

## Joan Bovino: Woman of the Eighties

Contributed by Steve Wennerstrom, MD Editor-at-Large  
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Originally from Merrick, New York, on Long Island, Bovino transplanted herself to California in

1988 to continue what was looking like the start of a very successful bodybuilding career. But as a 5-3, 130-pounder, Bovino's love of the competition had never been an end all to her efforts in building an impressively muscular physique - at least at first.

As Joan often said in her early days of entering contests, "I enjoy training more than competing. What I really enjoy is the act of training. I like the results I see. Training in the gym gives me immediate gratification, and the pain I feel from the training is what I can embrace and is a form of gratification itself. Being on stage makes me very nervous, and I realize it's a necessary evil, I just hope I'll lose some of the nervousness as I compete more often."

Unfortunately, Bovino's love for the stage never did blossom and in the end contributed to her drifting away from the competitive side of the sport.

But while she was a presence on stage, she more than made up for her perceived nervousness.

Beginning in 1987, and competing as Joan Signoriello (before she married), Bovino walked away with the heavyweight and overall titles at the NPC Long Island Championships - although she admits the competition was something less than challenging.

Just a few weeks later, however, she repeated her heavyweight and overall victories at the NPC Empire State, and although the event was a national qualifier, she was in no rush to enter the bigger national contests. Instead, Bovino (then married to Vinnie Bovino) decided to enter the NPC Junior Nationals in 1988, but that plan was aborted when a shoulder injury took her out of the mix.

So, Bovino took the remainder of the year to heal, and then prep for the annual NPC Ironmaiden (now known as the NPC Excalibur). Her patience paid off in dividends when she won the heavyweight and overall crowns at that prestigious California event.

With the coming of the 1989 season, Bovino focused first on the NPC Los Angeles - another of the west coast's prestigious contests during the 80's and 90's, and one which was far more competitive than most state contests at the time. Once again she demolished the field winning the heavyweight and overall titles. After that, the IFBB North American Championships were to be held in Las Vegas and sponsored by Powerhouse Gyms. The event was a pro qualifier and Bovino had high hopes of making that event "her contest". But as often happens, things can change when the contestants lineup on stage for the prejudging. At this event, Bovino ran into an up-and-coming future legend named Lenda Murray. And the results made the event "Murray's contest" - resoundingly.

"I didn't really feel I was ready for that contest," recalls Bovino. "And when I saw Lenda I pretty much knew the show was over. She was amazing. I really didn't have a problem losing to her because she already looked like a pro."

Competitively, Bovino held a reasonable philosophy about her time on stage. In an interview with Women's Physique Publication in April 1989 she said, "I'm trying to look at it not as competing against other women, but competing against myself with other women on stage. It's only natural to compare yourself to other people, but you'll go crazy if you do. You can only govern how hard you work to look your best. You can't govern how good someone else is going to look. I'm pleased with my progress and feel I've gotten better with each show, but you can only go so far so quickly." Those thoughts were about to come to a screeching halt.

Bovino ended up

placing third in the heavyweight class behind Murray and runner-up placer Liz Karp. No slouch as a top amateur bodybuilder herself, Karp went on to win the heavyweight class at the 1989 NPC Nationals, but never moved on to the pro ranks. Bovino, as things turned out, also bowed out gracefully.

"I didn't compete again after the North Americans," says Bovino. "I guess it was a combination of things made me decide to get on with life. I really got caught up in the desire to win and it can be intoxicating. So when I didn't [win], I got discouraged and depressed. While I was competing I liked the idea of being recognized on the street, and I definitely enjoyed my 15 minutes of fame and all the attention. But I had been very tunnel-focused during that time, and I just decided I didn't want to chase that dream anymore. The dedication I had as a bodybuilder had run its course, and at that point I was satisfied to watch Chris (Duffy) continue his competitive career."

During those last contests Bovino had begun dating her trainer - Chris Duffy - who she married in 1993.

"I was still very close to the bodybuilding scene after I stopped competing," relates Bovino. Chris was actively competing at the time and I went to all the shows he entered including the Masters Mr. Olympia. By 1991 I was divorced from Vinnie, and Chris and I moved back to Florida together, and we've been here ever since."

For a time after her competitive days, Bovino admits she also took a trip down a dangerous road experimenting with substance abuse and lots of hard partying. "It was crazy," says Bovino. "And it was really stupid. It has a lot to do with the crowd you find yourself hanging out with, and I ended up going along for the ride. I was glad I matured beyond that part of my life before I did permanent damage to myself."

Joan and Chris divorced in 2005 after 12 years of marriage but remain very close friends. Both are very busy on different life paths and career directions.

Bovino, who is now 51, has created a very successful dog grooming business in Tampa and has actually had to keep the business small to give her client's pets the best possible attention.

"I guess bodybuilding did help with my current career," laughs Bovino. "I can lift those

130-pound Bull Mastiffs up to the table for their grooming and trim, and most groomers can't do that. It's a great career and I love it. I love animals, and caring for them is very fulfilling."

Along with her obvious strength, most groomers aren't as visually impacting as Bovino either.

"It's pretty funny," laughs Bovino. "People are always asking me if I'm going to compete. It's flattering. But I only weigh 110 pounds now (which is only five pounds less than when she entered her first contest in 1987), and that's a long way from when I weighed 130 as a heavyweight at the North Americans. I'm still lean, and the vascularity is nuts. I have genetically muscular legs that will never go away, so when people tell me I'm in great shape, I take it as a compliment.....especially since I don't train seriously at all.

"As for Chris, he's doing great. He's 47 now and going to college and is preparing to enter the nursing school program. He's doing very well academically. His GPA is 3.75. Students consider him 'the old guy'. He wears glasses, but he still stands out in a crowd. He weighs 250 and his arms are completely tattooed.

"He's funny," jokes Bovino. "When he introduces me to new people, he still calls me "his lovely wife Joan".

We'll just call her 'the lovely Joan Signoriello'.

