

Legendary Lady

Twenty-six Years After Winning the First Ms. Olympia, Rachel McLish Is Still Turning Heads

by Lonnie Teper

Photography by Michael Neveux

Hair and Makeup Yvonne Ouellette

Age has been very kind to Rachel McLish. Nearly 26 years after she won the first Ms. Olympia contest, held in Philadelphia circa 1980, and 22 since she suddenly retired after finishing second to Cory Everson at the '84 Ms. O, McLish is still a dish.

Now in her late 40s (she was 22 when Arnold Schwarzenegger presented her with the initial Ms. O crown, so you do the math), Rachel still draws the same reverent stares when she enters a room as she did two decades ago. She weighed 128 pounds, at 5'6 1/2", when she was bodybuilding's preeminent female physique athlete; she's within five pounds of that today.

IFBB Women's Historian Steve Wennerstrom recalls McLish's effect on the industry. "Rachel provided the perfect look for the new sport. Of course, women's bodybuilding has evolved since she won her first Ms. Olympia, but in those days she easily possessed enough well-defined muscle to set her apart from the conventional beauty pageant entrant.

"That, combined with stunning beauty and a very competitive stage persona, made her an instant star in women's bodybuilding. In those early years Rachel's media coverage made

her a household name in bodybuilding, and her striking presence made a considerable impact on legions of women entering the sport using her physical look as motivation."

In addition to a champion bodybuilder, McLish has been a best-selling author, an actress ("Pumping Iron II," "Aces, Iron Eagle III," "Ravenhawk") and body wear designer; her highly acclaimed exercise video "In Shape With Rachel McLish" debuted at number three on the national video charts and continues to sell strongly. Her other video saw her costarring with the Governorator in "Shape Up With Arnold."

She's done the talk show circuit over the years, appearing with Oprah, David Letterman, Larry King, Regis Philbin and others. McLish needs a van to carry all of the awards she has been honored with; the latest is her induction into the World Gym Hall of Fame, which will take place during Arnold Fitness Weekend in early March.

Currently, she's preparing to launch her third book, *TL C...Tighter and Leaner to the Core*, and Michael Neveux's marvelous photo on the front of this issue marks her 68th magazine cover worldwide.





Rachel McLish

We met up at Jerry's Deli in Studio City, California, on a bright and breezy Friday the 13th—January in this case—for lunch and an interview. I ordered a chicken sandwich, complete with the obligatory french fries and a Diet Cherry Coke. Rachel—surprise—chose a small tuna salad, cucumbers on the side. She did fall, though, for a mini-éclair, sans the custard, as we left the deli. Obviously, she can afford to enjoy such delicacies on occasion.

LT: Hard to believe it's been almost 26 years since your initial Ms. Olympia victory. Actually, your first contest took place the same year.

RM: Yes. I competed in the United States Women's Championships, held in Atlantic City, and won. It was a worldwide competition because it had international competitors in it. It became my opportunity to introduce this "strange" phenomenon called women's bodybuilding to the world. The Olympia was my second show.

LT: How long had you been lifting weights at that point?

RM: Well, I had put myself through college [Pan American University in Edinburg, Texas] working at a health club in McAllen. The health club was about six miles away from school, and I had 10 minutes to get from school to work.

The women would work out on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, and the men on opposite days. I worked there from my sophomore year throughout college. When I graduated [with a degree in health and physical education], the owner of the club and I formed a partnership and built a health club from the ground up in Harlingen [where McLish was born and raised].

It was called the Sport Palace Association and had 1,500 members. It was a big success, so we decided to open up two more facilities, one in Corpus Christi and one in Brownsville. That was in 1980.

LT: The same year you first put on a posing suit. How did that come about?

RM: At that time Lisa Lyon was getting all this attention; I looked at

her body and felt it was beautiful. She had a background in dance like I did [McLish spent 10 years in ballet, jazz and tap]; she loved flamenco dancing, I loved flamenco dancing. This was, you know, a woman after my own soul.

She was going to promote the first "real" women's bodybuilding competition, the United States Women's Championships—up to that point there had just been little Mickey Mouse types of contests.

The men's manager at the club, Javier Gutierrez, would always throw these magazines in front of me that showed women competing, and he kept telling me that I should be doing this.

The reason I decided to enter was twofold: The grand opening of our new health club was going to coincide with the contest, which was going to be televised on "Sportsworld." A title of that nature would enable me to promote the definitive fitness lifestyle that women could embrace forever.

Of course, this "new" sport, this new phenomenon that they were publicizing like a freak show, was not new to me. I'd been bodybuilding long before it was called bodybuilding. The best way to get the body of your dreams can only be achieved with weight training, what I also call concentrated exercise. If you want to get from point A to point B the most effective way possible, you should do it this way. I took it seriously then, and I still do.

LT: Well, it's certainly paid off. Here you are, just finishing another cover shoot, 26 years later.

RM: I've always wanted to be a living example of what I was preaching; you can leave the hard sell at home. I think that's really important.

LT: Five months into competing, you're Ms. Olympia. Describe that feeling.

RM: I can tell you how I felt at the very first competition, because five months later, at the Olympia, I was an old pro [laughs]. I remember vividly at that first contest that my knees were shaking. I had to flex my muscles to keep my knees from jumping up and down [more laughter], I was so nervous.



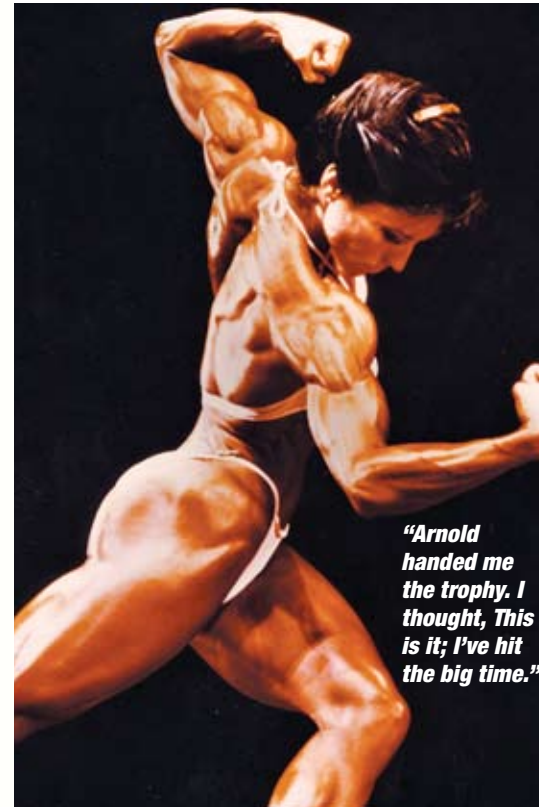
Rachel McLish

LT: Were you shy back then?

RM: Not all all—I was a ballet dancer and a cheerleader, so I knew how to be onstage. I loved that part; being onstage before helped me because it wasn't that much different.

LT: You must not have shaken too much because you left with the title. Next up was the Olympia.

RM: Yes, and Arnold handed me the trophy. Franco Columbu was there; I thought, This is it; I've hit the big time. It was the most spectacular feeling ever. Let me go back to Atlantic City. The first person I meet was Pete Grymkowski, and I said, "Oh, my God!" I'd seen him in the magazines, and he had this incredible body. When you've never seen a top bodybuilder in person before, it becomes an awe-inspiring moment.



"Arnold handed me the trophy. I thought, This is it; I've hit the big time."

"I trained for six months [for the '84 Ms. Olympia], got down to under 8 percent bodyfat. I decided, if this is what you want, I don't want anything to do with it—see ya later. And I've never looked back."



Women's Physique World

LT: Did you start getting magazine covers right away?

RM: No, because female bodybuilding was so new. But I did become the first solo female cover on *Muscle & Fitness* about eight months later. And they immediately did a layout after the win.

LT: You went from neophyte to superstar in a matter of months.

RM: The thing is, at the Women's Championships, UPI was there, the Associated Press was there. There were film crews from different countries, like Japan and Sweden. After I won, I had my picture on the front page of newspapers all over the world. That's what put my name out there globally. I was off and running, with or without the Ms. Olympia.

LT: Were you still involved with the health club business at that point?

RM: I was until I won the Ms. Olympia. I was spending more time in California. I had cousins who lived there. As you know, a health club does not run itself—I was putting in 12-hour days—and you need to be there all the time. It's a service industry. I had to make a decision, and I sold off my stock in the company and moved to California. That was 1981; I first had a place in Brentwood, then bought in Woodland Hills.

LT: You won the IFBB Pro World Championship in 1982 and followed that up with your second Olympia title the same year. Then came the Caesar's World Cup in Las Vegas in '83, which was centered on the controversial "Pumping Iron II" movie. You placed third behind Carla Dunlap and Tina Plakinger. And, of course, it's the film that introduced us all to Bev Francis.

RM: I found that film very dishonest; it was edited to try to create a controversy, of which there was none. I was portrayed in such a bad way. I was the one supposedly stunting the growth of women's bodybuilding, when, in reality, that was not the issue at all.

I trained as hard as anybody else;

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Rachel McLish

“‘Pumping Iron II’ was debuted at the Cannes Film Festival, and that was probably the most fun I’ve ever had.”



Bev was a world champion powerlifter, so she was much more muscular than anybody else. The movie was very misleading, and it didn't do anything but set the sport back. That was the start of more muscular women winning championships.

However, to be fair, it was debuted at the Cannes Film Festival, and that was probably the most fun I've ever had. In defense of the directors and producers, it got a heck of a lot of world press. We did the red carpet, the whole thing there. That was another perk bodybuilding gave me. "Pumping Iron II" was really a docudrama, not a documentary, but it was fun to do.

LT: Your next contest, the '84 Ms. Olympia, was your last. You finished second to Cory Everson and, at 26, retired from competition.

RM: That is accurate. Cory came in 15 pounds of muscle heavier than she had been the year before; she was really thin in previous years, then she came much bigger, with a lot of muscle.

I was told I was too small; well, if a lack of size was the main criticism of my physique, I really should have come in last. I thought I was huge [laughs]. I trained for six months, got down to under 8 percent bodyfat. I decided, if this is what you want, I don't want anything to do with it—see ya later. And I've never looked back.

One door closed, but others opened. In 1985 I got a contract with the Health and Tennis Association of America. I did a lot of commercials, and one of them was nominated for a Clio award, which is the Oscar for commercials.

LT: I remember that. For Bally's health clubs, right? "Before you primp, you gotta pump."

RM: That's right [both laugh]. Down the road I joined forces with K-Mart Corporation to form the Body Co., which became the best-selling line of activewear in the nation in less than three years. I had it for seven years.

LT: Your first book, *Flex Appeal*, came out in 1984 and did very well. Did it deal with competition?

RM: There was a little bit of that. It was a mass-market book that debuted on the *New York Times* best-seller list. It was really training 101—how to work out properly, how to diet. I did have a small chapter on the competitive side of the sport, with guidelines of how I prepared for my shows.

LT: And your next book?

RM: It was called *Perfect Parts*; that came out about four years after *Flex Appeal*. It was a simplified version of *Flex Appeal*, which was very detailed. In it I devoted a chapter to each bodypart, showing how people can train as little as 15 minutes a day and get great results, because a little goes a long way when you exercise correctly with weights.

LT: Your third book is coming soon.

RM: Yes, I'm working on it right now *T.L.C... Tighter and Leaner to the Core*, and the core section has nothing to do with Pilates.

It's a little more than a how-to book. All you have to do is look around and see all of the "experts" in fitness. All the information overload, so much confusion—I've taken it back to simplification.

It's about everything I've learned about training and eating correctly, and it's also about addressing your spirituality.

LT: What do you tell women regarding the best training regimen?

RM: There are so many ways to start getting in shape—and, more important, to *stay* in shape. Anybody can set aside a few weeks of her life and get in shape, but the real trick is staying there.

LT: Absolutely. A great bod is one that looks terrific all year. I still can't get over how different so many competitors look a few weeks after a contest. Or a few months before one. A lot of folks have lost great photo chances with Michael Neveux because they were so far out of shape when he wanted to do a shoot.

I imagine you've always been ready, or almost ready, to shoot anytime you need to.

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Rachel McLish

RM: Yes. My weight has not fluctuated over 10 pounds in the past 30 years or so. Give me a week—two at the most—preparation time, and I'm good to go. It's all about the lifestyle.

LT: What type of routine works best for you?

(continued on page 132)



The T L C In and Out Program*

You are rushed, on the clock, but determined to get your workout, no matter what. You want to get in and out of the gym as quickly and effectively as possible. Here are some tips for prioritizing your time and effort. First and foremost, though, you have to get to the gym! (Sometimes that's the tough part.)

1) Determine beforehand the type of workout or exercises you'd like to do.

2) Be flexible. Have a backup exercise in case the equipment you were counting on is being used, or go directly to your next move. Do not get hung up on annoyances that may derail your immediate goal of completing your workout quickly and efficiently. Even if you end up working out for only a few minutes, a lot of good happens in your body when you develop this consistent determination. (And in this case it's better than nothing.)

3) Always warm up. A three-minute jog on the treadmill gets you there quickly.

4) Start with abdominal/midsection movements first, as they additionally warm up the body, then proceed to the power movements.

5) Finish the last repetition of the last set for each bodypart with a sustained stretch before releasing the weight. It takes only seconds to include this very important step.

6) If, for some reason, you determine that there is no way you can complete your planned In and Out workout, shift immediately to plan B, which is to train a different bodypart, or better yet, pick a piece of cardio equipment (not necessarily your favorite one) and get a really good cardio workout instead.

7) Above all else, once you are in the gym, do not leave until you get what you came there for—a great, concentrated workout! Also remember that once you're engaged in the actual repetitions of the exercises,

you must maintain the integrity of the pace: Make every rep count, and do not rush—but do try to rush to get to your next movement.

8) If you opted for plan B and settled for a cardio workout, step it up a notch or two and get a much better, more intense workout than you had originally planned.

In and Out 35-Minute Whole-Body Workout

Perform this routine three to four times a week, taking one or two rest days between workouts:

Midsection

Elbow-to-knee ab tightener	2 x 25
Full-range crunches	2 x 25
Hyperextensions	1 x 15
Modified back bend stretches	2 x 10 seconds

Upper body

Lat pulldowns (don't forget the sustained stretch after the last rep)	3 x 12-15
Dips (assisted or unassisted)	3 x 12-15
Dumbbell or machine chest presses	2 x 9-12
Seated pulley rows	2 x 9-12

Lower body

Leg curls followed by hamstring stretch	3 x 15
Leg extensions followed by quadriceps stretch	3 x 15
Leg press or squat followed by quadriceps stretch	2 x 15
Isolated buttocks motion followed by hip stretch**	2 x 15

**To perform the hip stretch: In a seated or squatting position, place one ankle on the opposite knee, and then press down on the supported knee until you feel that good stretch in your medial glutes.

*Adapted from the soon-to-be-published *T L C...Tighter and Leaner to the Core* by Rachel McLish

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Rachel McLish

(continued from page 127) **RM:** The same one that works for everybody. You cannot ignore bodyparts. Yes, we all have favorite bodyparts, but you have to train for overall balance. You can't ignore movements because they might be uncomfortable for you.

In my photo session with Michael, I had to do exercises that I hate—squats, for example [*laughs*]. Power movements. But at the same time it felt so good to get back into it.

There are ways to keep a good level of fitness by going to the gym twice a week. Yes, you can do it. You mix that with some type of supplemental workout—hiking, swimming and other types of activities so you don't have to spend all your time in the gym.

Three times a week in the gym, a couple of effective, concentrated sets per bodypart, is probably the most doable number. Do a little cardio on your off days or after the

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weight training. Mix that in with a good nutritional plan, and you'll be very happy with the results.

LT: Did you always eat well when you were growing up?

RM: Yes. My father was a very good fisherman. We lived on the Gulf Coast, so we had the freshest fish. I didn't even know what salad dressing was growing up; we used lemon or lime juice.

LT: When you were training for the Olympia, was it much different from what you've just described?

RM: No. So much is being said now about high- and low-glycemic foods... yeah, yeah, yeah. Good, clean food will never disappoint you.

Now that I'm older, I have added a little more fats to my diet because you need the essential fatty acids—the omega-3s and -6s—because they do make a difference. Plus, it makes the food taste so much better and the so-called dieting process much more enjoyable.

LT: Where do you train, at home or at a gym?

RM: Both—I love going to the gym. I love the energy, the atmosphere. I train at the Gold's gyms in Palm Desert and Palm Springs [near her home in Rancho Mirage, California]. I love the owners, Brad and Wanda Neste; I've known them as long as I've been in the desert. They're a true success story, coming from Canada with just their possessions and their car—now they have Gold's gyms all over California and in Vegas, Arizona, the Southwest.

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LT: How about figure competition? Will we ever see you back onstage?

RM: Never [laughs]. It took everything I had to get into a bikini to get in front of Michael Neveux’s camera, okay?

I understand people are wondering what Rachel McLish looks like today. What a 40-something-plus looks like. It’s not like I went out and tried to get as many photo shoots as I could, but once in a while, with a trusted, fabulous photographer like Michael, it’s okay. I just had another terrific photo shoot with Bill Dobbins as well.

LT: In addition to your latest book, do you have anything else in the works that we should keep an eye out for?

RM: Well, what I’d like to do, especially since I’m going to receive the Hall of Fame award at the Arnold Classic, is a “Rachel Classic.” It would be a consortium of seminars that transcend fitness and bodybuilding. It would center around the new technologies and advancements in fitness, prevention, etc.—everything us baby boomers, us fitness fanatics, want for our lives.

I would be working with Neste Enterprises—Brad and Wanda are keen on it—and there’s a new company I’m very impressed with called Lifewave, which produces energy patches. There will also be a contest with this: bodybuilding, fitness and figure. I’m looking at Las Vegas as the site. It would be a wonderful extravaganza.

LT: When do you think this may happen?

RM: We’re talking, talking. Are you on board as a sponsor? [Both crack up]

Rachel McLish

LT: I see you haven't lost your business sense any more than you've lost your figure.

RM: Well, thank you! I'm glad you noticed.

Editor's note: To contact Rachel McLish for appearances, call (626) 403-1232, or send e-mail to LTpromote@aol.com. **IM**

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