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Shredding Secrets

A Time-Tested Ripping Regimen

by Tony DiCosta

Photography by Michael Neveux

Yes, it's that time again. The season that brings an onslaught of swimsuit issues packed with perfectly lean supermodels (and their six-pack-toting male companions) basking on the world's most beautiful beaches will soon be beckoning the less-famous among us to our own beach rendezvous. Summer is back!

Even if you don't hit the beach all that much, the departure of winter's chill will send your adipose-hiding sweaters and down jackets back into the closet. And you know what that means—you can't hide the winter weight cloaking your now-invisible abs. There's no time to waist (forgive me) in shedding the extra weight and bringing out not only the must-have six-pack but also every other cut possible in the hard-earned new muscle you added over the winter.

Why should you take my advice? Because I have trod the path of transformation myself, and many of the techniques I used to get my bodyfat down to below 4 percent for the '13 IFBB North American Championships—where I won the 60-and-over division and the

50-and-over bantamweight class and, ultimately, qualified for a pro card—can help you get in shape whether your goal is the beach or the bodybuilding stage.

Here are some things about me that you may find relevant:

1) These techniques have proven successful for my personal-training clients and for many I've advised over the years.

2) I am genetically average, not a gifted mesomorph who is naturally lean and muscular, so I'm not inclined to gain or shed weight easily.

3) I have never had the advantage of using illegal anabolics to assist me in reaching my potential.

4) I live in the real world. I work full-time; I have a family and a mortgage.

Item 4 is particularly key for this article. Everything I suggest here had to pass the test of *Is it practical?* Basically, if you can't afford it, you don't have time for it, or it makes everybody around you mad at you, then you will likely miss your goal. I will show you how that question factors into all of my shredding sug-

gestions.

That said, there is a bit of serious craziness in the pursuit of extreme conditioning; if you really want to enter the realm of the superlean, if you aspire to be a person who inspires others on the beach *or* in the gym (no matter what your size or age), you need to be prepared to go the extra mile. That will take doing things you have never done and being more "perfect" than you ever thought you could be. Most athletes never get there.

Maybe you think I am going to give you a really killer diet. I'm not. The bodybuilding magazines and Web sites are full of them (darn good ones too). Find one and stick with it. What I *am* going to do is lay out a series of techniques you have probably already heard about but never tried. (Maybe these "secrets" aren't so secret after all.) Putting it all together is what will make the difference between a nicely lean 8 percent physique and a shredded, "What planet is *he* from?" 4 percent.

Know this going in: The one constant in any true ripping phase



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Model: Ako Rahim

occurring during athletic training is *hunger*. That's right, get used to it. I keep in mind the words of IFBB pro Branch Warren: "I go to bed hungry; I wake up hungry." That leads us to the first secret.

Calculate Your Calories

Once you have settled on a diet menu (*what you will eat*) and the

meal timing (*when you will eat*), you *must* establish your maintenance calorie level; that is, how many calories you need to stay at the same weight. From there you subtract calories to establish a weekly weight loss you can live with. That will tell you *how much you can eat*.

You cannot guess at this. There are a number of good "calorie calculators" to be found on the Internet.

Just punch that term into your favorite search engine, and choose one that allows you to factor in levels and frequency of exercise and a few other details. Subtract 300 to 500 calories from your maintenance to begin with, and work your way downward from there (as you probably will need to).

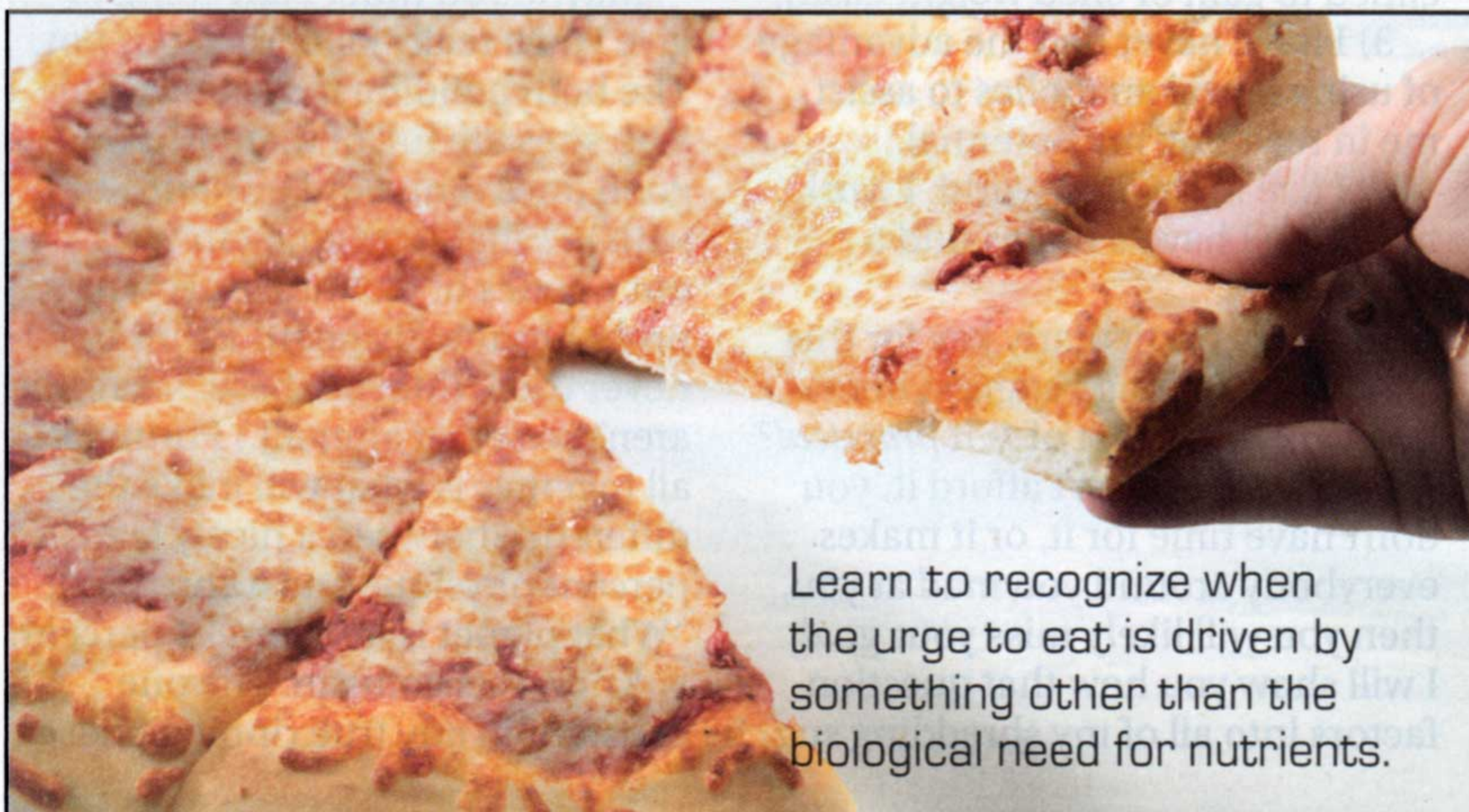
The Calipers Don't Lie

In the beginning your scale and your mirror will be helpful in gauging your fat loss. Ultimately, though, you can't trust either of them. If you get your nutrition, rest and training right, you may find yourself in an extremely anabolic state, putting on muscle even as you are dieting. Your muscle gains may just keep pace with the fat loss, in which case your scale may tell you that you need to cut more calories when you are actually doing great.

Even your mirror will fail you as you get deeper into cutting up and are looking so closely at yourself that you can't tell if you're really seeing changes. That is when a set of calipers comes to your rescue. A caliper-based skinfold test (done in either three sites or seven) will quickly and cheaply tell you exactly how you are doing. An inexpensive set of calipers with instructions can be had from any number of bodybuilding suppliers, such as Bodybuilding.com.

You Are Only Human

Pillar of strength and highly-trained athlete though you may be, recognize that you will be dealing with the same emotions that every minivan-driving soccer mom on a diet goes through. You will need to distinguish true physical hunger (brought on by a below-maintenance calorie intake) from "emohunger," the emotional urge for the comfort of eating during times of stress (a shredding diet *itself* being a source of stress) or the needs of habit (a pizza during your Sunday football game). Learn to recognize when the urge to eat is driven by something other than the biological need for nutrients.



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Have a Fall-back Position

Take a lesson from the annals of warfare. Good military leaders plan in advance what they will do and where they will go if a battle goes against them. It will be a position that can be defended easily and will keep the unit from losing any more of the valuable ground previously gained. For you and me that means having something to fall back on when the stress of training, dieting (and sometimes life in general) just becomes too much. It will be some form of low-calorie food that will satisfy your craving without causing you to lose a lot of previously gained ground.

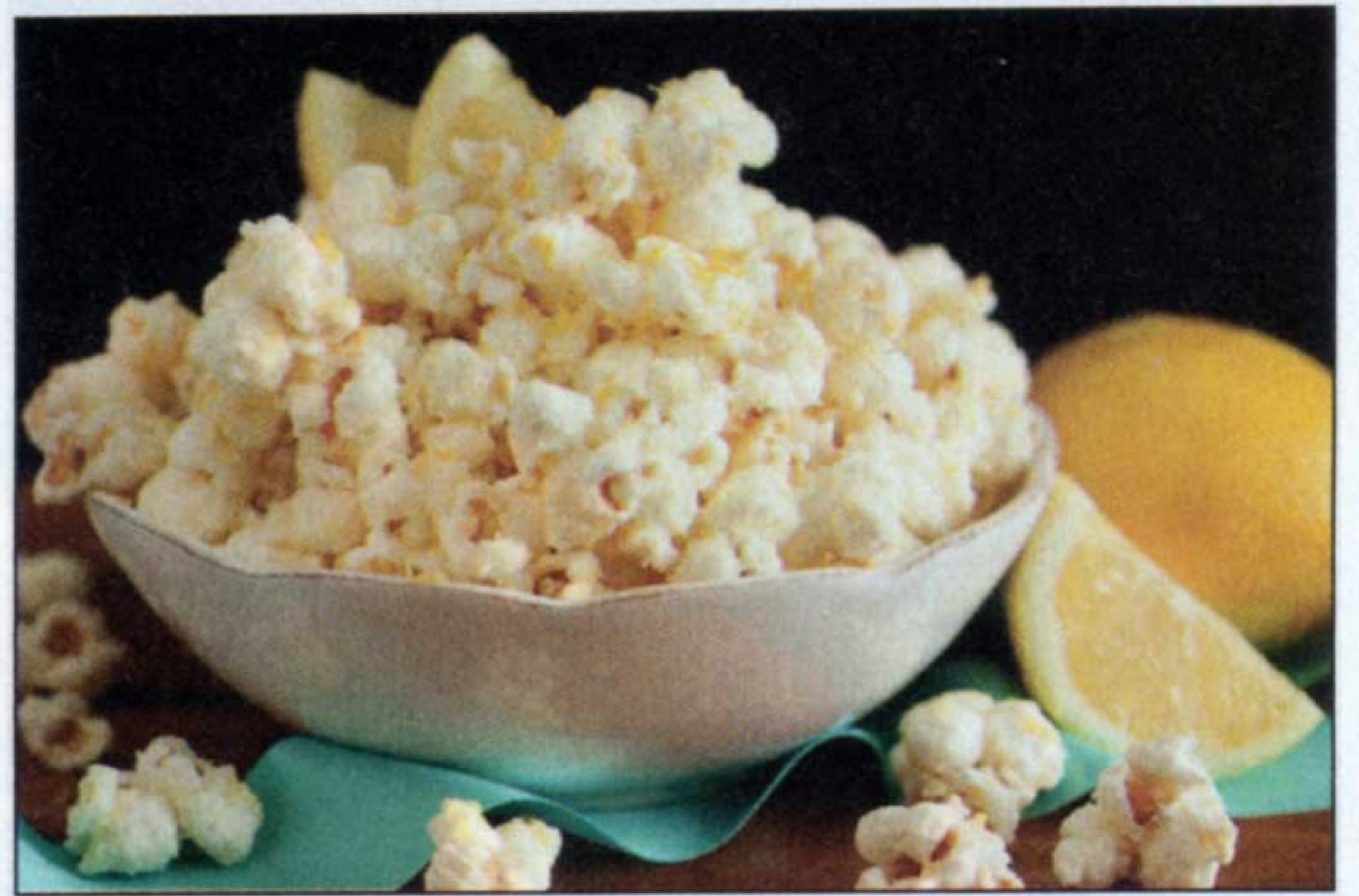
My fall-back snacks are beef jerky and popcorn. Don't laugh. If you buy the right beef jerky—be very careful, as some flavors contain a ton of sugar—it can take forever to

Putting it all together is what will make the difference between a nicely lean 8 percent physique and a shredded, "What planet is he from?" 4 percent.

eat a few ounces, the stuff is so tough. Plus, you take in a good amount of protein. And popcorn? That's right! A few ounces of this high-fiber wonder will pop into a big bowlful to keep you from going crazy during a movie at home. But (and this is a *big* but) you pretty much have to pop it yourself—without adding a ton of butter or a lot of salt. You can, however, spray it with some olive oil or coconut oil and get in a little good fat and flavor at the same time. Sprinkling on some stevia works great too.

Find Your "Stimulant Sweet Spot"

There are many highly effec-



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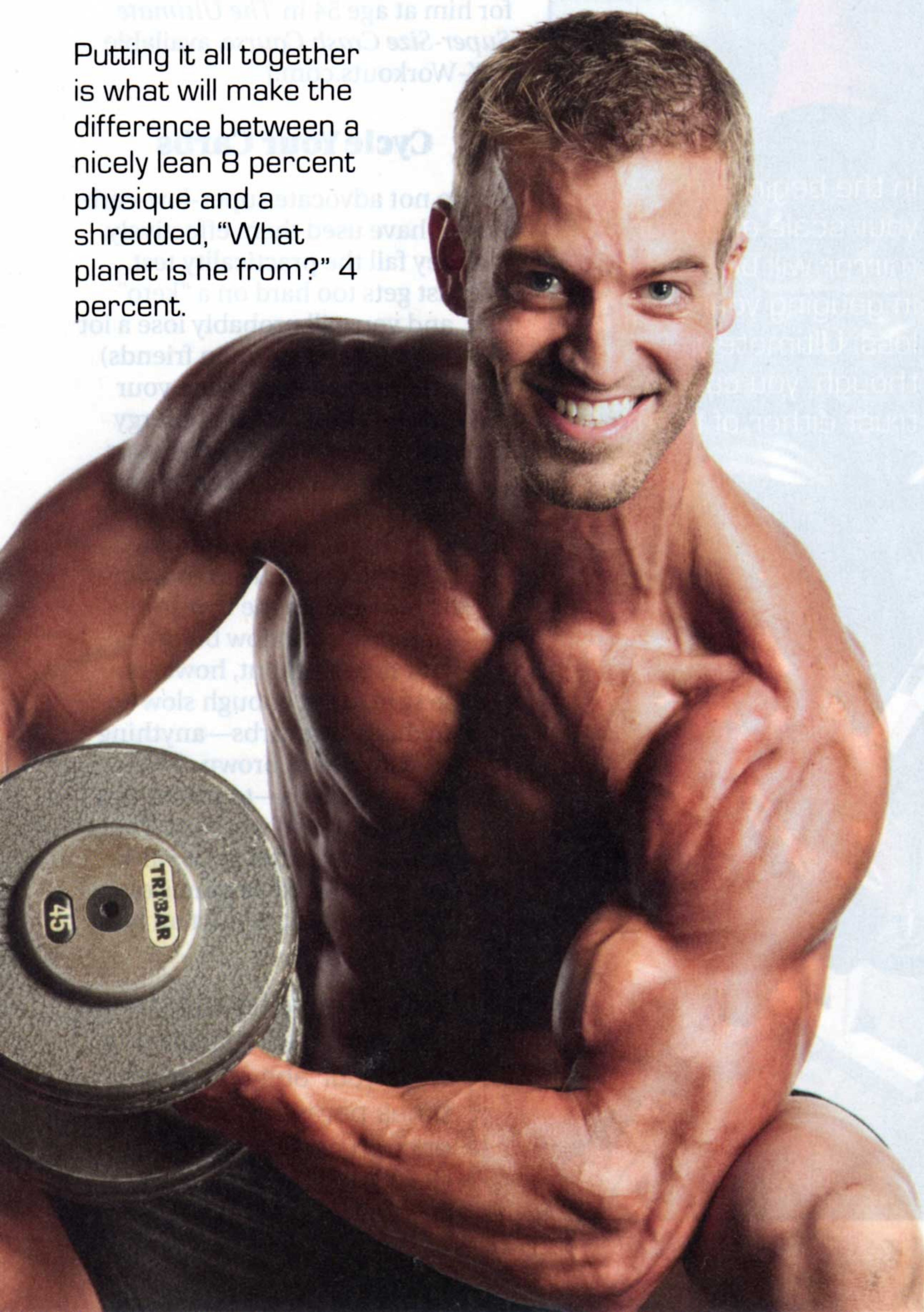
tive thermogenic diet aids on the market. I find them very helpful when used with proven fat-burning supplements such as raspberry ketones, CLA, green coffee bean and others. Here's the secret: Too much stimulation will bring on stress (just as too many cups of coffee can), and stress will bring on cortisol—which will stop your body from burning fat and cause it to store calories faster than a squirrel stashing acorns for the winter.

Work Your Abs as You Would Any Other Muscle

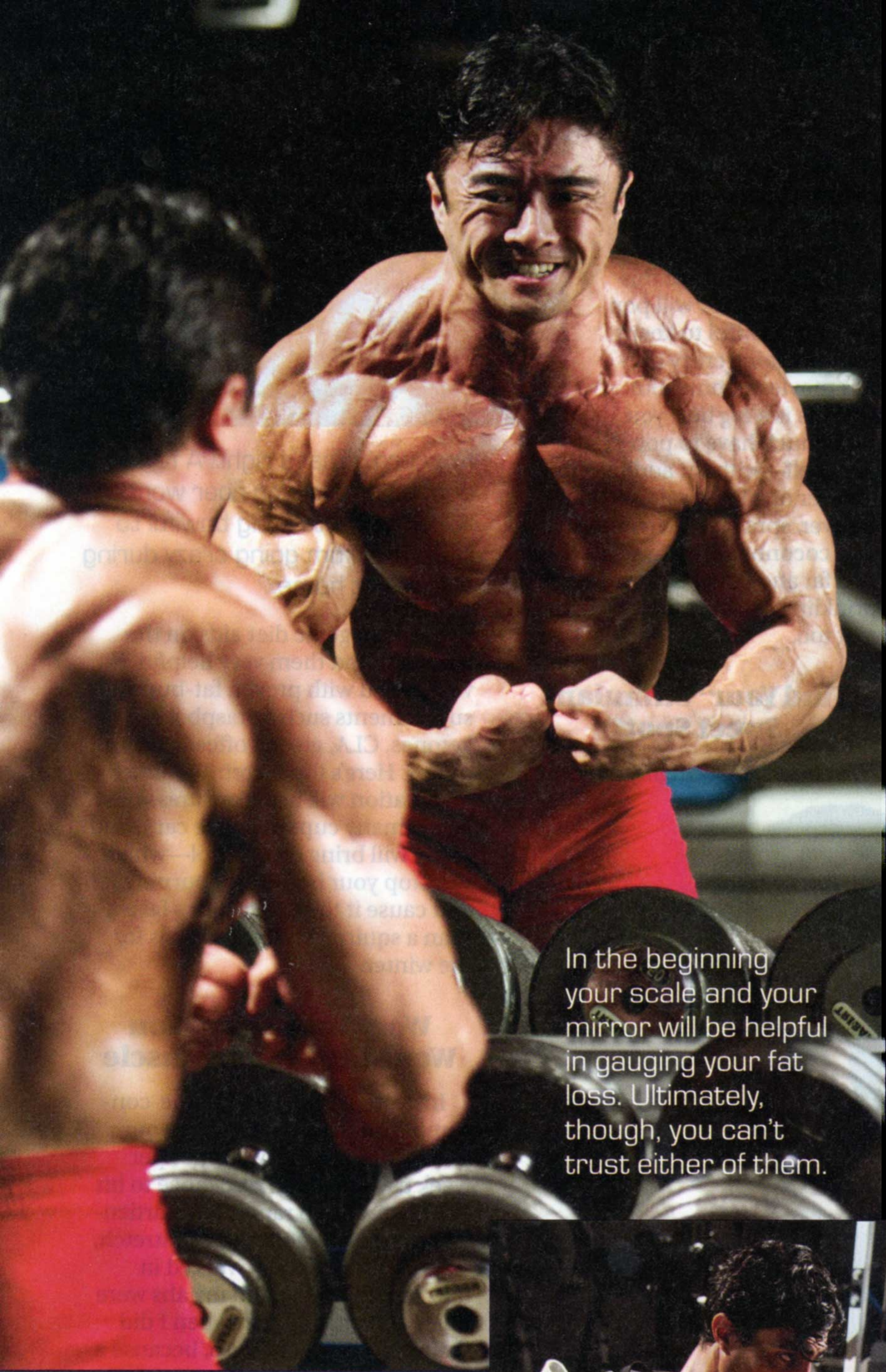
Instead of doing daily, time-consuming ab marathons, work your midsection one or two times per week using enough resistance to hit the 12-to-15-rep range. Pay particular attention to getting a full stretch, as your abs are rarely worked in that range. I did it, and my abs were fuller and deeper than when I did daily high-rep work. Also, because a fully detailed midsection completes the shredded look, pay close attention to your external oblique and serratus anterior muscles. Do not work your obliques or transversus abdominis with waistline-widening weighted twisting movements but with contraction movements such as hanging kneeups to the side.

Solve the Cardio Conundrum Yourself

Don't bother debating whether steady-state or high-intensity-interval training will burn a few more calories. Use both—on different days, of course. That's where the



Model: Ben Booker



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Model: Ken Yasuda

breakfast. Emerging research has proven what I found out on my own: Going without food for a minimum of 12 to 14 hours, usually between your last feeding in the evening and lunch, is great for burning fat while preserving muscle. Combined with the morning cardio of your choice—fasted, obviously—you won't find a better way to lose fat. And practical? You have the added benefit of one less meal to prepare, and the cost savings add up too. It takes a little getting used to, but it becomes easy after a while. For a treat—and to “re-load”—have a nice breakfast, with carbs, on the morning of one leg day per week. [Note: Steve Holman, *IRON MAN* editor in chief, outlines the intermittent-fasting diet—done two nonconsecutive days a week—that produced spectacular results for him at age 54 in *The Ultimate Super-Size Crash Course*, available at X-Workouts.com.]

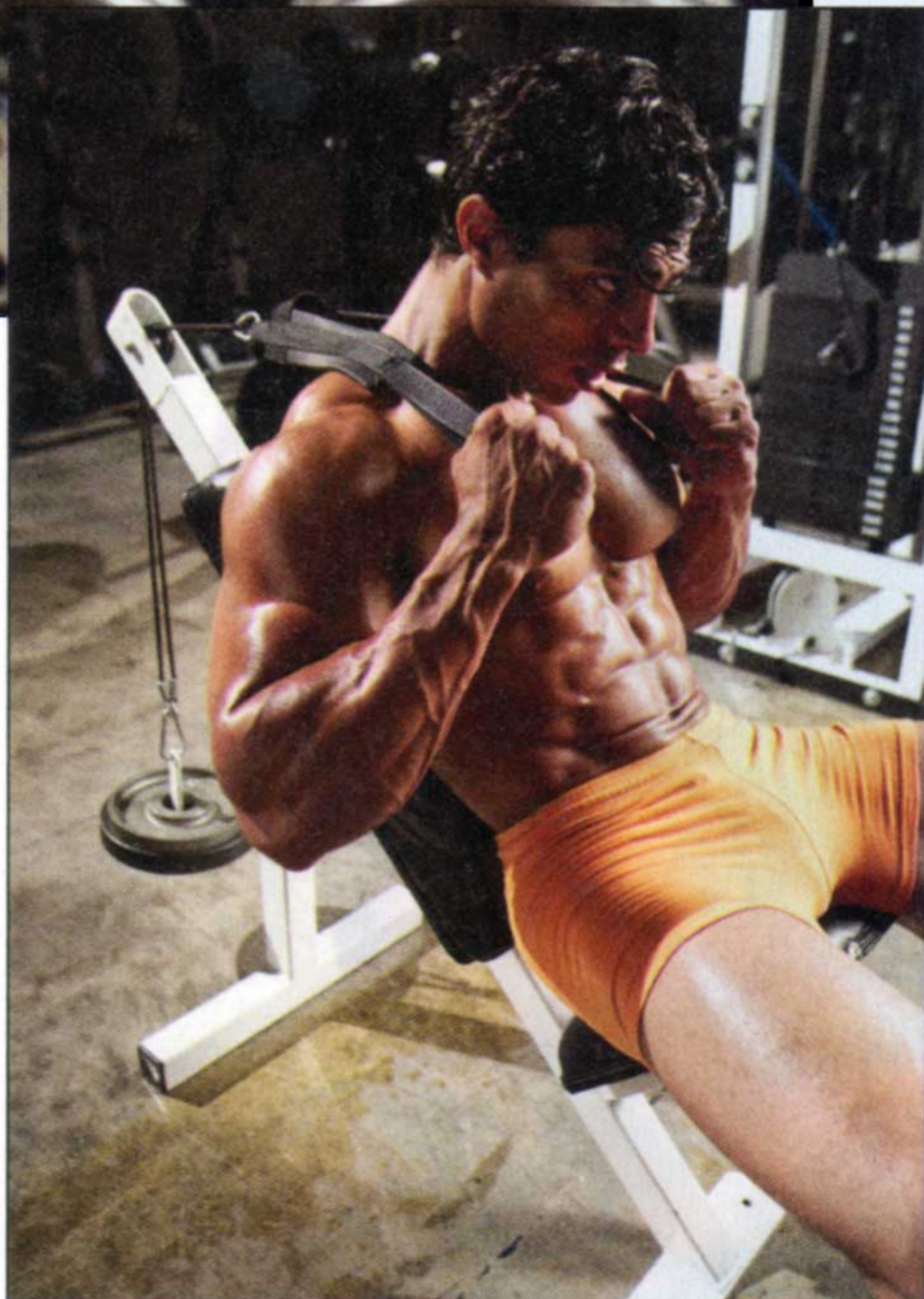
Cycle Your Carbs

I do not advocate super-low-carb diets. I have used them effectively, but they fail the practicality test. Life just gets too hard on a “keto” diet, and you will probably lose a lot of muscle (not to mention friends) along the way. Instead, time your carb intake based on your energy needs and use. Try this: After your intermittent fast, keep your first meal high in protein and low in carbs (or devoid of them). That will continue to promote fat burning. In the two-to-three-hour window before your next workout, however, be sure to get enough slow-to-medium-fast carbs—anything from apples to brown rice to sweet potatoes—to power you through a good workout. Then, immediately after your workout, get in 30 to 50 grams of fast carbs. Wait at least an hour

practicality test comes in. Let's say yesterday was leg day and a quick 20 minutes of HIIT would kill your already tortured quads, but an hour of steady state won't work because your boss doesn't want to hear that you are in training for the Mr. Oshkosh title when you're late for work. Skip the gym trip and take a *fast* half-hour walk around the block. That will work great because of the next “secret.”

Practice Intermittent Fasting

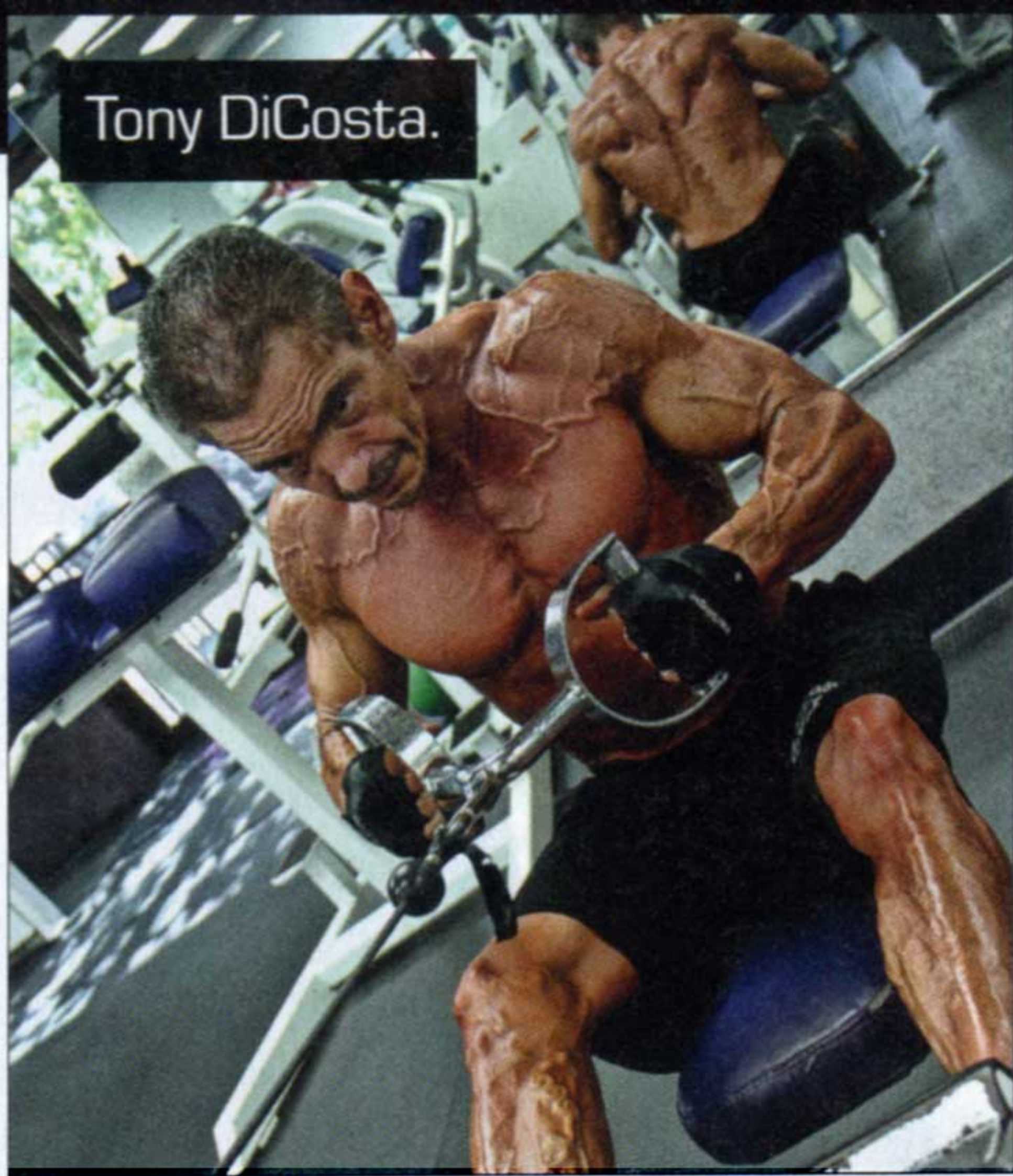
Basically, that means skipping



Model: Tamer Elshahhat

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Tony DiCosta.



Corso Photographic

before having a high-protein meal. Your last meal of the day should be high in protein and low in carb.

The Devil Is in the Details

What kind of secret is that? Well, to get into a freaky-lean state, you will have to pay attention to myriad small details that can make the difference between success and failure. Many of them you will have to discover for yourself, but here are a few I learned (some the hard way):

- 1) *Never* shop when you are hungry.
- 2) *Always* have your diet food prepared in advance or at least ready to cook quickly.
- 3) *Mercilessly* remove from your diet any traces of sugar or other fast carb that can spike your insulin. If in doubt, water is your beverage of choice—and lots of it.

When you are in the “Twilight Zone” of getting shredded, even tiny things like substituting zero-calorie creamers for milk in your morning coffee can make a difference. Taking noncaloric BCAAs before bed and in the morning will keep you anabolic.

And the final secret is...

Your Diet Began Before You Started Dieting

This is probably the hardest secret to embrace. Super-leanness is a year-round proposition. Outdated “cutting and bulking” cycles fail the practicality test, putting too much stress on your mind, your body and everyone around you. It’s far more impressive, effective and healthful to stay relatively lean all the time. Enduring 12 weeks of painful dieting and cardio only

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to rebound to an even chubbier state is such a waste.

Try to make these so-called secrets a part of your lifestyle and you will be rewarded on a daily basis—not just when the siren call of summer beckons you to the beach.

Editor’s note: Tony DiCosta, who’s in his 60s, is a successful national-level masters bodybuilder. **IM**

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