

## Buff is beautiful: Tica works out to win

Friday, November 04, 2011 - By Dominique Farrell

*Dedicated figure competitor Susetty Tabash of Jacó has national and international wins under her bodybuilding belt.*



JACÓ, Puntarenas – When Costa Rican Susetty Tabash won first place in the figure division of the 2010 National Bodybuilding and Fitness Championship, she was awarded a trophy in the shape of a man.

“It’s a really chauvinistic sport. You can be feminine and have muscles and be strong and not be a guy,” Tabash said. “To me, it shows that they didn’t care that women were competing or didn’t take the time to think what they were going to give them.”

Tabash, 30, competes in the relatively obscure figure category of the sport of bodybuilding. Unlike in traditional bodybuilding, figure competing is not about lifting weights. During competitions, figure contestants are judged on poses, stage presence, athleticism and symmetry.

“The judges are looking for your shoulders to be in proportion to your hips and your biceps to be in proportion to your calves,” said Jason Walker, Tabash’s trainer. “It’s all about symmetry.”

The muscular Tabash trains with Walker six days a week, two hours a day, at Platinum Gym in Jacó, on the central Pacific coast. Her workouts consist of an arduous weight-training session followed by a cardio workout.

Although Tabash has always been active, it wasn’t until two and a half years ago that she decided to train for a 2009 Revista Ejercicio y Salud contest in the sport model category.

“I approached Jason with the intention of competing in one contest, just to try it,” she said.

In addition to working as a personal trainer, Walker has competed in the U.S. National Physique Committee, an amateur bodybuilding federation, in both the heavyweight and super-heavyweight divisions. He said it’s important to look at each athlete and decide what would make them look more symmetrical and create a personal training program.

Given the short time he and Tabash had to prepare for the Ejercicio y Salud competition, neither was surprised when Tabash placed last. Nevertheless, she was hooked.

“It’s like a drug,” Tabash said. “I love to work out and feel the pain when I’m lifting. My adrenaline goes up.”

Tabash continued her training with Walker and entered more competitions. With time and hard work, her body gained definition.

“We took 3 inches off her waist by decreasing the amount of exercise she was doing to her midsections and lowered her muscle mass to give her more of an hourglass figure,” Walker said.

In 2010, a year after she placed last in the Ejercicio y Salud contest, Tabash went on to win the figure category in the National Bodybuilding and Fitness Championship.

Figure training is more than just weights and cardio; it's a way of life. Just as important as exercise is nutrition. Tabash eats every two to three hours, alternating between a protein and carbohydrate meal and one of vegetables. Staple foods include grilled chicken, oatmeal, potatoes, manioc and grilled or steamed vegetables. Butter, salt, pepper, dressings and sauces are off-limits. Alcohol, caffeine and sugar are strictly forbidden. Luckily, Tabash is a fan of bland food.

She even cheats with restraint.

"I cheat sometimes; I'll have sushi or a frozen yogurt," she said.

But for tomboy Tabash, her toughest battle was fought over the beauty aspect of the competition.

"It's somewhere between a beauty contest and a bodybuilding contest," Walker said.

Women take the stage attired in glittery fitness suits, jewelry, makeup, fake nails and heels to display poise, elegance and grace. Tabash had never worn makeup or high heels before. She purchased a makeup kit with step-by-step application instructions, but even after two years it still takes her an hour to put on fake eyelashes.

"I fought with her for close to two years to get her eyebrows arched. We finally negotiated on a mid-arch," Walker said, his biceps bulging beneath his T-shirt. "And I had to protest the European underarm hair. I refused to train her unless she shaved."

The former heavyweight competitor also taught Tabash how to strut on stage – a "tea walk" is what he calls it.

"It's not easy for me to feel comfortable onstage. I feel naked standing in front of an audience wearing high heels, dehydrated, cold and just thinking about finishing," Tabash said, though she added it has gotten easier over time.

Walker said judges look for competitors to have the confidence to go onstage and show they are comfortable with their lifestyle and physique and are enjoying themselves.

Despite all the hard work, the only gold Tabash sees is in her medals. Figure competing is a costly sport. The high-cut figure suits made specifically for the sport can cost up to \$2,000. Amateur athletes lack sponsors or endorsements, and the sport has not garnered much of a fan base aside from friends and relatives. To enter pro-sanctioned events and compete for cash winnings, athletes need a pro card, which can be obtained only by winning specific amateur events.

"It shows that a person has a lot of ambition, dedication and love for the sport to compete in something that may not have the financial reward or payback in society like a lot of other things," Walker said.



Susetty Tabash works out at Platinum Gym in Jacó.

Dominique Farrell

Many of Tabash's relatives don't understand her fascination with figure competing.

"My mother is worried I'll get hurt, and she feels sorry for me because of my restricted diet," Tabash said. "My dad doesn't understand why I want to look like a man. And my brothers think it's vain."

Although Tabash's family may not understand her love for the sport, they were in the front row cheering her on when she won first place in the national championship. And Tabash said her fiancé wears her competition T-shirts around town.

Tabash has lived in Jacó for the past seven years. In addition to training, she does administrative work at

her fiancé's family restaurant, El Hicaco, teaches aerobics three times a week and is a fitness chef who teaches aspiring figure competitors how to cook healthy, low-fat foods.

Walker said gym and community members have developed a great deal of respect for Tabash as they've seen her body change to where she could compete at the national and international levels. "She has captured the attention of the gym," said Camiel Moody, owner of Platinum Gym, where Tabash works out. "We think her success is great."

Moody added that there are even a couple of women at the gym who have started training for figure contests after seeing Tabash's success.

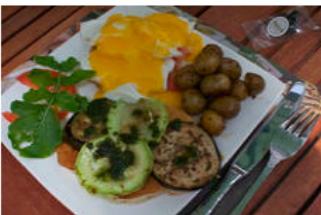
Last month, Tabash placed third in her division at the Central American and Caribbean bodybuilding championships in El Salvador. The loss prevented her from obtaining a pro card, but she's looking ahead.

"I plan to do the Arnold Sports Festival in March 2012," Tabash said, referring to the annual bodybuilding competition named after Arnold Schwarzenegger that takes place in Columbus, Ohio. She placed first in her division in the 2011 festival.

With four months to prepare, perhaps she'll even be able to let loose and have a frozen yogurt or two.

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