

Tuesday, July 21, 2015

Classic Bodybuilding: Sergio Oliva's Mass-Building Methods

The Legendary Mass-Building Methods and Workouts of "The Myth"—and the Story Behind Them



Sergio Oliva in the '80s

I've often written on this blog, and elsewhere, that I believe the greatest strength athlete/bodybuilder of all time was Marvin Eder. Of the truly "old-time" bodybuilders there were other greats, as well, but none that could match Eder for both sheer muscle and the most impressive strength feats of the age.

What I'm not sure of, however, is if I've ever mentioned who I think the greatest pure *bodybuilder* of all time was/is. By the title of this article, you've probably already guessed the answer: Sergio Oliva. At the time of his emergence, I think he had the greatest physique the bodybuilding world had ever seen—shapely muscles, huge legs (compared to other bodybuilders of the era), and definitely more mass than anyone else. His is a physique that still stands the test of time almost 50 years later.

History of "The Myth"

Oliva first won the Mr. Olympia contest in 1967, and then followed that up with two more consecutive wins in '68 and '69. In the '69 contest, he narrowly defeated Arnold Schwarzenegger, but then went on to lose both the '70 and '72 contest to Arnold. In my mind, the two wins by Arnold over Oliva were total and complete *bull*. In '70, Oliva looked just as good as he did the year before, and in '72, he was *absolutely massive*. The '72 Olympia was probably the biggest debacle that contest has ever seen—and it's seen more than its fair share, so that's saying something. To make matters even worse, Oliva wasn't allowed to compete in the '71 Olympia (by Joe Weider, who clearly wanted Shwarzenegger to win all these contests—he switched the '72 judges at the last minute). The reasoning, according to Weider, was because Oliva had competed in the 1971 NABBA Mr. Universe. The only problem is that Arnold had competed in the very same contest the year before, and *no one banned him*. So, in my mind, that means Sergio Oliva should have been the rightful champion of 6 straight Mr. Olympia contests. Hell, there's no telling how many he could have actually won if it wasn't for the contrived politics (and blatant racism) of Weider's organization.

For Oliva, unfortunately, the Mr. Olympia politics, and the racism he faced, were nothing new. He first really emerged on the scene at the 1965 AAU Mr. America contest, held in Los Angeles at the famed Embassy Auditorium. John Grimek—at the time probably the world's most famous bodybuilder—said he should have won that contest, but instead he lost to a far inferior Jerry Daniels (who, of course, no one reading this piece has heard of). In 1966, Sergio returned to the Mr. America with hopes of actually winning, but, unfortunately, he lost to his mentor Bob Gajda. He was thrilled for Gajda, who was his good friend, but even Gajda thought his own victory was a disgrace. Oliva switched over to the IFBB at the time, believing it was the only organization where he could get a fair shake, but even that only lasted so long.

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- Planet Muscle Magazine



Early Career

Sergio was born and raised in Cuba, and he got his start in Olympic weightlifting where he totaled almost 1,000 pounds in the Middle Heavyweight division (198 lbs) in (what were then) the 3 competitive lifts: the press, the snatch, and the clean and jerk. He spent his first 4 years of training using solely a weightlifting program.

In order to avoid the Communist regime that had taken over the country, Sergio defected from Cuba in 1962, where he settled in Chicago, and began working out at the Duncan YMCA, a legendary training facility for weightlifters and bodybuilders. There, he met the aforementioned Bob Gajda, who told him that he had the genetics to make it in the sport of bodybuilding. Apparently, he was skeptical at first—Olympic weightlifters didn't think much of bodybuilding at the time; I doubt they still do—but Gajda ultimately convinced him. Under Gajda's tutelage, he switched from building strength to building muscle. It was a decision that bodybuilding history should always be grateful for!



Sergio Oliva shows good technique here in the clean and jerk.

Sergio in his weightlifting days

Full-Body Workouts with PHA

Gajda was well known at the time for a full-body training system he had invented: Peripheral Heart Action training, or PHA for short. PHA was a system of what we might now call "circuit training" where the trainee picked as many as 6 exercises—one for each bodypart—and, without resting, performed 1 set of all exercises in succession. As the trainee advanced, he added more circuits, so that he would typically perform 10 circuits on any given training day.

Sergio actually thrived on this unconventional form of training, and continued with it for the first year and a half of his bodybuilding career. It stopped working at this time, and Sergio's bodyweight stalled at 200 pounds.

It was time for something new.

Sergio's Advanced Mass-Building Methods

Oliva studied the many and varied training methods of that era's bodybuilding stars. According to Gene Mozee, he was most influenced by the workouts and techniques of Dave Draper, Larry Scott, and Harold Poole, but he eventually settled upon his own unique methods that incorporated limited exercises per bodypart per workout combined with different rep ranges and, at times, some very heavy poundages.

Sergio's methods allowed him to reach a massive "in-contest-shape" 230 pounds by 1968. By then, he sported 21-inch arms, a 53-inch chest, 28-inch thighs, and 19-inch calves, all combined together with a 29-inch waist.

During this time, there were no big, lucrative money contracts for bodybuilding stars. In

Scott Abel

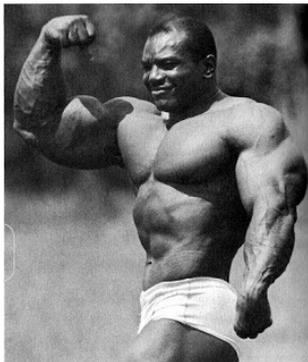
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The Masculine Heart

the '60s and '70s, he labored in a foundry all day, lifted for 2 and a half to 3 hour on training days, and would often take his wife out dancing once the training for the night was over. The man had obviously developed a massive work capacity in addition to massive muscles.



Showing off his massive arms!

Sergio Loved the Pump

Sergio loved incorporating a limited amount of exercises per bodypart, but sometimes performed up to 20 sets per exercise—he was definitely a bodybuilder who believed in “chasing the pump”, to use a term favored by many classic bodybuilders, and doing so with just one, or at the most two, exercises for whatever bodypart he was working.

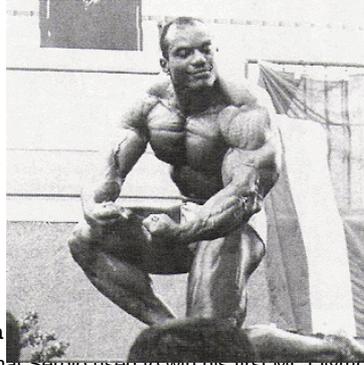
Here is what I had to say about him in a '97 issue of [IronMan](#) magazine entitled “Monster Pump”:

Oliva's favorite way to work out was with high sets and lots of reps. He often employed a form of rest/pause training, in which, for example, if he was working his chest, he'd do a set of bench presses for 6 to 8 reps, pause for a few breaths, perform another set, pause for a few more breaths, crank out another set and so on. That type of fast, localized training gave Oliva a tremendous pump and helped him build one of the most amazing physiques ever.

Sergio wouldn't finish any bodypart workout until he believed it was pumped to its absolute limit. Here, for instance, is what Greg Zulak had to say in an issue of [MuscleMag International](#) around the same time as my [IronMan](#) article:

After a particularly long and grueling workout that consisted of many sets of weighted dips, Sergio went to the change room to take off his sweat-soaked gym clothes and to take a shower. After someone helped him remove his sweatshirt (his arms were so pumped he could barely get them over his head), Sergio decided to do one more set of dips, so he headed back out to the gym floor to do them. After the set, he returned to the change room, removed his shoes and socks, and then went back out to the gym for one more set of dips. Then it was back to the change room. After removing his sweat pants, and wrapping a towel around his waist, he returned once again for one more set of dips. After this, he hit the showers, but a couple of times during the shower he put the towel back on and went back to the gym floor for more dips. After the shower, he dressed, but before leaving the gym to go home he performed yet another set of dips. Finally satisfied that his triceps and pecs were as pumped as they could be, only then did he go home.

From what Zulak had to say, it's also obvious that he was a fan of “instinctive” training. If he felt the necessity, then he did more, or less, than what he intended when planning his workout session.



The Myth's Mr. Olympia

Here is the program that Sergio used to win his first Mr. Olympia in 1967. He trained 5 days per week, Monday through Friday, and then took the weekends off. This was actually *less* training days than what a lot of the champions of his era performed, but his workouts were so demanding that he needed the two days' rest.

Monday and Thursday:

- Bench Presses: 135x10, 225x5, 315x5, 350x3, 375x3, 400x1, 380x max reps, 360x max reps. After this, he would perform "down-the-rack sets", dropping the weight by 20 pounds on each set, and performing the max number of reps he could until he got back down to 135.
- Behind-the-Neck Chins: 6x10 (performed between bench press sets as he worked up to 400 pounds)
- Front Chins: 14x10 (performed between bench press sets as he worked his way back down to 135 pounds)
- Upright Rows: 180x5x10
- Bent-Over Rows: 150x5x10

Tuesday and Friday:

- Situps: 5x20
- Calf-machine Raises: 200x5x50
- Dumbbell Curls: 70x5x15 (each arm) supersetted with:
- Standing Barbell Curls: 150x5x15
- Barbell Triceps Extensions: 150x5x10 supersetted with:
- One-arm Triceps Pressdowns: 90x5x15 (each arm)
- Barbell Preacher Curls: 100x5x10 supersetted with:
- Seated Triceps Presses: 100x5x10

Wednesday:

- Situps: 25x15 supersetted with:
- Twists x 2 minutes
- Leg Raises: 15x25
- Squats: Sergio performed these for 20 sets, using the same technique as the bench presses on Monday and Thursday.
- One-Leg Calf Raises: 200x20x15

Long Live The Myth

Sergio passed from this world into the next on November 12, 2012. Although he is no longer with us, his legend will live on, and for good reason—in my book, he was the best bodybuilder this world has ever seen.

Sources:

Moze, Gene. "Sergio Oliva's Myth-Building Training Secrets". [IronMan Magazine](#), June 1994

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Zulak, Greg. "Dips and Pushups for Big Pecs, Delts, and Triceps". [MuscleMag International](#), November 1995

Lamble, Mike. "Respect Sergio Oliva". [MuscleMag International](#), October 1998

Posted by C.S. Sloan at 8:40 PM 

Labels: "The Myth", 1972 Mr. Olympia, classic bodybuilders, mass workouts, Sergio Oliva, Sergio Oliva Mr. Olympia, Sergio Oliva training, Sergio Oliva's workout program

4 comments:



Jason Roberts July 23, 2015 at 11:15 AM

My training partner (and friend) off n on for about 5 years during the 90's was Ko Chandetka. He recently got his IFBB pro card as a Master's. He loved training in a similar fashion and we'd often do 1-2 exercises per bodyparts but around 20 sets total. He said it allowed him to "really get into the movement" and we'd do both heavy and light weight. Once when I was complaining about the lack of Flex inspired routines he asked me if id rather "have sex with prettiest girl I know for 3 hours or have an hour of sex with 3 mediocre looking girls for an hour each?" "...a crude analogy but I got his point.

Btw he trained with Rory Ledelmyer and Lee Priest and was VERY influenced by them.

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C.S. Sloan  July 27, 2015 at 9:06 PM

That's awesome, Jason. I'll have to check out Ko Chandetka—to be honest, I hadn't heard of him, but I must admit that I stopped following bodybuilding after the '90s.

I always loved the training of both Leidelmeyer and Priest. In fact, I have thought recently about posting some training tips from Leidelmeyer. I'm afraid he's kind of forgotten because (to my knowledge) he never got his pro card. Fantastic physique, though.

As for the training, I have always enjoyed minimal exercises for a lot of sets (whether power training or bodybuilding) over other forms of lifting.

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Jason Roberts July 29, 2015 at 1:53 AM

As I matter of fact, Ko and I trained with Lee Priest in Columbus in (I think 1998), if you ever wondered how accurate the muscle magazines are, in terms of how athletes train, we did arms and Lee did roughly 20 sets for both bis and tris all heavy as sh*t in the 6-8 rep range and nothing quite to failure.....

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Jade Graham February 21, 2017 at 3:12 PM

Then there was the diet portion of this book where Mr. Eaton explains the importance of protein. address

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