



Pumping Iron Discussion Guide

Directors: George Butler, Robert Fiore

Year: 1977

Time: 85 min

You might know this director from:

Pumping Iron II: The Women (1985)

The Endurance (2000)

FILM SUMMARY

Groundbreaking docudrama, PUMPING IRON, provides a compelling portrayal of the bodybuilding industry in the mid-1970. As the film's central figures prepare themselves for the 1975 Mr. Olympia competition in Pretoria, South Africa, a spotlight is shined on this rather niche sport. World-famous, five-time Mr. Olympia champion, "the one and only Arnold Schwarzenegger" is at the forefront of the film. In defending his title, Schwarzenegger guides us through the ins and outs, ups and downs of this seemingly cosmetic sport which puts endurance and motivation to the test. Contestants compete in a tight-knit community, simultaneously supporting and taunting one another in a battle to be the best, to stand at the top of the number-one platform.

In the end, it is the charm and ease of Schwarzenegger's personality that wins us over, and we witness how the psychology of bodybuilding is just as important as physical training. Schwarzenegger baffles and belittles the competition as they sculpt their physiques to such highly developed states through endless hours of weight lifting, running, boxing, swimming, and bronzing. From Arnold's training site of Gold's Gym on the Californian coast to the competition venue in South Africa, from Franco Columbu's hometown in Sardinia to Lou Ferrigno's home in Brooklyn, New York, PUMPING IRON displays the oiled-up, hardened bodies of those men out on the hunt for corporeal perfection, and even helps launch a few acting careers in its wake.

FILM THEMES

Bodybuilding has never been a sport for the masses, but this film approaches both the psychology and physicality of this borderline sport through the both charming and arrogant Arnold Schwarzenegger.

PERSEVERANCE/ENDURANCE

The perseverance required to attain The Grecian Ideal, a bodybuilding standard for the model male physique, is something your average individual arguably does not possess. PUMPING IRON spends a large portion of time inside the training centers as the men prep for the most esteemed contests. The countless hours, the sweat, pain, and sacrifice as these men push themselves beyond the point of pain (according to Arnold, the muscle is formed in the final two repetitions of any exercise, as it is pushed slightly beyond its capacity). Only through crossing their own pain thresholds can these men attain such superhuman physiques.

COMPETITION VS. COMRADESHIP

PUMPING IRON shines a light on the community of mid-70s bodybuilding, the brotherhood within the few gyms offered at the time. These men enjoy one another's company, joke, challenge, and push each other to their edges, sharing in the quest for "the pump." They persevere together. And yet they're all working towards the same goal - the Mr. Olympia and Mr. Universe titles, to stand on the highest winning platform, where one man alone can stand. Because theirs is a competitive sport, they stand both united and divided.

PSYCHOLOGY VS. PHYSICALITY

Physical strength is obvious in bodybuilding. But strength of mind is not to be overlooked. As Arnold claims, any negative energy must be kept at bay in the run-up to a competition. He allegedly skipped his father's funeral, as it was two months before a competition and he didn't have the space for such emotional weight. Cold? Necessary for a bodybuilding title? In addition to the psychology of the individual, the impact bodybuilders have on one another is tremendous. Schwarzenegger slyly cuts into Ferrigno when they meet in South Africa before the final competition. By the time they hit the stage Arnold's confidence carries him to the top, while Lou wobbles beside him. Any weakness, whether in body or mind, is weakness nonetheless.

COSMETIC BEAUTY

Priming and preening, sunning on sandy shores, adjusting coiffures, lathering oil on flexed muscles. Being a champion bodybuilder is as much about cosmetic beauty as it is about physical strength. Final competitions involve standing on a stage and "showing off" one's body of work, exhibiting not just physical power and strength, but the potential of the human body, and a desired beauty attained. There are many ways to redefine oneself through physical changes, be it a new hairstyle, layers of make up, a certain way of dressing, or building muscles.

"If you can go through this pain period, you may get to be a champion. If not, forget it."

Arnold Schwarzenegger

"Never feel sorry for yourself. Remember, if you are training hard, he may be training twice as hard. You just gotta keep coming back stronger."

Matty Ferrigno

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. In a society where we are bombarded with non-stop images of beauty through varying forms of media, how is bodybuilding both enforcing and/or destroying these images?
2. Have you ever been involved in a physical activity or sport that consumed the majority of your time?
3. If a close friend began to practice bodybuilding in a serious way, would you encourage or discourage him/her?
4. Is bodybuilding more acceptable for men than women? Do societal norms of female beauty allow woman to bodybuild without criticism of fear of losing their femininity?
5. How important is the role of the trainer for a bodybuilder? Can any true great athlete reach the top on his/her own?
6. When PUMPING IRON was filmed in the mid-1970s, there were very few public training facilities for bodybuilders. Nowadays, bodybuilders can train at any number of gyms across the world. How do you explain the increased popularity of physical training? Do you think the increased popularity of physical training has affected the bodybuilding sport?
7. As of 2014, bodybuilding is still not included in The Olympics, as it's not considered a true sport. Weightlifting, however, is. Do you think bodybuilders should be given opportunities for Olympic competition?
8. Do you think steroids should be legalized? Should bodybuilders be allowed any tools possible to reach their heightened states?
9. Testosterone, the male hormone that anabolic steroids replicate, encourages stamina, strength and muscularity, characteristics essential to a bodybuilder. Female bodybuilders on steroids often lose their breasts, grow facial hair, have enlarged clitorises, and deeper voices. Critics say that bodybuilding should be left to men, since they possess the natural hormones to make these physical forms possible. Do you agree or disagree?
10. How many films have you seen involving men from PUMPING IRON? Do you feel these men make better actors or bodybuilders?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- The Mr. Olympia statue is modeled on Eugen Sandow, the father of modern bodybuilding. Born in Prussia, Sandow moved to England, where he studied the Grecian form featured in ancient statues and intentionally modeled his body accordingly, working specific muscle groups. He took the sport of the strongman and developed it into bodybuilding, where sheer brute strength was coupled with a perfectly sculpted physique.
- Schwarzenegger's father was the local police chief in Thal, Austria, where Arnold was born. Claiming to have had a strict upbringing, his family was Roman Catholic and attended Mass every Sunday. He dreamed of moving to the U.S.A from the age of 10 and saw bodybuilding as his means of fulfilling this dream.
- Bodybuilders hold eight poses at a competition to display different muscle groups: Front Lat Spread, Front Double Biceps, Side Chest, Rear Lat Spread, Rear Double Biceps, Side Triceps, Abdominal and Thigh, and Most Muscular.
- The first bodybuilding contest was held in London, England, in 1901. The first contest in the U.S. was in 1904. The International Federation of Bodybuilders (IFBB) was founded in 1946. The first Mr. Universe contest was held in 1948, while the first Mr. Olympia was held in 1965.
- There are two classes in a bodybuilding competition: lightweight (under 200 pounds) and heavyweight (over 200 pounds).
- In Afghanistan, female bodybuilding is forbidden and in Malaysia, it has been officially banned.
- PUMPING IRON was shot in the 100-day run up to the 1975 Mr. Olympia and Mr. Universe competitions. The filmmakers ran out of funds and a number of bodybuilders raised money for it to be finished. The film launched the film careers of a number of bodybuilders and sparked the fitness craze of the 1980s, when the number of commercial gyms in the U.S.A. greatly increased.
- As bodybuilding grew in popularity, so did the use of anabolic steroids, which imitate the affects of testosterone, increasing muscle size, strength and stamina. Practically all competitive bodybuilders were using steroids by the 1960. Anabolic steroids have been illegal in the U.S.A. without a medical prescription since 1990.
- The record number of Mr. Olympia competition wins is eight, held by both Lee Haney (USA) and Ronnie Coleman (USA). Iris Kyle, who won her ninth Ms. Olympia title in 2013, became the bodybuilder to win the most Olympia titles – male or female.
- The 2014 Mr. Olympia competition will mark the 50th anniversary of the contest and will take place in Las Vegas, where it has been held since 1999. The first competition in 1965 took place in New York, and has also been held in Germany, Australia, France, South Africa, England, Belgium, Sweden, Italy, and Finland.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Watch Raw Iron, which tracks down the men featured in PUMPING IRON on its 25th anniversary.
2. Interested in taking your body to its own limits of perfection? Information on exercise, supplements and competitions can be found at BodyBuilding.com.
3. Learn more about bodybuilding. There's tons of research out there, from myths and misconceptions to information for both men and women.
4. Check out what filmmaker George Butler has been up to since the PUMPING IRON's release in 1977.

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