

Outward has moved! You can find [new stories here](#).

OUTWARD

EXPANDING THE LGBTQ
CONVERSATION

APRIL 7 2015 9:00 AM

Has Gay Panic Ruined Bodybuilding?

By Adam Ragusea



Branch Warren, left with his back to the camera, Justin Compton right facing front, and Cedric McMillan behind them at the 2015 Arnold Classic.

Photo by Dave Kotinsky/Getty Images

If you've ever seen a picture of a contemporary male professional bodybuilder and thought, "Dear lord, why would anyone want to look at that, much less look *like* that?" know that Arnold Schwarzenegger, of all people, agrees with you.

Yes, the man whose **brawn** took him from the tiny Austrian village of his birth to the heights of competitive bodybuilding, Hollywood stardom, and California politics thinks there's such a thing as *too much muscle*. He laid an epic burn on pro bodybuilding last month **during a Q&A** that followed the 2015 Arnold Classic—now the second-biggest bodybuilding competition of the year after the older Mr. Olympia (which Schwarzenegger won seven times back in his pro career).

Advertisement



“I was pissed off,” Schwarzenegger said of the judges’ decisions, which placed walking **beef charts Branch Warren** and **Justin Compton** above **Cedric McMillan**, who is known in typically euphemistic, desexualized bodybuilding-speak as a more “aesthetic” competitor. While McMillan is also hugely muscular by the standards of mere mortals, it’s not so extreme that he looks more like a tank than a Ken doll, as Warren does. McMillan’s competitive edge is the symmetry and balance of his body, the lines of which flow in a way that normal people might identify as “attractive.”

“The question is, ‘Whose body would I want to have?’ ” Schwarzenegger said, proposing what he believes *should* be the ultimate judging criterion but definitely isn’t. “I think that Cedric had such a beautiful body, he was so well-proportioned, that I think he should have placed higher than he did.”

Beautiful? Did he say beautiful?

It’s rare to hear anyone in the insecurely hyper-hetero world of contemporary bodybuilding describe a man’s body as *beautiful*, though that is ultimately what this “sport” is about. Competitors aren’t judged on their strength (that’s the domain of powerlifting, Olympic lifting, strongman competitions, etc.) but on the appearance of their muscular physiques. It’s a manly beauty pageant that calls itself a sport so the other boys won’t laugh at it.

Advertisement

Schwarzenegger, of course, has probably gotten more lady tail over the years than **Gene Simmons** and is therefore comfortable enough with his sexuality to look at bodybuilding for what it is—a combination performance and body art that’s all about transforming oneself into a living Michelangelo sculpture. Dance is athletic too, but that doesn’t make it a sport.

The Governor continued his rant, recalling the early bodybuilder and actor **Steve Reeves** from the generation before his own. “If you saw him at the beach, you’d say to yourself, ‘I would love to have this guy’s body. Wow, look at how beautiful this man looks.’ But that’s not what you can say about those guys today that win those competitions.”

Indeed, though Schwarzenegger himself is remembered by many in bodybuilding as the greatest of all time, if the Arnold we see in the 1977 documentary *Pumping Iron* showed up to an **IFBB** competition today, he likely wouldn’t make the top five. His chest and biceps were world-class by contemporary standards, but most other body parts would be regarded as too small, particularly his legs. The current reigning Mr. Olympia, **Phil Heath**, boasts thighs that are each wider around than his waist.

What the hell happened in a generation? In a word, drugs. In Schwarzenegger’s day, lots of pro bodybuilders took steroids, but in the ’90s, all kinds of other performance enhancers became common, notably human growth hormone, which 1992-97 Mr. Olympia **Dorian Yates** partially **credits** for his own **transformation** into a “mass monster,” as such competitors became known. (Bodybuilders’ use of these drugs is of varying levels of

legality, which is why the ubiquity of PEDs in the upper echelons of the “sport” is typically only acknowledged publicly by retired competitors, such as Yates. For the record, you also have to work out really hard to get that big; the drugs alone don’t do it.)

Advertisement

But with these new, huger muscles came an unexpected side effect: the **muscle gut**. The biggest guys have **big bellies**, even when they drop to painfully low body fat percentages for competition. They try to suck it in on stage, but the second they **relax** or turn their backs to the judges, *boom*, **there it is**.

So if the guys are so lean, what’s inside those **pregnant-looking** bellies? **Kuato** from *Total Recall*? Science has thus far had better things to study, so all we’re left with is what bodybuilders call “bro science.” One theory is that the insulin shots that some guys take to stimulate muscle growth also result in the retention of hard-to-lose visceral fat. Bodybuilders have to eat huge amounts of food, a meal every three hours or so, which leads to another theory: those heaps of muscle-building protein and carbs permanently stretch the abdominal wall. The theory I find most credible goes back to growth hormone—**real science** has shown that it makes *all* your tissues grow, your muscles, but also your internal organs, so maybe bodybuilders just have giant innards. Sexy, right?

“So many of those guys have their stomachs sticking out,” Schwarzenegger said in his recent tirade. “It used to be that you should have a V-shaped body. Now, I don’t know, it’s kind of like a bottle-shaped body.”

As someone who has dabbled in bodybuilding and followed the “sport” for years, I think there’s a reason why it and the bodybuilding-supplement-industrial-complex has grown in popularity and profitability while the physiques have strayed further from the general culture’s aesthetic ideal: It’s all about making straight dudes feel secure watching oiled men flex and pose in tiny skivvies.

Advertisement

Bodybuilding in Arnold’s day was undeniably intertwined with gay culture, and early muscle men like Reeves were gay icons. Now, no one but the most ardent muscle fetishist would want to have sex with the cartoon characters who place at Mr. Olympia or the Arnold Classic. They’ve gone from flesh-and-bone **Dauids** to circus freaks, and it’s a lot safer for an unenlightened meathead to idolize another man for his genetic and gym/drug/diet-fueled freakishness than his beauty.

Straight bodybuilding fans (and I remain one, don’t ask me why) have to do intense mental gymnastics to convince themselves they’re not watching male exotic dancing when they sit through a bodybuilder’s posing routine. That’s a hard thing to do when competitors are expected to turn their backs to the crowd, hike up the bottom of their “posing trunks” to expose their glutes, and show off the **striations** that occur there when one reaches near-fatal levels of leanness.

You can understand why props and extra clothes are forbidden at the Mr. Olympia, because when the competitor takes them off, it starts to look like a striptease.

Kai Greene, an enthusiastic user of **costumes** in his non-competitive appearances and easily big-time bodybuilding’s most artistic and creative star, has noticeably reined in his once elaborate, **dancelike** posing routines in recent years, as he’s become a contender for the top title. I suspect this is so he doesn’t risk alienating the core judging and fan constituency that is still queasy about his long-ago appearance in a homoerotic film in which he made love to a **grapefruit**. (So incredibly NSFW.)

Top Comment

"It's a manly beauty pageant that calls itself a sport so the other boys won't laugh at it." I laughed [More...](#)

-Fyva Prold

126
Comments

 **Join In**

To my surprise, however, Schwarzenegger's remarks have been met with near-universal acclaim in the bodybuilding community. While head IFBB judge Jim Manion has been notably silent (Schwarzenegger urged fans to "call out on him" for pushing judging standards that reward maximum freakishness), **prominent voices** in the fan community are calling for judging reforms that would bring back the "aesthetic" physiques.

"If you reward the right guys, then everyone will start training to have a beautiful body again," Schwarzenegger said, again feeling no need to append his comments with the "no homo" qualifier that is so often used on bodybuilding message boards.

What the muscle mag/pill/powder-buying masses will have to ask themselves is: Will you be comfortable that, bro?

Adam Ragusea is a journalist in residence and visiting assistant professor at Mercer University's Center for Collaborative Journalism.



FOLLOW SLATE



SLATE ON [IPHONE](#) [ANDROID](#) [KINDLE](#)

[REPRINTS](#)

[ADVERTISE WITH US](#)

[ABOUT US](#)
[CONTACT US](#)
[WORK WITH US](#)
[USER AGREEMENT](#)
[PRIVACY POLICY](#)
[FAQ](#)
[FEEDBACK](#)
[CORRECTIONS](#)

SLATEGROUP

Slate is published by The Slate Group, a Graham Holdings Company. All contents © 2018 The Slate Group LLC. All rights reserved.

[Support our tireless, fearless, yet somehow fun-to-read coverage of Trump's America.](#)

