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Bodybuilders compete against themselves and their reflections

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The rumbling from the stereo and an occasional rhythmic sound of metal against hard flooring fills the hallway of the Elmen Center. It's 3 p.m. and the building is dotted with coaches and identically dressed student athletes getting ready for practice. The smell of chlorine has crept its way out of the pool and will soon be accompanied by the scent of sweat and caffeinated sports drinks.

There. Through the glass separating the weight room from the rest of South Dakota, with protruding veins meandering under pearl-sweaty skin attached to muscular frames, you can spot them: The group of individuals who, without the recognition, financial rewards and fancy uniforms, share the same commitment and dedication of the many student athletes on campus. They put their bodies through tremendous amounts of stress, pain and weeks of starvation in the pursuit of the perfect physique.

They are the bodybuilders of Augustana.

Sixteen egg whites for breakfast, chicken and vegetables for lunch, some more chicken and veggies with a cup of cottage cheese for dinner, no carbs, no alcohol and no sweets. That's how it is to be senior Ryder Reed.

With his 175-pound body covered in less than eight percent body fat, he deadlifts 555 pounds on a good day—a lift that would have gotten him into Nationals in powerlifting if he had done it in competition.

It's been months since he last took a day off from his lifting routine, and if being a pre-med student isn't time-consuming enough, he still finds time to spend 14 hours in the gym every week.

"It's definitely an addiction," Reed says. "You're supposed to take a week off when you're resting—I don't listen to that."

Reed's training partner, senior Heath Clark, has been lifting since his senior year in high school.

"I see it more as an obsession," he says.

Clark explains how one part of bodybuilding is setting goals and working toward them, but the other part is cosmetic.

"We look in the mirror all the time, every day."

What they're looking for is definition and proportion. Every body part needs to match every other, size-wise. The first sign of a novice bodybuilder is big arms, a big chest and no leg muscles, and that's a ditch these guys don't want to get into.

"Real men train the booty," says Reed.

"Yeah, I always say, I don't want to look like a tornado," says Clark.

Increased strength and muscle mass is just one of the addictive side effects associated with bodybuilding.

"It's like therapy, you know," Clark says. "You can go in there and bang out some weights and you get all that endorphin and dopamine release, so I mean, you just feel so much better. My outlook on life is just a lot better after lifting."



Senior Ryder Reed eats 16 white eggs for breakfast every morning and hasn't skipped a workout in months.

Maia Lavello

Even if Reed and Clark have no plans of stepping on stage covered in oily tanning cream and shiny speedo thongs as Arnold Schwarzenegger and Ronnie Coleman once did, there's still no offseason. They keep up their training throughout the year, but the focus shifts depending on what time of year it is. While the winter is used to bulk up to gain muscle mass, springtime is usually when they start shedding body fat by cutting calories and eliminating carbs completely.

For Clark, working out is the easy part. Dieting, however, is a challenge. But now, with less than six weeks left until the summer starts, he is joining Reed's no-carb diet. In order to maintain as much muscle mass as possible while dropping weight, they focus on always getting enough protein, and while Reed sticks to supplements like fish oil, multivitamins, protein shakes and C4 pre-workout

powder, Clark uses a different mixture to give his muscles enough fuel: caffeine powder, BetaAlanine, Creatine, Glutamine, L-Carnitine and Taurine, among others.

To the outsider, that list may sound like it belongs on the periodic table rather than a dining table, but, to maximize the recovery between workouts, proper fuel is key.

"That's a part a lot of people forget about," Reed says. "You can go to the gym for two hours a day, but your success is really made the other 22 hours of the day with what you're putting into your body."

However, having a body that deviates from the norm can present itself as a problem at times.

"Finding clothing is the worst," says Clark. "I bought these pants, like a couple of months ago and now they're like skin-tight on me."

Reed usually has to buy pants with the waist size two sizes too big, just to fit his legs in them.

The young men also say they often meet people who look at them and think they're "meatheads" or "just stupid."

"A lot of people think that we're the dummdums, you know, that we're just in there throwing the weights around, but there's a science to it," says Clark.

Reed says some students give him a hard time for eating all the eggs in the cafeteria, but the bodily benefits outweigh those minor everyday issues.

The fitness girls

While bodybuilding is usually seen as the prime example of masculinity, there's now a new generation of "builders" entering the circuit: the fitness girls. Former track athlete and 2015 Augustana graduate Laura Popanz is one of the many women who have broken the stereotype and embraced bodybuilding as a lifestyle. During her track career, her training was directed toward performance. Today, she focuses on changing the look of her body, and, just like Reed and Clark, Popanz rarely skips a workout.

"Even if it's convenient at the time to just skip my workouts, I just know in the long run I won't be happy with myself," she says.

Carrying her rigid training routine out of college and into her life as a fulltime personal trainer went smoothly, thanks to the support of her boyfriend and the opportunity to spend a large portion of her day inside the gym.

"It's hard preaching fitness to people if I'm not doing it myself," says Popanz.

She lifts five times a week and devotes the whole workout to one muscle group each day. Legs, she says, is her least favorite, while back and abs often get more attention—so naturally, that's where she's seen the most progress.

"Abs, I think, is a big ideal look for both men and women," she says.

She too agrees that lifting alone won't necessarily give you the body of your dreams, which is why she tracks all her macronutrients through an app on her phone. By registering every meal, she can monitor the exact grams of her daily protein, carbohydrate and fat intake and detect patterns that will keep her from reaching her goals.

Since muscle weighs more than fat, measuring progress by stepping on the scale can be disheartening. Therefore, Popanz takes pictures of herself regularly to compare size and definition to earlier pictures.

"I guess I'm kind of competing against myself," she says. "If I feel like I'm not getting anywhere, just looking back to where I was a year ago and just seeing how much muscle I've built helps motivate me."

Hundreds of muscle contractions later, the buzz of the radio is now overlapped by the sound of breathing and wires sliding smoothly through the tackles of the cable cross machine. The gym is almost empty now, and standing with his back against a weary mirror is Ryder Reed, finishing his chest workout. Another successful day in the gym is over, but it doesn't end here.

It never does.

In the cafeteria, there's a cup of cottage cheese, some chicken and vegetables waiting for him—and then the cycle repeats itself. Tomorrow is another day to get better, another day to carve out more definition and symmetry.

Once the semester is over and Reed has reached six percent body fat and benched 350 pounds,

then what?

Well, he got accepted to three medical schools.

“I guess I wasn’t such a meathead after all.”

