



Figures. Dr. Braga-Mele posing at her gym, R3 (left image), and at the Barrie Naturals regional event (center and right images).



NOT JUST A FEAT OF STRENGTH



Bodybuilding has proven to be a test not just of physical strength, but also of mental fortitude, and its positive effects on life are countless.

BY ROSA BRAGA-MELE, MD, MED, FRCSC

I've always been athletic. I'm a long-distance runner, a second-degree black belt in karate, and have always been a bit of a *gym rat*, but I had never really considered taking up bodybuilding seriously. That is, until I met a physical trainer at my gym who trains bodybuilders. We started talking about the training process, and, just like that, the seed was planted. That conversation sparked my desire to embark on the journey to becoming a bodybuilder.

When you undertake a journey like this, whether for fitness or weight loss, you have to ask yourself, "Why am I doing this? What is my goal?" My goal was twofold: first, to tone my body and lose a bit of weight; and second, to see if I had the mental and physical stamina to get stage-ready, or ready to compete in a bodybuilding contest. It really

is more of a mental game than a physical one.

Diet and healthy food choice are key. I gave up sugars in the beginning, which felt almost like a withdrawal. Once I got my diet under control—eating high protein and healthy carbohydrates—I embarked on the bodybuilding process, which required a lot of time in the gym and a commitment to working compound muscle groups and doing cardiovascular exercise every day. Pursuing this adventure required 1.5 to 2 hours in the gym every day. Generally, my day would consist of waking up early, trying to get to the gym before heading into the office, and then hitting the gym after work as well—oh, and raising three kids at the same time.

But again, more than physical endurance and stamina, bodybuilding is a sport of mental endurance and

stamina. There were many ups and downs and many moments of feeling like I just couldn't do it. But thanks to determination, a great coach's shoulder to cry on, and amazing family support and cheerleading, I kept going.

After 6 months of training, I went to a regional prequalifying event at which I earned one first place and two second place medals, which allowed me to advance to the Canadian nationals. I participated in what is known as Women's Physique, All Natural, with no supplemental drugs at all.

When I went to the Canadian nationals, a week later in Toronto, I placed fourth in my category of women's physique for my height class, which was between 5'4" and 5'6". Because I am 50 years old, I was also able to compete in an older age group, the masters.

I placed fourth. My ultimate goal was to get an International Federation of Bodybuilding & Fitness professional card, but, to do so, one has to place first overall in every category in women's physiques, against height and age, so I didn't quite make it. My goal now is to continue doing karate and to continue bodybuilding, this time lifting heavier and eating a bit differently to build more mass and, hopefully, make the changes required to continue competing.

There's so much dedication, willpower, and hard work required in bodybuilding. You have to set goals for this because, without a goal, it's hard to hit the gym for 1 or 2 hours every single day. It is a many-year process because it takes time for your muscles to mature and develop. It also takes time for your skin to tighten over those muscles if you've had any weight fluctuations. Time is key, as is dedication over time and mental determination.

One of the best things that has come out of my pursuit of bodybuilding is what the change in diet and physical activity has given me: better focus, endurance, and energy. I'm now finding that I have more energy and, in turn, my performance at work has improved as has my surgical judgement and stamina, and the arthritis that I had in the past has improved. It really has made a difference in all aspects of my life. ■

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