

The Surprising History of Bodybuilding

Many of us associate the pioneers of bodybuilding with 20th century athletes like Charles Atlas. The history of the sport, in fact, reaches back hundreds of years.

The history of bodybuilding can be traced to the 12th century, where the first training techniques and nutrition regimes were developed in India. By the 16th century, bodybuilding had become a national pastime for people around the world. These archaic bodybuilding exercises were performed using dumbbells made of stone and wood, which planted the roots for modern weightlifting, as we know it today.

From the late 1800s to the early 1900s, bodybuilding became a widely popular commercial sport, particularly among the general public. During this period, the first national and international bodybuilding competitions took place in and around Europe.

In that era of bodybuilding, a fellow by the name of Eugene Sandow was a key figure in creating the sport that we know today. Called 'The Father of Modern Bodybuilding,' Sandow incessantly promoted his fitness and bodybuilding ideologies, and published one of the first bodybuilding magazines called Physical Culture. His persistence in endorsing bodybuilding led to the first official weightlifting competitions. The sport was first introduced as an Olympic game when it was featured as a main event in the 1896 Olympic Games in Athens, Greece. Five years later, Sandow was honored as one of the judges in a bodybuilding event that drew 2,000 spectators to the Royal Albert Hall in London.

In the 1920s, bodybuilding gained in popularity and became a very profitable industry. New muscular celebrities like Charles Atlas stepped into the spotlight, adding to the bodybuilding furor. Commercially manufactured dumbbells and barbells sold like hotcakes all over the world, while new developments in diet plans, exercise devices and bodybuilding strategies increased in volume every year.

The Golden Era of Bodybuilding

The sport of bodybuilding reached its "Golden Age" during the 1940s to the 1970s. This was the era of muscle beaches, movies featuring bodybuilders-turned actors like "Tarzan" and "Hercules", and new bodybuilding celebrities like Harold Zinkin, Joe Gold and the two-time Mr. America John Grimek. During that period, bodybuilding became formally separated from weightlifting. The basic ideology was finally solidified, with goals set on health, fitness, strength and aesthetic muscular building.

Since the mid-1960s, a new generation of professional bodybuilders has worked to promote the sport. As leader of this pack, Arnold Schwarzenegger used his talent, charisma and amazing physique to bring the popularity of bodybuilding to new heights. "Mr. Universe" Schwarzenegger transformed his body into the materialized version of what every bodybuilding fan strived to achieve. Who could have imagined at the time that he would one day become Governor of California?

Steroid Use

The darker side of this era saw the introduction of anabolic steroid use in professional bodybuilding and other competitive sports. These drugs tainted the competitive side of the sport, although the universal appeal for the core values of bodybuilding never changed.

Throughout the history of bodybuilding, the sport has evolved and changes have taken place. The basic premise, however, has not changed. Today, some 800 years after the sport was first introduced, athletes continue to work hard and play harder in an effort to be the best that they can be.