

## ***My IFBB Competition Experience During COVID-19***

On July 11, 2020, the National Physique Committee (NPC) and the International Federation of Bodybuilding (IFBB) held a bodybuilding show in Sacramento. It happened to be the first competition hosted in the age of COVID, and I have some reflections:

Those reflections begin exactly 100 years ago. During the presidential election of 1920 – the first election held after World War I – Warren G. Harding campaigned with the slogan, “Return to normalcy.” In other words, let’s get back to the way things were before all of this death and destruction.

Today, we await the second coming of “normalcy” (made up word, but we all understand Warren meant “normality”). We await a time in which grocery stores are no longer viral vectors and our neighbors are not regarded as toxic threats. But between now and normalcy, we must (repeat: must) amend our lifestyles. We must be increasingly empathetic, increasingly thoughtful, and exponentially increasingly cautious. Now is not a time for selfishness.

This may seem a curious position, coming from an IFBB professional bikini competitor. Surely, this is the most selfish division of the most selfish sport, right? Maybe. But maybe also, it is a sport of health, solidarity, and positivity. And maybe those qualities are exactly what we need right now. We (the bodybuilding community) have an opportunity to act as representatives of public health. What else could possibly be more central to our image? Or more “core” than our abdominals to our integrity? Whether we want the role doesn’t matter; we’re stuck with it. Our conduct will never escape appraisal (nay, scrutiny). And those among us exemplifying health in times of hardship (times like this) should be applauded pretty loudly.

So let me offer my first round of literary applause. Hosting a bodybuilding show in the age of COVID (and competing in it and attending it) falls into the category of “novel experiences”... and the category of “rocky terrain.” This last weekend, Spectrum Fitness Productions took the first step into that rocky expanse, hosting the NorCal Championships. My applause go to their genuine effort to uphold safety standards. I repeatedly found them uncomfortably shepherding what turned out to be a partially noncompliant herd of competitors and fans. Despite the disappointment I felt when seeing those individuals publicly devaluing their own health and that of their peers, I remain encouraged by the conscientious efforts of the few, most notably (but not exclusively notably) the staff of Spectrum Fitness Productions. Thank you for setting strong health standards, and for continuing to uphold public health values when ongoing representation required increasing wrangling. I hope the larger community can follow your lead.

Now... let’s go back in time.

As March 28 was approaching – the date I thought I would be taking the Governor’s Cup stage – I was focused. And focused is the quickest road to ripped. And the more ripped I got, the more

eager I became to walk out on the stage. And then the show was canceled. And I was disheartened. But I was also relieved that it was up to others to make those hard decisions. And I was trusting that the appropriate decision was made (today, I have replaced trust with certainty: I am now certain it was the correct decision to cancel). But I still couldn't shake my disappointment. Not until I received the news that shows would be opening back up. The first one would be in Sacramento, CA, on July 11<sup>th</sup>. The resurgence of focus escorted me to ripped, and being ripped topped off my eagerness tank. And on show day, I showed up well-prepped.

Check-ins for the IFBB athletes were held on Friday, July 10<sup>th</sup> at 7pm. Temperatures were checked on the way into the arena, we were all required to wear masks, and every chair was placed exactly six feet apart, likening the floor to an industrial orchard of chair trees. "Don't hug; you have to maintain social distancing." I heard that once, early on, as two competitors attempted to show more camaraderie than transmission prevention protocols permitted.

Below is a picture of me at check-ins. This hold-up-your-number, first-encounter photo is a ritual long maintained by the photographers at these shows. My last name is Acosta. So I'm the first one out of the gates. Number one.



Literal side note: I enjoyed wearing this cute mask I bought on ETSY (profile name on ETSY: AhLannah). It came with a pocket so I could insert my own HEPA filter (which I obviously bought and inserted). In addition to the HEPA filter, it has a make-up shield. A figurative one, as in: no one can see that I'm not wearing any makeup. The mask added enough cuteness without the need for waxes, emulsifiers, and coloring agents.

Post-side note: After all the bikini pros had checked in, the facility was sanitized and reopened for the next group to check in.

## SHOW DAY: JULY 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020

Pre-judging was split into two sessions to permit intermittent sanitization of the rooms. NPC men and IFBB bikini pros were up first, and they were followed by all NPC women divisions. The show went fast. It started around 9:00am and I was on stage by 10:30am. We were allowed to take our masks off as we entered the stage and return them as we exited. Where does this mask go as I do my prancing on stage? Look at my wrist. See the green thing that matches my suit?





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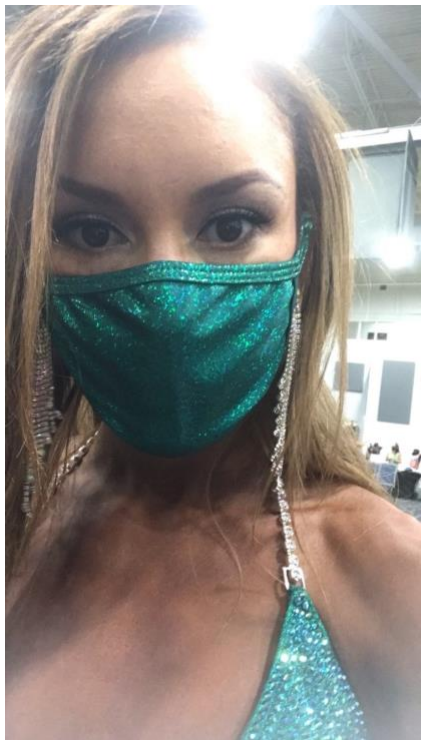


And..... done. This is the final second of excitement detectable on my face (I finally got the chance to get back to the stage!).

After this moment, the excitement didn't vanish, but it was shielded by a very cute, suit-matching mask.

And I decided to keep that mask on during every other moment of the show. It wasn't required while well distanced (e.g., when you're the only person on a very large stage), but why not use that stage as an opportunity to show my support for public health? My support for *bodybuilding* is evident: here I am, on stage, smiling like a child on Christmas morning. But my support for actual *health* isn't being broadcast from that same smile.

So at the night show, I decided to wear my mask even while on stage. No leopard spots on this one, but it is no less cute. It looks like I'm auditioning for some sort of *Scheherazade On Ice* role. See?



Finals started at 5:00pm and the IFBB bikini pros would be taking the stage first. Well, it was *supposed* to start at 5, but there was a delay due to electrical problems. The result of this delay was an approximately-thirty-body pileup in front of the venue. "Pileup" was a carefully chosen word. People were practically on top of one another, shoulder to shoulder. And while those shoulders were artistically sculpted, they were framing a head that was not covered by a mask. I went to great effort to count the total number of masks being worn in this pileup of people: zero. There were exactly zero masks in the entire throng.

As a student of health and, increasingly, a representative of it, this was obviously distressing. It hardly needs to be said that our community needs to do a much, much, much better job. And those who choose to behave in selfish, unsympathetic, and altogether unthoughtful ways, should take up a different passion. Bodybuilding is for people who care about bodies, both their own and those populating their communities.



We would do well to avoid exemplifying bodybuilding as a sweaty club of self-centered, health-illiterate, belligerently dangerous gym rats that every epidemiologist and healthcare worker is trying to shoo away. We would do well to put health first, and to demonstrate that in our conduct.

After counting a grand total of zero masks, I took my luggage (and my deep disappointment) elsewhere, and waited for the show to begin.

About twenty minutes later, the venue opened, and the Spectrum Fitness staff began attempting to enforce the basic CDC regulations. But as the evening crowd seemed a bit more unruly, there were obvious challenges. Many audience members were wearing masks around their chins. I repeat: their chins. There are no ventilatory holes there. No respiration at all occurs at the chin. So what's the point of covering it, I wonder.

Spectrum Fitness staff took time (and even interrupted the show) to make announcements about this behavior and that of the interstate pileup tendencies. And I smiled beneath my permanently-affixed mask each time they did. They were clearly going to great effort to uphold a reputation of health awareness and, you know, dignity. Spectrum Fitness led by example, but for our community to be accepted, and for our sport to grow, we need a lot more people to be leading by example.

Let me conclude: The terrain was rocky, and traversing it was a daring hike, but owing to the integrity and the hard work of Spectrum Fitness, it was a success. A success with some disappointing holes in it. But, being a competitor in a sport of great solidarity and positivity, I like to focus on the positives. And the positive is this: during a challenging time, we got the chance to compete, and the production company did their best to ensure our safety as we did. Today, I look forward (eagerly) to the opportunity for our sport to grow in such a sensitive and difficult time. In other words, now is a vitally important time for ethical anabolism.

Xoxo, Marie

Marie Acosta, BA, IFBB pro

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