RACHEL MCLISH INTERVIEW
MAKERS: WOMEN WHO MAKE AMERICA
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Rachel McLish
Bodybuilding Champion
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Interviewed by Beth Osisek
Total Running Time: 46 minutes and 8 seconds

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Makers: Women Who Make America
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ON SCREEN TEXT:
Rachel McLish
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BETH OSISEK:
So we're just going to start off very broadly. Can you tell me about your family and childhood? Where did you grow up and what was your family like growing up?

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RACHEL MCLISH:
I grew up in south Texas. A small town called Harlingen, Texas, and it was just your common small town, one high school type of a place. And it was just a wonderful place to grow up. You knew everybody at the stores, the cops, cousins lived there, neighbors… It was your typical small town.

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BETH OSISEK:
What message did you receive as a child about the role of women?

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RACHEL MCLISH:
I don't know if I really received any message about the role of women growing up, but I could observe what the role was. My mother was the woman who stayed home and raised her children, did not work one day in her life, and my father was the bread earner. That was the message that I observed, and I don't know if it was good or bad but I knew growing up as a child that that wasn't really for me.

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BETH OSISEK:
Which parent did you more closely identify with, and why do you think?

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RACHEL MCLISH:
I think the parent I most identified with was my father, and I'll tell you why. He had strength, he had freedom, he had money, and he made all the decisions basically. And I just thought to myself, "I want to be like that."

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BETH OSISEK:
When you were growing up, did you ever wish you were a boy or want to do boy things?

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RACHEL MCLISH:
When I was growing up, I never wished to be a boy but I really wanted to do all the things that boys did. And I had one brother. He was an older brother, and of course being older, I wanted to tag along and to all the things that he did. He got to do all the fun stuff. He got to fish, he got to hunt, he got to play sports and really do whatever he wanted. And growing up in south Texas, women were protected and they were kind of kept subdued and that didn't sit too well with me. I mean, I wasn't a rebel but nevertheless, yeah, I desired to do the things that my brother did. Definitely.

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BETH OSISEK:
How important were beauty and looks and things like that growing up?

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RACHEL MCLISH:
Growing up, I think beauty was very, very important. Not only because I was a girl, but because in south Texas or in Texas in general, beauty was very, very much revered. And growing up in a family full of girls, I had older sisters and a beautiful mom, I admired beauty. I wanted to be beautiful. Who doesn't admire beauty? I think it's an intrinsic quality that most people have. We're attracted to beauty and we desire it for ourselves. Most definitely.

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BETH OSISEK:
What did you imagine that your life was going to be like once you finished college?

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RACHEL MCLISH:
When I went to college, I had a background of being a cheerleader in high school and prior to that in junior high. There were no sports available for women and so I was physically active in that realm. So when I went to college, I did not gain the fifteen freshmen pounds, but I really, really missed being in

physical shape. So, I was a little bit homesick for a lot of things. I was on my own.

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I went away to college 30 miles away, but I did have the dorm life. And I just decided that I needed exercise, so I went to health club. I was very intimidated by the health club environment and I finally got the nerve to walk in, and the instant I walked in, I fell in love with the atmosphere. I just knew that's what I wanted to do with my life, not only because I wanted it instantaneously to stay in shape and get in shape, but I knew that was the direction I wanted my life to take. That's when I was a sophomore in college.

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BETH OSISEK:
People vow to become fit or weight train because the body that they see before them is not the one that they want. Was that you? Can you talk about that a little bit?

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RACHEL MCLISH:
The reason I decided to weight train was because- First of all, I was going to college and I was taking all the college courses—exercise physiology, kinesiology and all those things that made you appreciate what the body was capable of doing and achieving. And I was so lucky that I got to practically put all of those applications to work while I was taking my courses. I had exercise

classes. I could weight train. I put women on their exercise programs. And I saw the change, the positive change, that these women would experience, and to me, that was the most exciting thing in the world.

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That's why I knew I was going to dedicate my life to exercise, weight training in particular, because that really, really is a foundation of the human body. And from that foundation, you can springboard and do all the other supplemental workouts, whether it's pilates or yoga or anything else. Those I don't consider real workouts. They're not foundational workouts the way weight training is, and to me, that understanding was just fabulous.

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BETH OSISEK:
What was a gym like then? Was it the kind of thing that we see today where everyone's working all together, and they're doing classes together and things like that? If you could just talk a little bit about that too.

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RACHEL MCLISH:
The first time I went to a gym was the gym I worked at. It was called The Shape Center in McAllen, Texa. And all the equipment was chrome plated. It was heavy-duty equipment, because the men worked out on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays and the women had access to the club on Monday, Wednesdays and Fridays. There was no such thing as coed working out and

they did not train together. So that was my experience as far as the gym environment. It was chrome plated. It was pretty to appeal to the women, but yet it was heavy duty to be able to give a man, who is much stronger, a good workout.

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BETH OSISEK:
And how did it come to be that all of a sudden, people were working out together?

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RACHEL MCLISH:
I believe that coed workouts began, probably in the '80s, when fitness started to become more and more popular. When I first started working out and going to gyms and fitness centers in south Texas—and mind you south Texas is not a trendsetting type of a place, there were fitness centers, maybe one in the major cities, maybe three in all of south Texas—but they were segregated. The men and the women did not work out.

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When I moved to California in 1981, I noticed that the fitness centers were all coed. So when I went back to Texas, I made the suggestion, “Well, let's try out a couple of days.” And that's what happened, and all the sudden, it just became coed probably a couple of years after that. And everybody accepted it and there was nothing unique or scary about that all.

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BETH OSISEK:
Was working out popular among women, and what were the fears that you heard from women when you talked to them about working out with weights?

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RACHEL MCLISH:
It's really funny because in the early days—I'm talking about the early days of my career when I was working out at the fitness center and putting women on their exercise program—the fitness centers were called spas, health spas. And within the workout facility, there were the rowing machines, there were the vibrating belts, and there were the saunas and the steam baths and all the things that were spa related. However, the exercise programs that I put the women on was nothing less than serious weight training exercises.

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They didn't know they were lifting weights. All they knew was that their body was toning up, and they were losing inches, and they were like, firming up everywhere, and that's really what the end result was. So I think labels had a lot to do with whether women were going to embrace working out and weight training, or not.

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BETH OSISEK:
Was there any reluctance, or was there any idea of- For women, did you have to talk them into it at all, with them thinking, "Oh, that's what my boyfriend does and I don't want to get all muscly and big and brawny, and that's not what I'm going for?"

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RACHEL MCLISH:
I believe the stigma of getting too big or getting muscular was born after bodybuilding was born unfortunately. On one hand, it gave me the platform to really parlay and share this wonderful message of weight training to the women of the world, that they could actually take control over their bodies and have the body of their dreams. And on the other hand, it was this image that was really repulsive to a lot of women.

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The word bodybuilding connotates big, overly muscled, masculine type of women, and fortunately, I was able to defuse a lot of those misconceptions and basic myths.

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BETH OSISEK:
I think it's important for people to know what your body was like before the competition.

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RACHEL MCLISH:
It's a funny thing because I started weight training when I was still a teenager in college. And prior to that, I was a cheerleader and I was very much involved in ballet, jazz and tap, so I always had some degree of physical activity. So weight training, bodybuilding, didn't really change my body, but it altered it a little bit. It refined it, gave it definition and shape and tone, but also, you must understand that I was still growing. So it was a good way to nudge my body to look the way I wanted it to look.

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BETH OSISEK:
A sculptor has a particular idea about how they want to mold the clay. Were you like that when you were doing the weightlifting, and do you know specifically what areas you wanted to be impacting and how?

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RACHEL MCLISH:
The motivating force behind competition is highly personal, and yes, the more passionate and driven that force is, the harder you're going to work. So yes, I looked at my body as a blank canvas and I looked at it as an art form that was driven with science. So it was an art, it was a science, and yes, I loved being able to take my body and to really direct it and form it and build it according to my genetic expression.

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But yes, it was a very good feeling and it gave me a lot of confidence and a lot of power to really be able to take control over my body. And when there was competition involved, well, that made it even more serious.

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BETH OSISEK:
If you could take me back to the moment when you found out there was going to be a bodybuilding competition for women, how did you hear about it? Where were you? What were you doing in your life at that moment, and how did you react to the news?

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RACHEL MCLISH:
The first time I heard about the first ever bodybuilding competition for women, I was running my health club. I had put myself through school at the Shape Center health club, so when I graduated from college, the owner of that facility and I formed a partnership, and we built a huge health club in my hometown. The summer of 1978, or something like that. We sold memberships out of a trailer while the construction site was going up, and we sold memberships with pictures of the equipment, and we gave them the pitch that, "This is what you're going to look like and…"

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Anyway, by the time we opened our doors, we had over a thousand members. And it was just fabulous. It was very, very successful, and this is in south Texas. People didn't really know about the fitness craze. People were starting to jog a little bit and stay a little bit in shape, but nothing serious like that so this was a big deal. And we had glass backed racquetball courts as well. So, that went very, very well for a whole year, and we were getting ready to expand to Brownsville and to Corpus Christi—two satellite clubs.

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And around the time of our grand opening, coincided with the first ever United States- International Women's Bodybuilding Championship. And the the men's manager of the club just kept throwing these magazines in front of me—these bodybuilding magazines. I said, "Why are you doing this? I'm not…" So anyway, he said, "Well, look. They're going to have a women's competition." 'Cause to tell you the truth, the image of these guys in those little bikinis… I mean, maybe it's appealing to some people, but it wasn't to me and I thought they were kind of creepy looking.

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But this was going to be—I don't know—just a milestone for women in a way, and I thought, "Hm. Interesting." And he would show me these pictures of these women posing, but they would be posing like men and they're trying to emulate men, and they were calling it this new way of exercise. And I thought, "Wait a minute. This is what we've been doing in south Texas for the past few years. It's not new. And besides, you're doing it all wrong."

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I mean, I went to college to study, I had hands-on application and experience with all these women, and I had wonderful experiences with all these women getting in great shape, and men too. And I thought, "You know what? This is very interesting to me." Took a photograph, sent it in, all the way to Atlantic City. I was one of 30 women selected to enter the first ever competition, and the rest is history, I guess. I won and I was lucky to do so.

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But the reason I entered was because that competition was going to coincide with our grand openings at our new club, so I thought, "Hm. I could go up there and get into the top five at least, and use it to my advantage." Media wise, it was going to be televised on Sports World. NBC was going to cover it. And I thought, "Well, this will be very prestigious for our clubs." And I was really marketing my clubs back then and I thought it would be a great push. So, when I went to Atlantic City, I sized up the competition and I thought, "Hm, I've got a pretty good chance at winning this thing." So…

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BETH OSISEK:

So when you went out in the beginning, it wasn't like you were trying to break down any barriers, or that you were trying to- It came from a whole different place, huh.

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RACHEL MCLISH:

There were women who were trying to make a statement about women empowerment, and if men can do it, build muscle, why can't women build muscle? But the funny thing is we were doing it without any labels. Okay? I just wanted women to have control over their own body. I wanted them to feel good in their own skin, and I wanted them to know that they didn't have to look like their mothers. Just because their mother's are genetically big-hipped and they have a tendency to gain weight here or there, doesn't mean you have to follow along those same genetic paths, so to speak.

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So that was my intent. My intent was to really empower women for their own good and for their own self-confidence and empowerment on a personal level, not on a big statement type of a level. It wasn't really a public opinion, really.

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BETH OSISEK:
Did anyone try to talk you out of it, or discourage it?

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RACHEL MCLISH:
When the word got out that I was going to enter a so-called bodybuilding competition, like I said before, the stigma that comes along with that word really turns a lot of people off. And I did get discouraged. My own mother discouraged me. She was a little concerned because she had to hear it from

her friends, and there was a lot of ridicule going on but I just knew in my heart what it was.

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Facts are facts, and it was really a matter of informing people so that they could have informed opinions about it. And that's basically what it is in anything, any new endeavor. You have to really inform yourself, inform your conscience, as to what it is that you're talking about before you can say anything about it.

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BETH OSISEK:
What was the outcome of the competition? And if you can just sort of take me through what happened during the competition.

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RACHEL MCLISH:
To be honest with you, I didn't really know what to expect at that very first competition. It was the first ever competition. The best I could do was to flip through magazines and read about what the men went through, and that was it. I knew that there was a line up, there were compulsory poses, and then there was a freestyle pose. So… my freestyle pose, I only did half of it because I said, "Well, if I get to the point where I have to-" Because only the finalist would get to do their entire posing routine, so I thought to myself, "If I got to the point where I have to worry about the rest of it, well, I'll just wing it."

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And I mean, that was the way I was thinking. So I went to Atlantic City, and we had the orientation and I sized up the competition and I thought to myself, "Well, wait a minute, this is about fitness and bodybuilding," which to me is extreme fitness. It's not just about looking shapely in a bikini. So I knew I had a good chance when I saw some of the competitors with a little softness in areas that shouldn't be, and you call yourself a bodybuilder so… It was fun that way and I knew I had a chance.

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BETH OSISEK:
And so, how did it feel when you won?

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RACHEL MCLISH:
Well, first let me tell you that it was one of the most nerve wracking things I had ever done, because the cameras were all there. The World Press was there. Japan had a camera crew there—Sweden, Europe—and of course, NBC was filming the whole thing. So it was my very first experience in the big time. There was cameras and lights and interviewers, and people wanted interviews, and photographers, and photo sessions set up, so it was quite exciting.

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So when I was up on the stage- I mean, I had had experience on stage being a cheerleader and dance recitals, but my knees… I had to flex my legs so hard because my knees were jumping up and down. I thought, "Oh my God. I'll never win with jumpy knees." But that just gives you an indication of how exciting it was. So when I won, it was just fabulous. I mean everybody wants to win, of course. That's why you enter a competition, not to come in second. So it was a very, very exciting time in my life. The highlight of my life at that point.

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BETH OSISEK:
Well, that brings us to a point then, because here you are coming from this small, small town in Texas. Could anything have prepared you for that, or were you prepared for that, and can you just talk a little bit about that as well?

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RACHEL MCLISH:
There was nothing in my life that could've prepared me for what was ahead of me at that first competition. How does one prepare for the influx and the army of press that would actually assault you? There was nothing, but prepared I was because… It was just so fun and exciting and all the attention is on you. So of course, yeah, here I am and what do you want to know? It was all about me, me, me. So it was fun. It was great fun.

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BETH OSISEK:

Now, you come from a state that is known for its pageants, and here you are in Atlantic City, which is also known for its pageants. And yet, you were sort of changing the- sort of the idea of the feminine body. Did you think about that at all, or were there any kind of references to that at all for you?

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RACHEL MCLISH:

There were definite references and comparisons to the pageants of… yore. I mean pageants, beauty pageants, were the only pageants up to that point. So yes, this was definitely a new type of beauty ideal. And it was quite exciting to really explain what we were doing. And we had to kind of make it up as we went along, but it didn't negate the fact that we believed very deeply in what we were doing, and that commitment to fitness and taking control of our body and the fact that it was good for you and healthy and all that.

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I knew in my heart that it was going to be here to stay, even though it was regarded a little bit like a freak show. Because it was a novelty and nobody knew that it was going to last. But I did. So that was good.

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BETH OSISEK:

So describe what happened right after the competition as far as how your life changed.

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RACHEL MCLISH:
The minute I won that competition, my life changed. The next morning my picture was plastered on every newspaper around the world and I became this bodybuilding champion all of the sudden. And it's funny because up to that point, I was the glamor girl at the health spa. And I used to do the print ads, and I was the one with the good figure, and the one that helped you get all toned and in shape, and it's funny how people's perception of a person changes.

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Now I became this bodybuilding champion, and people were a little bit afraid and a little bit intimidated of this title. But, it gave me a wonderful platform to really explain the entire fitness world, the whole concept.

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BETH OSISEK:
But you had done something really important, why do you think they were afraid or intimidated? Or what was it that was changing?

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RACHEL MCLISH:

I think people are afraid or intimidated at something that they don't understand, or something that's a little too foreign for their understanding, or something that they're not familiar with. But a little bit—and this is what I've said even those in those old interviews—just give me five minutes with somebody and I'll convince you. I'll tell you what: it's all about your body and taking control over it and really empowering you and having fun with it. And it's not anything more important than what it is.

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It's fitness. It's exercise and it's fun. And if you keep it simple, in it's simplest form, it's something that's really good, it's something your body craves and it benefits everyone. And that was the basic message.

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BETH OSISEK:
In August of 1980, you competed in another large competition. Can you tell me what it was and the reputation of the brand? This was Miss Olympia…

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RACHEL MCLISH:
Yes, yes, yes. So here I was, the first bodybuilding champion, I got all this attention, and then all of the sudden, there was this other competition and it was called the first ever Miss Olympia competition. It was held in August of 1980, and again it was held in Atlantic- No, it was held in Philadelphia

actually, and Arnold handed me my first trophy. So yes, I won. I won that one as the reigning champion.

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The only reigning champion to go into a competition. So that established me in the world of bodybuilding. The first one was kind of a- out of the hands of bodybuilding. It was promoted by this man named George Snyder, and he was involved with the networks and the World Press, and they were all involved. But the Miss Olympia really solidified my position as a legitimate champion in the serious bodybuilding world.

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BETH OSISEK:
What was the difference between what you were doing with your body as a female, and what was happening with the male body?

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RACHEL MCLISH:
Well, it's interesting, the word bodybuilding. Muscles have no gender, so… I mean, if you exercise a certain way- a bicep curl, you affect your biceps muscle, and you get it tone and firm and everything. You give it more resistance. It adapts and it grows a little bit. But the way I approached bodybuilding and weight training is to… give womanhood an added dimension, to be more of a woman, and to be stronger and more fit.

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I had no desire to try to be like a man or try to look like a man, and a woman's physiology and your own genetic makeup will set those parameters to themselves. I mean, there is no way that you're going to become manly if you're not manly. And there's a difference between a muscular looking woman and a manly looking woman. And… there's no activity. There's nothing any woman can do, physically speaking, that will change the way her hormonal makeup and her physiology makeup looks like, so there's no fear in that.

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BETH OSISEK:
There was a wide difference in the way that the female bodybuilders appeared. Can you talk a little bit about that, and about how that came to be?

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RACHEL MCLISH:
There's the difference between the activity of bodybuilding and competitive bodybuilding. Competitive bodybuilders look the way they do because their sole purpose is to build their body. And most women, most women competitive bodybuilders, want to build as big of muscles as they possibly can because that's what they're being judged on. Of course, you need to have the aesthetic lines and the proportions and all that sort of thing that you're judged on, but I think what scares most people is the extreme muscularity.

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And even though men and women are different, the motion is the same. The activity of bodybuilding is the same. There is no activity that's going to make a woman look like a man unless you do something to your endocrine system, meaning if you inject steroids into your body. That is the difference. The women that are extremely muscular, the ones that you have to do a double take on, and the ones that don't look quite right, I can guarantee you that they're the same ones that have taken the same type of drug therapy that precedes a sex change operation.

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And that's the difference. It's a sad difference, and unfortunately it does affect the muscles, the musculature, and most people- these women that are under the impression that big muscles is all that it's about, are just sorely, sorely mistaken and mislead and under this delusion that that's what it's about. And it really isn't, because enlarged muscles by steroids is only one of the side effects.

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All of the other side effects, or the intended effects, of anabolic steroids is enlarged muscles, gynecomastia, disrupted hormone systems in your body, and once you start messing with your hormone system, I mean, it really throws your equilibrium totally out of whack. And I highly don't recommend it.

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BETH OSISEK:

You were outspoken about this, even way, way, way back when. How was that received?

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RACHEL MCLISH:
When I would talk about steroids, I felt the need to talk about the white elephant in the room. People were saying, "Oh no, we don't take steroids." And yet you look like you take steroids, or you look like a freak. So I had to address the fact that, yes, there are some people taking steroids, anabolic steroids, to make their muscles unnaturally large.

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I felt like I was fighting a one woman battle trying to encourage women, on one hand, to embrace bodybuilding and weight training as a way to really be fit and be strong and be empowered as a woman, and yet on the other hand, these other women were saying, "Oh, bodybuilding won't make you look like a man." And they look like, very, very manly. So I had to make that distinction, absolutely, because it needed to be said.

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BETH OSISEK:
And how did they treat you in the bodybuilding world itself?

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RACHEL MCLISH:

The way I was treated in bodybuilding was with respect, because I was the only one talking about it. Even the ones on steroids said, "Yeah, Rachel, you know. you're right." I was the champion. I was the Ms. Olympia. I was the one they were trying to dethrone, and yet they were caught between a rock and a hard place. I was friends with so many of these women and I love many of them, but… one thing had nothing to do with the other. If they wanted to take steroids, they should be on the stage with a man and compete with a man.

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If they were chemically, hormonally similar to a man- I mean, that was my feeling. It was very simple, black and white, and that's just the way I felt. And I said it way back then and I was considered a very outspoken type of a person. That's one of the nicer descriptions of me. But people needed to know the truth and I could only tell the truth as much as I was able to see for myself.

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I didn't have any proof. I didn't see lots- maybe one taking the pill or putting the injection into their body, but I didn't have to. You can look at a body and know that there's something not right. I was doing everything possible, nutritionally, training hard. Nobody trained harder than I did. I'd get up before everybody. If it was raining, I'd still be out on the bike path doing my cardio, double training, split sessions… just everything. And your body responded in a good way.

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I looked beautiful and I loved it. It just wasn't responding as fast as these others who would gain 15 pounds of muscle in a year. Whew, because they're genetically gifted? I don't think so. If you look at previous pictures of their bodybuilding days when they were competing in the normal ranks, and then all of the sudden, "Whew, I've got a new trainer and all of the sudden, I've gained 15 pounds of muscle." What's the difference? You know it's steroids.

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And, it's a very, very easy thing to detect to the trained eye. So it was just a part of life. It was just a fact of life. I mean, muscles were being revered, they were being rewarded, so you didn't blame them. I don't blame them, I don't judge them, because everybody makes these choices for themselves. And I thought, "Well, I'll do it my way because this is what I believe." Bodybuilding, to my end, was to help women and give them this message about empowering themselves and helping themselves.

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I mean, I was so privileged to have introduced this to the women of the world, and that is still my message. So the bodybuilding, steroids-slash-competitive aspect of it—it was just a bump in the road of the big message and unfortunately, it was the demise of women's bodybuilding.

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BETH OSISEK:
Were the women who were taking steroids being rewarded in the competitions?

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RACHEL MCLISH:

I believe women's bodybuilding changed with the release of the film *Pumping Iron II* with the women. It was a big film, as you know, Arnold did *Pumping Iron*, and I was the star along with the other female competitors of *Pumping Iron II: The Women*. And it was like a docu-drama. It was the first reality show actually for women, and one of the women stars was Bev Francis, who by the way is a dear friend. I highly respect her and she was an Australian powerlifter.

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Great champion. Strongest woman in the world. Mind you, her body was a product of power lifting, and she was genetically predisposed to be very strong, sturdy, and she built her body just by chance through powerlifting. Well, the producers of *Pumping Iron* thought that it would be fun to pluck her out of powerlifting, which is a totally different sport, and put her on stage as a bodybuilder. So they gave her the diet and they made her lean.

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Whatever training regiment she went on, she looked ultra muscular, and she made all the others on stage look like they didn't even train, because oh my God, her body looked extremely ultra muscular. And that fueled the controversy of- Well, if it's bodybuilding, shouldn't women build to be like men or should it be a bodybuilding beauty contest? So they really created a controversy where there really was none, but controversy sells so…

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So that was the big turning point in bodybuilding. And after that, women thought, "Well. Yeah, maybe Rachel McLish is stifling and stunting the growth of women's bodybuilding, because this shouldn't be a beauty contest." I think it should, because I think bodies are beautiful—muscular bodies and all—but they just took aesthetics out of it and they were just rewarding the large muscles, which I think, well, as we know now, was proven to be a big, huge mistake.

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BETH OSISEK:
How much do you think this parallels this sort of dynamic of women and their perception of themselves, physically, at that time period?

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RACHEL MCLISH:
I was lucky in the sense that women's bodybuilding was a brand new sport and I could really pave it and color it anyway I could. And I was very careful not to emulate the men. I wanted to empower the women. I wanted to show them that you can be sexy, you can be beautiful and you can be as strong as a man. All of my training partners were bodybuilding champions because I was smart enough to know I want somebody really, really strong to spot me while I was pushing really, really heavy weights.

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So I would train in the male domain, looking very much like a woman, but the way you carry yourself and your demeanor will really determine the respect that you get, and if you're really passionate and you believe in what you're doing, people are going to back off and say, "Oh. Okay." People do not contradict you. They don't mess with that.

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BETH OSISEK:
Did the way that men reacted to you change once you won the title and how?

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RACHEL MCLISH:
My reputation would always proceed me everywhere I went. Complete strangers would come up to me and… somehow they feel they know you if they see your image, pictures of you and name in print, interviews and things like that. And yes, I said in an interview, "If one more man asks me to arm wrestle, I'm think I'm going to scream." They have this image in their own mind—was totally misconstrued—of me being this ultra strong Helga-type woman and that's not what it was about.

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So I would just say, "Look. My muscles are just for show and that is it. I'm not a power lifter." So I always had to make that distinction as well. So people always… Especially men. It depends on the man too. I mean, insecure men will always try to take shots at you, but the ones that are secure would say,

"Oh. I admire what you're doing," because they would have an informed opinion and they would know a little more of what it was about.

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BETH OSISEK:
Were you taken seriously as athletes in the beginning?

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RACHEL MCLISH:
Actually, I was admired by a lot of athletes because they knew the dedication that it would take to build a body, to get the definition, and a lot of these athletes- Athletics has- they have evolved since the early '80s as you know, and at the time, I was highly revered as an athlete even though I had no skills to speak of. I mean, I can't serve a tennis ball very well and… So it didn't really take any talent but you really had to have a plan.

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You really had to know and understand physiology and nutrition, so it wasn't something you could just go into the gym and follow some quirky diet, and all the sudden, you could be a bodybuilder. No. You had to really assess your body, your genetic makeup, you had to be extremely disciplined, you had to exert a lot of self-control. And eat, live and breathe it. So I think that the fact that it required so much discipline earned the respect of a lot of the athletes, and a lot of top athletes were my fans.

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BETH OSISEK:
Why do you think so many people disliked the image of women who appeared physically strong initially?

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RACHEL MCLISH:
I think people who are repelled by the sight of a strong woman just show their own fear and insecurity about the power of something that didn't belong to them, and maybe they didn't realize that they could embrace it for themselves. Because strength and power and control over one's own body really has no gender. It could really be had by anybody. So I think the people that didn't really embrace it were really kind of afraid of it, and they didn't know their own power maybe.

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BETH OSISEK:
You sort of made it your mission to get women to work out and strengthen their bodies. Why was that so important to you and why were you so attracted to helping others in this way?

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RACHEL MCLISH:

The reason I was so enamored with helping women was because they hold a special place in my heart being from south Texas, and the diet, and the fact that genetically so many of them tend to carry fat between the waist and the knees and they think they're doomed to that body type. And so to me, it just gave me a lot of joy and pleasure to make them realize that they didn't have to really accept that.

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So when I won the bodybuilding competitions, it really enabled me to write the books, to write the fitness book. The first one was *Flex Appeal* and it was very well received and it's really a training manual 101 on how to weight train. And it's just there to be had. I mean, my mission wasn't- I didn't have a mission statement that I wanted everybody… But really I just saw how much it helped women and how much joy it gave them. And it just felt great.

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It gives me a lot of joy to help people. And if I pave the way for others to follow along in the same path, I mean, that's what it's about, really, because nobody does it by themselves. I can't say that it's because of me that all these women are working out, but I think I had a little bit to do with changing the perception, and encouraging women to body build and weight train, and to be stronger and really watch their dietary intake and all that sort of thing that's necessary.

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BETH OSISEK:

One of the general precepts of the women's movement was to redefine how women saw themselves and how others saw them. Do you think you impacted that and how?

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RACHEL MCLISH:
I think it's important to know that if you want to affect change in the world or the way people see you, you really have to change yourself. And that's really what bodybuilding was about, and fitness—taking control over what you do. People want to change people around them, control the situation, but all you can really do is control what you do. And in so doing, you affect change in your immediate world around you and that's been my philosophy since day one.

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And I really don't see- I mean, you cannot force feed your philosophy on anybody, and I think it's an important lesson for young women and young people to do. You can only change you, and that's it.

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BETH OSISEK:
So how did what you did—by winning this first female bodybuilding competition and permeating this sport—how did that change the female ideal of the body?

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RACHEL MCLISH:
I think my first win in bodybuilding really helped to enhance women's own feminine ideal. In the past, it was always determined by a man's vision of what a female should look like, and female bodybuilding really gave women the driver's seat. They were in the driver's seat to really determine what their body looked like. And thank goodness it was really well received, because it was good, it was healthy, it was fun, and they looked sexy as hell on top of it. So it was a new ideal, and yet it was a dimension to the womanhood that they had been brought up to accept.

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BETH OSISEK:
Did you consider yourself a feminist at all when you won your first championship?

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RACHEL MCLISH:
I was always confused by the word feminist, because to me, the feminist were the ones that were very aggressive and they were trying to almost emulate and be men, and to me, the true feminist was the one who was all-woman, who could do whatever a man could "do," not really "be." It's all in the doing and in the accomplishments,-

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-not really in the competition or to try to acquire these certain masculine qualities that really do not fit a feminine woman. So it was kind of like a dichotomy to call yourself a feminist and be very, very—I don't know—butch or aggressive or manly.

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BETH OSISEK:
What's the biggest change for women since you were young, do you think?

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RACHEL MCLISH:
I think the biggest change for women that I've seen since I was young is the fact that… they're choosing to be educated and they're choosing to go out and make their own way. And I think the workforce now, the statistics show that women earn most of the money. I'm not saying that they earn as much for equal jobs which I think is still a problem, but in the economy, women are generating the money and the economy. And that is a fact, and I'm very proud of that.

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I think one of the biggest changes also is the availability of sports for women. When I was growing up, there were no sport expressions for me. I mean, the only thing I could do in high school was to run track maybe, and I think there may have been a softball team. But as far as other sports like tennis and all

these other sports that are available to women now professionally, I think is just fantastic.

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And I'm just very glad that tennis, now finally, has given them the right to earn as much as the men. Even though they don't play as many sets so I don't know how that works, but I'm happy for that.

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BETH OSISEK:
Do you think that women can use their sexuality and their body for empowerment?

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RACHEL MCLISH:
A woman's sexuality is her empowerment because it's part of who she is, in the same way a man's sexiness empowers him too. I mean, it's just all in who you are as a person, but I think to isolate it and categorize it as one thing and say, "I own it and this is how I'm going to use it." Okay, it's your right to say that, but I think it's your individual and whatever power you have and whatever talent that you have, it all works together to go forth and to achieve the goals that you set out before yourself. So, yeah.

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BETH OSISEK:

You've worked a lot with women over the years about changing their bodies and what not. Where do you think we are with that as far as images of female ideal now, and what their body should be like?

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RACHEL MCLISH:
I think the wonderful thing about the time in which we live now is that women aren't so concerned about changing their body. And even in the early days of bodybuilding, I made it clear that body building doesn't change your body, it alters it. And it enhances it to the point where it enables you to be who you were intended to be if you really work hard, physically. But now, I think people are embracing the fact that they can look any way they want and be beautiful.

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And I think it's a fabulous, fabulous message, because you don't have to be pressured into being the skinny person, which in my book… the size zeros, the skinny fats of the world. No, no, no. It's about being healthy and being comfortable in your own skin, because genetically, a lot of people do carry extra weight, do carry more muscle. Some are rail thin and get criticized for it too, so it's working within your genetic expression and express it in a way that you want just as long as you're healthy and comfortable with it.

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BETH OSISEK:

And you think there's more freedom to do that now?

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RACHEL MCLISH:
Oh, there's a lot of freedom to look exactly how you want to look and how you were intended to look. But basically, the most important thing is you can look how you choose to look.

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BETH OSISEK:
What do you think your legacy is? Or what do you see as your legacy?

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RACHEL MCLISH:
It's hard for me to see what my legacy is, but I think, judging from all my Facebook friends, they're always thanking me for- Like recently, it was my birthday. So many people were thanking me for being born. I mean, I had nothing to do with that, but they're thanking me for inspiring them to work out and spurring them on to their own goals—fitness, careers and things of that nature, so…

END TC: 00:46:08:00