

## PERSPECTIVE

# The Art of the Comeback

Map out your return to glory

*I hate confessions, but it's only fair that I admit, right up front, that this article did not turn out the way I intended. Yes, it's still about coming back from a layoff, but it's not the nuts-and-bolts, how-many-sets-and-reps discussion that I envisioned. Read on, and I will explain.*

If you train in a gym for any length of time, it's not long before you realize that the two most common phrases you hear are, "You won't believe how much beer I drank last night," and, "Man, I've been out of the gym for x weeks (months, years), and I'm trying to get back into shape." The former statement, of course, speaks for itself. The latter warrants a bit of thought, as we will all be there at one time or another.

As a dedicated gym rat and veteran of more than four decades of bodybuilding training, I can testify to the fact that the longer you do battle with the iron, the more "comebacks" you will have. I've had about a million of them.

Now, make no mistake: I am a big proponent of consistent commitment (I once went a full year without missing a single scheduled workout). That said, the first point on my comeback to-do list is about not being too hard on yourself.

**Forgive yourself.** Unless you just decided one day to start being lazy, you probably had a good reason for your lay-off. Maybe it lasted longer than it should have, but it probably began for a good reason. Fitness—and that includes physique work—is not just a steady uphill progression from the very first day you pick up a weight until you get too darn old to lift one. Recognize that there are seasons in your life where family, career or health may intervene. Get over it, and get on with it.

**Understand that you are only as strong as your weakest link.** Whether you are coming back after a few months off or a few years, your weak link is going to be your tendons and joints. As you begin to train again, you will reconnect

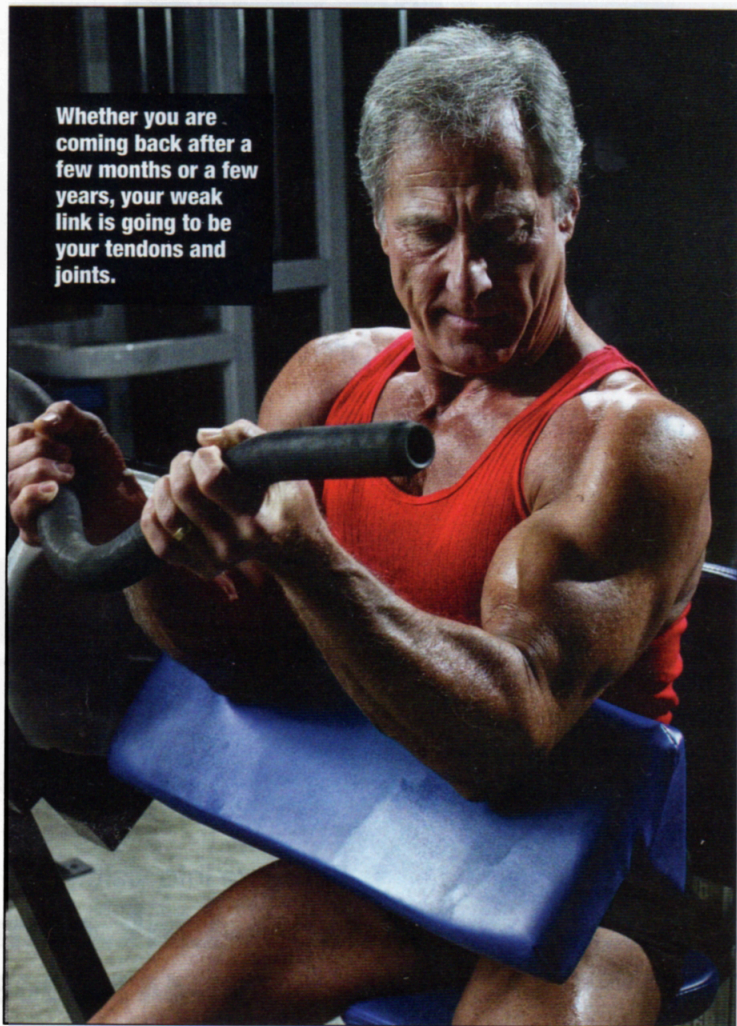
with the muscles, enabling you to recruit more of their motor units in each exercise. Muscle memory will kick in, too, as your muscles, with their plentiful blood supplies, become stronger at a pretty fast rate. Your joints and tendons, however, with their less-abundant blood supplies, will get stronger much more slowly. Keep that in mind at every training session. Don't get weight happy just because you're getting stronger quickly—stick with higher reps and lighter weights for a long time and give your joints and tendons the chance to catch up safely.

**Believe that you're never too old.** As I was searching for a great personal physical "comeback" to illustrate this article, I revisited what many consider the greatest individual sports comeback of all time: boxer George Foreman's 1994 recapturing of the World Heavyweight Championship, at the improbable age of 45, after losing it 20 years earlier. That's when this article took a different turn. George's incredibly successful comeback illustrates principles we can all use in orchestrating our own "return to the fitness ring." And what better model to follow than one that returned a long-retired fighter to the limelight and made him a household name as well as a wealthy man?

"There is no death sentence in the age 40 or 50." I heard Foreman, who was once again the champ, tell that to a TV audience. I would add the age of 60 to that, as my own comeback began at 60 and ended with regional and international masters titles, including an invite to become an IFBB pro. So do not be deterred by your age—it's not an impossible hurdle.

**Have a goal in mind.** From the minute Foreman began his 10-year quest, he had one goal in mind: Win the heavyweight championship of the world. Of all the things you can do to assure a successful comeback of your own, that, I fervently

Whether you are coming back after a few months or a few years, your weak link is going to be your tendons and joints.



Neveux \ Model: Frank Zane



# MUSCLE

believe, is the most crucial. Studies have shown that having a positively stated goal is a more powerful predictor of success than is a negatively stated one. For example, rather saying, "I have to lose this spare tire around my middle," a more positive goal would be to say, "In the end I will own a six-pack of abs."

**Start out slowly.** "Puddle-hopping," is the term Big George used to describe the modest (to say the least) competition he faced early on in his second rise to the top. Many ridiculed the former champ for the caliber of his opposition, but Foreman knew he needed to shake off a lot of ring rust before he faced serious competition. He fought often, too, sometimes twice a month. Apply those same tactics to your comeback workouts. Train lighter, with 20 to 30 reps per set, and more often to regain strength and conditioning without hurting joints and tendons.

**Ignore the critics.** George was hardly a sleek figure when he returned to the ring. He was ridiculed for being too old, too fat and too slow ("You can time his punches with a sundial," one noted boxing reporter observed). If you're like most of us, you may be your own worst critic and have those thoughts on your own. Even so, do what George did: He ignored the critics, continued to hone his skills and eventually racked up 20 straight wins (with 19 KOs) on the way to getting the title shot he so ardently sought.

**Realize that a big goal takes time to accomplish.** It took Foreman (who was no spring chicken when he began his comeback) seven years to win back the title. When I sought to get into contest condition at age 59, I started with a mediocre physique and 18 percent bodyfat, and it took me three years to drill down to a contest-ready 4 percent. Give yourself a reasonable amount of time to make big changes, and you will avoid injuries and have a lot more fun along the way.

**Accept setbacks.** Your fitness goals are not likely to be reached in one, continuous upward climb. There will be stumbles and setbacks along the way. Five years into his comeback Foreman suffered a loss in his first title bout—but he was not deterred. It took him three more years to win get a

second title bid and win the championship. Learn from him, and get over your own setbacks quickly. Just keep pursuing your vision of your physique.

**Use the superior wisdom of age to your advantage.** Along with the humbling wrinkles that Father Time has bestowed upon you, there also comes wisdom, maturity and discipline in greater measure than you had as a young person. Study, develop a strategy and work out while employing those gifts to your advantage. That is what George did to finally regain the World Heavyweight crown, which he lifted from Michael Moorer, who was 19 years younger, in 1997. Foreman knew he could not beat the younger, faster man with speed or boxing ability, but he used the wisdom of his years to set a trap for Moorer. Before the bout Foreman told skeptical HBO commentator Jim Lampley that at some point in the fight the elusive Moorer would choose to stand right in front of him and slug it out. And that is exactly what happened—allowing Big George to unleash the right hand he had been setting up all night—a right hand that knocked Moorer out in the 10th round.

Similarly, you may no longer have the physical advantages that came with youth, but you do have the mental ability to be a better bodybuilder than ever before. Even in my 60s I have many fantastic workouts, and I often wonder what might have been if I had trained that intelligently in my 20s.

**Look for the pot at the end of the rainbow.** In spite of the fact that he made tens of millions of dollars from boxing, Big George made more from licensing his name to the George Foreman Grills than he made in his entire boxing career. And the endorsements just kept coming. The unintended consequences of his win amounted to what HBO's Lampley colorfully described as, "Hundreds of millions of dollars—the biggest purse in the history of prizefighting."

Okay, so your fitness comeback may not make you millions of dollars—but what value can you place on your health? An unintended consequence of my own comeback came as I was training for the Masters Nationals in 2011. A genetic defect in my heart's main artery caused an instantaneous 100 percent blockage of the artery—which is usually fatal. After the surgical insertion of a stent, I walked away unscathed and returned to training within two weeks. My utterly stunned cardiologist said that there was no doubt that my hard training had saved my life. How's that for a comeback?

Your own comeback may also yield an as-yet-unknown wealth of benefits. Remember that as you shoulder the joys and challenges of your return to the iron game.

—Tony DiCosta

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

Conso Photographic



USE THE SUPERIOR WISDOM OF AGE TO YOUR ADVANTAGE... YOU MAY NO LONGER HAVE THE PHYSICAL ADVANTAGES THAT CAME WITH YOUTH, BUT YOU DO HAVE THE MENTAL ABILITY TO BE A BETTER BODYBUILDER THAN EVER BEFORE.