

MUSCLE

PARADISE!

MF looks back at Muscle Beach and the golden age of bodybuilding in Venice, Calif.

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GENE LESTER/GETTY IMAGES

If there's a heaven for guys who lift weights, it would have to be a re-creation of the original Muscle Beach of the '40s and '50s, and the bodybuilding scene in Venice, Calif., circa 1970. For a span of about 40 years, everything a guy could enjoy about the fit lifestyle was at his fingertips in Southern California. You could pump iron in a hardcore gym with your buddies all morning and chase girls on the beach all afternoon. You'd go to a restaurant, get a seven-egg omelet for a dollar, and then glance over at the next table and see Steve Reeves or Arnold Schwarzenegger looking back at you. And maybe one day, while you were showing off on the parallel bars on the beach or making a human pyramid with nine other guys, a director would stroll by and ask if you wanted to be in a movie.

Of course, a place this perfect couldn't last. But the legacy of the eras survives, and it has transcended the bounds of Los Angeles County and the bodybuilders themselves. Their "good time" has become our everyday routine. Whether we're conscious of it or not, every time we touch a dumbbell, cut a carb from our diet, or strike a pose for our girlfriends, we're emulating an age in which a bunch of so-called muscleheads laid the foundation for modern fitness. And all they were trying to do was have fun in the sun.

THE CRADLE OF MUSCLE

While the exact origins of Muscle Beach are in dispute, numerous sources credit one woman with starting it all. Kate Giroux, a local physical-education teacher, convinced the city of Santa Monica in the mid-1930s to supply the public with a tumbling mat (though some argue it was just a strip of carpet) and some gymnastics equipment, such as a pommel horse and rings. The gear was set up on 200 square yards of sand just south of Santa Monica pier. "During the Depression, the only recreation for people was the beach," says Bill Howard, a former bodybuilding champion and resident. "It was free." Naturally, local athletes—particularly gymnasts and acrobats, at first—took notice and began using the equipment to practice their flips and tumbles in the open air, while also escaping their economic blues for a time. Regular folks began to crowd around to watch the stunts, and as the site grew in popularity, city officials supported it, ultimately installing proper weight-training equipment and a platform for stunt shows.

Around this time, Muscle Beach found its first hero, another woman, named Abbye "Pudgy" Stockton. Despite her nickname, Stockton was regarded as 118 pounds of perfect feminine proportions—muscular and strong (she once clean and jerked 135 pounds) yet lean and soft enough to make any man drool. Stockton provided perhaps the earliest evidence that lifting weights didn't have to make women bulky or masculine but could instead give them tremendous strength and athleticism. She and her future husband, Les, were early celebrities on the beach, taking part in weightlifting contests and acrobatics displays that included hand balancing, throwing people into the air and catching them, and stacking 10 or more men toward the sky, one on top of the other. Witness the events just once, people say, and it was impossible not to want to get behind the weights and see what you could do, too.

During this time, in the midst of World War II, word of the physical and cultural anomaly taking place in Southern California began to spread across the globe. GIs on leave in Santa Monica would get an eyeful and relay pictures and stories to people they met overseas. After the war, there was a buzz practically everywhere people exercised about "this place in California where people run around with their bodies hanging out," says Howard. Though at the time weight training and bodybuilding were considered strange pursuits adopted mostly by narcissists and insecure men, the message most were getting was that on Muscle Beach, no such rebuke existed. By the mid-'40s, everyone who trained, including bodybuilders, circus perform-

ers, and movie stunt people, was doing it in Santa Monica.

From that motley melting pot, a unique and wonderful camaraderie grew. The performers and contestants at the Muscle Beach shows (presented free of charge) made no money for their efforts, participating instead for the love of sport and for fun. Though they played to audiences of several thousand on a weekly basis, the muscle folk themselves remained a relatively niche group of around 50 members, and they exchanged health and



nutrition ideas as well as gut-wrenching workouts. “People would ask us, ‘What can I do to get another inch on my arm?’ or ‘How can I get started with exercise?’” says Howard. “We were on the covers of muscle magazines that went around the world, so anybody who was interested in fitness was there.” It wasn’t long before nearby Hollywood came calling, snatching up champion lifters and bodybuilding pioneers such as Reg Lewis and Steve Reeves, and casting them as leads in the popular “sword-and-sandal” epics of the 1950s and early ’60s. And suddenly, the men lifting weights on the beach became celebrities. “It would be like you going into the gym and running into someone famous,” recalls Howard, “but it wasn’t a big deal for us. These were the people who were around you every day, and you could train with them.”

And so things continued . . . until one day in 1959, when Muscle Beach lost its innocence forever. A scandal erupted in which several bodybuilders were accused

of raping underage girls. A week or so later, bulldozers arrived in the middle of the night and leveled everything. The particulars of the case are still highly controversial. “It’s not on any police records,” says Howard. “Many think the city squashed it.” Rumors abound: Some believe the incident was actually statutory rape between only one man and one girl; others say there were more pressing reasons for cleaning out space on the beach (such as to create parking for the city’s growing population). Since then, the conspiracy theory has only grown—especially since the charges against the accused were eventually dropped. But most people agree in the end that city leaders believed Muscle Beach had begun to attract a bad element and had to be closed.

Though one era had come to an end, weight trainers would not be out of a home for long. The seeds of bodybuilding culture had been sewn in Santa Monica, but they would grow to huge proportions just two miles south in Venice.

BODYBUILDING’S NEW MECCA

By the early ’60s, some of the original Muscle Beach training equipment got the chance to resurface in a new facility in Venice. Nicknamed the Dungeon, the gym was a far cry from its old beachfront. Located in a basement that got no sunlight and offered only heavy weights, the locale became a refuge for hardcore bodybuilders and a harbinger of modern fitness’s transition from acrobatics to pure muscle. As such, it made the ideal training ground for many famous bodybuilders to get their start, including muscle-magazine icon Dave Draper. The camaraderie lived on as well. The Dungeon had no official owner, and everyone who trained there contributed a few dollars for rent. “It would be a horror story for anybody today,” says Draper, winner of several titles, including Mr. Universe, “because the equipment was so dilapidated. But it was wonderful to work under those circumstances. You had to improvise. You didn’t know anything better, because this was all you had.”

While the Muscle Beach lifters worked to regain their footing, other gyms began to pop up as well, all hoping to satisfy a new generation’s taste for iron. One such place was Vince Gironda’s gym in the San Fernando Valley. Of all the training gurus of the day, Gironda remains one of the most respected, as so many of his theories about exercise and nutrition have been proven true. He knew that ab exercises didn’t automatically trim the waistline and that fat intake supported testosterone. “Vince helped me win titles when I was in my 40s,” says Bill Howard, who took home the Mr. America title in 1974. “He was more into the aesthetic look of muscle,” he says. It was this change in thinking and training—a move from functional athletic skill to the idea of transforming muscle into art—that ultimately gave rise to the bodybuilding of today.

Just around the corner, the most famous and enduring training center of its time was getting its start. Gold’s Gym opened in 1965. Founded by Joe Gold, a bodybuilder who had done a stint in Mae West’s traveling male revue, Gold’s



offered a unique blend of the romance and glamour that the original Muscle Beach personified and the intense bodybuilding training that made the Dungeon and Girona's gym such productive places to work out. "The gym was a cinder-block building with nothing on the walls and a concrete floor," says Ric Drasin, a bodybuilder and professional wrestler who frequented Gold's, later designing its legendary muscleman logo. At about 2,000 square feet, the gym contained some very bare-bones equipment, including homemade barbells and dumbbells—enough for about 50 guys at a time to work out with. "It was also just a few blocks from the beach," says Joe Weider, fitness-magazine magnate and mentor to many bodybuilders of the day, "so all the champions gravitated to it." After an intense workout, the men could walk to Venice Beach and work on their tans or show off their pumps to gawking onlookers.

It wasn't long before Dave Draper and most of the future cast of *Pumping Iron* (including a 245-pound, gap-toothed Austrian) were calling Gold's home—sometimes quite literally. Since the cash prizes in bodybuilding at that time were paltry at best, Gold allowed a number of homeless bodybuilders to sleep on the gym's shower-room floor and even on the roof. "Joe wasn't looking to make a lot of money," says Draper, recalling that most of Gold's early members weren't even required to pay gym dues. "He was just putting a place together for the guys."

Gold's enormous generosity went hand in hand with his ferocious enforcement of gym rules. No music, no dropping weights, and no silly behavior, or you were out (nevertheless, stories of crazed antics remain—see "Muscle Memories," at right, for some examples). The strict atmosphere provided for some balls-to-the-wall workouts, the likes of which set a precedent for how to conduct oneself as a bodybuilder. "The first thing that came to my mind when I walked in the first time was that I had to train harder," says Lou Ferrigno, who had already captured back-to-back Mr. Universe titles when he arrived in 1976. "It was

all blood, sweat, and tears in there." More than a construction site for monstrous physiques, Gold's also served as a cultural meeting ground. Whether bodybuilders arrived seeking greater motivation, the fellowship of training around icons such as Schwarzenegger, or a chance to test their resolve against that of other determined champions, men flocked to Gold's from around the world. "And they would be accepted right off the bat," says Drasin. "If you were from another country, that was even better. It was a melting pot of ideas, and everyone got along." For these reasons, the gym came to be called the mecca of bodybuilding.

MUSCLE MEDIA

Although Gold's reputation was solid, it took Joe Weider (and his magazines *Muscle Builder* and *Muscle Power*—forefathers of our own *Men's Fitness*) to cement the gym's legendary status. In an age when bodybuilding was reviled by the media, Weider celebrated it, distributing information on the sport to newsstands around the world. "I believed that men who worked out and were strong were comparable to the ancient Greeks," says Weider, who sold his magazine empire in 2002 and recently co-authored the book *Brothers of Iron*. "The Greeks did feats of strength, and our bodybuilders would more or less do the same with their workouts. I wanted

to carry on the Greek tradition—building the perfect body." By photographing bodybuilders in loincloths and sandals against the backdrop of California's ocean and canyons, Weider created a heroic, cinematic, and indelible image of the pumped-up male body—and he sold it with great success. Arnold Schwarzenegger saw it in Austria and dedicated his life to looking the same way. Lou Ferrigno saw it in Brooklyn and did likewise. "That got our attention," says Ferrigno. "Everyone knew that to be the best, you had to come to California and be a part of Gold's Gym."

Though Weider did much to publicize the benefits of training with weights, he wasn't the first to do so. Bob Hoffman, a weightlifter, had been publishing a revolutionary fitness magazine called *Strength and Health* since the mid-1930s. Hoffman's agenda was very different from Weider's. He wanted the world to know that weightlifting (explosive lifts such as the clean and jerk and the snatch, as seen in the Olympics) was the best route to athleticism and power. (Hoffman, like the rest of the planet, believed that bodybuilding was self-indulgent and, worse, nonfunctional.) However, Weider shrewdly observed that bodybuilding training, with its attention to building each muscle group evenly and minimizing body fat, would ultimately have broader appeal. "I figured that for every one guy who

MUSCLE MEMORIES

The men who forged iron history look back with golden-era gossip

COED SHOWERS. According to bodybuilder Ric Drasin (visit him at ricdrasin.com), there were three women training at Gold's in the early '70s—but they weren't exactly gym bunnies. "We showered together sometimes, but you wouldn't want to check them out," he says. "One was 6'2" with purple hair, and she handed me the soap."

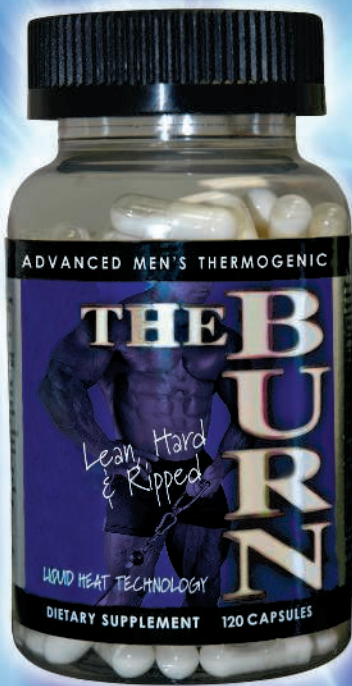
ARNOLD IS A GIRLY MAN. The world's biggest action star can't throw a punch. "I saw Arnold get in a fight once," says Drasin. "Some bodybuilder came into Gold's, and they went at it—they were scratching each other like women. Neither one of them knew how to fight. . . . Arnold's a great guy, though."

THE TUNA-AND-WATER DIET. Think low-carb granola bars are bad? That's kids' stuff. Dave Draper's tuna-and-water diet was the most hardcore cutting plan of the day. "I still use it today," says Draper. "It helps you put your disciplines in place."

JAKE THE SNAKE. Jake Steinfeld, creator of the Body-by-Jake equipment line, trained at Gold's, but not for long. "Joe Gold kicked him out of the gym for dropping weights," says Drasin. "He was a loudmouth."

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wanted to lift heavy weights, there were at least 10 guys who wanted a beautiful body," says Weider. "When World War II began, the Army took the weightlifters, and weightlifting competition was dead. That's when bodybuilding really began to rise."

Though Hoffman continued to fight Weider and his bodybuilders, his magazine lost momentum. By the 1960s, Weider's publications ruled the muscle media. Fitness aficionados no longer cared if you could lift 500 pounds—but it was particularly

THE GOLDEN AGE

Muscle historians and fans refer to the 1960s and '70s as the golden age of bodybuilding. It was the era of Arnold, bodybuilding's all-time most charismatic and visible champion, and *Pumping Iron*, the docudrama that introduced muscle mass to the masses. The physiques were awe-inspiring yet conceivably attainable, and as with Muscle Beach before it, men trained to be part of a brotherhood—not for a purse. But mostly it was a helluva fun time to be alive.



important that you *looked* like you could. The magazines' focus on aesthetic body development buried the more attainable athletic look and functionality that ruled the day at Muscle Beach. Back then, physique contests were only one part of the festivities, and they usually included some exhibition of strength and flexibility in addition to muscle posing. Now bodybuilders would only be required to flex onstage. The quest for gargantuan size and sharper definition led to the popularity of then-legal anabolic steroids, and the overall health of the participants became more questionable. "I was a natural bodybuilder for 15 years," says Bill Howard. "But then I couldn't get into a contest. We'd lie and say to each other that we weren't using steroids, but then we'd look at each other in the gym and think, 'That son of a bitch is, so I'm going to, too!'"

Muscle Beach had a resurrection of sorts in the Venice Beach "pit," a small, city-run club overlooking the Pacific where bodybuilders could train outdoors again. While the serious training was still done a few blocks away at Gold's, the pit allowed the bodybuilders to show off for crowds and work on their suntans. "They would save one for the sun," says Howard. "After their main workout, they'd go out and do a little extra work at the pit, showboat a little, and have fun with the public." The lifters particularly enjoyed attention from the ladies. "We didn't really need pickup lines," says Ferrigno. "The women felt an instant attraction—it was like having a bear for a boyfriend. They felt protected and safe with us."

Though L.A. today is notorious for its gridlock traffic, that wasn't so in the 1970s. "It was easy to get

around,” says Drasin, and even beach-front property wasn’t out of a young man’s price range. “I paid \$225 a month for two bedrooms, two baths, and a sundeck,” he recalls. “That’s probably \$2,000 today.” Bodybuilding food wasn’t hard to come by, either. The men had their fill at places like Zucky’s Deli and German’s, “where you could get a seven-egg omelet with ham and cheese for a buck,” says Drasin. Afterward, they would drive to the House of Pies for dessert. And if you think they needed a lot of cardio to burn it off, think again. “We used to get lean by using higher repetitions and a strict diet,” says Howard. “If you were doing eight to 10 reps normally, you switched to 14 to 18 to get lean and hard.”

MUSCLE GOES MAINSTREAM

Ultimately, the golden age outgrew itself. The fame that *Pumping Iron*, the Weider magazines, and Arnold Schwarz-

enegger brought to the area led to a mass influx of would-be bodybuilders and businessmen looking to capitalize on the craze. “All the guys who had made bodybuilding what it was had gotten older and moved on,” says Drasin. “New personalities began coming in. The training changed—there were more steroids. And there started to be other places to train, too. It wasn’t only in California anymore.”

But the more bodybuilding and fitness spanned the globe, the more people became nostalgic for their Muscle Beach and Venice origins. Today, these gyms and beaches are viewed by competitive bodybuilders and fitness enthusiasts alike as sacred ground, giving “the mecca of bodybuilding” a more literal meaning. In 1991, Howard finally saw his beloved Muscle Beach restored when the city of Venice allowed him to refurbish and reopen the weight pit under the official name of “Muscle Beach.”

He now hosts contests and shows there that are akin to what he first saw 50 years ago in Santa Monica.

Weight training today is bigger than ever, and it’s the No. 1 fitness activity among regular folks. Nutritional-supplement sales are a multibillion-dollar industry, and diet books sell millions. “Every diet you see—whether it’s the Zone or anything else—is all the same,” says Drasin. “Everything is a bodybuilder diet. It’s all about high protein and low carbs to build muscle and lose fat.” Even Gold’s Gym has worldwide appeal, with gyms in 26 countries and a membership that numbers more than three million. Ferrigno, who still trains in Venice, has come to grips with the expansion while also carrying the torch of yesteryear. “Nowadays, we have actors and rock stars and regular people working out here,” he says. “But everybody respects the bodybuilders because this is our home. We got here first.” **MF**

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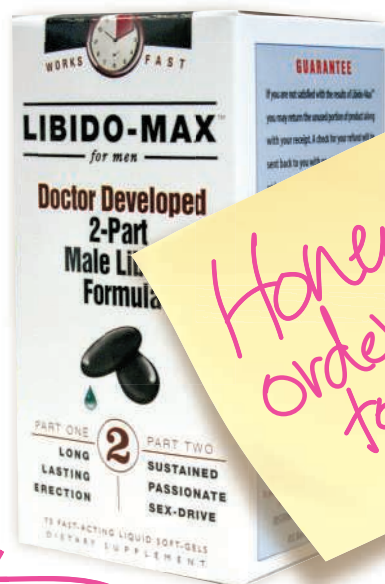
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