

Five-time *IRON MAN*
Pro Champion.

Yesterday & Today

Flex Wheeler Reminisces and Reflects On His Bodybuilding Career and the Current State of the Sport

by Rod Labbe

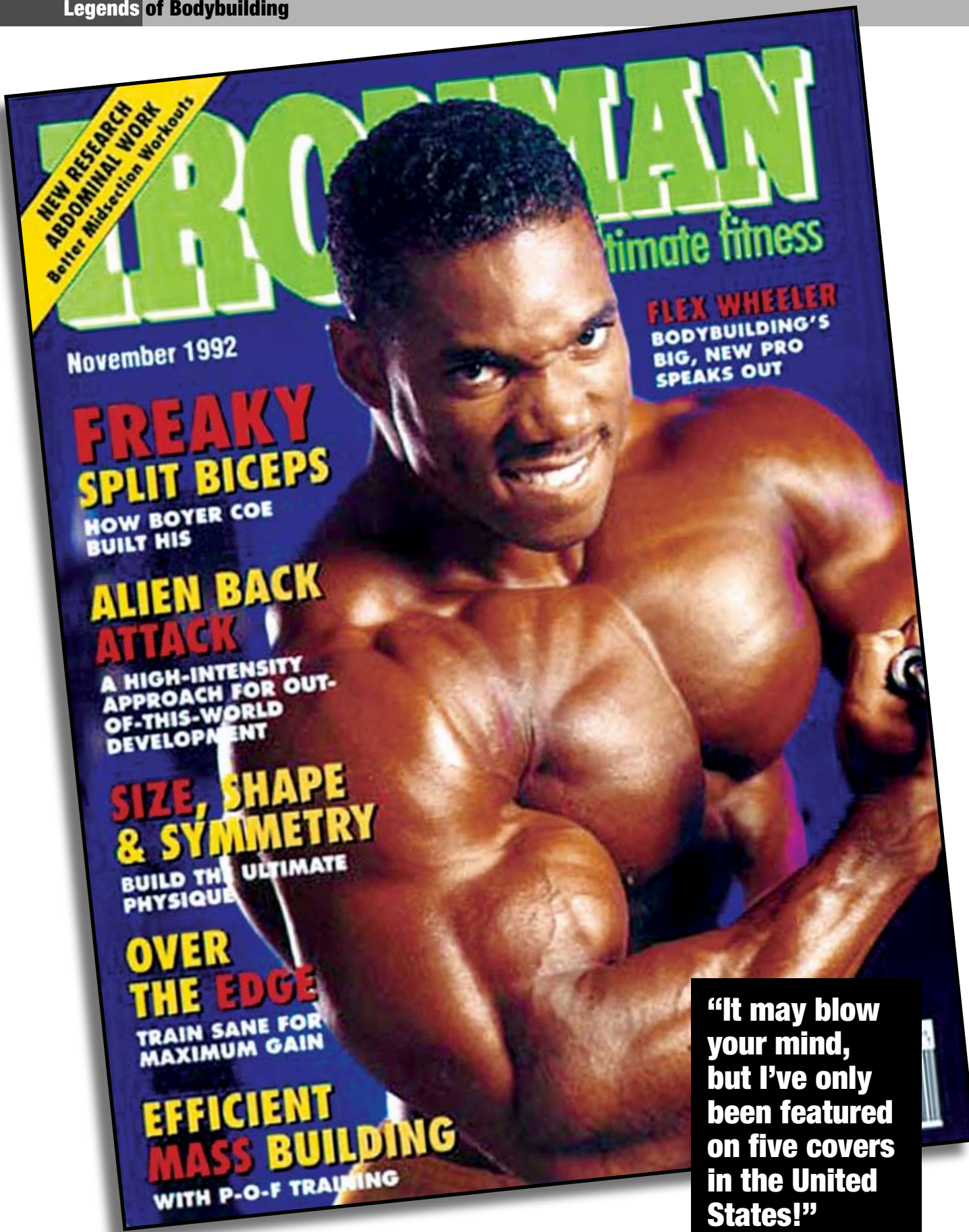
Dang it! Just when gears mesh and every duck is lined up, Murphy's Law comes along to yank the very comfortable rug out from beneath your feet. That's what went down in 2002, right after I'd landed a career-defining assignment: profiling Flex Wheeler. Flex had just completed an outstanding run as one of modern bodybuilding's greatest competitors. No longer contracted to Weider, he stood at a career (and lifestyle) crossroads. What would follow next? An autobiography? Movies? TV? His own line of nutritional supplements?

Tape recorder on, computer keyboard smokin', I listened as Flex described struggles past and present and the mysterious new horizon that lay before him. He hoped it offered a more rewarding existence, for he had finally conquered his demons, personal and professional.

We conversed for hours that day and planned one more session. Then, suddenly, his cell phone number no longer worked, and my follow-up e-mails were bounced back as "undeliverable." Uh-oh! I stored "Flex 2002" on my hard drive and sketched a mental note: maybe someday.

Someday came three years later. In 2005 Flex launched a Web site, and I dropped him a line. A little updating here, some tweaking there, and we produced an account of an extraordinary journey of self.

It's worth every bit of the wait.



Flex Wheeler: Yesterday 2002

RL: Bodybuilding, early '90s. Flex Wheeler hits the scene running, and fans can't get enough. But do any of them see inside your heart? Just who is Ken "Flex" Wheeler?

FW: The Flex of 1993 is a bittersweet memory. This is my first interview since rediscovering myself, and I'm glad it's for *IRON MAN*'s Legends.

Here's how everything started: When I was in the ninth grade, I began working out with my brother, Darnell, and our friend Mike Garza. We lifted weights in Mike's backyard after school and moved up to a real gym in Fresno called Dina's. Mike and I went at it seriously, but Darnell wasn't so dedicated. [Laughs] Someone told me about a bodybuilding show, the AAU Mr. Fresno, and Jeff Lawson said I should compete. Me? No way! Why would I want to do a bodybuilding contest? I'd seen probably two or three muscle mags in my entire life!

RL: If competition wasn't the game, what did bodybuilding mean to you?

FW: A way to slap muscle on my skinny bones. I never, ever thought about competing. Strutting around onstage half naked made no sense. Who would want to look at my body? I could barely stand to look at it myself!

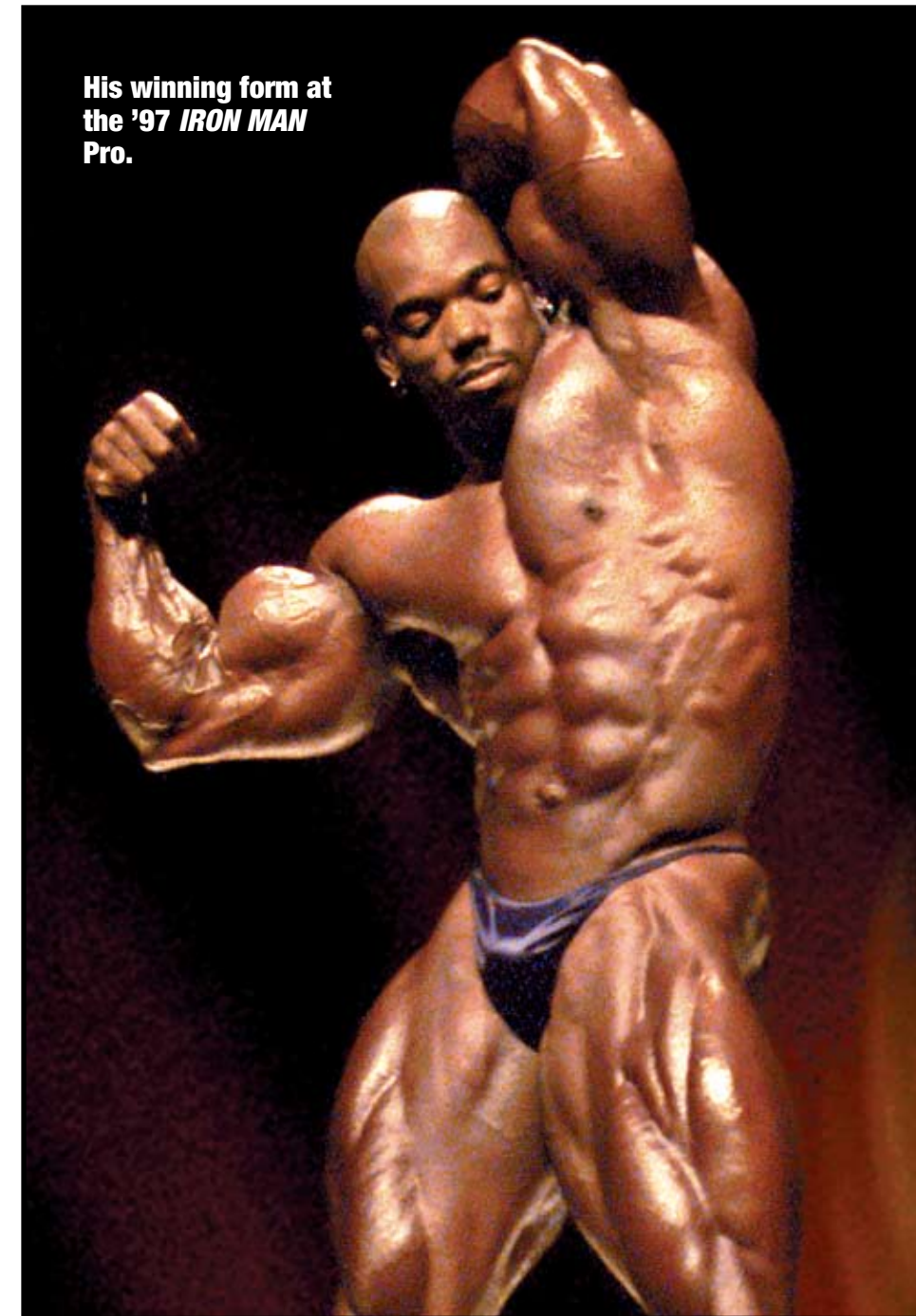
RL: You signed up, though.

FW: Yeah, yeah. When you're 15 and everybody's talking potential and genetics, it puts stars in your eyes. I had no idea where it would lead, but I did know my life up till then hadn't been so hot.

RL: Fifteen is young. How did your routine go?

FW: What routine? [Laughs] I basically imitated the other bodybuilders. I wore my burgundy underwear, and they weren't even new! Ha! Can you imagine posing like that in front of dozens of people? Oh, God.

His winning form at the '97 IRON MAN Pro.



RL: Something obviously clicked. You competed again the next year.

FW: Sounds trite, but I just wanted to be a good athlete. There was a bodybuilding competition between schools. I entered and won best abs and got hammered on by just about everybody.

RL: You weren't discouraged by the criticism?

FW: No, I enjoyed lifting too much. Jeff claimed if I ever stopped chasing girls, I'd have a respectable career as a bodybuilder. [Laughs] He even offered to train me.

RL: And that led to your collaboration with Jeff?

FW: Yes, it did. I went to Fitness Plus and took him up on his offer. I switched from the AAU to the NPC. A big (continued on page 222)



Aesthetic mass. Second place at the '98 Mr. Olympia, behind Ronnie Coleman.

Flex Wheeler's Pro Record

- '93 IRONMAN Pro, 1st
- '93 Arnold Classic, 1st
- '93 Grand Prix Germany, 1st
- '93 Mr. Olympia, 2nd
- '93 Grand Prix England, 2nd
- '95 Florida Pro, 1st
- '95 IRONMAN Pro, 1st
- '95 Arnold Classic, 2nd
- '95 Mr. Olympia, 8th
- '95 Grand Prix Spain, 5th
- '96 IRONMAN Pro, 1st
- '96 Arnold Classic, 2nd
- '96 Toronto Pro, 2nd
- '96 Florida Pro, 1st
- '96 Night of Champions, 1st
- '96 Mr. Olympia, 4th
- '97 IRONMAN Pro, 1st
- '97 Arnold Classic, 1st
- '97 San Jose Pro, 1st
- '98 IRONMAN Pro, 1st
- '98 Arnold Classic, 1st
- '98 Mr. Olympia, 2nd
- '99 Mr. Olympia, 2nd
- '99 Joe Weider Pro World, 2nd
- '99 Grand Prix England, 2nd
- '00 IRONMAN Pro, 2nd
- '00 Arnold Classic, 1st
- '00 Grand Prix Hungary, 1st
- '00 Mr. Olympia, 3rd
- '02 Mr. Olympia, 7th
- '03 IRONMAN Pro, 3rd

*From GraphicMuscle.com

(continued from page 219) change! I was terrified—those guys were for real. No disrespect, but the NPC's caliber is so much higher. I did my first NPC show in 1988, the Russ Warner Classic. Won middleweights and lost the overall.

RL: Followed by a heavy-

weight win at the Governor's Cup.

FW: Yeah! I was 198 and a quarter, but I couldn't tell up from down. Heavyweight? Weight classes? Huh?

RL: In '89 you bagged the Mr. California title. How'd that feel?

FW: My honest reaction? It meant very little to me. After the California I went home, and everybody said, "Whoa, Flex, you're Mr. California; you're a star." I had no appreciation of what I'd accomplished. My ignorance was holding me back.

RL: Enter Jim Manion.

FW: Yes, Jim. We met, and he asked if I was natural. Natural? Sure, why not. Okay, I'm a natural, whatever! I didn't understand it had anything to do with drugs!

RL: Your publicity accelerated considerably in 1990.

FW: The year 1990 was both an important and disappointing year. I felt good going into the Junior Nationals, but second place hit me hard. I openly cried from the stage all the way to the elevator, sobbing like a baby. In those days, I did not handle defeat well.

RL: What was your next step?

FW: I collected my stuff and went home. As the experience sank in, I knew I'd have to keep going. I was training with Chris Cormier and Rico McClinton in L.A. Rico and I signed up for the AAU Teen-age Black America. We were the only two competing, and he was much bigger than me. I thought, Damn, Rico's gonna beat my butt and steal my trophy. But I beat him instead.

RL: How many AAU shows did you do?

FW: Let's see. I won 60 to 70 contests in AAU Fresno. I'd enter as many as I could in the same day and leave with five or six titles. That gave me a false sense of security because in the NPC it's very different.

RL: Okay, now we're up to '91 and the USA. Quite an ego slam for Chris Cormier.

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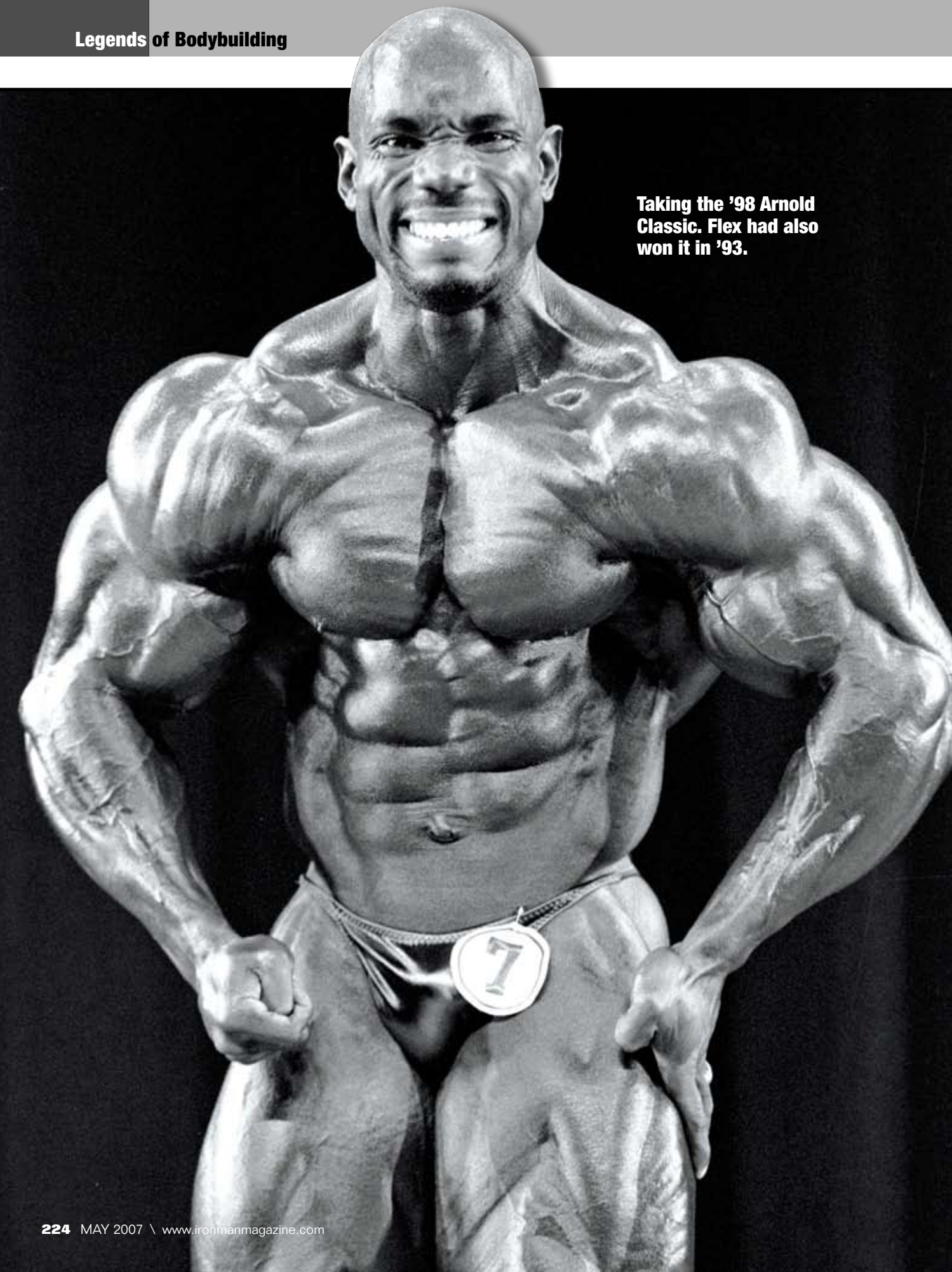
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Taking the '98 Arnold Classic. Flex had also won it in '93.

FW: I landed in second place, and Chris took fourth. He was pissed. [*Grins*] I kidded him onstage, whispering, "No way, bro, I shoulda won!"

RL: And your personal life: high or low?

FW: The lowest. It sucked! A bodybuilder's lifestyle can be quite expensive, what with gym memberships, nutrition and supplements and the everyday costs of living. Financially, my picture couldn't have been bleaker.

RL: None of it affected your love for lifting.

FW: No, I was very dedicated. I wanted to give my all to bodybuilding, to the personal achievement of designing a great physique—but I'd never have done it without help. We were training with Rico. Neal Spruce, my best buddy, taught me about nutrition. Cormier and Rico worked at the Roxbury as doormen, and they'd scrape up coin to feed me. Desperate, huh?

RL: Not so much desperate as eye-opening.

FW: It was a depressing time for me. I barely had enough cash to go to the Nationals. Neal went down and paid my bill without telling me. That's the kind of person he is. When I'd cry, he'd cry. People don't come along like that very often in life. When they do, cherish them.

RL: Were you having regrets?

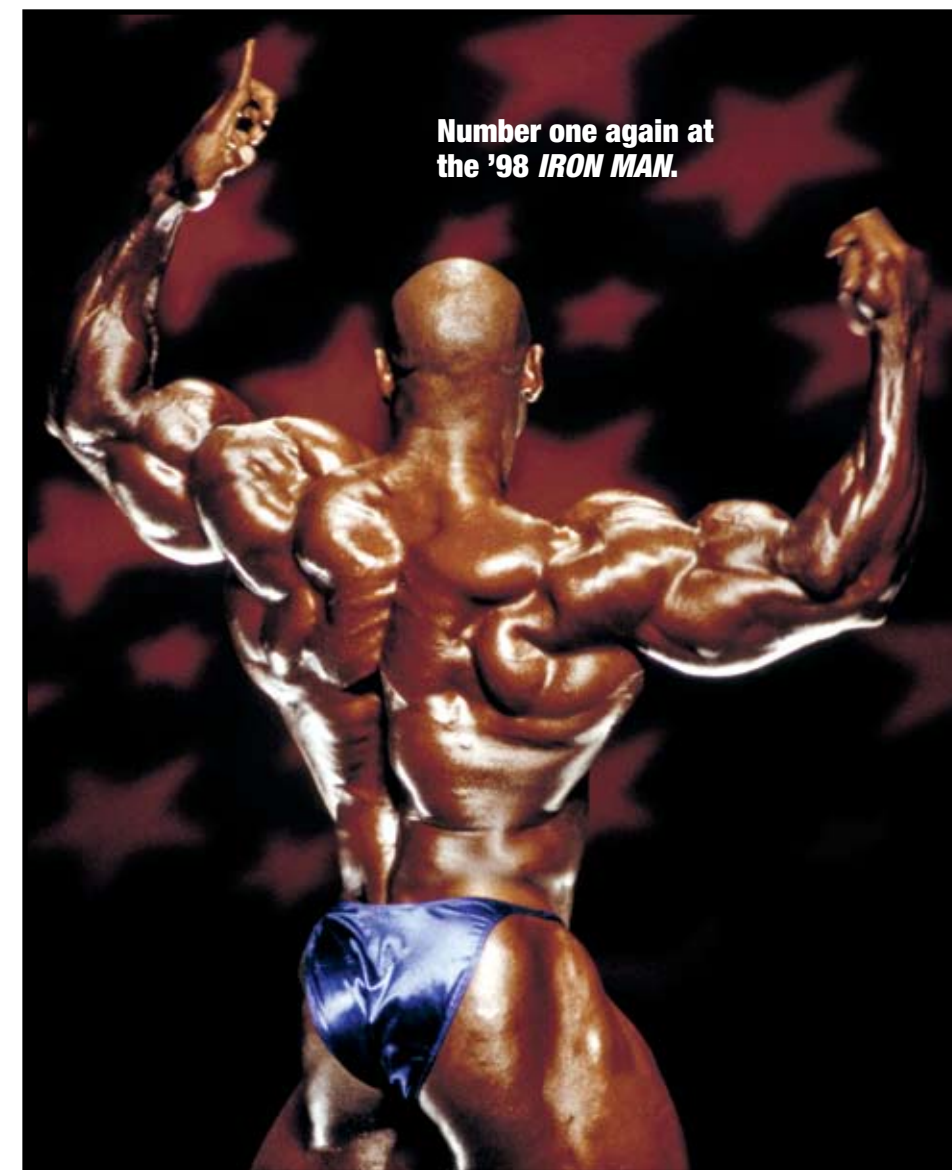
FW: About bodybuilding? No. But there's nothing worse than being broke. It forced me to rethink my priorities.

RL: Despite doubts and personal setbacks, your bodybuilding career was building major steam.

FW: True, but push came to shove. I decided to compete one more time, and if I didn't do well, I'd quit.

RL: The '92 USA spun things around, big time.

FW: Thank God! I went into the USA with Neal and Chris and Rico. I won the entire show, my class and the overall, with a perfect score. [Joe] Weider and Manion handed me the trophy, and Joe whispered in my ear,



Number one again at the '98 IRON MAN.

Many think Wheeler had the best back in bodybuilding—and it tapered to a tiny waist.

"Don't worry, I'll take care of you." A contract enabled me to pay for food, and I made my pro debut the following year.

RL: That sparked an impressive string of victories.

FW: The '93 IRONMAN Pro cinched it for me. Beating Vince Taylor and Lee Labrada instantly established me as the new threat.

RL: A scenario repeated at the '93 Arnold. You had momentum, my friend.

FW: [*Grins*] Winning does wonders for your self-esteem!

RL: Though you were a figure to be reckoned with, press coverage was wanting. Shouldn't there have been more, especially for a pro?

FW: You noticed that? [*Laughs*] Maybe I rubbed people the wrong way, but I've never had the kind of attention a champion deserves. It may blow your mind, but I've only been featured on five covers in the United States!

RL: Just five covers? Get out.

FW: No lie! *Flex* once, the *NPC News* twice, *IRONMAN* once, and Jeff Everson's magazine. That's pathetic! I won the *IRONMAN* Pro and Arnold Classic

Check out the improvement from '98 to 2000 (far right).



more times than anyone and was listed in the 2002 *Guinness Book of World Records*—21 titles, 27 shows. But you won't see me on covers!

[Shakes head] In '98 I swept every title I went after, including the Arnold, and I'm [Flex's] cover man only once. I used to get very angry about it, but I'm not bitter anymore.

RL: You copped the German Grand Prix in '93 too.

FW: With a perfect score. Lee [Haney] had retired, and I was pumped for the Olympia. I wanted to go in and wreak havoc!

RL: It turned out to be a rather historic scene.

FW: An unbelievable night. Second place behind Dorian Yates, a real upset! For the first time, an amateur making his pro debut was named the number-two bodybuilder in the world. Nobody had ever heard of such a thing.

RL: For a while you supplanted Shawn Ray as the Great Black Hope.

FW: It generated a tremendous response and more seminar work for me. But soon after, on June 9, 1994, I had a major car accident and snapped my neck in two places. In an instant my bodybuilding career came to a screeching halt. No earning ability, nothing. I was laid up for weeks.

RL: Didn't your Weider contract act as a safety net?

FW: So I thought. Unfortunately, the Weider group revoked my contract. They sent me a fax stating that since I couldn't uphold my endorsement performance, my contract had been terminated. I tried to reach Joe, but suddenly he wasn't available.

No one even called to check if I was dead or alive. I faxed them back, saying I'd compete in the '95 Arnold Classic and *IRONMAN* if they reinstated me.

RL: Which they did.

FW: Grudgingly. My contract was reinstated to only one-sixth of what it had been. I lost my home, my Harley, everything material. Neal Spruce came to my rescue again and let me and my girlfriend stay in his condo.

RL: Were you ever able to restore their faith in you?

FW: No, though I tried and tried. 1995 was the first year of the South Beach Invitational. I entered that and the *IRONMAN*, followed by the Olympia. I walked back onstage in February at the South Beach and won. But Joe thought very little of it. At the Olympia, I placed eighth; I was defeating guys who were healthy, but Joe could only look at how I'd been before my accident.

RL: How was your mood affected?

FW: It's sorely disappointing when people no longer have faith in you, but I was happy and satisfied with my performances. I'd just come out of a major injury and had almost lost my life. To go back onstage and make a decent showing—after only a few months—that's an accomplishment, in my opinion.

You know, I've always gotten the crappy end. Remember Dorian's famous biceps tear? The mags fell over themselves covering it. They called him a hero, a warrior. I recover from having my face literally ripped from the bone, and no one blinked!

RL: The mags were doing a major number on you.

FW: All the magazines were against me, and I'm still not sure why. One minute, you're in favor, the next, you're not.

RL: But you continued to make a very strong comeback.

FW: 1996 was an awesome year! I won the *IRONMAN* and came in second to Kevin Levrone at the Arnold Classic. At the Canada Invitational, Ronnie [Coleman] defeated me, and was I pissed! I couldn't wait to challenge him again.

RL: Man on a mission! You pummeled his ass at the Florida Pro Cup Invitational.

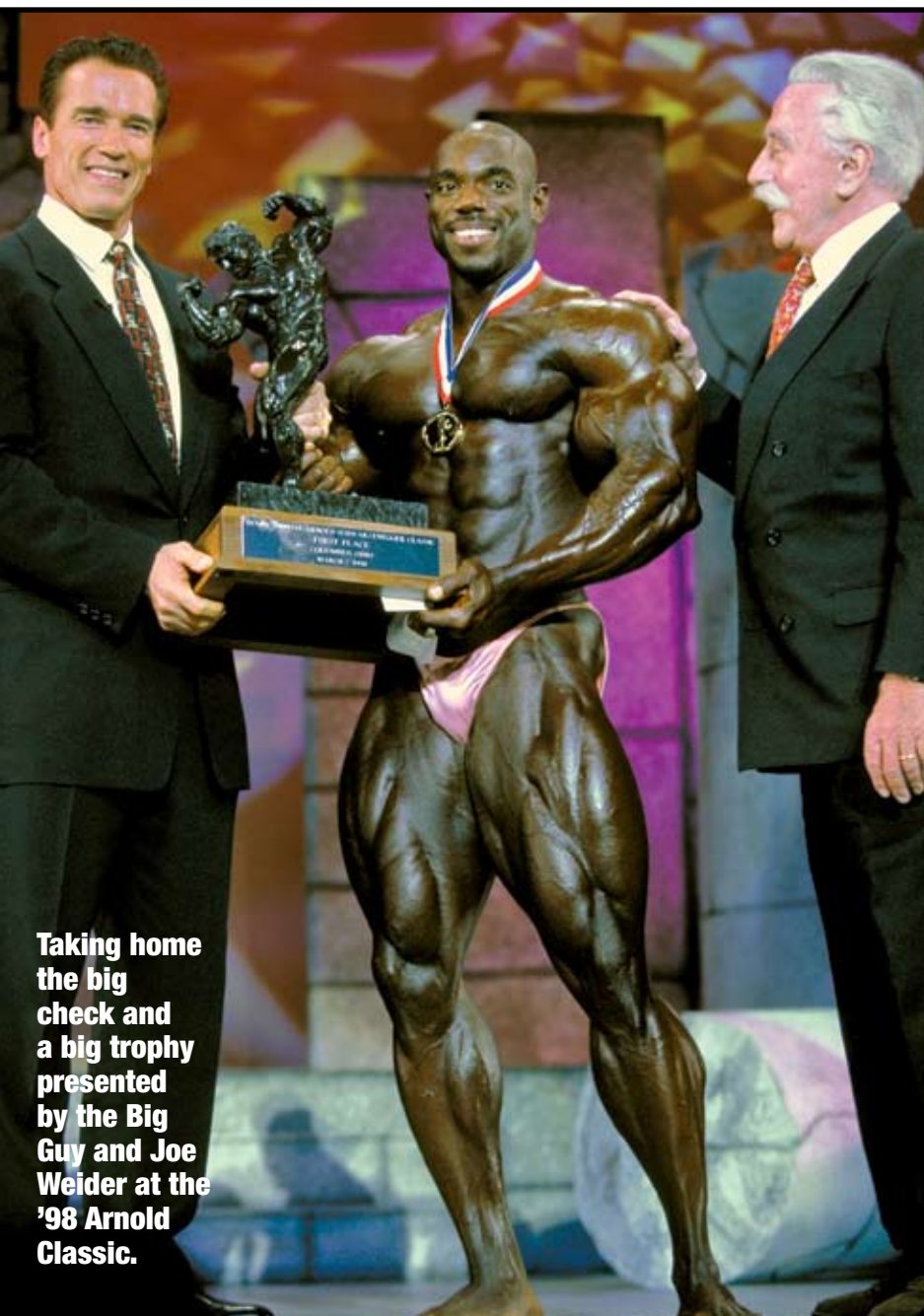
FW: It set up the Night of Champions, where I beat him a second time.

RL: That brought you once again to the Olympia stage.

FW: [Reflectively] Yeah, but I had a problem and only placed fourth. Another bitter pill to swallow.

The '00 *IRON MAN*, 2nd place behind Chris Cormier.





Taking home the big check and a big trophy presented by the Big Guy and Joe Weider at the '98 Arnold Classic.

RL: Do you ever look back on your bodybuilding career and say, "What a blast"?

FW: Emphatically, no! People ask me if I had a benchmark as a bodybuilder. You'd think it might be my first Olympia, but I was too young and didn't understand what it all meant. Now, I can reflect on my career from a more objective viewpoint and see the missed opportunities and situations handled badly.

RL: Sounds like you've grown up.

FW: Maturing should be a natural process, but I learned the hard way. Impetuousness and not thinking situations through have been the biggest downfalls of my life!

RL: You're describing human nature. By '97 you'd snagged the Arnold Classic three times, and I read that

Arnold himself was quite enamored of your abilities.

FW: At the '97 Arnold Classic he called me the best bodybuilder in history—in front of everyone at the seminar before the competition. I was flabbergasted.

RL: After the '98 Arnold you got your second wind.

FW: Dorian had retired, and I thought the '98 Olympia was gonna be mine. But Ronnie beat me by three points—three points, bro!

RL: Wasn't he behind you by, like, 17, at one point in the judging?

FW: Yeah. Somehow, he bridged that gap. And afterward, Weider offered him a contract!

RL: You've gone up against Coleman in several forums, not just the Olympia.

FW: At Joe Weider's Pro World, for one—held in England. Once again, I smacked up against reality; you just don't defeat Mr. Olympia. At the '99 Olympia, I was 17 pounds heavier, in better shape than ever before, and Ronnie still slammed it with a perfect score.

RL: What about 2000?

FW: The new millennium. I did the '00 IRONMAN, and Chris Cormier beat me. Damn! It hurt my feelings terribly.

RL: Only a temporary setback. You were able to exact sweet revenge at the Arnold!

FW: Oh, very sweet [Laughs]. I trounced him!

RL: The '00 Olympia saw your return to classic form.

FW: Man, you're fillin' me full of compliments. I like it. [Laughs] The year 2000 was a good one but one of my last. I did the Olympia and placed third behind Ronnie and Kevin [Levrone]. All the Weider guys were picking me off. [Shakes head] And then I became ill and had to go to the hospital. I was fighting colitis, along with other nasty stuff.

RL: At least it gave you time to reflect.

FW: Being laid up allows for lots of reflection time. Friends of mine—Rico, among them—reached out to me about becoming a Christian. Around November 2000 we started studying the Bible together. We studied every day. On June 28, 2001, I dedicated my life to God, and on the 29th I was baptized and quit taking steroids. Cold turkey.

RL: Completely clean?

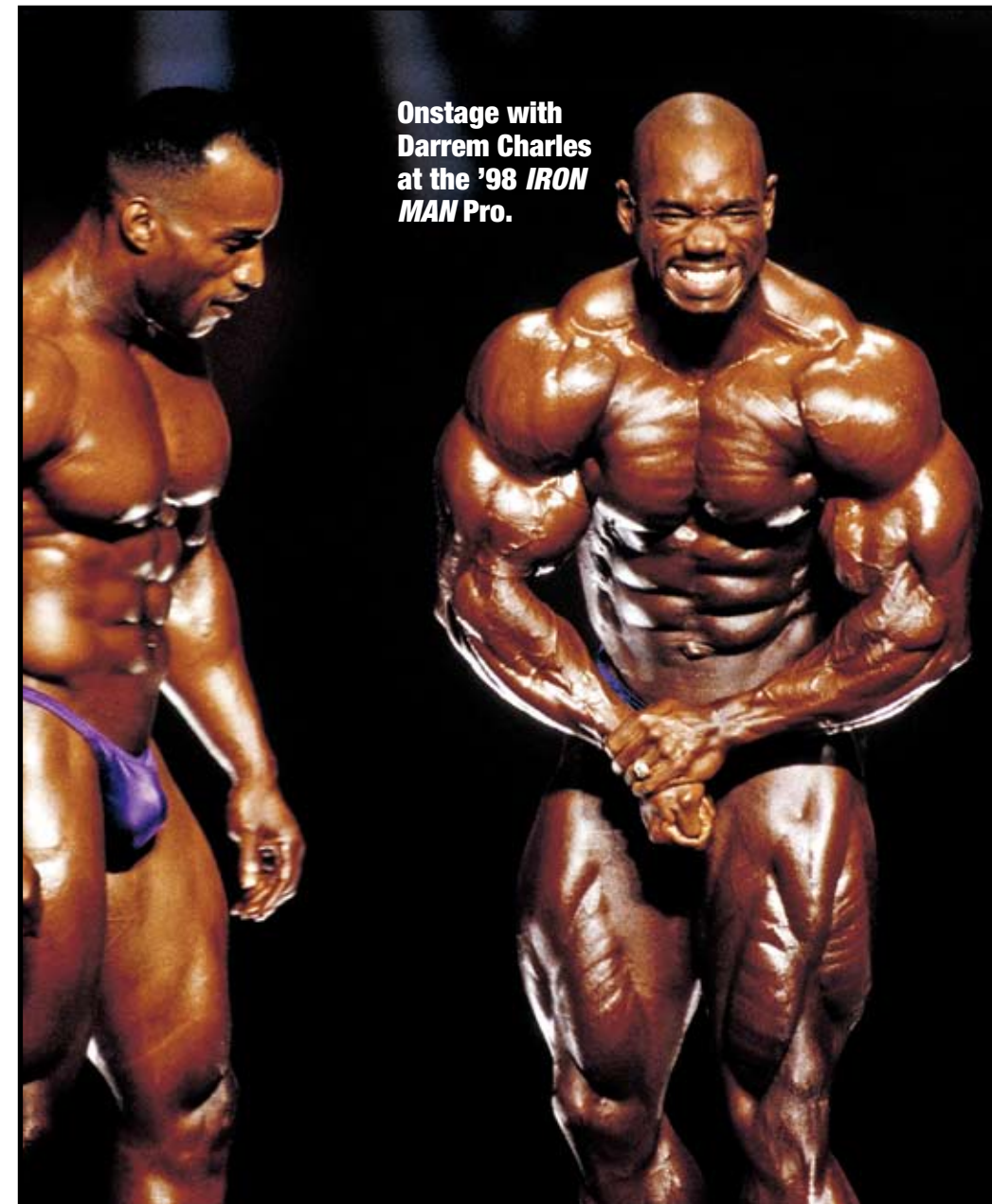
FW: Completely. I don't use anymore. I'm one of Christ's soldiers, and my biggest contest is against evil. I love speaking about it, at churches, gatherings, anywhere. There's also a book in my future; I recently signed a contract, and one of their key considerations is that I stop using.

RL: A book? Cool! Your life story?

FW: Yes, and it will be published in hardback. They gave me a great deal. Since September 2001 I've been unemployed. Bio-Chem released me, so I'm making ends meet by personal training.

RL: Okay, spill it. Is bodybuilding a lucrative sport? Can you actually earn a good living from it?

FW: The money situation's awful, and our exposure's wanting. People worldwide have no idea who Mr. Olympia is; we're not up to the standards of other sports. The cost of living is rising, all sports income is rising, but Weider contracts stay at a certain level or drop off.



Onstage with Darrem Charles at the '98 IRONMAN Pro.

RL: It's essential to formulate a backup plan.

FW: Definitely. My number-one piece of advice for any young bodybuilder: Do your homework. Educate yourself so you can't be misled or compromised because of a buck. Ask how far you can go with your body. When you come up with an answer, move on from there.

RL: Why do you think you went so far in bodybuilding, Flex?

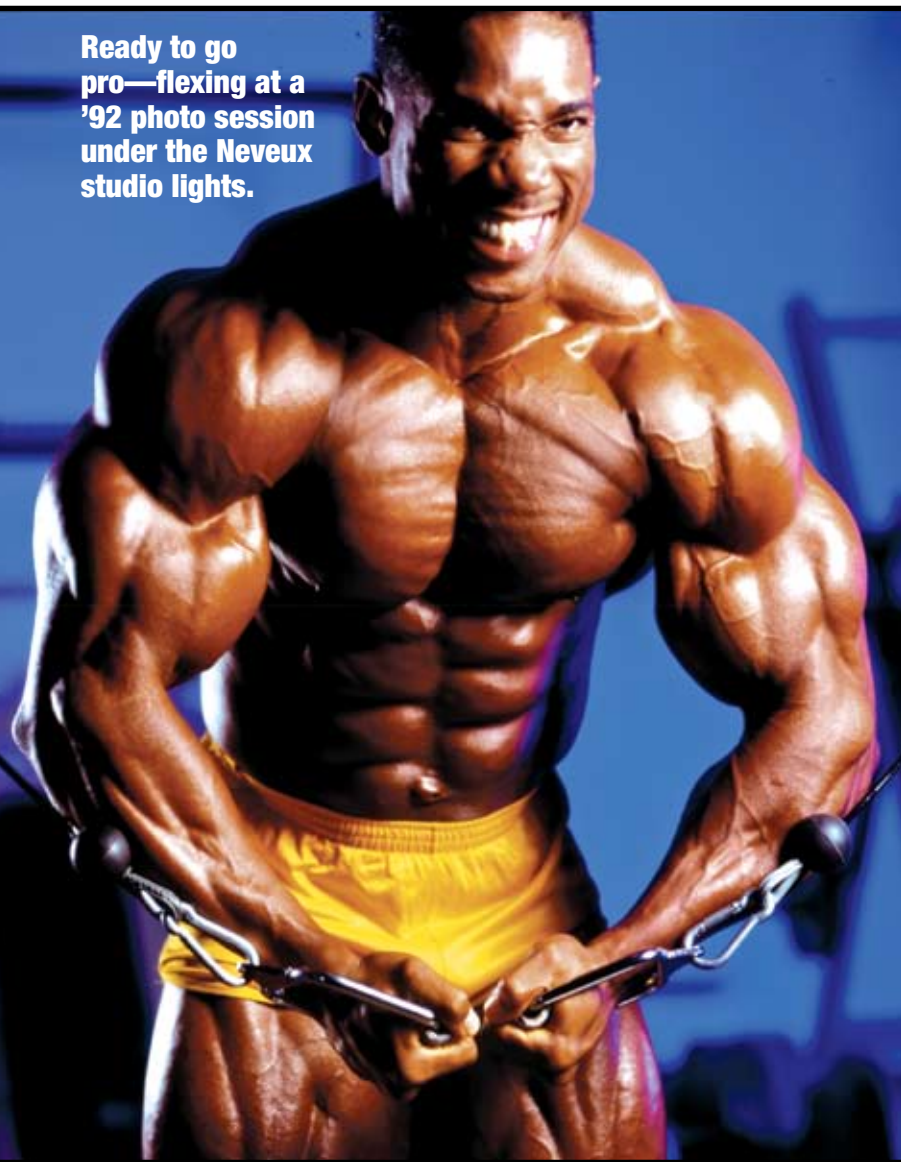
FW: I was blessed by God to have a different type of physique—a decent combination of mass and symmetry.

And when I was nicknamed Flex, that's kind of unforgettable. Even before I was seen, they knew the name.

RL: It's been an effective selling point, but it's more than mere name recognition. Maybe bodybuilding was your destiny.

FW: Bodybuilding was my destiny. I mean, I look back at how everything unfolded, and I understand there's a divine plan at work. I was born with this physique, to begin with—it's God given. Plus, I have drive and absolutely hate to lose.

Ready to go pro—flexing at a '92 photo session under the Neveux studio lights.



RL: Was there ever a time when you felt compelled to pack on more mass?

FW: That proved to be a mistake. I trained to get bigger and bigger, but it just didn't jive with my body type. If I'm a sprinter, it's best I sprint and not run a marathon. And I tried running a marathon.

RL: You were an important figure for most of the '90s, a bodybuilding superstar who seemed to have it all. Were you happy?

FW: I was never truly happy, not in a giddy, overwhelming sense. The bodybuilding scene isn't healthy. The camaraderie of Arnold's day

doesn't exist anymore, and that's sad. I don't blame the athletes; competitive bodybuilding is a cutthroat enterprise.

RL: Money is undoubtedly the culprit.

FW: Money is the root of every evil, but we need it to live. When I was with Weider, I received pay increases until 1993. From 1993 on, nothing—and that's when I began winning most of my titles! There were athletes who didn't qualify to be on the same stage with me receiving more coverage and more money. A recipe for friction!

RL: Speaking of friction, what about your own involvement? You had an ongoing feud with Shawn Ray.

FW: Yeah, I've been involved in personality clashes. Some were the result of writers, magazines and supplement companies pissing turpentine on a brushfire. It wasn't entertaining—not for me. What readers should realize is that bodybuilders are flesh-and-blood people. We have feelings, we have different personalities, and it's not at all the way we're portrayed in the mags.

RL: Have your feelings changed about Shawn?

FW: Since God has come into my life, I've tried to make amends. I publicly apologize to every man and woman I've ever hurt, including Shawn. All I ask is for them to judge me on who I am today, in 2002, not who I was in 1993.

Flex Wheeler: Today

RL: Here we are a scant four years later. How ya doin', big dawg?

FW: Fine, bro, just fine—now! Sorry for letting our earlier project lapse. I had health issues, and my commitments fell by the wayside.

RL: No problem. I realize you've been ill.

FW: It wasn't just an illness. I was at death's door! Have you ever heard of focal segmental glomerulosclerosis—FSGS?

RL: It doesn't sound good.

FW: FSGS is the most deadly form of kidney disease known to mankind. No cure, no therapy. A kidney transplant's the only option, and they don't always take. It can come back on you so hard; you're not out of the hospital before you need another transplant. I was diagnosed with it.

RL: When did all this go down?

FW: In '00, right after the Olympia. The last time we talked, I was having problems, and that's when they found out.

RL: Did you automatically blame steroids?

FW: My doctors said no, but I'm sure they didn't do me much good. Though taking shit for a contest could only aggravate my medical situation, I went all the way for my last show. A foolish, stupid move, with near-deadly consequences. That was the '02 *IRON MAN*. Medically, I already knew the prognosis; my doctors had explained it to me in gruesome detail. "Ken," they said, "your condition isn't getting any better, and it never will. We can try to keep it at a certain level, but eventually, you'll need a new kidney."

RL: A scary moment!

FW: It sure was. So I get out of the hospital, and I'm controlling my condition and feelin' pretty good. But in the meantime, my earning potential's crashing. No more contracts, and I'd earned a reputation as a dickhead and druggie. So I figured, hey, if that's my reputation, I'll play it up, medical condition be damned—might as well make money while I still had an opportunity.

RL: Medical condition be damned? Yikes!

FW: Exactly. I'm ashamed to admit it, but I was far from natural in 2002. I wanted to make as much cash as possible and couldn't do that as a natural athlete. I went nuts. Maybe it was kind of a death wish, because at the rate I was going, I was going to be dead!

RL: But you made it to the IRONMAN.

FW: And what I thought would be easy turned out to be one more disappointment. I came in third, behind Cutler. Something was fucked up in my body—I couldn't drop the water, no matter how I tortured myself. A few days later my family and I were going to church, and I had an attack. It's difficult to describe, except to say I was shaking and freaking out. My wife rushed me to the ER. It was a life-or-death situation. They hooked me up with needles and tubes for dialysis, and immediately, the search for a new kidney started. There was nothing I could do except what the doctors told me. Otherwise, I'd die. When you're faced with such a decision, you wake up and do what's right.



Flex today—contest photographer/reporter/videographer extraordinaire.

RL: I read about your troubles. How a girl from your church offered you her kidney. That's some story!

FW: Dude, I wouldn't be alive today if it weren't for her. The surgery required follow-ups, and I'm on medication for the rest of my life. They've cut it down for me, but I'm quite used to taking pills every day.

RL: Were you scarred considerably?

FW: Yeah, but when I look at that transplant scar, I know I'm alive. It's a reminder to walk the straight and narrow, which is what I try to do every minute of the life God has given me.

RL: You look fit, sound great. And you're carrying considerable size.

FW: I'm very fortunate, considering. You knew I won the ASC 2005 karate championship, right?

RL: I did. A remarkable feat.

FW: Thanks, man. Martial arts is an enjoyable outlet. It gives me a way to stay competitive.

RL: How are you feeling?

FW: Fine, overall. I have my bad days. When you experience such a devastating condition, you rarely bounce back to where you were before it began. And there's the mortality thing too. I was looking death squarely in the face, and all I kept thinking about were my kids, my wife—what would happen to them?

RL: Professionally, you've picked up speed.

FW: Yeah. I'm working for *Muscular Development*, I have my martial arts, my mind is clear, and I have the love of family. God's given me a second, third and fourth chance, and I won't blow it again. I'm the president of Hardbody Entertainment, a sports-related entertainment company. We were a title sponsor for the Arnold Classic and the Olympia in 2006 and did the Olympia Webcast. And I co-own Flex Wheeler's Choppers. We specialize in building custom exotic motorcycles. My kids are getting older, and everything's beautiful in the neighborhood.

Editor's note: Check out Flex-WheelerChoppers.com and www.HardbodyEntertainment.net. ■■■