

NATURAL BODYBUILDING



By Nathan Banq



As soon as you mention the word Bodybuilding, the countdown has begun. It's only a matter of time until the conversation diverts to the subject of steroids.

The IFBB (International Federation of Bodybuilding and Fitness) is Bodybuilding's equivalent to Football's FIFA (Federation Internationale de Football Association) or Track and Field's World Athletics (formerly the IAAF). The aforementioned are all governing bodies for their respective sports. Athletes competing in these organizations are generally among the best in the world and hold professional status.

Where Bodybuilding differs to most professional sports is the fact that the IFBB doesn't test its competitors for performance-enhancing drugs.

Just how wide-spread PED use is, will most likely never become public information. Nevertheless, from Boxing to Gymnastics, Athletics to Cycling, Swimming, American Football and pretty much any other sport you can name, failed drug tests are a fairly common occurrence. With that being said, the end result of a cyclist taking EPO (increasing red blood cell production for improved endurance) is a lot less "in your face" than a bodybuilder injecting HGH (Human Growth Hormone) until their biceps are larger than that of a cyclist's quadriceps.

In my humble opinion, this is a major contributing factor as to why Bodybuilding doesn't benefit from the same sponsorships and endorsements prominent in other sports. It likely also plays a part in the general public's perception that muscles and drugs must go hand in hand. I mean "if they're

allowed to take them then, of course, they all take them" right?

Wrong! There are numerous drug tested federations where Natural Bodybuilders compete on a level playing field. Of course, a "Natty" is also eligible to compete in a non-tested federation (and some do).

As a Lifetime Natural I'm probably not the best source of information on the subject of steroids, but here's what I do know. An Enhanced athlete is likely to take a number of drugs to:

- increase muscle protein synthesis
- increase metabolic rate
- burn body fat
- train harder and recover faster
- remove subcutaneous water
- make skin visibly thinner
- make muscle tissue visibly harder

I'm sure that's not a conclusive list but it should serve its purpose as a reference.

Many will disagree, but in my opinion, both Natural and Enhanced athletes are perusing the same goal in the same sport by essentially doing the same things in regard to nutrition and training. There are, however, a few key areas where a different approach becomes necessary for a Natty. Let's

take a closer look:

Training Intensity - The Same

Whether you're Natural or Enhanced if you want your body to grow you need to progressively overload the stimulus. The human body is resilient, you must push it past its limits forcing it to overcompensate in response. For hypertrophy, a rep range of 8 - 15 is a good place to start.

5 or fewer reps will mainly increase strength as your central nervous systems learns to cope with the extreme load. 20 or more reps is technically classed as training for muscular endurance, although there is an exception to this rule. Techniques such as drop sets, cluster sets, and negative reps are ways of increasing intensity without increasing the overall load.

Training Frequency - The Same

Some studies show that although elevated by resistance exercise, muscle protein synthesis can return to baseline in as little as 24 hours in trained athletes. PED's enhance protein synthesis (thus inhibiting protein degradation). A popular way that some Natty's attempt to replicate this effect is by training full body 5 x per week. Unfortunately, we don't grow in the gym. What we do in the gym is cause

trauma to muscle fibres through high-intensity training, but they can't grow back thicker and larger unless we give them ample time to rest and recover.

Both Natural and Enhanced athletes can benefit from training their stronger body parts a minimum of 1 - 2 times per week and their lagging body parts a maximum of 2 - 3 times per week.

Off-Season Diet - Different

Many bodybuilders bulk during their off-season (eat in a caloric surplus) then cut during contest prep (eat in a caloric deficit). When you eat in a large surplus for a sustained period of time, you not only gain muscle mass but also excess body fat. As a Natural, our two protocols for cutting subcutaneous fat are reducing caloric intake and increasing energy expenditure.

While in a deficit, although the body prefers to use carbohydrate and/or fat for energy, if these macronutrients aren't available in abundance it will happily utilise protein as an energy source. You will literally catabolise your hard-earned muscle tissue in order to get rid of the unnecessary body fat that you gained.

We've all seen people bulk through the winter only to look exactly the same (or smaller than when they started) by the following summer. Enhanced





athletes have means of avoiding this scenario as detailed in the following section.

Getting Shredded - Different

You're deep in a deficit and cardio is high but you're no longer able to lose weight or drop body fat! This nightmare scenario is caused by metabolic adaptation. As a survival mechanism, the human body will lower its basal metabolic rate in order to stay alive when food is scarce. At this point, the Enhanced athlete has tools at their disposal to ramp up their metabolism and hence continue burning calories. The natural athlete has no such options, but a good coach will know how to effectively break these plateaus through manipulation of key macronutrient groups. Timing is crucial here.

Muscle Mass - Different

As a generalisation, the maximum amount of muscle mass attainable by an Enhanced athlete surpasses that attainable by a Natural. That's not to say that everyone who takes

steroids will by default get bigger than everyone who doesn't. Only that with all things being equal (genetics, training and nutrition) the Enhanced athlete has a significant advantage.

While I would say it's unrealistic to expect to win your Pro Card in the Men's Open Class as a Natural, I do believe it's possible to be competitive in Men's Physique (and possibly even Classic Physique).

The FFMI (Fat-Free Mass Index) further supports the notion of the Enhanced athlete's superiority in this area. The scale correlates muscle mass to weight and height then calculates a numerical score. The scale can be interpreted in different ways but essentially, a score of 25 - 26 is generally considered to be the natural limit where the individual would have near perfect genetics for muscle building. Scores higher than 26 are deemed suspicious whereas scores of 28 and above are categorised as having a very high likelihood of steroid use. It's worth noting however that while based on research, the FFMI is

still only theoretical.

In summary, taking steroids will allow an athlete to get bigger, stronger and leaner in a shorter amount of time. There are, however, a multitude of health risks involved with going down this route, and the speed at which the strength gains come will greatly increase susceptibility to injury while training; especially when performing compound movements.

At the same time, being Natural doesn't make you any nobler a human being. While it may hinder you from winning the Men's Open Class at Mr Olympia, with the introduction of Men's Physique and Classic Physique there has never been a better time to aspire to be a Lifetime Natural IFBB Professional Bodybuilder.

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