

Super Women in Bodybuilding

The history of bodybuilding, though hundreds of years in the making, has just a few pages dedicated to the role of women athletes. While relatively short in length, however, this chapter is rich in character and accomplishment.

Historically, bodybuilding was typically a male-dominated pastime, so women entered into the sport somewhat late. Despite their delayed introduction, these women quickly rose to the top and heartily overcame the sexist stamp that was placed on them when women's bodybuilding competitions first took place.

Californian athlete Lisa Lyon wrote the first chapter in the history of women in bodybuilding. Born in 1953, Ms. Lyon was a graduate of UCLA and a student of the Japanese martial art Kendo. At the time when Lyon was a budding bodybuilding enthusiast, she was encouraged to join a women's competition by premier bodybuilding promoter Arnold Schwarzenegger. He saw big potential in Lyon's small dancer's physique, and his vision paid off when Lisa Lyon took first place in the first women's bodybuilding championship.

The history of women in bodybuilding continued with Rachel McLish. This powerhouse was named champion of the first Miss Olympia bodybuilding women's competition, sponsored by the International Federation of Bodybuilders (IFBB). Considered by many to be the epitome of women in bodybuilding, McLish combined aesthetic good looks with sheer muscle. More than just an icon, this Texas-born athlete helped to define the sport of women's bodybuilding.

If McLish was the feminine embodiment of women in bodybuilding, Bev Francis presented the muscular extreme. This Australian shot putter-turned-bodybuilder co-starred with Rachel McLish in the movie "Pumping Iron II: The Women". Her incredible appearance and awesome muscular bulk incited both awe and shock in spectators at women's bodybuilding. The organizers and sponsors of women's bodybuilding competitions began to ask, "how much is too much"? Since Francis first hit the spotlight as a finalist in the 1986 Ms. Olympia competition, this question has continually created controversy within the sport of women's bodybuilding.

A new "less is more" trend in women's bodybuilding became apparent when, in 1991, the extremely muscular Francis was awarded the runner-up prize, placing second to the more slender athlete Lenda Murray. Following this victory, Ms. Murray went on to win eight more Ms. Olympia titles. Since her last victory in 2003, Lenda Murray continues to be hailed as one of the most popular and successful figures in the sport of women's bodybuilding.

Other important figures in the history of women in bodybuilding include the "Dutch Superwoman" Juliette Bergman, winner of the 2001 Ms. Olympia competition, and IFBB fitness professional competitor Mandy Blank. An leader in the new movement of slender bodybuilding women, Ms. Blank focuses on shaping the muscular body into an aesthetic form, rather than beefing it up to become hugely muscular. Monica Brant was another important figure in women's bodybuilding, winning the title of 1998 Fitness Miss Olympia. Canadian model Sharon Bruneau turned her attentions from the runway to the gym, becoming first a hardcore female bodybuilder, and then a fitness competitor.

Despite the efforts that these incredible women have undertaken, men continue to have a hand in the sport of women's bodybuilding. Many people, particularly men, hold a disapproval (or maybe a fear) of super muscular women. For this reason, there was a decrease in financial support of traditional bodybuilding competitions that promoted muscle mass, with more funds being designated to those featuring more slender physiques. The rather obvious sexist double standard this demonstrates has not halted the decline of the sport for women.

The history of women in bodybuilding, and modern sport in general, owes a great deal to the strength that these women have displayed. They have overcome obstacles to bring the sport to where it is today, allowing all women the opportunity to work hard and achieve their full potential.