

In Conversation with Sergio Oliva

With Brian D. Johnston

BDJ: How did you meet Arthur Jones; what lead to your involvement with him?

SO: Jones initially contacted me from Deland, Florida. He wanted me to fly to Daytona Beach to check out what he was doing, and to give an opinion of his machines. So, I flew down and tested them, and I found them to be quite different from other, regular machines. He then asked if I wanted to go through one of his routines while under his supervision. And I said, "yes." It was very intensive... very powerful... and very different from other routines.

BDJ: Provide an example of a routine you did at that time.

SO: Jones would put you in a routine starting with legs. The exercises were carried to the point where you could not possibly do any more reps -- to the point of not being able to move the weight. A routine, for instance, would have you start with a squat to muscular failure. Then when you were finished, he would put you in the Nautilus squat machine and that combination would beat the hell out of you. By the time you finished, you would not have the energy to do anything. Then he has you immediately doing the regular free weight bench press, followed by a Nautilus chest machine... then more exercises for the remainder of the body.

BDJ: So, Jones had you alternate between free weights and machines?

SO: He would only recommend the machines, but I wanted to use free weights also. But when we started to get close to the competition, there was no way I could do both... no way. The machines alone would do it for me. If you don't use the machines the way we did, then it's a piece of cake and you can easily include other exercises in between. But with Jones's method, there is no way... you keep going until you can no longer move. And when you think you're going to rest, he has you going to another machine! By the time you get to the other machine, you feel like you're going to die, pushing yourself to the maximum again. When finish, all you can do is lay down on the floor.

BDJ: Did Jones train in your presence, and if so, did he train that hard?

SO: He had his own routine and method of using those machines. I saw other people use the machines, but it was not the same way that Jones used them. He had a machine for each muscle, and they way he used them and instructed people to use them, it felt like you were going to throw up. Sometimes he would get people to use machine after machine, and when you thought you were finished, he would get you to do a squat! It was unbelievable.

BDJ: A legendary workout had you train immediately after Casey Viator, performing a full body workout. Reports indicate that you could not complete the workout very well and was reduced to using relatively light weights in order to complete it. Is that account very accurate?

SO: Yes. That was my very first workout when I went down to Florida. Casey already lived there with Jones and was used to the workouts. I wanted to also workout, and I thought, "Jesus Christ!" I believed that I could not do it, having trained so hard for so long. That's when he put me through all the machines. By the time I got to the last one, I thought I was going to throw up on the floor. But as you continue going every day, your power, endurance, determination increases so much that you are able to handle that kind of routine. It was the way that he did it that was different. Too many people used them like they were using free weights – pumping and resting.

BDJ: I believe you may be the only person to officially develop a muscular arm with a height (from the top of the biceps to the bottom of the triceps) greater than the height of one's head. Did this phenomenon occur while training with Jones?

SO: This occurred with Jones, around the time of the 1972 Mr. Olympia in Essen, Germany. You see, Jones tricked everybody. He would invite them down and pay for the trip to test his machines. Everyone went down... Columbu, Arnold, Zane... everybody. And as soon as you arrived he would start measuring your arms cold, then he would tell you how much you can increase in a couple of days, and nobody would believe it. All those Weider magazines claiming 21-22" arms would have everyone coming down to 18-19"... and the only 20.5" cold was my arm. After going through his workouts, my arm was almost an inch bigger, and that happened for everybody. Arnold's arm was 19.75", and Weider had him in the magazines with 22.5". It was ridiculous -- all their measurements came down when Jones measured them. It was during that time that Jones measured my arms and my head, and I couldn't believe that my arms were bigger than my head... I didn't pay attention up to that point.

BDJ: I believe your initial meeting with Jones was around the same time that Arnold beat you during that very controversial Mr. Olympia in Essen, Germany?

SO: Yes, it was around then that we started training together, but was actually about a year before when I started training with Arthur to prepare for the Mr. Universe in London.

BDJ: The one picture I remember of you from Essen, Germany was when you held your arms up over your head -- it was very striking. You're also, perhaps, one of the few who can hold that pose and look good?

SO: Ah, yes, the Victory Pose. A lot of bodybuilders try to do it, but the problem with the Victory Pose is that you have to have so much muscle. Your lats have to be tremendous, and the waist very tiny. Plus the lats have to be linked to tremendous triceps and the chest has to be huge; otherwise you look flat from the front when you raise the arms. And when you work your way up, the forearms have to be huge, otherwise they look small connected to the triceps. And that pose came out of no where; I did it, but don't know how or why. I was posing in a country in the 1960s, I lifted my arms up, and everybody went bananas! From that day on everybody started calling me the Myth, and named it the Victory Pose. And after that if I didn't hold that pose they wouldn't let me off the stage (laughter).

BDJ: Judging from past photos, I believe you were your biggest while training with Jones.

SO: No question about it. And it's too bad... I should have stayed with him. When I went to London in 1970 for the Mr. Universe, everyone knew I beat those guys, including Bill Pearl... I was given second place. From there I was to go to the 1971 Mr. Olympia, in Paris. I spoke to Serge Nubret who asked that I go to the Mr. Olympia since Joe Weider wouldn't be there to fix the contest. I then flew to Paris, and while there Joe found out I was going to compete. And he refused... he would not let me compete. He said I was suspended for a year because I competed in the non-IFBB sanctioned Mr. Universe in London the year before. He used any kind of trick. He allowed me to do a posing exhibition, but not compete. In 1972, the Mr. Olympia promoter called everyone to go, and everyone did. But Joe didn't want Arnold to go, but Arnold wanted to compete. (I have nothing against Arnold, he has done very well; many people used him in the beginning, then he used them.) Arnold competed in Essen. By that time, the training I had with Jones allowed me to win the contest by miles. People are still talking about Essen '72. Even Arnold himself said that he didn't win, that it was nothing but politics... it was nothing but politics, but they gave it to him. After that contest Weider put the promoter out of the promotion business. Serge Nubret used to be the big man when it came to running contests. Weider also put him out of the business because Serge did not want to run the contests the way Weider wanted to run them -- his way with the placings predetermined.

BDJ: After you left Jones's instruction and went your own way, did you continue training with a HIT approach, or did you return to volume training?

SO: Well, I went back to free weights because I did not have access to his machines. I was definitely more powerful after the experience and was lifting more on the free weights than ever before. I did maintained the same intensity afterward, however.

BDJ: The reason I brought that up is that previous issues of muscle magazines, and throughout various Weider encyclopedias and books, it suggested that you performed a much higher volume of training, up to 15-20 sets per muscle group.

SO: I definitely did not do that many sets, but don't forget I didn't have the machines, which were much more intense -- requiring less volume in comparison to free weights. So I had to make up for the reduction in quality. It's politics, the Weider bullshit magazines. But they control everything. If you try and fight it they will do everything to get you out of the way. They control all the contests, equipment and bodybuilders. And bodybuilders have to go with Weider because where else are they going to compete? They have to bend and go with them. But me, I did not care. When I went to Weider I was already Sergio Oliva, so he could not say that he 'made' me. People already knew me from before and that I was with the AAU before going for the IFBB. He could not use me, perhaps to the point where he could claim that he took me out of my mamma's belly.

BDJ: Well, Weider claims to be Trainer of Champions.

SO: When he took Arnold under his wing, Arnold was already competing in London, England for Mr. Universe. He only trained a few people, but that's the propaganda. They also call him the 'Master', but I don't know the master of what... maybe the master of breaking your back and your brains. A lot of politics, and it's too bad. For the younger bodybuilders they have no choice. If you use the drugs, have the physique and want to make money, then you have to go with him. Otherwise, don't use the drugs because you won't have any other place to go. It's all Weider: the Mr. Olympia, Mr. Universe, Night of Champions. They have every body back and front.

BDJ: What opinion do you have of Arthur Jones?

SO: Anything I have to say about Jones is good. He is the only honest man I met in bodybuilding. If he says "I'm going to pay you so much", he does. If he says that he's going to train you a particular way, and next year you're going to look a certain way, then you will look that way. He's the type of person you like to be around; the type of person you like to deal with since he won't screw you or use you. Totally different from those other assholes. And everyone who went down to Florida knows that. And it's too bad... if Jones was the one running all the competitions, there would have been a lot of changes. He should have been the one to run the Mr. Olympia and other contests.

BDJ: What is your opinion on the competitors of today, compared to your competition days?

SO: When I see what they are going through, and what they have to take to be what they are... I wouldn't want it. You can even see how differently the muscle develops on bodybuilders of today versus those of the sixties. The amount of steroids that they use is way over the limit. And that's why you see those physiques... they're tremendous.

BDJ: I find most of the physiques today look like one another; almost clone-like. Competitors of the sixties and seventies each had a special unique look or style.

SO: Yes, they all look the same. And if they have a little bit of shape, they all have the same kind of shape! They all have the same look. And it's hard to differentiate one from the other.

BDJ: What are your thoughts on some of the past Mr. Olympias, in regards to political tampering? How about the 1979 Mr. Olympia between Zane and Mentzer?

SO: Mentzer all the way. There is no doubt about it. But don't forget, Mike came from the outside; Zane was with Weider. Don't let anybody fool you. Zane, Arnold, Columbu, Haney... all those guys were under contract. Now, Lee Haney is my friend and I have a lot of respect for him, but there is no way in the old days that Lee Haney would have won the Mr. Olympia. His physique is unproportional -- a man with a back, but no arms or calves. Then there's Dorian Yates. He has a belly like a cow and no arms. That is not a complete physique. That is not proportional or symmetrical. But being under contract.... Now, if they put Zane and Mentzer together in a contest that was not Weider dominated then Mike would have won. Zane knows that, and Zane is my personal friend.

BDJ: Do you think Haney deserved any of the Mr. Olympia wins?

SO: He may have deserved some Mr. Olympias, but not all... not the guys he competed against. But, he knows. Everybody knows.

BDJ: Could you relay your own experience with drug use?

SO: This is an area of great interest for people. I don't care who wants to take steroids, because that's a personal choice... that's his life. Now, today, everybody has access to them. I even saw in one of the big magazines that Arnold denies having used them, but Arnold was one of the first to bring steroids over to America. And everybody in the old days used them: Zane, Columbu, myself, Arnold, Larry Scott, Harold Poole, Dave Draper, and even Steve Reeves. There's no way to deny it. It wasn't much, nothing like today. But the development of drugs is much different. I used decca and dianabol, and that was something really big at the time; and decca was not considered that bad. It was even prescribed by doctors to help make your bones strong. Today you have guys weighing 200 pounds, and six months later they weigh 250-300 pounds! So you know these guys are taking something unbelievable. When they say they haven't taken any thing, you know that it's phony.

BDJ: I could only imagine what you would look like if you have access to the drugs of today.

SO: Geez... I wouldn't even want to think about it. My God... (laughter). We used to talk about the big deal of taking decca and dianabol. Now the talk is about growth hormone. I see what they are using... the way they look... I tell you, it's scary... I would pass on that. Anybody can go work out and get a physique without steroids, and that is what I recommend. The drugs today is not worth the money or the way it makes you look. The consequences later are going to be big.

BDJ: I notice a lot of people take steroids because they are too lazy to train hard – mostly teenage boys.

SO: Yes that's what it is. But they're making a double mistake. When you take steroids you have to train even harder... otherwise the excess weight later turns into fat. If you train hard, eat well with quality protein, and take a good vitamin and mineral, then you can achieve a good physique. And a good physique comes from about 45% of your genes, whereas the rest is from training. So, if you're going to be something, then you're going to be something. If you're not, then you're not. But with all those steroids, you're going to be one of the group... you're not going to be different. I wouldn't recommend them to anyone... to my friends or any of my family.

BDJ: You're still training to this day. Tell us about it.

SO: I'm 60 years old and I go to the gym five days a week. I enjoy going to the gym very much. When I competed I trained 5 days a week, year round. I'm not like some of the competitors who only trained for six months for a contest then laid back.

BDJ: Physique wise, who do you consider to be the best bodybuilder?

SO: There are a few. One of the best right now is Flex Wheeler. I also like Shawn Ray and Ron Coleman. I compare myself to Flex Wheeler, a little bit. He reminds me of myself, with a tiny waist. My back was much bigger, though. He is the only one with a really complete physique.

BDJ: Your last year of competition was 1985. I've heard from some spectators that they did not care whether you won the contest; it was worth attending just to see the legendary Oliva. Tell us about that.

SO: I could have entered that contest much better, and much bigger... that night was not the same physique that I always carried. I felt sick, like a Zombie. I followed my wife's suggestion in changing my diet. I've always had a problem with my diet. Thank God I had good genes to be able to eat what I want. So it seemed everything that I ate, I turned it into muscle. Anyway, she wanted me to follow the diet that Frank Zane followed. But she made a mistake. The diet was all right for Frank Zane's metabolism, but for me, it was not doing the job. I had no power to train and I felt too weak to workout... it was a disaster. If I did it my way, I would have looked unbelievable. The second thing is, and I found this out, that even if I looked like King Kong and cut, they would have given me the same placing. Weider indicated no other placing for me but eighth.

BDJ: A similar thing happened to Mentzer in Sydney, Australia, in 1980 when they gave him fifth place.

SO: That's right, and believe it my friend. And I could not do any better than eighth place because all those guys on the stage are the same ones endorsing his vitamins, proteins, magazines, equipment... I didn't do anything for him, because he didn't do anything for me. As a matter of fact, he took away from me. But I decided to come back for that contest. And who picks the judges? Weider. So, how can you win?

BDJ: What projects and plans do you have for the immediate future?

SO: I regularly do seminars and guest appearances. And I do my seminars different from everyone else. I tell it like it is and allow the audience to ask me questions. Other bodybuilders only talk about the good things. I talk about the good and the bad. People don't always want to hear about the blue and the red, but the black and the white. That is why I'm asked to do seminars all over the world, and people really enjoy them. I'm also working with someone on a book about my life story and competition days. I was supposed to do this book before, but I like to say things they way they are and it was difficult to get interested writers willing to put it all on the line. I don't push or drink protein powders and I won't endorse things I don't believe in. So, in a business sense, I was bad for the business. And this also affected some of the contests in which I competed. The book will discuss these things, but also my Olympic lifting days before bodybuilding, when I prepared for the Pan American games, when I prepared in Russia, all the sports I did in Cuba to escape... basketball, volleyball, boxing, running... I was doing everything, but the competition was too high. I did so much in life that it is not necessary to add or take away from my stories, but it is hard to find someone willing to print the truth. I will tell about the politics and the contests Joe fixed. A lot of people will be against it, and a lot of people are going to know a lot that they don't already know. also, I'm also still working on the police force with about 6-7 years to go.

BDJ: Thank you for your time.

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