

Sue Gafner: Busier Than A One-Armed Paper Hanger.

Contributed by Steve Wennerstrom, IFBB Women's Historian
Monday, 31 March 2008

It is one of the most commonly asked questions in women's bodybuilding, now that three decades have passed since its earliest days. What ever became of..... so and so? The sport of bodybuilding has seen thousands of women come and go from the competitive stages over the years - many of whom are still remembered vividly for what their presence and physiques contributed to the judgment of the muscular female body, and the evolution of the sport in general.

It is one of the most commonly asked questions in women's bodybuilding, now that three decades have passed since its earliest days. What ever became of..... so and so? The sport of bodybuilding has seen thousands of women come and go from the competitive stages over the years - many of whom are still remembered vividly for what their presence and physiques contributed to the judgment of the muscular female body, and the evolution of the sport in general.

Sue Gafner is one of those who managed to leave her considerable imprint on the sands of the sport's history, particularly as a competitor who valiantly fought the reality of opponents who were considerably larger. Her lasting legacy is a notable one.

It was 1987 when a tiny Sue Gafner made her way to the competitive bodybuilding stage at the NPC Palm Springs Muscle Classic. Mind you, her entry in this event wasn't a dedicated plan of attack on the unsuspecting bodybuilding world, rather, merely an outlet for the weight training she took up to drop some weight after falling into what she called the 'Great American Diet' of processed junk food and the dizzying array of fast food establishments.

Prior to 1987, the 23-year-old Gafner admits that she was far from a jock in school, and didn't possess the necessary discipline needed to compete in any sport - let alone an activity as demanding as bodybuilding. Her interests at the time went more along the lines of choir singing and gospel music.

But when she started weight training, she found that her body responded quickly, so fast in fact, that within less than four months she was looking at entering her first bodybuilding contest at the behest of gym members who recognized the positive gains she was experiencing. In an early article on Gafner in Muscle & Fitness she related that she was an "accidental bodybuilder". Little did she know that she was about to make a head-on collision with the highest levels of success in the sport.

The Contest Road

Sue Gafner's career as an amateur bodybuilder amounted to just seven contests spread over a four-year span, and four of those were of the national/international variety.

After winning her class at the Palm Springs event, followed by an overall victory at the NPC Tournament of Champions in 1987, Gafner added a runner-up lightweight finish at the 1988 NPC California before embarking on national level shows.

After her entry at the California, Gafner made the jump to the NPC USA a few months later. That year, the USA was a drug-tested event and when she left the stage at the evening show assuming she had finished a very respectable third in the lightweight class, imagine her surprise to learn later that she had, in fact, won her division after the first two finishers tested positive. Presto, Sue Gafner was the USA lightweight champion.

In 1989 Gafner moved on to the NPC Nationals in the hopes of turning pro. But she ran into one of the best lightweight bodybuilders ever to compete in the amateur ranks - Susan Myers. From Maryland, Myers was remarkably well-defined with impressive muscular thickness in every bodypart. Gafner's runner-up placing could not be argued. Weighing only 112 pounds at that contest, Gafner was quite simply out-muscled, but the finish served to motivate her to come back with a vengeance. She sequestered herself away in the gym for 12 months in an effort to leave no doubt in judges minds that she was a National champion caliber competitor when it came time for the 1990 NPC Nationals. Her dedication paid off as she not only won the NPC Nationals, but she did so as a middleweight. "I think the added pounds gave my physique a fuller look and a better overall shape," recalls Gafner. "The year's training definitely made the major difference, but I also came in as tight as I could to show the muscle separation."

Before finally making the jump to the pro ranks, Gafner traveled to Mexico City for the 1990 IFBB World Amateur Championships. The event was held a month following her victory at the Nationals, and the additional dieting over that period of time took its toll on her ability to retain the sharpness she had showed in winning the Nationals. Nevertheless, she entered as a middleweight, and took the runner-up silver medal in a very competitive field of 15 women.

On To the Pros....and a Ton of Publicity

The 80's and early 90's were the halcyon days for women's bodybuilding as it related to the magazine publicity that time period generated and competitors enjoyed. Frequently female bodybuilders appeared on the covers of the magazines in the bodybuilding industry. And Sue Gafner's likeness was a notable inclusion in the early 90's.

In addition to the obvious coverage she received from specialty mags like Women's Physique World and Female Bodybuilding, Gafner also became a regular in Flex with frequent training articles. And from 1991 to '93, she was also given full-length article coverage in Muscle & Fitness, Muscular Development, Ironman, Muscle Mag, and even the unlikely (and now defunct) Muscle Media 2000.

With much of the above-mentioned coverage being fueled by Gafner's ascent to the pro ranks where she made her debut at the 1991 Ms. International (placing sixth), it was her victory at the inaugural Jan Tana Classic later that year which took her notoriety to an international level. Along with her coverage in the United States, Gafner began to pop up in bodybuilding publications in France, England, and Spain, among other locales.

But the remainder of her pro career was spread over less than two years, albeit at the highest levels attainable.

Finishing up the 1991 competitive year after her Ms. International debut and the Jan Tana victory, Gafner added a 10th-place finish in her first visit to the Ms. Olympia. In 1992 she gave the Ms. Olympia her best shot taking another full year of preparation only to drop two slots to 12th. After that searing dose of reality, it was a respectable, but eye-opening fourth-place finish at the 1993 Ms. International that brought Gafner to the final decision that her desire to break into the top three at a major contest probably wasn't in the cards.

"It didn't take a lot of forethought on my part," recalls Gafner. "There wasn't a weight class structure in the pros at the time, and I was just too small to be favorably compared with women who outweighed me by 30 or 40 pounds. I weighed 112 pounds as an amateur and managed to get up to the 120 to 124 pound range as a pro. At an Olympia I was lost in the crowd due to my size....even if I did have a better structure or a more aesthetic overall look than some who finished ahead of me. So I decided to bow out gracefully."

Life After Bodybuilding

All during her competitive career, Gafner had been married while splitting time as a wallpaper hanger and personal trainer - a unique combination of employment occupations if there ever was one. But in 1994 she divorced, and at that point, with no further interest in the competitive endeavors of bodybuilding serving as a distraction, she decided to go back to school.

Living in Orange, California, Gafner entered Chapman College - only a few short minutes from where she lived in Orange. She attended the school from 1994 to 1998 graduating with a Bachelors degree in Food Science Management with a Business minor. She also completed her MBA.

Gafner remarried in 2001 and will celebrate her 45th birthday and her seventh year marriage in April.

Currently, Gafner, who now lives in the Tampa/St. Petersburg area, is working as an independent management consultant specializing in financial compliance, and has every intention of staying connected to the fitness world in the future.

Laughs Gafner, "If it wasn't for the fact that I currently weigh only 102 pounds and am way too small to compete at the pro level, I'm still in great shape. I wake up in the morning and I have veins all over my body, and the muscle definition is still there. Sometimes it even freaks me out."

Whatta tease!

END