
THE BEV FRANCIS STORY

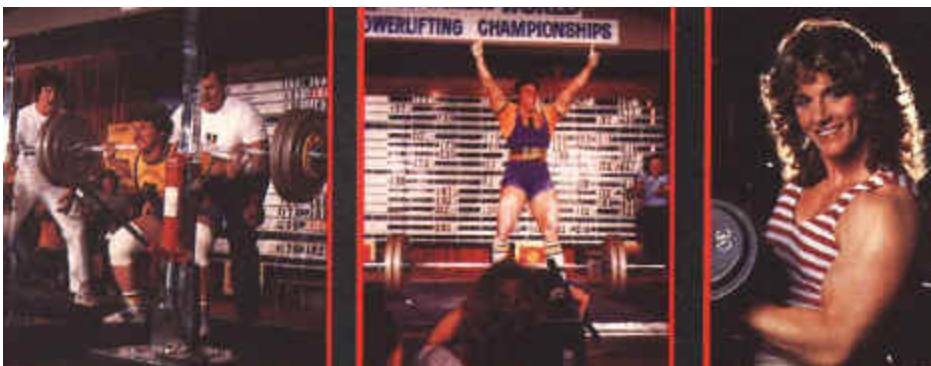
A CAREER IN FOCUS

ACT ONE: SCENE ONE - THE 'LUCKY' BREAK

Australian track and field star Bev Francis pounded around her local Melbourne track in February 1983. A three-time women's world powerlifting champion, hailed as history's strongest woman, and one of her country's top three shot-putters, the 180-pounder used sprinting as part of her power training.

Having undergone surgery 12 weeks previously for a partially torn Achilles' tendon, she now hung on for the final 10 yards of her first sprint workout since the surgeon's ministrations.

The LA Olympics were 17 months away, and after missing the 1980 rendition due to injury, Francis felt good on that blazing summer's day (February is summer in Australia).



Bev was never beaten in a powerlifting contest, winning six world championships - 1980-1985 - and the sobriquet "the strongest woman in history." The far left and center photo shows Bev in 1984, by which time she had relocated from Melbourne to New York.

"Bev Francis: Bodybuilder" was a 1983 creation, devised solely to add spice to the movie Pumping Iron II: The Women. From that contrived beginning, Bev Francis became a hardcore bodybuilder through-and-through, and her career may well have ended at the 1991 Ms. Olympia contest: an event which, like her initiation, was enacted (courtesy of being broadcast live by ESPN) amid the priority of "Lights! Camera! Action!" Bev's 1983 arrival and 1991 exit both, in very separate ways, revolutionized the sport of women's bodybuilding. FLEX herewith presents The Bev Francis Story from first cut to final frame!

BY PETER MCGOUGH, senior writer

But suddenly, with a searing, snapping pain in that fragile Achilles' area, her track and field season disintegrated as she crashed to the ground.

The medical view was that she would be out of shot-putting and sprinting action for the remainder of the year and, as was the eventual reality, quite possibly for good.

Bev now had plenty of time on her hands. Time to respond to the somewhat "weird" telegram she'd received from a certain Wayne DeMilia in New York, outlining an idea that she appear in a movie. More out of curiosity than belief, she called the New Yorker, who described himself as head of the International Federation Of Bodybuilders' professional division. DeMilia told her that George Butler, the man who had produced the 1977 cult movie *Pumping Iron*, starring Arnold Schwarzenegger, was intent on bringing another bodybuilding narrative to the screen; this time featuring the mushrooming women scene.

In early March, Butler called Bev and gave her a synopsis of his celluloid scheme. The movie, entitled *Pumping iron II: The Women*, would document the action in and around the Caesar's World Cup, to be staged on December 10th, 1983, at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas. The event had been conceived solely for the purpose of giving Butler a women's contest to point his cameras at. The manufactured nature of the concept was contradicted by the \$50,000 prize money: the largest purse ever for a women's contest to that point.

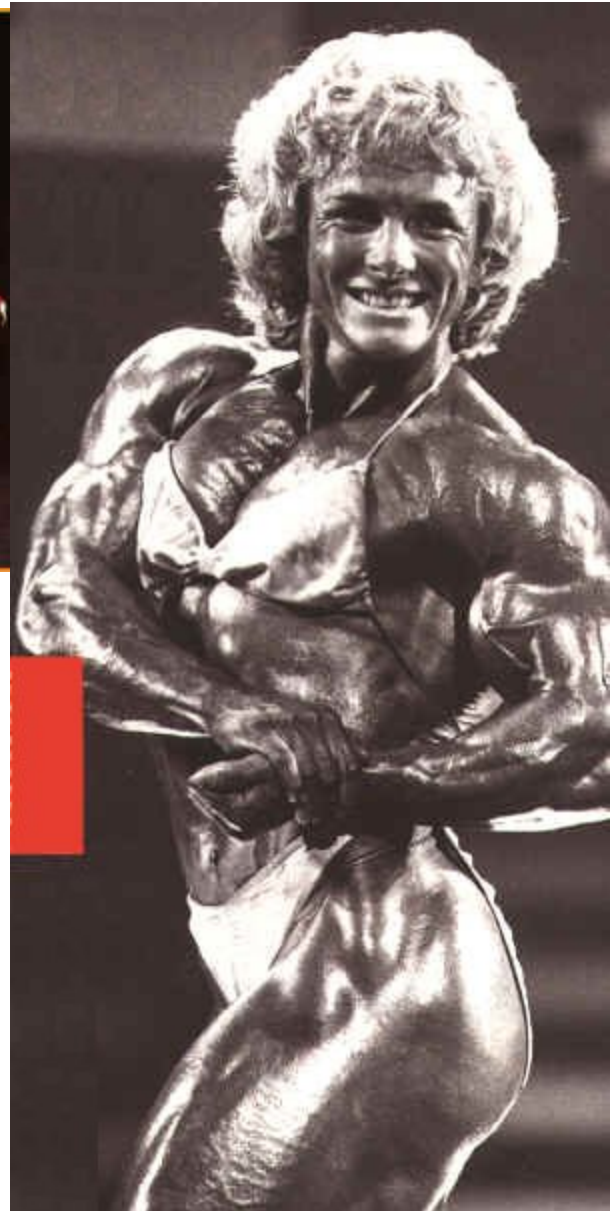
The distinction of being "history's strongest woman" had brought Bev to George Butler's attention, and with -- at the most conservative estimate -- one eye on introducing drama (and thus box-office interest) into a documentary project, he envisaged Bev as portraying the muscular extreme of the female species.

Butler's overture did not, however, represent Bev's first participation in a bodybuilding contest. At the 1984) Mr. Olympia, promoted by Paul Graham in Sydney, she had been invited as reigning world powerlifting champion to demonstrate some strength lifts. As an encore, Graham had persuaded the game Bev to don a bikini and hit some bodybuilding shots. She had even met and talked at length to the controversial winner of the Sydney Olympia, Butler's leading superman for the original *Pumping Iron*, Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Bev enjoyed the diversion, but would have been horrified if anyone had suggested that within a few years she would be devoting her life to bodybuilding. Like most track athletes of the time, she had little respect for bodybuilders or body building, viewing it as a narcissistic endeavor: "They build all that muscle and then what do they do with it?" As regards the much promulgated training dedication of the sport, Bev's riposte was that every athlete trains hard.

With 1983 being bereft of shot-put activity, the timing of *Pumping Iron* was perfect for Bev. She couldn't run or throw, so she knew the inertia would drive her crazy. The thought of committing herself to a new physical discipline appealed to her sense of challenge and adventure. *Bloody Hell!* There was also financial reward involved, and how many Australian shot-putters had been offered a starring role in a movie?





In 1983 Bev Francis was the most muscular woman the sport had ever known. Over the years she radically altered and streamlined her physique before traveling full circle in 1991 to become "the most muscular woman" again.

ACT ONE: SCENE TWO -- THE SOLID LITTLE KID

Bev Francis was born in Geelong, a small town 45 miles from Melbourne, on February 15th, 1955. The baby of the family, she has three brothers and one sister. At the present, her father is 81, her mother 77: devoted partners in a 54-year marriage.

Physical prowess was exhibited by Bev's mother, who was a professional vaudeville dancer, as well as her eldest brother. Fifteen years Bev's senior, he accomplished miler at the state level, and he acted as a torch bearer at the 1956

Melbourne Olympics.

The Francis family was, and is, a very close-knit brood. Bev was taught the importance of cultivating and maintaining good values. It was effective tuition delivered with love and good humor.

Her sister followed in their mother's dancing footsteps, but the brat of the litter skipped to a much more physically robust tune. From as early as the age of five, Bev found herself influenced by the philosophy of "survival of the fittest." She admired and learned all she could about the history of the Australian aborigines and North American Indians, cultures "that had to depend on a physical ability to combat, and coexist with, the elements."



The young Bev yearned to be stronger and fitter than average. By the age of six, she was the toughest kid in the neighborhood, ready to submit herself to feats of endurance and even downright pain. She and her pals -- all boys -- used to test themselves on the hottest days of the year by going without water for as long as possible. Bev's abstinence was always the most protracted. During summer, the blistering temperatures would turn certain roads around Geelong into a mass of bubbling red-hot tar, and the group would see who could walk barefoot on the scorching surface for the longest distance. Bev was the hot-tar champ.

She had, and still has, no idea where those daredevil impulses came from, and she was almost a teenager before she realized that 'not everybody thought that way.'

The archetypical tomboy, she was often hard to control: but as a student, she always attained good marks, because, "I always tried to please." Remember that phrase.

Due to her physical exploits, Bev was stronger and stockier than other female contemporaries. She laughingly tells how, as a child, whenever she was introduced, adults wouldn't gush, "Oh! Isn't she sweet?" Instead, they'd affirm of the tousled-haired tyke, "What a solid little kid!"

Her induction into the world of track and field, and then the supplementary activity of weight training, was a natural progression for the solid little kid. Once introduced to gym work, Bev 'immediately fell in love with the thought of lifting heavier and heavier poundages.'

In 1983, having graduated from college eight years earlier and employed as a physical-education teacher, the solid little kid was even more solid. As in 180 pounds solid.

For the Caesar's World Cup, she would have to lose 40 of those solid pounds from her powerlifting frame, so as to compare in any way with the lean musculature endemic to winning women's bodybuilding contests.

(left) In the movie *Pumping Iron II: The Women*, Bev and Rachel McLish represented opposite ends of



the female bodybuilding spectrum.



Of all the repercussions of her bodybuilding career, Bev is adamant that, "the most important one, the most joyous one, was meeting Steve."

Bev at the 1991 Ms. Olympia:

a) stunned by her second-place announcement; b) with quickly regained composure, she congratulated winner Lenda Murray; and c) left to think of "what might have been."

ACT ONE: SCENE THREE -- THE BADLY CAST SCREEN HEAVY

The *Pumping Iron II* script called for Bev's freaky muscularity to represent an extreme version of the female in bodybuilding. Butler saw Bev as the counterbalance at the other end of the physical spectrum to two-time Ms. Olympia Rachel McLish.

The Australian was not at all fazed by being presented as the flip side of the coin to the traditionally glamorous McLish, often referred to as *Deelish*. All her life Francis had been that solid little kid, not a cutie. From first working out with weights in 1975, she'd developed muscle easily and quickly. She wore her hair short, preferred jeans and T-shirts to "frilly girlish fashions," and had even become accustomed to being challenged when entering ladies' restrooms.

Many jumped to the wrong conclusions. Bev Francis was butch; her muscle and strength was due to steroids. What was ignored was Bev's genetics, and her willingness (in an age when women "glowed" instead of perspired) to sweat and strain under a bar. In the rush to judgment, the accusers had preconceived notions about how strong and muscular a

woman could be. Bev had no such notions. The critics also conveniently forgot that in her role as shot-put and powerlifting champion, she had routinely passed drug tests.



Bev was used to being different, used to being "the muscular one." One-hundred percent female, she left misconceptions about her sexuality to others. To her, "Femininity is in the eye of the beholder. I know some very feminine -- in the traditional sense of the word -- women who happen to be out-and-out bitches, which doesn't strike me as a 'feminine' attribute. 'Femininity' is as difficult to define as excellence: Everyone has their own opinion."

Bev Francis was not affronted by being asked to portray *Bev Francis*. Fact is, she even enjoyed it. She knew that once people got to know her, they'd realize she was really quite a nice person.

This explains why, upon the release of *Pumping Iron II: The Women*, Bev Francis, the scripted heavy of the piece, became the darling of the audiences; while Rachel couldn't have fared any worse if she'd appeared complete with poisoned apple and broom!

Four months prior to December's Caesar's World Cup, Bev was ensconced in New York, under the auspices of IFBB pro Steve Michalik, who was charged with getting history's strongest woman ready for her bodybuilding debut.

The newcomer did everything, and more, that was asked of her. Witnesses still speak in awe of the intensity and dedication she put into her task. Wayne DeMilia recalls, in an incredulous tone that time has not diluted, "Three times a week, she'd leapfrog for a whole mile."

As with all things physical, once committed, Bev put her blinkers on and went for broke. She dieted, not really knowing what dieting for a bodybuilding contest entailed, and lost 40 pounds. At 140 pounds, everyone said she was huge: Bev thought she was small.

Despite the diminished view of herself, as Bev went into the competitors' meeting held 24 hours prior to the event, her overriding thought was, as it had been throughout her preparation, *Damn the novelty, I'm here to win this contest.*

That conviction crumbled as the combatants (for an encounter in which all the precontest ballyhoo had concentrated on the "feminine muscle vs. unfeminine muscle" question) were told: "We're looking for something right down the middle."

Whatever else she might be, Bev Francis sure as hell knew *she* wasn't "right down the middle." She stood at a far-flung outpost of the female bodybuilding landscape.

The next day, by a quirk of mathematics, Bev actually was "right in the middle," judged eighth in a line up of 15.

But from the competitors' meeting onward, the debutant just wanted to get onstage, do the contest, get something to eat and then go back to powerlifting, where winning was not a matter of interpretation. Bev didn't know it then, but *Pumping Iron II* had altered her life forever.

ACT TWO: SCENE ONE -- CUE: ROMANTIC LEAD

In truth, Bev Francis' life had been altered forever the moment she landed in New York in August '83. Among the Big Apple reception committee was 6'3", 240-pound powerlifter Steve Weinberger. As far as Steve was concerned, the potency of Bev's pulling power had little to do with deadlifting, and pretty soon the two were inseparable.

There was a 16-month hiatus between the staging of the Caesar's World Cup in December 1983 and the release of *Pumping Iron II* in the spring of 1985. Because of her developing relationship with Steve, Bev stayed in New York until February 1984, when she flew home to recommence her teaching duties in Melbourne. Once there, she realized how much she missed Steve, and their phone calls became a daily transcontinental affair. Bev Francis was head over heels in love.

In May, she resigned her super-secure job (a job so secure the incumbent could only be fired if he or she committed a

criminal act) and flew back to New York via Los Angeles, where she picked up her fifth world powerlifting title, to be with Steve.

The couple were married in September 1985. Despite all the repercussions of her appearance in *Pumping Iron II*, Bev is adamant that "the most important one, the most joyous one, was meeting Steve."

ACT TWO: SCENE TWO -- BLESSED RELEASE

Bev's 1983 Caesar's Gold Cup appearance radically altered the perception of how muscular a female bodybuilder could be. The graceful lines of reigning Ms. Olympia Carla Dunlap duly took first spot in Las Vegas, but a year later a supermuscular unknown, Cory Everson, became Carla's successor in a contest that marked Rachel McLish's competitive farewell. Bev had pushed back the frontiers, and in doing so she ushered in a new breed who felt no need to apologize for exhibiting hard muscularity on a female frame. Bev Francis' intrusion had helped lift the sport to a new and more muscular plateau.

With the spring '85 release of the movie, the personality of Bev Francis captivated audiences. She was inundated with assurances that she had been robbed: She should have won the Caesar's World Cup.

Bev knew differently. During her preparation for the contest she had gained a new respect, and then a "love," for bodybuilding and its devotees. She had learned the hard "calorie deprived, one more rep" way just how tough this new sport was.



After analyzing the movie, she rationalized that her lack of V-shape and proportionate muscle dictated that she could not win that particular contest. Not that she doubted her ability to, with a change of training, mold her physique into one that *could* win pro contests. Nevertheless, a prevalent school of thought existed, which opined that Bev Francis could never overhaul her structure into one with top-class bodybuilding potential.

Tell Bev Francis she can't do something, however, and it's a sure bet she'll prove you wrong!

The girl from Geelong was ready for a change of sporting direction. She had won six world powerlifting titles, broken over 40 world records, and was unbeaten in powerlifting competition. She probably could have won 10 world powerlifting titles, but the hunger to do so wasn't there like it was in previous years: Her overwhelming dominance no longer generated the sense of challenge required of her competitive instinct. So when this world champion heard the smart set say she'd never rise to the top in bodybuilding, her combative spirit allowed only one option.

In the summer of 1985, after winning her sixth and final world powerlifting title, Bev decided to play by the bodybuilding rules and do it their way. She had always been adept at "trying to please." It was to be six years before she reverted to pleasing herself.

ACT TWO: SCENE THREE -- AIMING TO PLEASE

Bev eyed the 1985 Ms. Olympia contest, but the sport was not yet ready to welcome her with open arms. *Pumping Iron II* had made her one of the globe's best-known body builders, but she was advised she'd have to qualify for Ms. O action.

The unspoken word was that extra care was being taken to ensure that the 1985 Ms. Olympia -- the first time the event was drug-tested -- be untainted by a drug scandal. Disregarded, *again*, was the fact that during her powerlifting career, Bev Francis had passed more drug tests than any registered bodybuilder.

With Steve as chief adviser, Bev set out to resculpt her physique. The priorities were to streamline her well-developed obliques, increase her upper-body V-taper and build more sweep to her outer thigh. Cosmetic surgery had already

reshaped her nose.

The "new" Bev Francis was revealed for the first time in March 1986 at the inaugural Ms. International, a pro-am event in those days. She finished third, a placing that was duplicated a week later at the Los Angeles Grand Prix.

In November, Bev placed 10th in her first Ms. Olympia. She could have been harder, but was still disappointed, feeling she deserved to finish around sixth position.

Bev's unspoken ambition was to become one of the elite who had attained world-champion status in two sports. She duly accomplished that goal by winning the 1987 World Bodybuilding Championships in Toronto. Bev Francis' bodybuilding career could have ended there, but her competitive soul still had some unfinished Ms. Olympia business to attend to.

With each outing, Bev was displaying more stage presence, was looking more glamorous, and was overcoming her initial fear of being "almost naked onstage with a couple of thousand pairs of eyes looking at me."

At the 1987 Ms. Olympia, despite having to leave the stage three times because of severe cramping, Bev finished third. Her gutsy performance earned a standing ovation at the post-contest banquet: an unheard-of occurrence for a non-winner. Bev was fast being installed as the peoples' champion.

Her biggest thrill at the 1988 Ms. Olympia was that of her parents watching her in bodybuilding action for the first time as she muscled out another third-place ranking.

1989 represented Bev's most bitter Ms. Olympia disappointment to date: "I was in the best shape of my life, while Cory Everson [at her Olympia swan song] was at her least impressive." Furthermore, Bev felt that runner-up Sandy Riddell's upper body overpowered her lower structure. Bev considered that on contest day she possessed the best amalgam of muscle, hardness and symmetry.

Figuring that her level of muscularity had perhaps been too much in 1989, and knowing that the judges in 1990 would be looking to crown a successor to Gory Everson, Bev decided to reduce her contours to their most streamlined ever.

Of the 1990 Ms. Olympia, Bev states: "I was the most 'feminine,' in traditional terms, that I've ever looked. The judges rewarded me by placing me second and then confused me by placing someone -- Lenda Murray -- who was packing more muscle than me, first!"

Bev's second-place finish was roundly condemned by the media. The consensus was that she wasn't carrying enough muscle to warrant such a berth.

Compare the photos of the Bev Francis who competed at the 1983 Caesar's World Cup with the Bev Francis who by 1990 had hit the top three in four consecutive Ms. Olympia competitions. Has anyone ever done more to change her physique in order *to please*?

And therein was the root of Bev's 1990 anguish. She had been striving to please others. Now the 1983 antithesis of Rachel McLish was being told she didn't have *enough* muscle.

Bev quit! But only in her mind, and only for an instant. It was impossible to quit at anything less than her best, her *muscular* best! If muscle was the bankable commodity, she'd give them muscle: more muscle than any woman had ever exhibited. And so the seeds were sown to make the 1991 Ms. Olympia the most controversial in the contest's history.

ACT THREE: SCENE ONE -- MINOR ISSUES

For Bev and Steve, the 1991 Ms. Olympia became a personal crusade, a very *personal* crusade, for reasons not mentioned previously.

In February of 1991, Bev was 36 years old, and she and Steve had for some time discussed starting a family. Thoughts of being a mother and a competitive bodybuilder are frequently incompatible; and Bev didn't want to look back later in life

and regret that her sporting career had precluded the option of having a child. She loved bodybuilding, but beyond bodybuilding there was another life, hopefully a family life.

Thus, with the mood that the 1991 Ms. Olympia could well be her last contest, Bev sank her heart and soul into her preparation.

She worked out until she was numb. Onlookers at the couple's gym, Bev Francis Gold's Gym in Syosset, New York, gasped in awe at the sight of her eking out sets of 30 reps of nearly 700 pounds for leg presses. She commenced daily two-hour aerobic sessions in April for the October contest. And she loved it! For the first time in eight years, Bev Francis was pleasing *herself*.

ACT THREE: SCENE TWO THE UNKINDEST CUT OF ALL

The 1991 Ms. Olympia, staged at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles, was a contest containing three notable firsts. It was the first body building event (*apropos* ESPN) ever broadcast live in the US; the first Ms. Olympia to have a two-day judging format (the symmetry and muscularity rounds were judged Saturday evening, October 12th, with the posing and posedown rounds 24 hours later); and it was the first time judging scores were made public after the completion of the first two rounds. This last innovation was the one that would eventually cause Bev Francis the most angst.

Prior to the contest, Bev said, "I'm gonna show what my concept of a woman bodybuilder is. I'm as muscular and as hard as possible with the best symmetry attainable. If my physique wins, great! Because I think it's the kind of physique that should win a bodybuilding contest. If my physique doesn't win, it doesn't matter, because if I don't win this year I'm never gonna win. This time I'm just pleasing myself."

For the Saturday-night segment of the 1991 Ms. Olympia, Bev Francis unveiled 160 pounds of muscular development (albeit with a hint of water retention) that was unprecedented for a female competitor. Defending champ Lenda Murray was not as hard or as big as the previous year. If muscle was the name of the game, Bev's rivals might as well have stayed in the dressing room. But if the capricious pseudonyms of "acceptable" and "marketable" were to be power brokers, then Bev would have to stand aside and let others decide the issue. She was so clearly not "right down the middle" that there were only two positions Bev could have been allotted: first or last!

At the end of the first evening's judging, Bev was leading, four points ahead of Lenda Murray. Come Sunday night, following the unique announcement of the half-time scores, Bev knew that unless she fell over in the posing round, she would be home and dry. Dry was the operative word: The water retention of 24 hours earlier had been dispersed.

Bev didn't pose badly, while Lenda executed her usual accomplished performance: Nobody fell over. All things being equal, Bev told herself, this was a bodybuilding contest, and the previous day she'd been judged as having the best body.

As she stood hand-in-hand with Lenda awaiting (as were millions of TV viewers) the announcement of positions one and two, Bev could hardly contain her excitement. She had been vindicated, and all she had undergone had been worthwhile.

Bev Francis savored the ultimate moment of her bodybuilding career, which would now end with her taking home the Ms. Olympia title on her sixth attempt; a feat accomplished by virtue of pleasing *herself*.

Then the roof fell in!

The thunderbolt boomed out over the vast Shrine Auditorium: "In second place, Bev Francis!" Bev had never been more stunned. Her hands rose halfway to her face in shock as she tried to shriek, but couldn't: "*No! No! There's been a mistake; count the points again.*" Realizing there would be no correction, she quickly regained her composure, smiled good-naturedly toward the audience, congratulated Lenda and then left the stage. Very possibly for the last time.

As a direct reaction to Bev's 1991 physique, the authorities took dramatic steps at 1992 contests to penalize overt muscularity and soften the sport's hard image. The out come of this approach was that the 1992 Ms. Olympia -- in which, with a couple of notable exceptions, the protagonists went along with the "small is beautiful" edict -- was the most lackluster in the contest's 12-year history. Talk of the distaff side of the sport being in crisis was rampant.

Bev Francis twice revolutionized bodybuilding. Her 1983 emergence signaled the fledgling sport's more muscular future by showing "what could be." Her 1991 finale caused the sport to radically change its outlook again, this time to "what must not be!"

If the competitive bodybuilding career of Bev Francis did end on the night of October 13th, 1991, it is a career that can be said to have had a very theatrical, and coincidental, beginning and conclusion. "Bev Francis: Bodybuilder" had been created in 1983 solely as an entity to provide *Pumping Iron II: The Women* with a controversial story line. For the Caesar's World Cup, she had been her muscular self. Eight years later, she returned to being her muscular self to again become the center of judging controversy at the 1991 Ms. Olympia, another contest whose main intended audience wasn't sitting in the auditorium in which it was held.

And in a touch that a Hollywood screenwriter wouldn't dare script, the Bev Francis story traveled full ironic circle, as sharing that 1991 stage -- to receive a special Lifetime Achievement Award -- for the first time since their 1983 Caesar's Palace face-off was Bev's former bodybuilding alter-ego, Rachel McLish!

ACT THREE: SCENE THREE -- THE FINAL CURTAIN?

A fuming Steve Weinberger rose from his front-row seat, clambered over the press section and followed his wife backstage. Both were hurting. Bev couldn't come to grips with the swing of emotions she had just endured, and was rendered almost speechless. Those close to the couple will tell you that Steve *adores* Bev, so his hurt took the form of berating the highest-ranking official he could find. The cause of devastation for both was the carrot of being in the lead that had been dangled in front of Bev, before being cruelly yanked away at the eleventh hour.

The couple left the hall so shell-shocked they couldn't even speak to each other. Jumping into their car, they headed toward their hotel. It was Steve who spoke first: "Y'know, we really should go back, so that you can greet the fans at the banquet."

"Yeah, yeah!" Bev concurred. "The fans."

At the banquet, the 1991 Ms. Olympia runner-up mingled, signed autographs, posed for photos and was generally "good ol' Bev." But deep inside, something had gone, possibly forever.

A full 16 months after the 1991 Ms. Olympia, Bev Francis said:

"After being in the lead with only the posing round left, I still can't believe I lost that contest. In my heart and in my mind, I can't motivate myself to train for a bodybuilding contest. The fire for competition is just not there. If the fire returns, I'll return."

The judging that held sway, and *swayed*, throughout the women's 1992 season has done little to reignite Bev's fire. Confirming that she will continue to serve as an IFBB judge, but that her and Steve's family plans are of current utmost importance, she concluded: "I have no bitterness. If my bodybuilding career is over, I'm happy with it. It's given me so much. If it wasn't for bodybuilding, I'd never have met Steve. And I still have such wonderful fans!"

I'm sure those wonderful fans will join with me in giving Bev Francis -- the toughest kid from Geelong; the hot-tar baby; the unbeaten six-time world powerlifting champ; the would-be villain-cum-heroine of *Pumping Iron II*; the one they said would never be a top bodybuilder; the one who, circa 1985-90, tried to please; the controversial 1991 Ms. Olympia runner-up who pleased herself; the athlete whose muscularity *twice* revolutionized the course of women's bodybuilding -- the following advice: "Bev! Face facts! There's no way you should ever compete again! You just can't do it!"

"Whaddya think a bodybuilding contest is, a *movie*?"
