

# “Just Look At His Vascularity:” The Dangerous Theatricality of the World Bodybuilding Federation

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In 1991, legendary bodybuilder Lou Ferrigno announced his intention to return to competition. Rather than host a mere established bodybuilding contest, he decided to throw his weight behind the newest company, established only a year previously: Vince McMahon’s World Bodybuilding Federation (WBF). When asked why he chose the WBF he said, “What’s nice about the WBF is that you have a choice to pick your own character. Music, the posing, connecting with the audience, expressing yourself” (“Lou Ferrigno”). This was not “a competition where you are just standing there” (“Gary Strydom”). After considerable success “just standing there,” Ferrigno seemed to be chasing something more, a way of competing which, even more than bodybuilding seems to do in general, lurched towards the theatrical. Here was a new form of bodybuilding show, one that twisted the genre entirely while also adapting the conventional expectations and muscular poses. Ferrigno’s description sets the tone. In this article we provide the first scholarly reading of the WBF, understanding it alongside that other more famous McMahon-owned global entertainment provider, the WWF (World Wrestling Federation, renamed the WWE in 2002). Pursuing this comparison enables us to see the WBF as a

theatrical challenge to, and simultaneously an extension of, the established history and practices of bodybuilding. Ultimately the WBF, like wrestling, flits between the real and the fake, the authentic and the phony (while recognising the troublesome nature of all these terms). What emerges in this article is a new intertextual history of American entertainment in the early 1990s. We conduct this analysis, first, by setting out the disturbing history of theatricality, particularly in association with wrestling. We then lay out a history of bodybuilding. This is a history which the WBF both contributed to and unsettled. This narrative can be scoped in the WBF’s magazine *Bodybuilding Lifestyles* which will be understood both as a primary source and as an extension of the WBF’s theatricality. As will be shown, *Lifestyles* represented an early attempt to market a healthy lifestyle while simultaneously serving as a platform to extend the WBF’s efforts to create bodybuilding characters. This article marks the first time that this publication has been seriously analysed. It will read the tension between authenticity and performativity (particularly in relation to wrestling tropes, and the acceptance or rejection of anabolic steroids) as its defining characteristic. Finally, we focus on the WBF’s final 1992 show as paradoxically

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the pinnacle and demise of this short-lived but memorable venture.

## The Contamination of Theatricality

The theatrical has frequently been read as dangerous. In plague times theatres were closed for fear of spreading disease, a situation that, interestingly, we are currently experiencing as we write. During religious upheaval, the theatre was regarded as morally bankrupt. Actors were seen as pedlars of pretence, show-offs who perverted manliness by being fraudulent and phony; actresses were even worse, as they were a danger to patriarchal structures in their perceived sexual deviance. According to critic and historian Jonas Barish, words associated with the theatre—stagey, showing off, melodramatic—are inherently ignoble, especially when compared to words from other art forms such as the literary or the poetic (Barish 329). This antitheatricality is not just an accusation shouted from offstage; it is a tradition within the theatre itself. In the early twentieth-century context, scenographer Edward Gordon Craig expelled the actor from his stage and complained that the body of the actor “is *by nature* utterly useless as a material for art” (5) and Russian director Constantin Stanislavski condemned the “disgusting artificiality” of melodramatic theatrical work (43). An antitheatrical impulse remains on the contemporary stage too; in an interview with *The Guardian* performance artist Marina Abramovic, for example, contends “Theatre is fake: there is a black box, you pay for a ticket, and you sit in the dark and see someone playing somebody else’s life. The knife is not real, the blood is not real, and the emotions are not real” (O’Hagan 2010). This sentiment, what Barish refers to as an “anti-theatrical prejudice,” extends throughout Western culture and civilisation. In her more recent book, Lisa A. Freeman attends to Barish’s reading in a new way. She contends that antitheatrical incidents “provide us with occasions to trace major struggles over

historical shifts in the nature and balance of discursive power and political authority” (2). Ultimately, the understanding of the theatrical as a threat is embroiled in broader conflicts about ownership, authenticity, tradition, and the purity of the culture, all of which are imperilled by the infiltration of theatre’s innate fraudulence.

It is this polluting version of the theatrical that stalks the WBF. Ultimately the transforming of the bodybuilding competition into a spectacle complete with costume, props and characterisation (of sorts) detracts from the real muscular contest. Or so said the WBF’s detractors (McGough 25): in reality, bodybuilding has always slipped down the gap between sport and art. It is, in essence, a liminal form, a between space which is both a type of theatre and a type of sport. It celebrates look rather than athleticism, even though behind the exhibitionist muscularity is extensive training and extraordinarily (perhaps even dangerously) disciplined nutrition.

In its valuing of spectacle, bodybuilding always resembles professional wrestling. We make this claim while acknowledging that neither of these practices are stable or anchored, that this comparison is sometimes clear (as in the early 1990s’ WWF-WBF context) and sometimes less applicable (take, for example, contemporary British independent wrestling where there are very few bodybuilding physiques competing). In his chapter in *Performance and Professional Wrestling*, Broderick Chow explores this shared sign of the muscular body in bodybuilding and wrestling, coining an “erotohistoriography” of the built body in both practices. Both bodybuilding and wrestling (while acknowledging the diversity of bodies in the latter), Chow suggests, gives the “bare male body something to do” (Chow, Laine, and Warden 148). This muscled figure also extends our initial context of the antitheatrical as, Chow confirms, “the wrestler’s built body is thus a *theatrical body* which manages to provoke the same kind of discomfort and irritation as bad theatre, more specifically, theatre that is *trying too hard*” (Chow, Laine, and Warden 150). While this accusation might be levelled at all bodybuilding to a certain extent, this resemblance becomes more

pronounced in the WBF given its association with the WWF; Chow acknowledges that the WBF "was borrowing spectacle from the WWE" (Chow, Laine, and Warden 148). The spectacle is centred on the excessive, muscular bodies of the performers. This is unsurprising given the obvious real-world business connection between the two as both were owned by promoter Vince McMahon who, more famously, tried his luck with American football in 2001 through his company XFL which, again like the WBF, was 'tarnished' by its association with the WWF. But the relationship between the WWF and WBF also existed on far more complex, intertextual levels. In the lead-up to the 1992 final show, for example, the WBF is presented through the lexicon of the WWF. The bodybuilders are referred to as "Superstars" ("Ultimate Warrior Promo"). This is the moniker used to describe wrestlers in the WWF and in the contemporary WWE. Individuals are notably not 'sportsmen' not even 'bodybuilders' or 'wrestlers'; 'superstars' makes a firm association with showbusiness. A number of peculiar pre-show promotional events and interviews also played on the intersection between bodybuilding (WBF) and wrestling (WWF). There was a WBF vs. WWF Tug of War Challenge which the WWF team won because they cheated; there is the suggestion that WWF heel (that is 'baddie') Ted DiBiase paid off the referee ("WBF vs. WWF"). This is the sort of heinous cheat 'The Million Dollar Man' Ted DiBiase did regularly in the WWF. In a promo, a form more readily associated with wrestling than bodybuilding, WWF superstar Ultimate Warrior compared himself to the future winner of the WBF: "I had the same hunger, I made the same sacrifices, I had the same desires" ("Ultimate Warrior Promo"). Ferrigno referred to the WBF show as the "Wrestlemania of bodybuilding" ("Lou Ferrigno"). While all this meant that the WBF could attract a crossover audience of wrestling fans it actually proved a distraction. Bodybuilding here became polluted with the theatrical fakery of wrestling.

Numerous scholars have endeavoured to flesh out wrestling's liminality and theatricalism. Sharon Mazer, writing at approximately the same

time as the WBF's brief existence (her book was published in 1998), describes wrestling as "a hybrid performance practice: a professional sport in which players can earn their livings at the same time that it offers its audiences a show that goes beyond contest into theatrical spectacle" (7). Her apt description could be applied just as readily to the WBF's version of bodybuilding (and, arguably, bodybuilding in general). The "superstars" are, as the denotation suggests, hybrid practitioners. Following Mazer's reading, they are embedded in capitalist wage systems. Wrestlers are regularly referred to as "workers" and, contentiously, are independent contractors even in the global leader WWF/WWE. In his recent study *Professional Wrestling and the Commercial Stage*, Eero Laine contends that wrestler's bodies are key sites of profit-making: "Professional wrestlers manipulate emotions for a living and share in the emotional labor of building an in-ring story. Their ability to do so is what makes them productive laborers for promoters" (22). While, conventionally, bodybuilding has not been (or perhaps not been as) subject to these sorts of narrative structures, the WBF morphed bodybuilding into wrestling, meaning that both their more typical physical, muscular labour and the new layer of emotional labour the WBF project imposed, dragged the bodybuilders into the structures that had exploited wrestlers since the inception of wrestling.

Returning to Mazer's description, in both the WBF and the WWF the show is "beyond contest." This is not to say that there is no contest in both, of course; there are titles to be won, victors and losers, even if these are theatrical devices. The contest in wrestling can, rather, be seen in who will "get the push" and who will not. In this, wrestling is extremely competitive. Ben Litherland suggests that wrestling and bodybuilding can be compared because both "sit uncomfortably on the boundaries of sporting contest and theatrical display" (4). Because of this, wrestling is notoriously difficult to define in terms of genre; as Laine says, "professional wrestling is a tradition, an institution, a ritual, even while it is a fleeting entertainment, a carnival trick, and a flippant

waste of time” (1). In *Performance and Professional Wrestling*, the editors intentionally sit on the fence when they say, “professional wrestling represents a special case in that it is at once scripted, theatrical, and fake, and improvised, performed, and real” (3). It might be said that bodybuilding, in general, exists on a similar axis of tricky definition. However, in the WBF, where the association with wrestling is so strong, it becomes even more difficult to disentangle it, as the finale of the last show illustrates (a moment to which we will return below).

Indeed, wrestling has a word to describe this “beyond contest,” this uncomfortable boundary sitting: kayfabe. Emerging from wrestling’s carnival foundations, kayfabe is the maintenance of the fictional story. Traditionally, wrestling protected kayfabe by, say, not allowing ‘antagonists’ to travel together or by maintaining character outside the ring. In contemporary wrestling, it describes the way in which the audience, which is almost universally aware that it is watching a show, plays along with the fiction because it is a pleasurable, entertaining process. While kayfabe is a wrestling term, it is now being picked up by various disciplines to analyse the difficulty of identifying real and fake. As Eero Laine says, “it reads narratives onto everyday events and assumes a backstage, where those in power make decisions that affect the rest of us” (90). It is, therefore, a useful descriptor for many contexts from an analysis of fake news to the prevalence of simulacra. Most notably, the term ‘kayfabe’ has recently been used by Shannon Bow O’Brien (2020) to understand Donald Trump’s presidency. This opening up of the term enables it to be used in a bodybuilding context, particularly in the WBF which was so closely related to the WWF. Just as in its sister organisation, it is difficult to differentiate between the real and the fictional, to truly decipher the kayfabe. Clearly some elements are obviously fake—in terms of characterization, for example, nobody truly believes that WBF bodybuilder Tony Pearson is a fighter pilot in the same way that they are not buying that The Undertaker is really a mortician. There is an excessive theatricality in both, then, that is easy to identify. Yet other

elements, such as the idea of the fair contest, are far harder to determine. Reading the WBF through the hazy lens of kayfabe, a lens that is inevitable because of its association with the WWF, means that one can never be sure what one is watching: is this a sporting event, a competition, a theatrical show, a cynical but financially lucrative ruse? The kayfabe structures mean we cannot be sure.

Both the WWF and the WBF also battle with the tension between the live event and the screen-mediated spectacle. This is not unique to these two companies, of course; wrestling and bodybuilding often flit between these different viewpoints. But it would be true to say that these companies navigated the live and the mediated in particularly interesting ways. The WWF has always been the premier televised wrestling corporation; the only exception to this was between 1996 and 1998 when rival WCW enjoyed higher ratings (the WWF took over WCW—performatively and actually—in 2001). While bodybuilding has enjoyed television coverage (and now uses live streaming), the WBF was unique in its televisual presentation. In the WBF, and the WWF, the live and the mediated are difficult to distinguish and tease apart. Philip Auslander, one of the prominent voices in contemporary performance studies, contends that live events are becoming more and more like mediated events to the extent that it becomes impossible to pull apart these two ways of seeing. Auslander explores the historical and contemporary intersections of the live and the mediated by critiquing the traditional valuing of the former over the latter: “live performance cannot be shown to be economically independent of, immune from contamination by, and ontologically different from mediatized forms” (7). Note Auslander’s terminology—“contamination”—here which resembles the arguments about antitheatricality investigated above.

The WBF benefits from being analysed through this intricate debate as, in essence, it is neither live enough nor mediated enough to be successful. The mediated emerges in two layers: like the WWF, it uses pre-recorded story vignettes to present the personas and then, clearly, the whole

show is mediated through the television screen. These two layers have a different relationship with the live as the pre-recorded films are presented as past documentation, whereas television programming (even when pre-recorded) "remains a performance in the present" (15). As Auslander goes on to say, "Television was thought to make the home into a kind of theatre characterized, paradoxically, by both absolute intimacy and global reach" (16). The vignettes in the WBF usually feel forced and awkward, illustrating that WBF superstars, unlike (some) WWF superstars, have little training 'on the mic.' But the "performance in the present" is equally unsuccessful. Like the WWF, there is a commentary team, with Bobby Heenan as colour commentator, and the personas in the vignettes spill out on to the stage. The superstars seem unsure whether to perform for the live audience or for the audience in their "home theatres." Unlike the WWF, where the audience is its own character holding signs, performing chants and even at times getting physically involved in the action, the audience of the WBF is in proscenium. This not only distances them from the action on the stage, but also makes it difficult to discern the liveness of the televised action too.

## **Bodybuilding "as it should be"**

This initial reading of the WBF needs to be understood in the context of bodybuilding. Bodybuilding, as a practice, stands in stark contrast to other physical activities. In the first instance, the sport of bodybuilding is not based on skill or objectivity but rather on the subjective comparison of physiques. Bodybuilders train for months prior to competitions but such training is not then placed in a competitive context but rather serves as the backdrop for the sport itself. Comparing bodies, based on standards which are subject to changes in taste, distinguishes bodybuilding from other sports which utilize relatively objective means to determine a winner—be

they a point or goal scored, a knockout or a record-breaking time. As sociologist Dimitris Liokaftos argued in their book on the subject, it is this subjectivity which has often led to accusations that bodybuilding is not a legitimate sport despite the physical demands it places on competitors (Liokaftos 167). That several high-profile claims of cheating exist in major bodybuilding competitions furthers the idea that the sport's objectivity is problematic (Fair 77). Bodybuilding, as a sport, has a relatively recent history compared to other activities. While soccer, football, rugby and a host of other sports were codified in the nineteenth century, it was not until the mid-twentieth century that regular bodybuilding competitions, as bodybuilding historian John Fair explained, became a reality (Fair 23-33). Although early physique competitions were held in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, it was not until the late 1930s that recognisable bodybuilding contexts began to be held.

In the American context, this came in the form of the Mr. America competition which was first held in 1939. From 1939 to roughly the mid-1960s, the Mr. America contest was recognised as the United States' preeminent bodybuilding competition. Unlike later shows, winners in the contest were not chosen based solely on their physique, but also on their appearance and ability to perform athletic feats. The reason why the Mr. America contest used this variety of metrics stemmed from its organizational structure. The contest was organised by the Amateur Athletic Union which, at the time, was the governing body for American sports in a range of disciplines ranging from amateur wrestling to track and field to weightlifting. Under the auspices of Bob Hoffman, who also acted as coach to the American Olympic weightlifting team at this time, the Mr. America competition was designed to find the best male representative of the United States (Fair 45-60). The inclusion of an athletic component—which was routinely taken to mean a weightlifting feat—spoke to the restrictive nature of the AAU's bodybuilding vision.

As John Fair's work on the Mr. America contest previously explained, the AAU's handling of

the Mr. America contest caused a great deal of discontent among those competitors who wished to be judged solely on their physique and not, say, on their appearance (191-195). Filling this demand were a series of private entrepreneurs offering bodybuilding competitions without personality or athletic components. Of these entrepreneurs, the most important were brothers Joe and Ben Weider, the two men whose competitions Vince McMahon sought to challenge. In 1946, the Weider brothers founded the International Federation of Bodybuilding and Fitness (IFBB) and began running competitions soon after. As well as organising competitions, the two men also ran a fitness magazine and supplement empire which, in time, became the preeminent business in American fitness. Running shows against the Mr. America competition for roughly two decades, the Weiders launched a new contest in 1965 which, as they claimed in their later biography, helped position them as the sport's top promoters (Weider, Weider, and Steere 159-165). In 1965, the Mr. Olympia contest was created which promised first that all bodybuilders would be welcome (the Mr. America contest did not allow winners to re-enter) and second that it would be focused solely on physiques. These two stipulations, combined with the offer of prize money, helped position the Mr. Olympia contest as the sport's preeminent competition within a manner of years.

Although the Weiders had fierce competition with others in the fitness industry, not least the previously mentioned Bob Hoffman—who also sold fitness equipment, supplements and magazines—the Weiders became bodybuilding's most successful duo (Fair 111-123). Where Joe Weider helped propel bodybuilders like Arnold Schwarzenegger into the limelight, Ben Weider attempted to create IFBB affiliates around the world and even make bodybuilding an Olympic sport. The Weiders became to bodybuilding what Vince McMahon was to professional wrestling—they helped coordinate the sport, were seen as its preeminent organizers and, importantly, they oversaw the sport's most important annual contest in the Mr. Olympia. It was, after all, the Mr.

Olympia contest which featured in the 1977 bodybuilding documentary *Pumping Iron*. *Pumping Iron* helped introduce Arnold Schwarzenegger to the public, increased the popularity of bodybuilding in American culture, and reinforced the importance of the Mr. Olympia contest in the sport (Liokaftos, 197). During the 1980s, the Weiders' primacy in bodybuilding grew even more and, although competitors existed, there was a clear hierarchy within the sport.

This does not mean that the Weiders were not without problems. When Vince McMahon decided to found the WBF in 1990, the Weiders, and the Mr. Olympia, were under public scrutiny regarding anabolic steroids. Anabolic steroids had been used in bodybuilding competitions since the early 1960s. Returning to Liokaftos, they cited a series of moral panics in American society, and several instances of bodybuilders collapsing on stage in the 1980s and 1990s, which led to tighter scrutiny being placed on the Weiders (Liokaftos, 160). This case at a time when American society was becoming more aware of anabolic steroids in general. Precipitated, in part, by the revelation that Canadian 100m sprinter Ben Johnson had used performance enhancing drugs at the 1988 Olympic Games, efforts were brought forth in the United States to tighten legislation around performance enhancing drugs. After several months of exploratory reports an Anabolic Steroid Act was issued in 1990 which made the use and abuse of such drugs much more difficult (Denham 260-265). The bill was signed into law in November of that year but even before it became official, bodybuilding responded to the new media and legal landscape. 1990 marked the year that the Weiders' competitions attempted to enforce drug testing protocols.

In the build-up to that year's Mr. Olympia contest, which, as was noted, was the sport's main event, the Weiders instituted drug testing at all of their shows. This was done to counter claims that bodybuilding was unsafe, and to fuel Ben Weiders' efforts to make bodybuilding an Olympic sport. The problem was that elite level bodybuilders did take steroids, and many struggled with the new testing protocols. Such problems

even emerged at the Olympia as five of the twenty male contestants failed their drug tests. Writing on the event, bodybuilding journalist Peter McGough noted:

If Friday, 14th September 1990 (the day of the contest), was a black day for bodybuilding, it was a blacker day for the disqualified athletes. When the dreaded news was broken to the five concerned, tears were a feature of some of their responses, anger and histrionics weren't.

(“Bodybuilding’s Blackest Day”)

This is the backdrop of the World Bodybuilding Federation. At that year’s 1990 Mr. Olympia Vince McMahon had rented a booth at the contest’s accompanying exhibition hall. As retold by powerlifter, fitness writer, and later McMahon employee Fred Hatfield, McMahon was there to promote his new supplement line Integrated Conditioning Program (ICO-Pro) and a new fitness magazine, *Bodybuilding Lifestyles* (Hatfield 66). That McMahon was branching out into the world of health and fitness was not too surprising. Former wrestling bookers, trainers, and athletes, have all noted McMahon’s fondness for large, muscular athletes. Indeed, in the world of bodybuilding, McMahon was known for signing bodybuilders to take part in his wrestling events, despite their lack of formal training (Hotten 70-75). He also, as famous wrestler Hulk Hogan’s memoirs made clear (43-50), had a personal interest in bodybuilding as evidenced by a dedicated workout schedule and obsession over his diet. From a financial standpoint, McMahon and his WWF were experiencing success after success. The 1980s, fuelled by individual superstars like Hulk Hogan, ‘Macho Man’ Randy Savage, Andre the Giant or Ultimate Warrior, had been a breakout decade for wrestling. Hulk Hogan, in particular, became a household name and one which the WWF relentlessly marketed (Maguire 155-160). In early 1990, McMahon officially opened Titan Towers in Connecticut. The towers were a state-of-the-art television facility costing over 9 million dollars with production facilities far outstripping his rivals. The ribbon cutting was accompanied by the news that McMahon was henceforth president of Titan Sports Inc., and that the company would be branching out into other areas (Klein 105). The

WWF was one such avenue. This explains why Vince McMahon was at the ‘Olympia Expo’ in 1990.

Promoting his *Bodybuilding Lifestyles* magazine and his new supplement range, McMahon was joined by Tom Platz. At that time, Platz was very famous within the bodybuilding community. Despite never winning a Mr. Olympia title, Platz had obtained a large following owing to the freakish size of his leg muscles, especially when compared to his upper-body, and the intensity that Platz brought to his training (Hotten 87). Modern-day montages of Platz training, found online, depict a blond muscular man screaming at both himself and others in the gym (“The Quadfather”). Hired as Editor of *Bodybuilding Lifestyles*, Platz’s relationship with McMahon was meant to signify the seriousness with which McMahon was treating his new project. Platz’s contacts, and status, within the industry was potentially invaluable. At the ‘Expo,’ the two men used outlandish wrestling style promotional tactics. Platz asked the Weiders if he could make an impromptu speech, which they allowed. Declaring that he was there to announce a ‘new dawn of bodybuilding,’ Platz’s speech ended with the news that a new bodybuilding federation, the World Bodybuilding Federation, was on the horizon. This WWF, Platz declared, would overtake the Weider’s IFBB, and bring back bodybuilding as “it should be” (Platz 15). As Platz’s message was digested, dozens of women entered the hall, brandishing WWF t-shirts and handing out flyers with more information.

Platz’s comment about bodybuilding “as it should be” became a rallying call for the WWF. Joe Weider and the Mr. Olympia contest had begun to drug test athletes in the face of increasing media pressure to curb anabolic steroid use in America. American politicians, journalists, and coaches had begun decrying the use of steroids in sport, and while such debates had existed for decades, they took a renewed emphasis after the 1988 Olympic games when Canadian sprinter Ben Johnson failed a drug test. In 1990, the American Congress passed the Anabolic Steroid Act of 1990 which sought to deter steroid use. Bodybuilding,

more so than many other sports, embodied anabolic steroid use (Denham 260-265). Since the 1960s, competitors had exhibited more and more musculature and, in fact, the 1980s had seen several high-profile instances of bodybuilders suffering medical problems from their drug use. At the time of the Act's passing, Ben and Joe Weider were petitioning to have bodybuilding included in the Olympics (Weider 71). Owing to both sporting and political pressures, they began to curb drug use in the sport. It was for this reason that the 1990 Mr. Olympia, and several smaller contests, were drug tested shows. McMahon and Platz's comments that the WBF was bodybuilding 'as it should be' was an admission that their contest would not be drug tested and would privilege the largest physiques on stage. Likewise, the WBF would provide yearlong contracts to bodybuilders alongside prize monies in contests. The Weiders' IFBB did not pay athletes outside of contest prizes (Fair 311-313). These were some, of many, ways in which the WBF sought to distinguish itself from the Weiders.

## **"This is all a new con. . .:" WBF *Lifestyles* Magazine**

In January 1990, the WBF launched its first issue of *Bodybuilding Lifestyles*, a magazine which promised to give readers behind the scenes access to WBF 'stars' as well as lifestyle and muscle building advice. At the time of publication, the magazine had to compete with magazines run by the Weider group, like *Flex* or *Muscle and Fitness*, as well as independent media corporations like *Muscle Media* and *Iron Man* (Todd, Roark, and Todd 26-40). Seeking to distinguish itself in a saturated field, *Lifestyles* positioned itself as a magazine seeking to tell the truth about bodybuilding, as a magazine that would inform readers about the way to live a modern lifestyle and, finally, as a magazine that would give in-depth access to its 'superstar' athletes. These goals contributed to the organization's broader publicity push which included a short-lived television programme,

guest appearances on popular television shows and, at multiple points, appearing at live wrestling events (Fair 311-313). Central to the magazine's approach was a claim for legitimacy and 'realness.' *Lifestyles* featured well known bodybuilding names, like Tom Platz and, in time, coaches like Dr. Fred Hatfield (Assael and Mooneyham 118). Likewise, names from wrestling like Hulk Hogan and the Ultimate Warrior appeared sporadically. The magazine routinely pushed the message that the WBF was not wrestling but that it represented a new form of bodybuilding, one which was modern and representative of a new generation of gym-goers. In this regard, the WBF asserted itself as a periodical that separated truth from fiction especially when it came to diet and/or supplementation, and bodybuilding itself. Much like the WBF's life shows, such efforts continually met with the unreal and carney-esque nature of professional wrestling.

In the first instance, *Lifestyles'* two-year life-course was defined by an awkward attempt to simultaneously promote anabolic steroids and to eschew them. While part of this effort reflected the very real effort by Vince McMahon to avoid federal charges in a 1993 steroid trial, it also played on older efforts within the sport of bodybuilding itself (Assael and Mooneyham 93-96). Anabolic steroids came to bodybuilding in the mid-twentieth century but, as John Fair deftly explained, a knowledge gap existed between elite athletes and the general public (Fair 162). Stemming from this, a common tactic in the 1960s and 1970s was for steroid using bodybuilders to claim that a certain supplement, rather than performance enhancing drugs, helped build their physiques.

Mainstream bodybuilding had been forced to evaluate steroid use by the early 1990s which helped, to a certain extent, bridge the knowledge gap between athletes and fans. It was here that *Lifestyles* struggled to exist. Part of the WBF's existence lay in the claim that the federation would bring back 'real' bodybuilding by which it meant untested shows and steroid fuelled athletes ("Ripped & Venous" 10-12). The WBF's 'real' is, of course and as always when using this word,



highly contested. In a sense, 'real' here actually means 'fraudulent,' a return to shows when muscularity was not only gained through training and nutrition, but through performance-enhancing substances (the use of the word 'performance' here reveals another contested, multi-faceted term). 'Real' and 'fake' therefore, confusingly, mean the same thing for the WBF. There is a search here for an authenticity in comparison with other companies who, because of their insistence on clean athletes, no longer presented 'real' bodybuilding. This reflects broader conversations about the authentic and the real, the fraudulent and the fake. In his book *Authenticity in Contemporary Theatre and Performance: Make it Real*, Daniel Schulze argues that "it is no exaggeration to say that authenticity, or rather the longing for it, always goes hand in hand with a profound feeling of having lost something" (14). Authenticity, Schultze goes on to claim, is particularly troublesome in the arts and, perhaps, especially in the theatre: "authenticity is often consciously created, specifically in performing arts, as an aesthetic tool; it is both a strategy of creation and reception" (37). This is certainly true in this instance where the magazine and the performance present the WBF and their drug-augmented version of authentic bodybuilding as the antidote to the other companies which no longer perform 'real' shows.

*Lifestyles* was forced to simultaneously condone the use of anabolic steroids for athletes—at least in its first year—while also promoting steroid alternatives. Unlike previous decades in which steroid like results were attributed to a food supplement, training innovation or visualization, consumers of bodybuilding magazines in the 1990s were more aware of what was, and was not, likely to build large amounts of muscle (Fussell 45-55). Thus, *Lifestyles*' advertisements and articles in 1991 focused on 'steroid replacers' and clean muscle building foods ("Steroid Replacer Pacs" 13). Targeting those individuals 'sick and tired of steroid users embarrassing' them at the gym, such products were promoted as steroid-like substances which were legal and safe ("Steroid Replacer Pacs" 13). While such products were not

unique to *Lifestyles*, a point the *Wrestling Observer* noted in its evaluation of the WBF, the magazine's odd stance of publicly condoning steroids while simultaneously decrying them marked it as different from competitors (Observer Staff "ICO-PRO" 4-5). In the second year of publication, *Lifestyles* took a much stronger stance against anabolic steroids owing to the federal government's investigation into Vince McMahon's wrestling federation. Alleged to have supplied steroids to wrestlers, McMahon claimed that his WBF would be, from 1992, steroid free. Steroid replacements continued to be advertised within the magazine and were combined with articles decrying the scourge of anabolic steroids in bodybuilding. This about face, as the *Wrestling Observer* noted at the time, did little to help the WBF's reputation as a 'real' bodybuilding federation (Observer Staff "ICO PRO" 4-5).

Confusion in the WBF concerning the 'truth' about steroids was echoed in articles on nutrition. The idea of certain food being 'pure' and others being 'dirty' is not a new trend but is one which intensified in fitness circles in the early 1990s. A regular *Lifestyles*' column during this period focused on the truth about the nutritional purity of foods. Thus, readers were told of toxic mercury levels in tuna, the dangers of dietary fat or how to count calories in restaurants (Kleiner 33-35). Susan Kleiner penned several articles on 'Chemical Cocktails' by which Kleiner meant foods with additives (Kleiner 33-35). Throughout 1991, *Lifestyles* devoted a great deal of column space to the danger of certain food additives like aspartame. The general tenor of such articles was that additives were unnatural substances which could be blamed for everything from America's obesity epidemic to elbow pain (Falkel 70-73). In articles, authors returned to the question of whether such 'chemical' substances could be safe for the body. Discounting, momentarily, that *Lifestyles* and the WBF supported the use of anabolic steroids during this period, such articles were made even more problematic because of the magazine's advertising. Aside from the 'steroid replacement pac's', *Lifestyles* also promoted Vince's new supplement chain, ICO-Pro ("IcoPro" 90-91). Manufactured

in a factory, ICO-Pro's various protein powders and weight gain powders were advertised as more effective than natural foods. Readers were told that natural foods were the best foods in nature, that food additives were dangerous and could, at their worst, permanently damage one's health. At the same time, the magazine promoted steroid using bodybuilders, steroid replacements, and processed protein powders. This tension between truth and untruth was never resolved in the periodical's short tenure and at times incurred the ire of outside commentators. Aside from Weider's own magazines, Dave Meltzer of the *Wrestling Observer* regularly commented on the WBF's dishonesty in nutrition.

This is all a new con to set up selling food supplements (ICOPRO) which the bodybuilders will endorse to make teenagers believe that's the secret for developing these physiques when the real secret is heavy drug use and superior genetics and most don't even use supplements and even among those who do, it isn't much of a factor in building a freaky physique.

(Observer Staff "WBF" 15)

*Lifestyles* struggled to assert what was, and was not, acceptable in terms of nutrition. The periodical, its editor, and certainly its owners, struggled to assert the 'realness' of the WBF itself. In the magazine's opening run of editorials, the editor Tom Platz, continually spoke of the WBF as 'bodybuilding the way it should be' ("Ripped & Venous" 10-12.). This served as a means of defining the WBF against its competitors but, more importantly, sought to answer questions from critics about the WBF's authenticity as a sporting organization. The late 1980s and early 1990s was a time when professional wrestling, and especially the WWF, was publicly acknowledging its predetermined status (Assael, and Mooneyham 55-56). Although eschewing the idea that wrestling was fake, court cases and high-profile scandals forced the WWF to admit that matches were predetermined in advance. Turning to the WBF, this presented problems. Bodybuilding, as a sport, is a subjective enterprise and there have been several significant examples of bodybuilding victories that were disputed by fans and judges as 'fixed.' In the inaugural *Lifestyles*' issue, Rochelle Larkin stressed that although the WBF and WWF were

owned by the same parent companies, the WWF would not dictate the policies of the WBF (Larkin 4). This did little to silence claims that WBF contests were predetermined well in advance. This same message was given several months later by Tom Platz whose assertion that "the WBF and WWF are sister federations, which will remain separate and distinct," was done to address bodybuilding rumours that the WBF would be predetermined (Platz 15).

For the next several months Platz, and to a lesser extent Larkin, promoted the message that the WBF was 'legitimate,' that the WWF was entirely absent from the organization and that the federation was, above all, 'authentic.' At several points in 1991, Platz used his editorial column to 'tackle the rumours' surrounding the Federation's legitimacy (Platz 16). These rumours ranged from accusations that the WBF used predetermine shows to allegations that the WBF acted as a 'farm system' for the WWF whereby bodybuilders would eventually be hired as wrestlers. Part of the problem with the WBF was the subjectivity of bodybuilding itself. To overcome this problem, *Lifestyles* routinely claimed that bodybuilders were the 'hardest working athletes' in the world because their sport demanded continuous attention to one's diet and training program (Platz 18c). Thus, articles focused on individual workouts, the 'pain' WBF athletes experienced during training and their self-discipline (Platz 18). Where the football or baseball star could point at their records and 'objective' successes, the bodybuilder was forced to assert their realness through the bodies they presented. This subjectivity lent itself to suspicions that the WBF would predetermine contests.

Exacerbating rumours and suspensions were efforts in *Lifestyles*, and the WBF's accompanying television programs, to create bodybuilding 'characters' for WBF athletes. In the past, bodybuilders, like Arnold Schwarzenegger, gained notoriety based on their charisma and persona (Holmlund 38-42). The WBF went one step further than mere charisma and, instead, sought to create exaggerated personas for each of their athletes. In direct mimicry of wrestling characters, the WBF assigned wrestling inspired personas to

each ‘Superstar’ ranging from the aggressive biker, the entitled rich man, or the California surfer. This also included a superhero inspired character for bodybuilder Aaron Baker and an alien fighting aesthetic for ‘The Future’ Jim Quinn. While such characters were easily identifiable in wrestling circles, save perhaps for the alien fighter, they were unknown in bodybuilding (“WBF Championship 1991” 18-24). Blurring the lines between fiction and reality, the WBF sought to superimpose personalities on their athletes. For an organisation continually pleading its authenticity, the fabricated personas were problematic at best.

What furthered the troubled nature of these personas were the storylines attached to them in *Lifestyles* magazine. Not content to simply dress athletes in specialised attire, the print arm of the WBF often included fictitious stories involving the characters in question. ‘The Future’ Jim Quinn was perhaps the best example of this. Labelled ‘The Future’ of bodybuilding, Quinn’s live posing performances featured smoke machines, minimalist techno music and ‘time machines.’ Writing in the build-up to the second WBF competition, *Lifestyles* featured a story of Quinn on a ‘foreign planet.’ Dressed in a singlet and short gym shorts, Quinn carried a laser gun into battle against ‘huge’ alien ‘predators.’ Over three pages, the article detailed Quinn’s battle with his alien counterparts. The article itself ended on a cliffhanger—‘Can Jim manage to save himself and complete his mission?’—and was surprisingly not continued in future issues despite claims it would be (Martin 69-77). Quinn’s story marked the strangest effort to create a new persona for a WBF athlete, but it was not unique. Bodybuilder Aaron Baker was given a hybrid superhero/vampire persona by the organization.

In biographies of Baker, *Lifestyles* spoke of Baker in reverent tones.

The dark. For most of us, it is a place of unseen terrors and lurking danger ... For Aaron Baker, the Dark Angel, it’s home.

(“The Dark Angel” 68-74)

What differentiated Baker’s treatment from Quinn was that articles on Baker were

interspersed with questions on his diet and training regimen. There was thus an effort to balance out fiction with reality. This proved to be a far more common approach with other WBF athletes like Mike Quinn, whose aggressive motorcycle gimmick was balanced out with stories grounded in his life (“Easy Rider” 24-31). Importantly both wrestling and bodybuilding communities rallied against the influence that wrestling personas seemed to be having within the WBF. Magazines branded the WBF the ‘We Bore Fans’ federation while wrestling magazines like the *Wrestling Observer* began to question the use of ‘larger-than-life exaggerated and unique personalities’ (McGough 25). The *Observer* proved to be particularly acerbic in its evaluation of this approach.

The issue that hits the newsstands on Tuesday showed signs of desperation with the sleazy photos of Mike Quinn and the girl on the motorcycle; and appears to have been ‘buried’ when it comes to display space in a lot of newsstands.

(*Observer* “Olympia” 3-4)

Throughout its short life-span—it lasted for just two years—*Lifestyles* was subject to the varying fortunes of the WBF itself (Fair 315). It acted as a second point of reference for fans and, if reports are to be believed, was never a particularly popular magazine. It struggled to balance the wrestling gimmicks incorporated into the Federation with its overt desire to be ‘real’ and legitimate. This struggle was not confined to a particular area but repeated itself again and again in articles on WBF superstars, nutrition, and supplements. Like the shows themselves, the real and the fabricated came in constant contrast and this tension was never truly resolved.

## When bodybuilding meets ‘Cats:’ the final WBF show 1992

These personas and themes were upheld in the WBF shows in 1991 and 1992. While snippets of early shows remain, the 1992 show is accessible in its entirety and this, coupled with the fact that it

represents both the pinnacle and the end of the WBF (as so often in this story the high point and the low point are one and the same thing), is the reason why our analysis will focus particularly on this. This final show illustrates the tensions in the WBF's aesthetic, objectives, and reception, extending those identified in *Bodybuilding Lifestyles*.

In one sense the show prides itself on its realism. Platz adds legitimacy to the commentary team which also includes McMahon and Heenan. McMahon plays the role of the celebratory but informed pundit; Heenan is the excited newbie, calling each performer as his pick for the win. Platz, on the other hand, cuts through the typical wrestling commentary with an acknowledgement of sporting competition. Take, for example, the entrance of Iron Warrior Mike Christian who McMahon and Heenan praise. It is at this point, overwhelmed by the spectacle of Christian's entrance—his film sees him forged and then presented on stage in a wooden box as if he has literally been made out of iron—and the bodybuilder's physique, that Heenan exultantly compares the WBF show to the stage musical *Cats* and the spectacle of Vegas. He is here associating the show firmly with the theatrical, the lavish, and, notably, the pretend or even fake. The former is one of the examples of 'McTheatre,' a phrase coined by Dan Rebellato to describe theatre (specifically megamusicals) in which, in our globalised world, "liveness takes second place to smooth reproducibility" (Rebellato). These sorts of productions give the impression of liveness while actually, barring any unlikely technical hitch, being infinitely repeatable. In essence they, at least partly, fake liveness. Interestingly, Laine has recently read the practices of professional wrestling alongside McTheatre (83). Las Vegas, Heenan's other comparison, was critiqued by Jean Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation* as the classic site of twentieth-century advertising, emblematic of "superficial saturation and fascination" (91). While presumably unaware of these associations, Heenan inadvertently chooses two examples of corporate-driven theatrical production. Platz,

however, voices an entirely different opinion of Christian cutting through Heenan and McMahon's rhetoric by saying that the performer is a little soft this year. This, of course, is due to the supposed banning of steroids for this show as opposed to the 1991 event. It is a comment Platz makes regularly throughout the show, bringing an awkward sense of the real to the extravagant exhibition. In one sense it brings an authentic competitive feel to proceedings, while satisfying those pushing for the banning of steroids. But on the other, it detracts from the theatricality. When watching *Cats*, I do not wish to be told that they aren't real cats; it is a dull night in Vegas with grumbling friends who complain about its kitsch fraudulence. In the same way, while watching the WBF spectacle, Platz's reflections feel based in another genre altogether.

The same tension emerges in the characters of the bodybuilders. In a 1991 interview the first champion Gary Strydom talks about the connection he has with the audience: "we're not only bodies, we're personalities," he says ("Gary Strydom"). At first glance, this would appear to be a hope to present something beyond just the muscular body, that is the authentic identity of the performers. Yet, at no stage in this show do the real personalities emerge. Rather, furthering the characters created in *Bodybuilding Lifestyles*, they are submerged beneath some of the typical gimmicks of the wrestling ring producing a hybrid form that appeals neither to wrestling fans—who presumably found the whole show static and lacking in drama—or bodybuilding fans who no doubt saw the presentation as flip-pant. Some of these gimmicks were highly inter-textual. For example, Major Guns Eddie Robinson was a thinly veiled version of Rambo, and Jetman Tony Pearson was seen completing dangerous manoeuvres in a fighter airplane like Tom Cruise in *Top Gun*. Some of the popular culture references are a little more generic, such as Barry de Mey's suave James Bond-like character or the horror show aesthetic of the Executioner Jonny Mourant. Rather than allowing the bodybuilders' real personalities to shine through as Strydom suggests in his interview, these (to

use wrestling parlance) gimmicks undermine the sense of the real that Platz's presence sets up. Interestingly, these later two theatrical devices in particular have been regularly associated with the WWF/WWE. The James Bond character—winning at roulette, wearing the dinner jacket, seducing the lady—is a regular character, especially for European wrestlers, recently for the Swiss superman Cesaro. Only last year, the new NXT UK performers completed a Bond-influenced photo shoot (WWE). The horror aesthetic is a regular trope from the classic Undertaker and Kane to the recent Fiend. In the introduction to their book *Convergent Wrestling*, CarrieLynn D. Reinhardt and Christopher J. Olson describe wrestling as a "polysemous text" (1) for the way it combines influences, images, and language structures. The WBF took a similar approach.

A number of these storylines use wrestling's classic focus on sex and masculinity. De Mey's character is a prime example of this. Wrestling has often been accused of hypermasculinity (Oppliger) and certainly in its celebration of violence and its focus on typical male attributes of winning at all costs and objectification of women, this stands up. For example, Mighty Mike Quinn is seen being dragged to jail in his filmed vignette in a case of mistaken identity. Compere Mean Gene apologises for his absence. Then, of course, in a swerve taken straight out of WWF, he surprisingly appears on stage wearing a straitjacket. While Platz makes a customary comment about Quinn looking soft this year, infusing the whole fantastical spectacle with a nod to bodybuilding realism, the superstar dances with two women in a wholly sexualised display before asserting his manhood yet again by bashing together the heads of the policemen charged with bringing him back to jail. This story extends the photographs published in *Lifestyles* and reflects numerous WWF/WWE tropes: the dangerous straitjacketed unstable psychotic (characters such as Mankind or Dean Ambrose); the heroic escapee, a thorn in the side of the police force (Stone Cold Steve Austin); and the sexually-alluring virile man flanked by adoring

women (McMahon himself dancing with the Dudes in 1998 or the Godfather and his problematically labelled troupe of dancers called the 'ho train'). As so often happens in wrestling, the WBF show was balanced between the hypermasculine and the queer. Janine Bradbury, focusing on former WWF characters Goldust and Marlena, understood wrestling as both upholding and resisting homogeneous models of masculinity and femininity. Ultimately, she says, wrestling (and particularly the flamboyant yet violent Goldust) "forces the spectator to grapple with ga(y)zing" (114). The WBF's gender performativity, as in the wrestling ring, is likewise both heteronormative and disturbingly queering at the same time.

The storytelling sets WBF apart from bodybuilding shows more generally. Yet what works for wrestling, in its strange combination of parody and reality, fakery and authenticity, wholly undermined the WBF, compelling comparisons with the WWF rather than more established bodybuilding shows. In essence this engendered an antitheatrical backlash from the bodybuilding community. But, conversely, the WBF superstars also make for awkward performers, especially for a crowd used to the overblown performative rhetoric of Hulk Hogan and Macho Man Randy Savage. Wrestlers train as athletes and characters with the best priding themselves on being 'good in the ring,' and 'good on the mic.' Bodybuilders, by comparison, are focused on honing muscular physiques with little attention to acting. This meant that the WBF superstars stacked up poorly against the WWF superstars, almost unanimously telling their fictionalised stories with a degree of uncomfortable self-consciousness.

Even Platz begins to reimagine the spectacle as a WWF show. Discussing the early rounds, he injects some rivalry into proceedings by saying "I thought they were going to fall off the stage and start to wrestle." In Platz's description the stage is the place of order and competitive realism, while the chaotic space just off the stage is reimaged as a hybrid location where the WBF might just become the WWF. In many ways Platz's comment makes one yearn for the visceral energy and

excitement of the wrestling ring. By association this show feels wrestling as a lack, unlike bodybuilding shows in general.

The climax of the show moves the WBF most firmly into the spectacle of wrestling. The top five bodybuilders are announced and perform in a final pose down. The victor is announced: Gary Strydom, the 1991 winner, wins for a second year. There are audible boos in the crowd. It feels as if the audience is challenging the kay-fabe of the WBF, recognising the result not as a playful, malleable outworking of an entertaining show but rather as “a con, a fix” (Laine 93). Strydom by no means has the best physique of the final five. It feels as if he has, as in wrestling, been pushed by those in charge, namely (as always) McMahon. He stands alongside WWF/WWE wrestlers who have also fulfilled this function. In reality, of course, any wrestler who wins a title or has a good run has received a push from the company but, normally, this push is carefully covered: the wrestler has “fought his way to the top,” has been “brave” or has “cheated.” But, at times, this backstage actuality has made its way into storylines. Legends Austin, Mick Foley, and The Rock have all been the wrestlers the company has pushed as a storyline, therefore in a fictional and an actual way; in all cases this marked a ‘heel turn’, that is a move from being a hero to being a baddie. Other wrestlers have been booed by the audience simply because the fans see through the narrative and those wrestlers are perceived as being ‘pushed’ over other wrestlers. Here the real business breaks through the fictionalised performance: John Cena and Roman Reigns would be two examples of these figures. Given the association, it becomes difficult to see Strydom apart from this typical wrestling narrative. It feels as if he is being set up as the heel character to be challenged in forthcoming years by his fellow bodybuilders. This casts doubt on the true competitive nature of the WBF show, again making complex the relationship between the real and the fake. This is speculation as the 1992 show was the WBF’s last.

## Conclusion

“Things were in a slump...”

(Bret Hart, 2017)

Speaking on *Youtube* in 2017, well-known wrestler Bret Hart revealed the anger many WWF wrestlers felt towards the WBF during the it’s short tenure. At that time, Hart was slowly becoming one of the biggest stars in wrestling. Although later relations between Bret and Vince McMahon soured the two’s relationship, his comments on the WBF were illustrative. Interviewed by an incredulous wrestling fan, Bret critiqued the WBF for its vanity, its dependency on anabolic steroids and its lack of entertainment. “There’s no fascination with bodybuilders” was one of many comments the Canadian wrestler uttered in a ten-minute vignette (“Bret Hart Insults”). In a fascinating twist, part of Bret’s criticism centered on the lack of authenticity in the WBF. It was deemed uninteresting, phony, and fake. This fakeness even extended to the steroid enhanced bodies of the athletes themselves. That a wrestler could make such comments about the WBF, and indeed be praised for doing so, stresses the uniqueness of the WBF as a product. During its short two-year sojourn, the WBF struggled with issues of realness and authenticity. It flirted between the real and the fake, the authentic and the inauthentic. The WBF marked a new turn in American entertainment which expressed anxieties about the body and its cultivation. Fans were given nutrition and exercise advice, competitions designed to determine the most desirable body, and television programming on how to fully adopt health as a lifestyle. At the same time, the Federation struggled to convince individuals that it was nothing more than a wrestling side product. Enforced personas, outlandish promotions, and pay-per-view events did little to help this case. While it is tempting to view the WBF as an aberration, a fairer assessment is that the WBF marked a new turn in American entertainment which sought to make bodybuilding, and bodybuilding cultures, a point of intense focus. The 1990s was a period when wrestling cultures emerged more and more in

American media. Where the WBF failed but the WWF succeeded was in the former's inability to fully traverse the nexus between real and fake.

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