

1995

Contributed by Shawn Ray
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By Shawn Ray So there we were, flexing, sweating and squeezing with every fiber in our bodies trying to maximize the time and effort we put into the months and years of training for this very moment. We saw each other coming years in advance but were powerless to stop the charge so we pressed on, focusing on what we did best preparing ourselves for the inevitable collision that was sure to come sooner or later.

IFBB Official Stage announcer, Wayne DeMilia made the call, "Shawn Ray on one side, Kevin Levrone on the other and Flex Wheeler in the middle!" A hush comes over the crowd then a rolling sound of applause but whom are they cheering for, I thought to myself? I was a former National Champion that arrived on the scene years before my time yet held my own for a couple of years while both Kevin and Flex were bigger with much more "Wow" factor coming into the Olympia and were equally decorated athletes with Kevin being a former National Champion in 1991 and Olympia 1st Runner Up 1992, as was Flex with exception that he was a former Mr. USA Champion in 1992 but had an equal resume in so far as making a Pro Impression winning the Ironman and Arnold in 1993 as well as 1st Runner up in the same year at the Mr. Olympia! In 1994, I too would add a 1st Runner Up at in the Mr. Olympia to my resume joining Flex and Kevin in this fraternity with Gasapri, Labrada & Makkawy. Now, here we all were in 1995 finally on the same stage in spite of taking different routes that all lead to the same destination and with great anticipation! Who among us would be able to dethrone the freight train named Dorian? Looking back, we all got a good "Sniff" of what it must be like to be King to the reigning Three Time Mr. Olympia in the form of Dorian Yates but the real story for all of us was that we all felt we should have won at least once? Strange as it may seem, we all participated the ensuing next 3 years into Dorian's reign of terror on the Olympia stage before his run came to an abrupt end after Dorian's body could no longer hold up from the intense beating he put it through year in and year out to maintain control of the title beyond 1997. I am often asked, "If not for Dorian, do you think Pro Bodybuilding would be different had Flex, Kevin or you won the title?" With a wee bit of reservation in my voice I typical response was always, "Hell yea!" I say "reservation" because I like to live in the real world and deal with the cards I'm dealt, saving my dreams for when I am sleep at night. Truth be told I'm no "Day Dreamer." The reality of that time was the landscape of professional bodybuilding had changed and was changing toward bigger more massive guys and the Judges had no problem rewarding it. Flex was no "Mass Monster" to be sure; he had all the classical lines of a Greek God with small joints and full muscle bellies. While Kevin had real thick deep striations etched into his heavily muscled frame with Chest, Shoulders, Traps and Arms to die for! What saved Kevin was the fact that he could dial his conditioning in while remaining under 250lbs and maintain having a small waist. Myself, I had caught the tail end of an era gone by where smaller more aesthetic symmetrical physiques ruled the stage until Lee Haney vanquished those days for good in the mid 80's leaving the canvas for those Jurassic Mass Monsters of the 90's to run roughshod over the sub 220lbs bodybuilders on sheer size alone for good! The "Epic" battle that was to be Ray, Levrone & Wheeler was effectively side tracked and tossed into somewhat of a "CYBER" conversation rather than reality due to the fact that Dorian picked up where Lee Haney left off and Ronnie advanced what Dorian had begun. In the year 1999, I personally began to question what I was trying to accomplish in realizing the goal of obtaining the ever elusive Sandow Trophy which for many of us was no different than obtaining the "Holy Grail" and somehow find its way into my possession so I lost heart and quit pushing myself to pursue "The Dream." Flex began to change his regime which in effect changed his look; subsequently killing off what potentially could have been a "Masterful" work of Art reminiscent of his first Arnold Classic victory in 1993. What he created was still good enough to land him many IFBB Pro Titles and accolades from the fans but the added Mass and extra Bulk, blurred and altered all that was beautiful and classical about this man-child's physique. Needless to say, the added mass did not destroy his grace and beauty, as he finished his career being inducted into the IFBB Hall of Fame when it was all said and done. However, the changes to his physique did put an end to "what might have been" had Flex been able to continue being the "Flex" of 1993 and doing what he did to achieve that look sans trying to keep up with Dorian and Ronnie. Kevin conversely, could handle the extra size but only to a "degree." When he came in a tad too heavy, he became vulnerable and beatable for guys not in his league. Hence, Kevin's competition weight would begin to fluctuate as would his Olympia placing's which would take Kevin into more and more Grand Prix Contests where he would experience greater success having the time to make adjustments and corrections from show to show. Kevin was strong and powerful, he had the girth and look to prove it but what made him stand out was his execution of the Poses. His Side Chest, Side Tri, Most Muscular poses were his strengths, however when he came in a tad too heavy, his Abs, Back and Thighs suffered due to water retention and lack of detail. Kevin was consistent in that he was always a top 6 Guy in the Mr. Olympia garnering 4 1st Place Runner ups before his Hall of Fame Induction in 2008 but one could not place "Money" on which Kevin would show up from year to year as he was in a constant battle of Size or Conditioning? A colorful Poser whose choice in Posing Music was reflective of his personality but deep into his career became disenchanted with the landscape and the efforts he put into becoming Mr. Olympia and I am certain Dorian and

Ronnie contributed to his fatigue as they did me and Flex. In another time and a different era, Flex, Kevin and I would have been a "Hotly Contested" Contest to witness! Sadly, for all three of us came into the game while it was changing and evolving before our eyes in a manner unbecoming of why we became bodybuilders in the first place. The envelope continually being pushed in the direction of Size and Freakiness made all of us vulnerable to ultimately falling out of love with our passion. How cool it would have been if each of us were to have obtained 1 Mr. Olympia Title while competing. Maybe it would have made Dorian and Ronnie train harder and blow our minds even more. Possibly we could have changed the direction the sport went heading into the new millennium? Better yet, a victor by one or all of us could have opened some doors that were gradually closing as Dorian and Ronnie ran off with 14 yrs worth of Sandow Trophies between them.

Speaking of what might have been or could have happened or should have happened, all 5 of us are now retired, in the Hall of Fame and in our 40's. In our own way "Paying it Forward" for those would be bodybuilders to glean knowledge and wisdom we are able to share with them on their personal journeys. The pain of "Not having" as Sandow Trophy on our mantles is bearable and livable but the thoughts of "What might have been" creep into all of our minds as we watch and witness the passing of Mr. Olympia Contests year after year wondering where our sport is heading and has it really changed? Like all things, they change and we move on but it's always nice to reflect and remember where we came from hoping to gain some insight to where we are heading. After this year's Mr. Olympia I still have no idea since after 45 years there are still only 12 Mr. Olympia Champions when I know of at least 3 names that should have been added to that list! The passage of time heals the wounds but that doesn't mean the pain goes away when we look at the Scars.