

The Myth of the Superhuman Contest Consideration for Real People

By
Deitrich D. Benjamin
First Edition 1994

When I first decided to do a fitness contest it was simply for the experience. I did not know much about fancy dieting techniques or guidelines for being more presentable. I was a ballet student/entertainer who was looking for an outlet. In 1994, I did my first contest, I saw a flier at the gym and called the number. As someone who never competed I did not know this particular contest was a qualifying contest for a National Competition to be viewed on ESPN. With my nutrition background in dentistry I knew I would have to increase my protein intake and intensify my resistance training but that was about the extent of my knowledge of contest diet and preparation. I even ate ham steaks (sodium) during the last week before the contest (they were in the freezer). I cut carbohydrates the week before but when I added them back in I added (simple carbohydrates) teaspoons of jam (sugar). With that I still looked good for my first contest. After eight contests I now know why. I have learned what my body needs to look full and cut at the same time. All in all with my daughter's choreography and my exuberance I placed second in that first contest. I thought I worked hard that first time but little did I know what future contests would demand. When it came time to do Nationals, six months later, I had spoken to just enough people to become really confused. I added complex carbohydrates (brown rice) and drank vinegar to remove subcutaneous water in the hope of showing my definition and vascularity. I worked out the week before the show, a big no, no as I would learn and my muscles went flat. I looked cut but skinny not particularly like a fit, healthy woman. I also made the mistake of redesigning my routine and changing my music even though my first show had done so well. Needless to say I had a disappointing outcome while playing with some of the top fitness competitors in the country. I learned a lot.

Now as I embark on my eleventh contest I have some insights that might assist others who are considering competition for the first time. First of all, what made me think I could do a contest? Well, I am a driven person. As a successful business owner, I am goal and result oriented. I am aware enough to recognize my limitations. My skill level for a fitness contest has its limitations as I have no gymnastic background so my routine had to be based on strength, flexibility and endurance using dance and yoga moves. I questioned was it practical to compete against individuals who excelled in gymnastics and aerobics? I decided yes. Then I considered bodybuilding contests, maybe that is where I should play. I questioned whether my body was healthy enough to withstand the stringent diet required to develop muscle and stay lean? Meals every two hours with no less than one gram of protein per body pound can be taxing on the healthiest system. The intensity of resistance training in building that muscle puts even the strongest bones and joints at risk. After answering these questions I realized that if I wanted it bad enough I could do it. I would use common sense, drinking plenty of water each day (four gallons), budget time for recuperation and add a daily stretching regimen to my already full training and rehearsal schedule. I might never be a star but I would rather play the game than sit home. Personal satisfaction is what I was after. Below are a few considerations to be reviewed before deciding to do your first contest. Realize this commitment does affect every area of your life.

Personal and Professional. There is no question about it, doing a contest puts a strain on your relationships. You will need the agreement of your employer and your family, asking that they be flexible during this time. If your occupation requires you to put in 12 hour days how will you find the time and energy to do all that is necessary? Does your job already make demands on you physically? Will you become a victim of over-training and fatigue? Can you take time off from work should you find the demands of your workout routine cutting into your work performance? How will your family and friends react to six to ten weeks of intensity? Juggling workout schedules, sticking to rigid eating patterns may leave your family and friends shortchanged. You can be guaranteed that this will not enhance your social life.

Budget: Money is a necessary tool. Where will the money come to enable you to hire the necessary professionals you need to reach your goal? Like opening a business, you will need to create a budget. You will need to budget for supplements and foods, needed to build muscle (six to eight chicken breasts a day does add up). Will your show be local or will have travel expenses, will you go alone or will you take a family member to support you? Will you need costuming or simply a custom made posing suit (these usually fit in a #10 envelope)? Will you have to take extra time off from work, affecting your income? What will it cost you to hire the necessary professionals to assist you in reaching your goals? Do you have associates that are willing to sponsor you, perhaps your employer, a health club, a health food store, or even your physician or chiropractor? Do you feel comfortable asking someone to sponsor you? What does a sponsor want for their investment? Having a sponsor does increase the pressure on you to deliver a high score.

Professional Assistance: Do you have access to professionals to assist you in training, choreography, music taping, posing and stage presentation. Whether you are doing Fitness or Bodybuilding you will need to choreograph a routine. Some of us can do this ourselves. Yet posing is not something that is easy to teach oneself. Does the trainer you choose understand the concept of good posing technique and can they communicate this concept? Having done a contest themselves does not always qualify them to teach or train you.

You will need to be brutally honest with yourself as to the extent of your abilities. When selecting a fitness or aerobic competition know specific elements that are required. Do you have time to learn or build the strength needed to execute the required elements? Make a list of your skills and grade your level of proficiency. Do this before you meet with a choreographer; this will give him/her a base to work from. When selecting music either for fitness or bodybuilding, use music that moves you. The music should let your personality come through and touch your judges as well as your audience. Always have a professional tape made, two for the contest and one rehearsal tape for daily use. Your rehearsal tape should have the music repeat three times for ease in rehearsal. If you can get through your routine three times in a row you are in contest ready shape.

This is not something that can wait until three weeks before the contest. Draw a timeline and stick by it, even basics such as cutting back on water should have a date. From the get go you should have a vision of how you see yourself on stage and who will help you get there.

Time: I mentioned this briefly above but let's look at some specifics. What can you afford on a weekly basis? Do you have 20 hours a week to spend in the gym? Can you schedule A.M. cardio, resistance training, rehearsal/posing time and a second cardio session? It requires daily planning, not in just getting to the gym. Budget time for cooking, cleaning and recuperation. Will you be asking your family members to do the cooking and cleaning? Be certain they are able to devote the time do not make assumptions. Recuperation is of utmost importance. Rest is essential in developing muscle, strength and maintaining a healthy mental attitude. Increased protein and water makes a full nights sleep a gift; trips to the restroom are frequent and interrupt a solid night's rest.

Post Contest Syndrome: You didn't think I would miss an opportunity to identify yet another syndrome did you? There are a few feelings, which might surface after a contest. Intellectually speaking we say "just doing the contest makes you a winner" but do we own that emotion. Should you walk off stage without a trophy you can't help but feel just a little bit like a "loser". All the time and effort you have invested may seem like a waste. Even when you walk off with a trophy you may experience some disappointment. I have seven trophies, one plaque and some dried roses and I still have experienced empty feelings after a contest. It is true in life we learn from each experience. We hope every experience adds to our life and does not take away from our life. So should it be with any contest you do.

In addition to the psychological side, there is a physical challenge. Let us assume you had no eating disorders or body image problems before the contest. Soon the realization that you cannot be in contest shape for the rest of your life becomes apparent. You will need to go back to your normal eating times and workout schedule. Show your body you appreciate the work it has done by getting plenty of rest and eat a balanced diet. When you begin to eat a balance diet and I mean, carbohydrates, protein and fat your body's

shape and composition may change. That six pack you were so proud of may be covered with water as you begin to add carbohydrates to your diet.

Although you are continuing a healthy lifestyle your personal self-image may change. Just knowing this does help but perhaps this reminder will enable you to keep your attitude in tact. Keep doing reality checks. Healthy body, healthy attitude is the bottomline.

With all these things taken into consideration do you think you have what it takes to do a contest? If it is what you want, you can do it. It is a most fulfilling experience and as one fellow competitor said, " Once I got on stage I didn't want to leave." It is the time to show your "stuff", you have worked hard. At this point you will know your strengths and weaknesses. You will have exhibited the willpower needed. I use willpower loosely. For myself it has always been having a vision. Once I had established that vision I let nothing get in my way. Once you have visualized yourself on stage when it comes time to cheat on your diet or hit the snooze button (and believe me that time will come) you will overcome any and all resistance.

In addition although you may have hired others to support you, and have family and friends in the audience, you know that ultimately you are the only one who can accomplish this goal. You will be the one standing on the stage being judged. Insecurities may come forth as you weigh in or as you meet other competitors. Comparing yourself to others does not serve you, remember there is no one like you. You have trained, managed your diet, and rehearsed and when you get on stage the world is yours and you will come off smiling. In closing I salute each and every person who challenges him/herself. Good luck to all that dare to play hard ball, it is truly worth it. Do your best and enjoy it.