

# The Back

## THE MUSCLES OF THE BACK

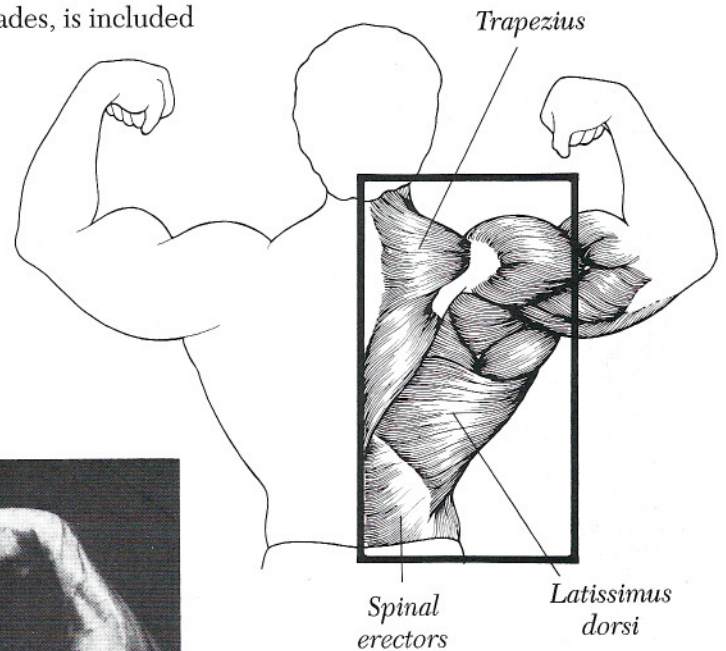
The **latissimus dorsi**, the large triangular muscles that extend from under the shoulders down to the small of the back on both sides. These are the largest muscles of the upper body.

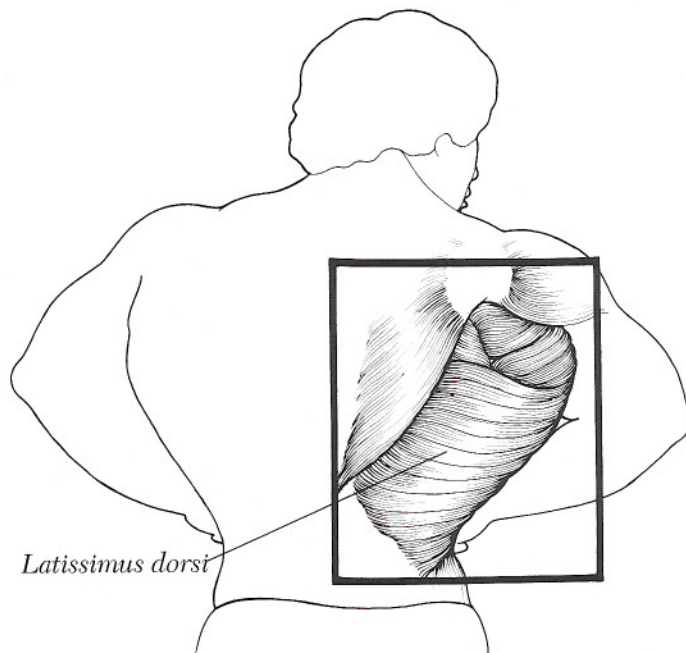
**BASIC FUNCTION:** To pull the shoulders downward and to the back

The **spinal erectors**, several muscles in the lower back that guard the nerve channels and help keep the spine erect. They are also the slowest muscles in the body to recuperate from heavy exercise.

**BASIC FUNCTION:** To hold the spine erect

Note: The **trapezius**, the flat, triangular muscle that extends out and down from the neck and down between the shoulder blades, is included in the shoulder section.





## TRAINING THE BACK

Developing a broad, thick, and massive back is absolutely necessary in the creation of a quality bodybuilding physique. Strong back muscles are essential for lifting and carrying heavy weight, and a highly muscular back has always been considered the measure of a man's strength.

"My back is a weapon I use to destroy my opponents," says two-time Mr. Olympia winner Franco Columbu. "I place my thumbs in the small of my back and begin to spread my lats. It doesn't all come on at once. First I flex them a few times and then begin to let them extend their widest. Each time the audience and the judges think that is all, I flex harder and they come out farther. And just when everyone is gasping with surprise that a human being could achieve such development, I lift my arms into a powerful double-biceps shot, displaying enormous muscularity, thickness, and separation. Only the very best of bodybuilders can stand beside me when I do this without being blown offstage by the shock wave."

When a bodybuilding judge looks at a competitor's back, there are three things he is especially interested in: (1) the thickness and muscularity of the upper back; (2) the sweep and width of the lats; and (3) the definition and development of the lower back and lower lats.

## THE UPPER BACK

Upper back development involves more than just the back muscles themselves. When you hit a rear double-biceps pose, the traps and the muscles of the upper and middle back are dominant, but all the muscles from elbow to elbow play their part, including the biceps and the rear delts.

The central muscle of the upper back is the trapezius, an angular muscle that extends down to the shoulders from either side of the neck, then comes together over the spine about halfway down the back. In a highly developed back the traps will be full and massive, balancing off the lats on either side and clearly separated from them in back poses. Exercises that specifically work the traps include anything which involves lifting the shoulders—Shrugs and Upright Rows, primarily, but also Rowing in certain positions and some kinds of Presses—and are covered in the Trapezius training program (beginning on page 295).



*In a twisting back shot, you need a thick and muscular upper back to balance off the development of the shoulders, biceps, triceps, and forearms.*

*Sergio Oliva is a perfect example of how impressive a thick upper back can be.*



*Lee Haney*

## **THE LATS**

---

The most impressive area of a fully developed back is the sweep of the lats. It is this muscular width that declares to the world that you are really a bodybuilder. And it is the lats that are likely to first attract the judges' attention, even when standing relaxed in the first round. The traditional V shape of the bodybuilder—wide shoulders descending to a firm, tight waistline—is dependent on the right kind of lat development. A friend of mine once told me that when he did a lat shot onstage, he imagined his lats were so wide that the audience would think the curtains were closing!

The width of the lats is developed by any kind of pulldown movement, such as Cable Pulldowns or Chins. The precise way that the pulldown movement affects the lats is determined by the angle you are working at, how wide apart your arms are, and whether you are pulling down in front or to the rear. So I have included a variety of close-grip and wide-grip movements as well as front and rear Chins and Pulldowns in the back program to encourage total lat development.

The lats are also evident from the front view, complementing the chest by widening the torso, with the line of the back muscles acting as a frame for the pectorals. The lats contribute to any number of poses, including front and rear double-biceps and a variety of twisting shots.

*Lee Haney, Ronnie Coleman, and Robby Robinson are three great bodybuilders known for the V shape of their torsos—from the back and from the front—which is the result of outstanding lat development.*



*Ronnie Coleman*



*Robby Robinson*

## LOWER LATS

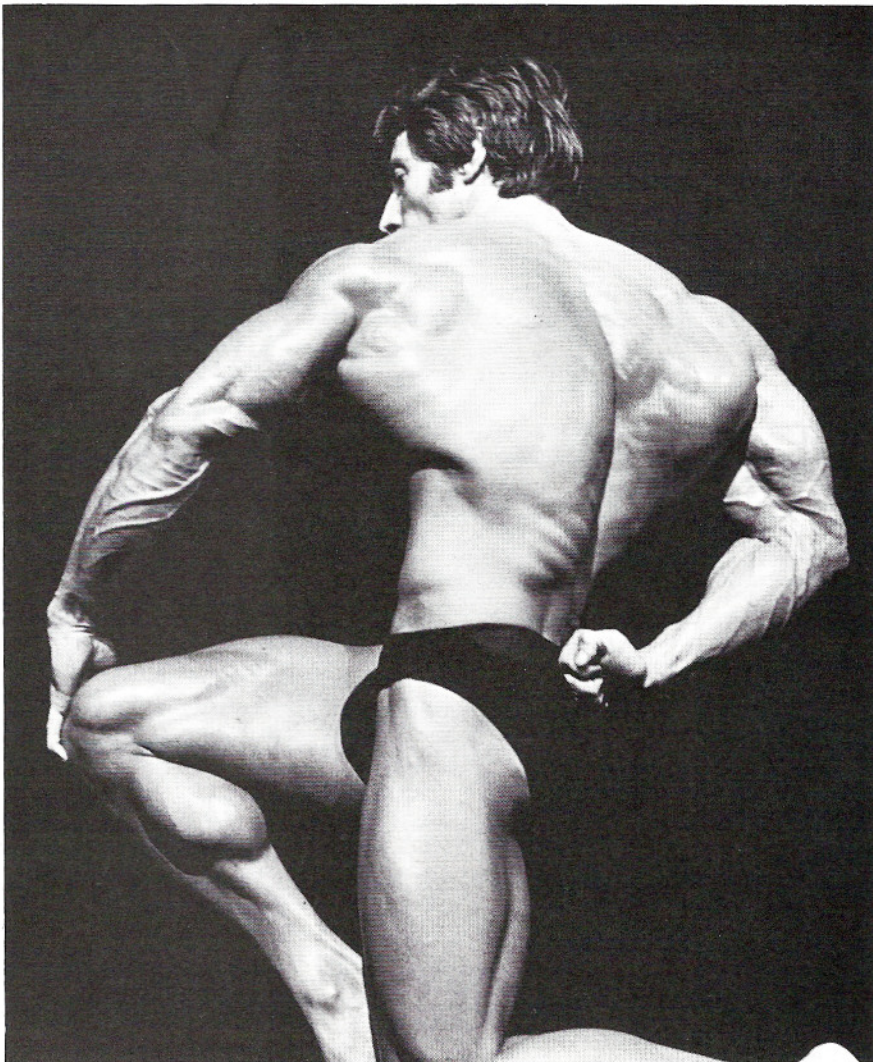
When you see a Franco Columbu or a Frank Zane do a twisting back shot you can't help being impressed by the way their lower lats sweep all the way down and insert into the waistline. This gives the lats a terrifically aesthetic look.

To develop the lower lats, you need to do your back exercises with a very narrow grip—Close-Grip Chins and Close-Grip Pulldowns, for example—as well as One-Arm Cable Rows and One-Arm Dumbbell Rows. It is also important to do stretches between sets, grabbing hold of something with one hand at a time and really pulling until you can feel the lower lat almost down to the hip.

Well-developed lower lats will also help you in rear back poses because they come down at an angle and form a kind of frame that shows off a well-striated lower back.



*Franco Columbu*



*Frank Zane*

## MIDDLE BACK THICKNESS

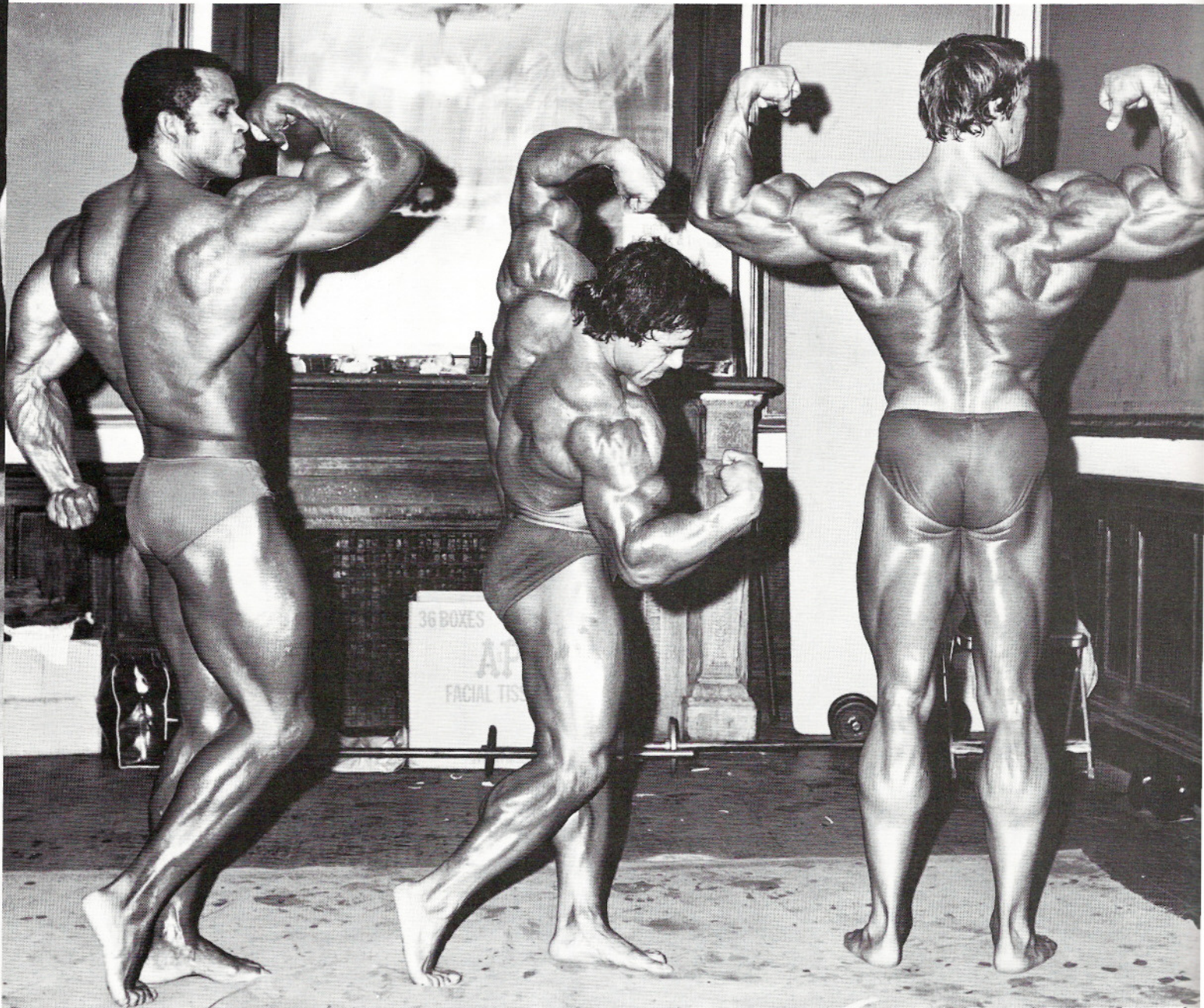
Not only should the lats be wide and sweeping, but they should also look thick and powerful where they come together in the middle back. Many bodybuilders have wide backs with sweeping lats but fail to look their best in back poses because the center of the back lacks that strong, thick look that a really great bodybuilder has to have. When you look at Dorian Yates, for example, you are immediately struck by the solid thickness of his back muscles. Dorian's back shows thickness even when he is standing relaxed.



*Chris Cormier*

*Flex Wheeler is credited with having incredibly good genetics, but the thickness and muscularity of his back indicate just how hard he has trained to realize his potential.*

Thickness in the back is achieved primarily by doing rowing exercises—Barbell Rows, Cable Rows, T-Bar Rows, and so forth. However, if you want to target the middle back, do rowing that gives you a longer range of motion so that you can fully contract that area—Cable Rows with separate cables or a wide grip, One-Arm Rows, or Barbell Rows with a wider grip.



*The back can be posed in a number of different ways, but as you can see, total back development is necessary to make each one effective. Serge Nubret, Franco, and I all show thick upper and lower back development, lots of lat width, and good muscularity.*



---

## LOWER BACK

---

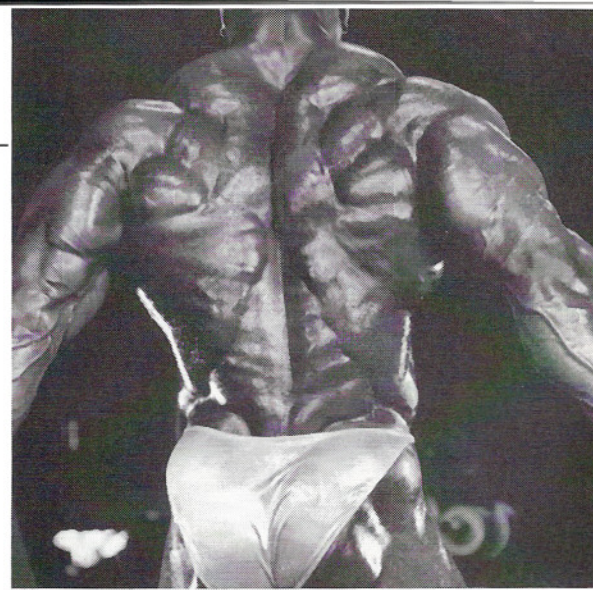
Many top bodybuilders have a great upper back but have never developed the lower back to the degree that they should. A really great lower back has two columns of muscle that stand out on either side of the spine, an indication of years of heavy Deadlifts, Bent-Over Rows, and other power exercises. When you see Boyer Coe onstage you notice the tremendous sweep of his lats, but when he stands next to someone like Danny Padilla, with his thick and powerful lower back, you can see he is weak in this particular area.

A truly Herculean physique needs that lower back development and thickness. Look at a Sergio Oliva, Franco Columbu, Dorian Yates, or Nasser El Sonbaty and you will see magnificent lower back development. Frank Zane at one time was very weak in the lower back. I recommended to him that he begin doing Bent-Over Rows, starting out with a relatively low weight and gradually increasing his poundages as his back developed. Zane is such a dedicated bodybuilder that within a relatively short time his lower back development increased enormously, and within a year you could see striations across the lower back.

Shawn Ray, although he had already won pro titles, eventually found himself threatened by the extreme back development of a number of the increasingly bigger bodybuilders against whom he was competing. Instead of giving up, or mindlessly just trying to gain additional overall mass, Shawn instead concentrated on back development, particularly on back width, to the point where competitors who were often fifty pounds bigger than he was couldn't blow him off the stage in rear lat spread comparisons.

Because we tend to store a disproportionate amount of fat around the waistline, leanness and definition in the lower back are visible proof that a bodybuilder has worked hard to get in shape. When he hits a back double-biceps shot and the judges see a clearly defined, sculpted lower back they know instantly that he has done an enormous amount of work, not just for the lats but for the entire back.

I have included exercises for the lower back right from the beginning so that bodybuilders following my training program will not find themselves with a weak lower back a year or so down the line. Heavy power exercises like Deadlifts are ideal because they not only develop the lower back but also strengthen it; you are able to do a variety of other exercises like Bent-Over Rows without having your lower back give out before your upper back.



*Three of the top bodybuilders, Chris Cormier, Dorian Yates, and Flex Wheeler, demonstrate three different ways to display the muscularity of the back. Note the "Christmas tree" that can be created by the striations and muscularity along the center of the back.*

---

## BACK MUSCLE FUNCTIONS

---

The lats have two basic functions as far as bodybuilding is concerned: They pull the shoulder back (a rowing motion) and pull the shoulders down (a pulldown or chinning motion). A common mistake when doing these movements is to use too much biceps effort and not enough back, or to involve the muscles of the lower back in a swaying motion instead of making the lats do most of the work. You have to make an effort when training lats to isolate them so that only these muscles are involved in the movement.

The lower back muscles function differently from most other muscles in the body. They are stabilizers, holding the body steady rather than constantly contracting and relaxing through a full range of motion like, say, the biceps. Therefore, when you do full-range exercises like Hyperextensions or Straight-Leg Deadlifts you put so much strain on the lower back that it can take up to a week to fully recuperate. This means that total-effort lower back training using power exercises and maximum weights is necessary only once a week. On the other days, do your sets with nonpower exercises and less than maximum poundages.

---

## DESIGNING A BACK PROGRAM

---

To plan a comprehensive program of back training you need to consider how each of the important back muscles functions so that you include exercises for each vital area. If you don't properly appreciate the complexity of the back and how many different movements it takes to get full back development, you will end up with serious weak points in this part of your physique.

For example, it doesn't do any good to do 5 sets of Chins to the front, 5 sets to the back, 5 sets of Wide-Grip Pulldowns, and 5 sets of Close-Grip Pulldowns and then figure you have worked your back adequately. Every one of those exercises works the pulldown function of the back, which develops the width of the lats, but a complete back program also has to develop the thickness of the back, the lower lats, and the strength and definition of the lower back.

The Basic Training Program starts out with simple exercises like Deadlifts and Chins. Later, to Deadlifts you'll add other back exercises such as Hyperextensions and Good Mornings. Similarly, chinning movements can be supplemented by various kinds of pulldown exercises, two-handed rowing exercises can be replaced occasionally by One-Arm Rows, and so forth. In the Advanced and Competition Training Programs, I have included an even greater variety of back exercises, so that by the time you

are ready to compete you will be doing several movements for each of the important areas of the back.

## **WEAK POINT TRAINING**

---

The most common problem of today's competition bodybuilders is incomplete back development. One reason for this may simply be that they do not get to study their backs as clearly as they can a front view, and so are not as motivated to train their backs as diligently as their chests or arms. One other reason, however, is poor back training technique. Back training is more subtle and more difficult than most people realize. For one thing, the basic function of the lats and other back muscles is to pull the shoulder girdle down and back. Many bodybuilders don't understand this and get confused as to which muscles they are supposed to be using. If they lurch back during the exercises and use the lower back or shoulders themselves, then the back muscles never get to work through a full range of motion.

Early in life you learned to coordinate your muscular efforts to make lifting easier. You learned to bend your knees when lifting something, to take as much strain as possible off the back muscles and distribute it more evenly to allow adjacent muscles to help. This is the opposite of what you try to accomplish as a bodybuilder. The trick to effective back training is to learn to isolate the various areas of the back, then make it harder on each individual area of the back instead of easier.

I have watched bodybuilders do Bent-Over Rows with an impossible amount of weight, so that they had to heave the bar into the air using every muscle in the body. This kind of cheating will never build a quality back. When doing Seated Rows, many bodybuilders add weight to the stack, as if lifting heavy weights is all that matters and then sway way back, using too much lower back, in an effort to finish off the movement.

Also, many bodybuilders allow the biceps to do too much pulling when they are doing pulldown or rowing exercises, which results in some powerful arm development but doesn't do much for the back. They need to concentrate on using the arms simply as a link between the back and the bar or handle, and not as a primary means of lifting the weight.

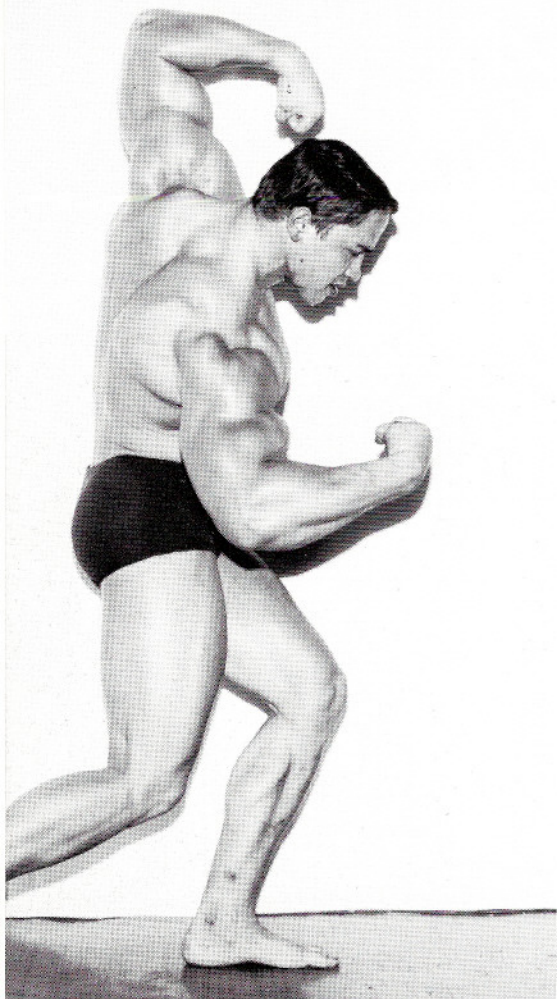
But even if you learn absolutely correct back training technique, the back consists of a number of complex and interrelated muscles and they do not necessarily all develop at the same rate in all individuals. As you become more advanced in bodybuilding and you begin to see which areas of the back have responded more quickly than others, you will want to alter your program to include more work for the muscles that are lagging behind.

## Outer Back Development

The outer back responds to Rows done with a narrow grip because with a narrow grip the handles or bar allows you to go back no farther than the front of the torso and shortens the range of motion. One of my favorite outer back exercises is T-Bar Rows, done as strictly as possible.

## Upper Back Development

The primary exercise I recommend for developing the upper back is heavy Bent-Over Barbell Rows. Additionally, you can do Seated Wide-Grip Rows, using a long bar instead of handles. If one side of the upper back is more developed than the other, try doing One-Arm Dumbbell Rows to work each side in isolation.



*What a difference three years can make! At age eighteen, I realized I needed more upper back thickness . . .*



*. . . by age twenty-one, after concentrated weak point training, this area had become my strong point.*

## Lat Width

The lats are extremely important for both front and back poses. Dorian Yates and Kevin Levrone have truly Olympian lats, and they look good no matter what pose they hit or what angle they are viewed from. The sweep and width of the lats is accentuated by doing exercises that pull the lats out to the side as far as possible. Wide-Grip Chins and Wide-Grip Pulldowns are the primary exercises for achieving this.

*Dorian Yates*





*Kevin Levrone*

## Lower Lat Development

The sweep of the lats is less effective if the lats do not extend all the way down to the waistline. Exercises to help you train the lower lats include One-Arm Cable Rows and close-grip movements such as Close-Grip Chins and Close-Grip Pulldowns.

## Middle Back Thickness

The middle back receives the greatest amount of work when you extend the range of motion as far as possible. Therefore, Seated Rows done with separate handles, allowing you to bring your elbows farther back, put more stress on the middle back. Rows done with a fairly wide grip or T-Bar Rows done on a machine allowing a wider grip create the same effect.

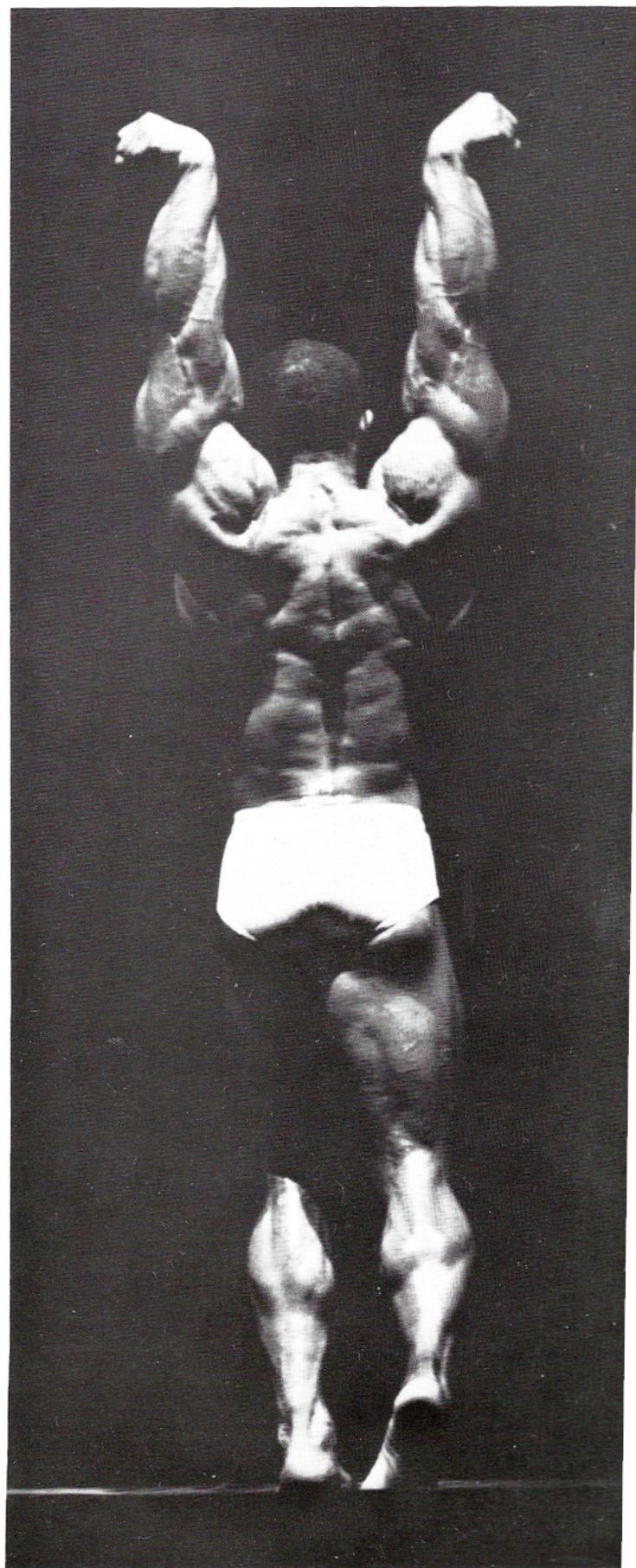
## Lower Back Development

Many bodybuilders forget that the lower back is an essential element in making any back shot really effective. Heavy Deadlifts force the lower back to work to the maximum. But you can also use exercises like Good Mornings and Hyperextensions to isolate and develop this area.

## Overall Back Development

Remember that other muscle groups contribute to your back poses, especially straight-on back shots like the rear double-biceps and rear lat spread. Therefore, you need to be concerned with muscles like the rear deltoids, the trapezius, and even the biceps and triceps. Everything ties in with everything else, and judges may watch you pose and give you low marks for the back when in reality it was some other aspect of your development that was at fault.

*Sergio Oliva displays perfect middle and lower back thickness.*



## **STRETCHING AND FLEXING**

---

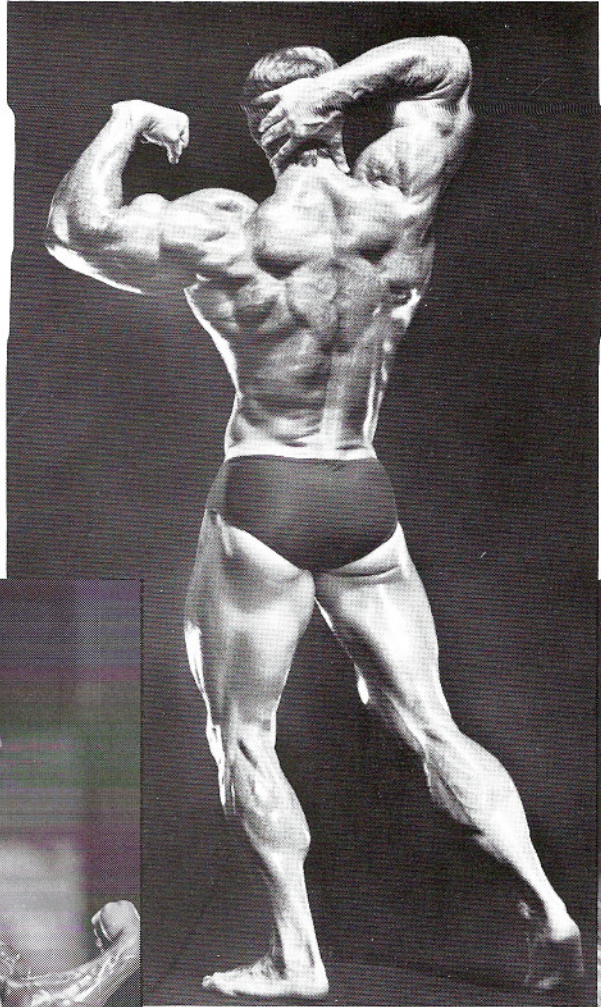
I am a firm believer in flexing and posing the muscles between each set. This is especially true for the back. You have to keep posing and flexing your back in order to gain full control over the muscles needed to show it off effectively in competition. Continually stretching the lats also helps achieve that long sweep and low tie-in at the waistline that make the champions' backs so impressive.

Flex the back or hit poses like a back double-biceps shot between sets of Rows and Pullovers. If you pose while your training partner is doing his set, you will keep the muscles pumped and warm and ready to really hit the next set.

When you are training lats with Chins and Pulldowns, between sets grab hold of something solid and really stretch them out one at a time as pictured here, or both at once. Also, all the serratus exercises (beginning on page 340) can be used to stretch the lats. This lengthens the muscles, helps you get a fuller range of motion and a deeper contraction, and develops the lower area of the lats as they extend down to the waist.







*Ken Waller*



*Shawn Ray*



*Dorian Yates*

*This series of poses demonstrates the number of different ways the complex muscle system of the back can be presented, and why it is necessary for the aspiring bodybuilder to achieve total back development in order to ensure success.*

