

Starting Strength

Jim Steel's Crazy 63-day Odyssey: Part 1

"You wouldn't believe what I found hidden underneath forty pounds of bodyfat!"

by

Marty Gallagher

Jim Steel is no bodybuilder. In fact, Steel has little use for bodybuilders and their preening peacock affectations. Oh sure, as a young boy Jim used to idolize Arnold – but to hear Steel tell it now, those days are long gone. “Back in my younger days the bodybuilders of that era, the 1970s and 1980s, looked athletic and most of the best bodybuilders (Robbie, Franco, Arnold, Sergio) had in fact been fantastic athletes in other sports before becoming bodybuilders. Nowadays the IFBB professional bodybuilders are so bloated and swollen that they don't look like they could possibly do anything remotely athletic.” Jim Steel is the longtime strength coach at the University of Pennsylvania, and is famous for training collegiate athletes; he is also famous for speaking his mind and not suffering fools lightly. Jim Steel is Old School all the way and defiant about it. “I have been accused of being stuck in the 80s.” he related. “I take that as a compliment.”

Six months ago about the furthest thing from this premature curmudgeon's mind was the idea of entering a bodybuilding competition. It was far more likely that he would embark on a deadlift specialization program in order to push his current 700-pound deadlift maximum, up to 750 on his eventual way to 800. Those of us who knew Steel found it hard to imagine he would ever enter a bodybuilding competition, yet that is exactly what he did: two months and three days after commencing preparation, he walked onstage in front of a packed house at the 2012 NPC South Beach Bodybuilding Classic in Miami Beach. With just nine short weeks – 63 days – to prepare, Steel characteristically threw caution to the wind and leapt in feet first: he lost forty pounds of bodyfat while adding five pounds of muscle, and he did it in two months. He showed up in Miami wearing tiny trunks (“a banana hammock”), sporting a fake tan, and placed 5th in his class, an astounding feat for a 45-year old with no real bodybuilding experience.

Steel had not even entered a local show as a preparatory warm-up when he strode onstage and posed to the defiant tale told in the song *Walk* by Pantera. Taking one's time, entering local shows before tackling national competitions, would be logical and sensible, whereas Jim Steel is impulsive and creative. In a surreal turn of events, he followed the preparatory process through to the end without a single misstep, flew to Miami, oiled up, posed to music in front of a packed auditorium and performed flawlessly. The audience loved Steel, the judges loved Steel, and Steel actually made the final onstage pose-down. Steel's impulsive adventure had paid off. It likely should have blown up in his face.

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The NPC, the National Physique Committee, is the “NCAA Division II” of competitive bodybuilding. The NPC hosts the best amateur bodybuilders in the world. High-grade NPC shows are used as vehicles by amateurs to turn professional – win at a major NPC event and you get to become a card-carrying member of the IFBB, the most prestigious, exclusive and exalted of all professional bodybuilding organizations. For Steel to take 5th in a major NPC competition as a rookie in his first ever serious bodybuilding competition was one hell of a feat. It speaks volumes about Steel's steel willpower and to the amount of pure muscle his Old School primal methods have bestowed upon him over the past thirty years.

Jim and I talked periodically as he bulled his way through this process; he was funny as hell at the end. A week before the show he said over the phone, “You wouldn't believe what I found hidden underneath forty pounds of bodyfat.” There are a lot of Old School hardcore power men that pack a ton of muscle, however their impressive muscle size usually lies hidden beneath a thick coat of obscuring bodyfat. Jim fell into that category and would likely have stayed fat and happy had not life and circumstance and timing intervened and inspired him to take a wild, impulsive leap into the weird and whacked-out “sport” of competitive bodybuilding.

Say what you will about bodybuilding, the participants are hands-down the world's finest and most effective dieters. Go to any local-yokel bodybuilding event held in your very own neighborhood and you will see a dozen bodybuilders possessing sub 10% bodyfat. Thirty years ago this knowledge (how to get ripped) was tightly held by a few members of an elite bodybuilding inner circle. Nowadays the procedures used to attain a sub 10% bodyfat percentile are widely known and widely used. Anyone can lose a mountain of bodyfat in a relatively short period if they have the discipline and tenacity to stick to it through the requisite 60, 90 or 120-day timeframe.

To reduce bodyfat, bodybuilders religiously follow a highly defined set of principles and procedures: multiple nutritional and training strategies are invoked and pursued simultaneously; these are tweaked and altered as the bodybuilder moves through the preparatory timeframe. The bodybuilder seeking to get shredded follows these specific guidelines to the nth degree: how best to eat, how best to weight train, how best to weave in the copious cardio without becoming over-trained, ad infinitum. The modern competitive bodybuilder also makes expert use of targeted nutritional supplementation.

When all these elements are balanced, spun, woven, and executed with the requisite tenacity and adherence, muscle is built while bodyfat is mobilized, oxidized and removed. It's as simple as that. And it can happen really fast – assuming you lock down every tiny aspect of the bodybuilding matrix fully, completely and immediately. To understand the “Principles of the Process” is one thing – to implement and adhere to these unbending, rigid procedures for 60, 90 or 120 days is another matter entirely. Jim used iron willpower to smash his way across the goal line. He purposefully put himself on the spot; he purposefully subjected himself to a quick-trigger timeline.

He had 63 days to get ready. If he bobbed or fumbled a single time during the process, he would fail, and risk being laughed off the stage at the Miami show. This has happened before: NPC competitors that show up out-of-shape get booed. It's a regular “Gong Show” and Jim Steel was determined not to embarrass himself. Jim recounted an ancient bodybuilding experience. “I had actually entered one bodybuilding competition as a teenager – that was thirty years ago. I was going to enter another bodybuilding competition in 2001. My wife, then my girlfriend, decided to do a bodybuilding show. So I trained with her and I dieted down with her and I lost down from 255 to 211. My intention was to do the show with her.

“One day (and I remember this so clearly) I was out walking my dog and I thought, ‘Damn, this bodybuilding shit it so stupid! Why am I doing this bodybuilding thing? This is NOT me!’ I had

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bought the tiny little trunks and everything and when I looked at myself in the mirror in the trunks I felt so silly and I thought I looked like shit. So I went out and bought a bag of Barbecue Fritos and some Oreos and I went back up to 268 pounds real quick and started powerlifting and started having a blast!" But it gnawed on Jim that he didn't finish out that show in 2001. "It ate at me that I quit. It has eaten at me ever since."

The years flew and by and Steel's bodyweight went up and down, depending on what, if anything, he was training for at the time. "I have been as high as 312 pounds and at that weight I was a miserable fat ass. I was pretty strong, but that is no way to live. At 300 pounds you can't breathe. Moving is a problem. Everything you do is a monumental chore." When Jim Steel began seriously contemplating entering a bodybuilding competition he was weighing just a biscuit over 250. Jim is thick-boned and stands 5'9"; his skeletal structure always put me in mind of Bill Pearl. His frame is built for power and muscle.

First, Jim had to get his head screwed on straight. "The funny thing was, at the start of the process, I was a little delusional. I thought, 'Okay, I am starting off really well, 250 pounds is a really good, nice lean bodyweight for me!' Then reality hit. I start thinking, 5 foot 9 and 250 is fat dude! I had deadlifted 700 pretty easily in July at this 250 bodyweight, so I felt strong and I felt I was on a physical roll. I felt that if I could, on the spur of the moment, shift gears and devote 60 perfect days to this impulsive bodybuilding effort, that I could actually get my bodyweight down and show some of the muscles I knew I had.

"Knowing myself really well, I knew that I couldn't pick a show that was too far off or I would find some way to bail out, at some point. I would come up with some really good reason as to why I needed to quit and I would let myself off the hook." Jim went on the NPC website and found a show in Florida in December: The South Beach Classic. This show is a big damn deal and Steel could not have picked a worse show for a stone-cold beginner like himself. He would have been smart to find a local bodybuilding show with a lesser title and less pressure and less topflight competition. But Steel, if anything, is adventurous and his motivation is usually in direct proportion to the outrageousness of whatever crazed challenge he has invented for himself.

While he might maintain his motivation and concentration while training and dieting for "Mr. Colossus," to be held at his local high school gym in six months in front of fifty people, he would damn sure maintain his motivation and concentration for the next 60 days in order to avoid utter and complete public humiliation at a major show. Jim Steel would stand essentially naked in front of an auditorium full of people, and if he was fat and out of shape, if he pranced around and girly-posed in front of a packed auditorium that would include family and friends, he would be booed and publicly embarrassed. He could not half-ass the process and show up fat. No sir – if Steel committed to this insane idea, he was all in. His task would be literally Herculean: he would compete in a huge NPC show in a bodybuilding hotbed locale, he would have half the time he needed to prepare, and he had zero experience posing to music in front of a huge throng of rabid, savage bodybuilding fans. It was a recipe for disaster.

The South Beach Classic is Big Time – so Big Time that it was being held in conjunction with the IFBB Master's Olympia contest. "If I wanted to be competitive in this particular contest," Jim related, "I knew would have to get my body into the finest condition of my entire life." From a logical and realistic perspective, Jim was starting off way behind the proverbial eight-ball: he was a 45-year old man with zero competitive bodybuilding experience. Suddenly, on a whim, he decides to compete in one of the premier amateur bodybuilding competitions in the country. He has 60 days to prepare. Top amateurs will usually take 120.

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On October 3rd, 2012, Jim pulled the trigger and began preparation for the South Beach Classic. “I had a lot of hard-earned bodyfat to contend with; years of accumulated build up. I had loose skin around the waist and pecs from being 312 pounds. I had loose skin from so much losing and gaining, up and down, so many times.” Jim knew he would have to have a good plan, and for the plan he called upon bodybuilding senior statesman and preparation genius Rich Salke, Ph.D. Jim had known Rich, a national-level bodybuilder in the 80s and 90s, for twenty years. “I knew that I needed Rich to oversee this thing and to monitor me as it unfolded. Rich is an absolute master at getting off bodyfat – the methods are severe and effective.”

Steel was under no illusions about the pain that would accompany this birthing process as a lean, ripped man emerged from the depths of a thick, big man. “I knew I would have to suffer to get into shape. I had suffered before. But I had never suffered when I had so much responsibility in my life. Before, I basically worried about myself. Now I had kids and a job and a wife and bills and I was going way down in calories and way up in activity – all the while still doing what I needed to do in life. Nobody gives a damn if you are training for a bodybuilding show. Not your kids, not your work. So you get your job done. Your deciding to train for something is your choice, and you don't make it anybody else's problem.”

Jim committed, and now time was his enemy: he had to lock down every single aspect of the bodybuilding matrix immediately, or else he would run out of time. Dorian Yates once said he was “addicted to the process,” and not so much to the actual bodybuilding “shows,” which Yates felt were “a bit of a bother.” Jim Steel had a similar attitude. For Steel this journey was all about the process – the training and the perfect eating in the weeks leading up to the show. For Steel, he'd just as soon dispense with the show part. Most bodybuilders live for The Show and the chance to strut and preen. Amongst competitive bodybuilders there are a disproportional number of adulation junkies. Go figure.

Steel had his own thoughts. “Bodybuilding is a strange, strange activity. It has that narcissistic aspect that I detest. In the end you stand onstage in a Speedo – a banana hammock, and pose muscles sprayed in Pam while wearing a fake tan. It's weird, it's odd. But I didn't care about that part. I cared about the ‘getting there,’ the challenge of it. I chose to ignore that show stuff. I focused on the training and the dieting. I didn't think about standing onstage that much.

“I had gone to watch a bodybuilding show a few years back, and it turned me off completely. It was so weird that I even stopped flexing my muscles for my sons. This particular contest turned me off in a big way: the strangeness of the painted-on tans, the guys with ELS – Exaggerated Lat Syndrome, the vanity exhibited onstage and



Jim Steel defiantly displays the final finished product: onstage at Miami. *Photograph courtesy of John Hawley, www.musclepapa.com.*

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by the idiots in the audience. Moron bodybuilder 'wannabes' walking around the lobby and in the auditorium wearing ultra-tight clothes, flexing and strutting. It made me cringe. That experience turned me off to the entire bodybuilding subculture – not that I'd ever been deep into it to begin with. I was not and will never be a bodybuilder – however what I wanted from bodybuilding was the opportunity to strip fat off my body using their proven, yet extreme, procedures. The 'show' would be used as a timeline, a goal and a threat: without the show (knowing myself) and without this looming deadline and the threat of complete catastrophic embarrassment, I would find a way to quit.”

Next: nuts and bolt dieting: how total allegiance to “the matrix” caused Steel to shed fat fast.

Marty Gallagher has been a national and world champion masters powerlifter and is widely considered one of the best writers in the iron game. Since 1978 he has written over 1000 articles published in a dozen publications. He has authored more than 100 articles for *Muscle & Fitness* magazine and produced 230 weekly [live online](#) columns for the Washington Post. Gallagher has coached some of the biggest names in powerlifting and witnessed some of the greatest strength feats of the last half century. If you like his style pick up a copy of his masterwork, [The Purposeful Primitive](#).

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