

Shawn Ray Remembers the Ironman Pro!

Contributed by Dave Palumbo
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DP: How did it feel to be the first IRONMAN PRO Champion back in 1990? Who'd you beat and what do you remember of that show?

SR: When I won the 1st Annual Pro Ironman Championships in my back yard of Southern California, I felt on top of the world for a number of reasons: My entire Family was there!

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All the top Pros who weren't competing where in attendance: Mike Christian, John Brown, Robbie Robinson, Chris Dickerson, Samir Bannout and more! I remember winning the \$10,000 knowing that 2 weeks later the Arnold Classic prize money was going to be \$60,000 and I would be the front runner to win which would validate to my parents that I'd made the right choice 6 years earlier to walk away from my aspirations of becoming a professional football player.

I remember beating a massive Gary Strydom, who won the National Championships the year before I did in 1986 as well. He had placed 5th in the 1988 Mr. Olympia and if I could take him down, the other big guys were not to be feared ever again by me! The line up wasn't very deep and I didn't focus on anyone in particular, Tony Pearson, Vince Comerford & Mike Ashley all kind of stood out but I remembered them all having too many "Flaws" for me to be overly concerned about one or more of them.

I knew if I beat Gary I would win the contest and the rest was history!

DP: Why do you think the IRONMAN PRO is a stepping stone of sorts for TOP PROS to establish a reputation for themselves?

SR: I simply believe that the "Placement" of the contest on the Calendar two weeks prior to the Arnold Classic makes it almost impossible for some guys to resist the temptation of jumping into it to establish themselves as a "Front Runner" for the Arnold by virtue of a Victory. It basically ensures and establishes the winner as "The Man" to beat for the BIG Pay Day in Columbus! In contrast, many guys that have competed in this contest come back annually because of the "Professionalism" of which the contest is run, the stage lighting, the location, time of year as well as the surround events during the weekend.

DP: Flex Wheeler has a record 5 victories at the IRONMAN. Why don't previous years' champions come back to defend their titles anymore?

SR: Economics 101. Like myself, I only competed in this contest on 2 occasions, many of the "Top Guys" who have been fortunate enough to win this contest, don't necessarily feel the "NEED" to win it again and again to "establish" themselves. I won it and never felt the desire to continue adding a contest I previously won to my list of achievements. My true desire like many of the former champions, was to become Mr. Olympia not a multi-Ironman Champion. That said, many top guys these days, following their Mr. Olympia competition, take the balance of the year off to make appearances or rest their bodies and begin training again around the New Year which in turn leaves little to no time to prepare for the Pro Ironman which comes up a couple of months later.

DP: In your mind, who was the best IRONMAN PRO Champion? Why?

SR: Because the cast of "characters" changed from year to year while there were a couple "repeat" multi-champions, it's really hard to say because you judge by who your standing next to in the winners circle which isn't always the best bodybuilders in the world. This is true with all the Grand Prix contests, and the Mr. Olympia where you have to compete to "qualify" against the "Best of the Best" in the entire industry from around the world!

I always tell people typically after the first or the original champion, everyone else are just imitators trying to be better than the original, so the answer to your questions is self explanatory.

DP: I had a hunch you'd pick yourself!

DP: Of the 19 previous contests, which year's lineup was the toughest?

SR: I would have to say 1996. Flex Wheeler won, Paul Dillett was 2nd I was 3rd. It was a very talented line up where anyone of us could have won. All 3 of us were top 5 in the world and Flex nailed it on that day. Bodybuilding back then was I believe at its all time high in terms of participation, fan base, public visibility and popularity!

DP: Tell us about the Titus and Kamali rivalry at the IRONMAN.

SR: Well, these two had been exchanging insults and barbs on the Internet and magazines for some time. Titus had signed up the services of Milos Sarchev and Kamali literally had pissed off or insulted all the top guys and Titus wanted to teach him a lesson in humility. Sadly, Titus admitted he was loading up on "Donuts" and could not stick to the Sarchev regime which in turn lead to him not being able to properly hold his stomach in.

That year I believe they both made the top 5 with Kamali landing in like 3rd and Titus in 4th or 5th. During the Pose down, Kamali was making fun of Titus by sticking his Gut out and pointing to it and then poiting to Craig! Craig responded by mimicking Kamali's Robot Routine in a clowning fashion and the crowd went nutz!

Later in the same year at the Mr. O, Kamali again would place higher than Craig and the two would go on to became Mortal Enemies!

DP: Is it really true that you were instrumental in getting the prize money raised from the original \$10,000?

SR: Yes! A little known fact

Dave but glad you brought it up. Sometime back while posting on the Internet Gossip Boards, I made reference to the fact the Ironman Contest Weekend had grown into a 3 Day EXPO with everything but Table Tennis! Ticket prices increased, sponsorship increased, amateur contests were added, athlete participation was peaking and the fans were supporting the weekend but like 15 or 16 years had passed without a Prize Money increase? Meaning, since 1990 when I first won \$10,000 the prize money was the same in 2004!

I was challenged online by some guys working for Ironman and later semi confronted by Mr. Balik via email to try and put on a contest of my own and then I'd see how hard it was. So I did. in 2005 & 2006 I put on the Shawn Ray Colorado Pro/AM Classic where during both years I raised and gave out \$25,000 to the winner, paid the Top 10 in the contest, and had a \$10,00 Best Presentation Award! Hell, I even added a Pro Figure Contest where we paid the top 5 Girls and the winner got \$5,000. We even held a 2-Day EXPO for 2 straight years! I wasn't a bodybuilding promoter with 15 years experience but I had a passion to rise to a challenge and blow the concept of "It can't be done" out of the water! Not only did I do it but I did it twice and gave out over \$100,000 Prize Money to 30 pro Bodybuilders in 2 years time! I have the nice people at Ironman to thank for making me put the money where my mouth is!

DP: What year did they start offering the Mr Olympia qualification spots to the top 5?

SR: I want to say the year was 2004, the depth of the field was so good they had to allow more guys to qualify.

DP: What do you think of this year's lineup? Who are your favorites? Top 5?

SR: Interestingly enough, many felt this years line up would suck due to the contest being held earlier this year than ever before but, surprisingly, it has stacked up nicely! While there wont be any of the top 6 from the Mr. Olympia Contest, I really believe they landed the best of what's left allowing some fresh blood to have a shot at getting to the Mr. O for the first time ever! The contest will be even more competitive with new guys mixed with a dose of seasoned veterans like Johnny Jackson, Troy Alves, Silvio Samuel and Ronny Rockel.

My Top 5:

1. Silvio Samuel
2. Moe Elmoossawi
3. Johnny Jackson
4. Ronny Rockel
5. Marcus Haley

DP: Do you think the January 24th contest date (3 weeks earlier than last year) will negatively affect the number of competitors and quality of competitors?

SR: As of today there are 28 athletes from 14 different countries including: Japan, Germany, Sweden, England, Lebanon, Russia, Spain, New Zealand and Greece to name a few off hand. I think "Timing" of a contest has more to do with the athletes who train for the show than the actual "Date" of the show. these guys know what's at stake-- 5 Mr. Olympia Qualifications-- which are important to them as well as qualifying early so as to have the next 9 months to train. In my first Pro Ironman there were 10 competitors from the USA, my how times have changed and the Ironman continues to bring the world closer together. This contest, by the way Dave, will also mark the 19th year I will be in attendance! Congratulations to promoter John Balik, Lonnie Teper, Marc Missoric and Mike Neveux for all they have done to bring us memorable moments in the sports history!

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