainly accomplish. Realistic goals might include losing 1 pound per week, or maintaining weight-training poundage's as you lower carbohydrates. (Not losing 10 lbs in 3 weeks, or trying to train on only 50 grams of carbs).

Success is the best motivator, so tailor your expectations to your own abilities. You want to feel inspired to continue, not so frustrated that you quit.



MOTIVATION:

The best possible weapon is a **positive mental attitude**.

If you keep copious workout and dieting notes (which you should), you can easily look through them to remind yourself of all the hard work and discipline you've exuded thus far. Looking in the mirror, you should see progress as well, especially as compared to "before" pictures which you hopefully have taken.

Feel free to enjoy positive comments from others in the gym, and people around you. *(Do be a little careful about these comments from non-bodybuilders in terms of true evaluations. They may say you look great without knowing when you're actually contest-ready. Not a reason to slack off!!)*

Definitely train in a supportive atmosphere, and surround yourself with positive people. Fellow bodybuilders are good choices, as they really know what you're going through. Explain to others that this is something that you truly enjoy, and the intensity will not last forever. Stay away from those who endlessly criticize.

At the end of the day, congratulate yourself on being one step closer to the goal, and then forget about training to let your mind rest as well.

Keep negative thoughts at bay through meditation, listening to music, or watching a movie (whatever you find relaxing).

Convince yourself that each workout brings physical improvement, and use any motivational tool you can find to combat fatigue (music, etc.).

Finally, think of this experience as a wonderful adventure, and remember to relish in the journey. You have entered into a club of very special athletes, and you will drive yourself farther than ever before in terms of not only physical

boundaries, but also self-exploration and personal accomplishment. Be gracious for the opportunity to experience these things.

"Unlike the mediocre, intrepid spirits seek victory over those things that seem impossible" (Ferdinand Magellan)

SHOWTIME

As the day of the contest draws near, you may be feeling other emotions such as fear, anxiety, and excitement.

In terms of dealing with fear, the "unknown" won't really be a factor. You will recognize most of the backstage help at the Capital City show, several of the judges, and obviously the promoters. You will have your body perfectly prepared for presentation in terms of tanning, oil, and the right posing suit. As you've attended the seminar and posing sessions, your mandatories and routine will be well rehearsed, and your conditioning solid. You are significantly more prepared than the majority of other competitors.

Also, remember that all of the other athletes are simply *people* too. They lift weights, do cardio, and watch their diets just as you do. Be affirmed that for the INBF, they are all **Natural** athletes, just like you too!

In reviewing the previous section, you should not experience a fear of failure, or endangerment of your self-esteem. You have made an incredible accomplishment! Focus upon positive thoughts, and visual imagery.

Try to enjoy the excitement and anticipation of the event, but at the same time remain relaxed. There is a difference between arousal and anxiety. There is an optimal level of arousal or excitement for each athlete. This level of arousal, or "getting fired up" should happen closer to when you will be going out on stage. There will be quite a bit of down time before prejudging, (and you probably won't have slept much the night before), so bring something to keep yourself occupied rather than nervous. A walkman with relaxing or inspiring music is a good choice.

The competition aspect should really be focused upon yourself as an individual in doing the best that **you** can (with the exception of a pose down). You can not control how others will show up, and you must be wary about comparing yourself to them off stage. Most people will stay covered up, and you should as well. As you are pumping up, focus on yourself, and do not attempt to size up the competition! Someone may look huge in sweats, but end up with a lot of body fat. Also, many people may show off big arms, but may have a narrow back, and unseparated legs. You will have NO WAY of knowing how you look against the competitors until someone reputable tells you, or until you see pictures. So....don't think about it before the stage!!

Don't let anyone else intimidate you either. If someone purposely positions themselves in front of you to pump up with arm curls, showing off big arms, turn and find another spot to pump up. Most people in this event will be friendly and helpful, or just quiet.

When you get on stage, the lights are so bright that you won't be able to see much. You may notice the judges, but won't really be able to discern any of the audience. Stay focused and controlled throughout your posing, and remember to smile! Enjoy your time in the spotlight, you've worked very hard for it!

AFTERSHOCK

"Then, as we walked back down the great peak, relief that we had survived began to alternate with mild disappointment. The excitement was over"

(Michael Apter, *The Dangerous Edge*)

Be prepared for a gamut of emotions to assault you once this adventure has ended.

Clearly, without the focused determination commanding your every move, you will at first feel exalted and free. Yet, soon you will begin to miss that structure and discipline, and perhaps even feel "empty".

At first, you will love being able to rest, and not feeling run down all of the time. However, be careful not to slow down so much that you actually stop. That's not the kind of person you really are. You're a driven competitor, and enjoy an active lifestyle. Don't be a couch potato, just because you can. Get back into the gym within a week or two, or engage in other sports you've missed such as tennis, golf, basketball, etc.

Along those same lines of newfound freedoms, **be extremely careful about being too carefree with your eating**, simply because you can. The initial excitement of flavors really lasts for only the first meal. After that, your beloved oatmeal pancakes are perfectly appetizing, yet you may be inclined to have a double cheeseburger, fries, and a hot fudge sundae, just because you can. Control is the issue here. Most bodybuilders eat things after a contest that they would never have even considered, or wanted, prior to their dieting regimen.

There are so many temptations and persuasions within this issue! You may view Bel Air as a five-year-old views a toy store. You may enjoy going out to eat with friends after having declined so many times during your dieting phase. Just the opportunity to have someone wait on you in a restaurant, rather than cooking, weighing, and charting all of your own food is exhilarating!

Moderation is key! Try not to eat out every night, but rather try for once a week. If you're dying to try a new brand of cookies, buy a small box, or take most of them

into the office. Always eat your regular diet foods first, and then add a treat. You will gain some weight, and quickly, so monitor this by watching your portions, and adding a little cardio back into your day.

Be aware that you **will** experience body dysmorphia.

You have been looking at your body critically for a very long time, and have climaxed that process with the best physique of your life. It took a long time to get there, but an amazingly short time to lose it! The added sodium, and foreign foods will immediately cause you to retain significant amounts of water, and don't be surprised if you face balloons up like a chipmunk!

People who have outstanding abs can find them completely obscured in only two to three days. Some people can gain 10 to 25 pounds in only two weeks of free-for-all eating!

As your body changes back from the ultra-lean, remember that its o.k., and that ultra-lean is what's not "normal". Try very hard not become fat, but know that it is simply impossible to stay within a competitive bodybuilding state all of the time.

Your personhood was never based upon your appearance alone, and keep that in mind as you may feel depressed, or saddened that your physique has been lost. Again, focus upon a goal, and support a positive mental attitude. Your goal can certainly revolve around "off-season" prep for another bodybuilding contest, or also something completely unrelated such as taking a class, or constructing a garden.