THE 15 BEST BODYBUILDERS WHO NEVER WENT PRO

ALWAYS AMATEUR

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF WEIDER HEALTH AND FITNESS
LIKE THE OUTCOME OF THE 1980 MR. OLYMPIA

or which guy’s guns would win the ultimate arms race, it’s one of bodybuilding’s enduring debates: Who are the best amateurs to never go pro? We set out to compile the definitive list. In determining our top 15, we began by limiting it to bodybuilders in their prime during the professional era, launched in 1965 with the inaugural Mr. Olympia. Physiques were evaluated against others of their eras, because a body capable of placing in a 1981 pro show (see number 9) probably wouldn’t in 2001. We excluded men who never attempted to qualify as an IFBB pro, such as 1983 Mr. America Jeff King. Youth and unrealized potential landed some on the list, while others who peaked well into their 30s but still couldn’t advance didn’t survive our final cut.

There are names you may have expected to see here simply because they were in the running in numerous pro qualifiers, but we haven’t simply awarded persistence. After all, sometimes a decade of single-digit finishes without winning is merely proof that someone didn’t have what it takes and wouldn’t be bulldozed in the big league. That said, many very good bodybuilders were edged out of the final 15. To name just two: Toshio Konuma won the Mr. Japan an incredible 14 times between 1985 and 1999, and Jeffrey Williams defeated the number one and two men on our list at Nationals contests in the early ’80s. Who are numbers one and two? All in good time, for we have 13 other everlasting amateurs to discuss first. This list may spark as many debates as it settles, for it’s mere conjecture who could’ve been the best pro. Unfortunately, we’ll never know.

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BILLY SMITH

Many bodybuilders came closer to nabbing a pro card than Smith, but few, like him, had professional-caliber size while still a teen. At 19, Smith won not only the teenage title, but also the open overall of the 1984 Gold’s Classic, and shortly after his 20th birthday, he made a splash by finishing sixth (just behind numero uno on our list) in the ’84 Nationals heavyweight class. The following year, at 21, the blond behemoth was third at the Nationals, and it seemed inevitable that he’d haul his wide 6’2” frame and its 260-plus pounds to the pro circuit soon thereafter. Smith had other plans. He began devising nutrition programs and supplements, first for Gold’s Gym and then for his own INTRAFITT company, and he spent three seasons (1990-92) as Thunder on American Gladiators. At 30, after nearly a decade away from the national stage, he returned at the 1995 USA, weighing a veiny 274 and landing fifth among the heavies. It was his final contest, as thereafter he focused on expanding his business.

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ROBERT LOPEZ

He came close, but Lopez just couldn’t get over the hump. Early in his career, he won his class, but not the overall (1987 Teen Nationals, 1996 Atlantic States). Then, he just missed out on class wins, placing second, third or fourth in seven national shows. Renowned for his outrageously cutedipated biceps and wispy waist, the 5’6” Lopez was runner-up in the USA light-heavy class a heartbreaking three times — in 1985, 1999 and 2001 — edged out on each occasion by a future Mr. Olympia competitor. Likewise, the five men ahead of him when he was fourth at the 2000 Nationals and third at the 2002 USA, all eventually qualified for the professional ranks. A decade ago, he seemed a sure-thing pro, but perhaps we haven’t seen the last of the now-41-year-old Robert Lopez.
Always Amateur

Paul Grant

Born in 1943, this Welshman is probably best remembered for his appearance in Pumping Iron, which captured him placing third in the tall class of the '75 IFBB Mr. Universe. He was also third the year before and again two years later. Before then, Grant won the '71 Mr. Europe, '72 Mr. Britain and the tall class of the NABBA Mr. Universe in both '72 (defeating Lou Ferrigno) and '73, losing the overall both times, once to Chris Dickerson. He later suffered kidney failure and received a transplant in '85. In the years before his death in 2003, Grant ran a gym and health-food store, and served as president of the Welsh Federation of Bodybuilders.

Harry Dodich

This Louisianian had one of the most aesthetic physiques on our roll call and often showcased impressive conditioning by the standards of the mid-'80s (look, hamstring lines!). He leaptfrogged from ninth best heavyweight at the 1984 USA to second in '85, behind only number one on our list. The following year, he won the class but lost the overall. Next came a third in the '86 Nationals and a second in '87. Dodich was the heavyweight favorite going into '88, but he never competed again (Johnnie Ray Kinsey, whom Dodich defeated at the previous two Nationals, won the heavyweights that year). The line on Harry Dodich was: “With a few more pounds, he could do some damage in the pros.” Unfortunately, he — and we — never got the chance to find out.

Manny Perry

Born in Massachusetts, 6'2" Perry won New England physique contests before moving to Los Angeles in 1975. There, he was befriended by Arnold Schwarzenegger and other demigods training at Gold's Venice. In 1976, at age 27, his overwhelming mass helped Perry become Mr. USA. The following two years he took the tall class of the Mr. America (ahead of four future pros), but lost the overall. While preparing for the second of those Mr. A assaults, the then-29-year-old and 260-pound Perry was hired to be Lou Ferrigno's stunt double on TV's The Incredible Hulk. His class victory at the 1978 Mr. A was his final contest, and he went out very near the top. For more than three decades, Perry has worked as a stuntman, stunt coordinator and actor.
Gunnar Rosbo

Norway’s Rosbo had arguably the freakiest forearms ever, and the rest of him was pretty spectacular, too — with the exception of a lagging back. He began competing in international contests in the mid-’70s, but didn’t make a dent until 1981, when he won the heavy division of the European Championships and finished second in the same class at the World Championships. With his combination of Scandinavian good looks and full muscle bellies, he was soon staring back at us from the pages of American muscle magazines. In 1982, Rosbo was again deemed the second best heavyweight at the World Championships, this time beaten only by future eight-time Mr. Olympia Lee Haney. Very near the amateur apex, Rosbo — who still lives in Norway — left the bodybuilding scene after a year in the spotlight, leaving us to wonder if we imagined his dense muscularity and those football-size forearms.

Bronston Austin Jr.

He’s the answer to a tricky trivia question, for Austin holds the unique distinction of placing third in an IFBB pro contest even though he was never a pro. How can that be? It happened at the 1981 Pro World Cup, where, in the best shape of his life, he vanquished such notables as Albert Beckles, Johnny Fuller and Greg Deferro. Only Boyer Coe and Chris Dickerson — who together won 10 pro shows that year — landed ahead of him. The contest was a pro/am event, and Austin, one of four amateurs, was the only non-pro to place. The previous year, the Illinois native had come as close as anyone could to advancing to the big league without doing so when he won a stacked light-heavy class at the 1980 Mr. America but lost the overall, and was subsequently edged out by Fuller at the World Championships. He was fourth among light-heavyweights at both the ’81 Mr. America and ’82 Nationals, before prematurely retiring. Although he never turned pro, he proved indisputably that if he had his collection of cuts, he could’ve finished in the money.
**JIM HAISSLopez**

This Floridian won the 1966 Mr. North America, and, at 25, the 1967 Mr. USA, weighing 220 at 5'11". After a runner-up finish in the '67 Mr. America, he took the title in '68, defeating five future IFBB pros, including Coe and Dickerson. Soon thereafter, Haislop was deemed runner-up in the tall class of the Mr. Universe. In 1969, he won that Mr. Universe division, but lost the overall to Coe. Haislop's arms were somewhat undersized, but his dramatic quad sweeps, svelte waist and capacious shoulders combined to form one of the era's most dramatic X frames. Madison Avenue certainly appreciated his striking looks, casting him in a Lestoil Cleaner TV ad, but in an era when only Mr. U overall victors qualified for the Mr. Olympia, Haislop hung up his trunks at 27, having rapidly progressed to very near the pinnacle of bodybuilding. He later judged NPC contests and won the masters division of the '92 Mr. Florida. Today, he lives in his native Tampa Bay and still works out.

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**BEAU MATLOCK**

No one on our list accomplished more at a younger age. At only 21 in 1991, this 5'7" New Jersey resident won the Junior USA, the light-heavy class of the USA and placed third in the Nationals. At a time when only the overall winner of the USA went pro, many favored Matlock's artistic physique over the freakier Mike Matarazzo’s for the USA crown. Regardless, everyone felt he would soon be a pro. Moving up to the heavy class (at a mere 208), he was second at the 1992 Nationals, ahead of six future pros and the number four man on our list. Unwisely staying with the heavies, he struggled the following year. When he last competed, placing sixth among heavies in the 1994 USA, Matlock was only 24.

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**MOSES MALDONADO**

One of the main reasons why many of the Americans on our list were at their best in the ‘80s or first half of the ‘90s is that few pro cards were handed out then. No one suffered more from this slight than New Yorker Maldonado, who, at 26, burst onto the scene with symmetrical thickness and won the loaded light-heavy class of the 1982 Nationals at a time when only its overall victor or a World Championships class winner went pro. Lee Haney took the overall, and then two men (including number three on our list) placed ahead of Maldonado at the World. When, seeking pro status, Maldonado returned to the Nationals light-heavy class having previously won it, there was, of course, a natural inclination to give someone new a trip to the World Championships. Torturously, he was runner-up in that class for the next two years. In 1985, he was fourth behind three future pros. For Maldonado, at age 29, that show was the final contest in his brief but very promising career.
PIERRE VANDELENSTEEN

One of the best short men of his generation, Vandelensteen beat two others who lay claim to that title, Franco Columbu and Mohamed Makkawy (twice), when, between 1960 and 1974, the Belgian won the Mr. Universe short class three times, landed in second three other times and added a short class win at the Mr. World. At his peak, he also packed home the overall trophies from the ’73 Mr. International and ’74 Mr. Europe. Noted especially for his ridiculously separated abs and a level of crisply striated conditioning that could hold its own on today’s pro stages, it’s unfortunate we never got to see Vandelensteen battling Columbu in the mid-’70s for the lightweight class in the Mr. Olympia.

EDGAR FLETCHER

Lining up with heavyweights (before there was a super-heavy class) often over a half-foot taller than he was, 5’6” Fletcher never appeared squat. He wore his 210 pounds like a stylish suit, melding a dramatic V taper, superb arms and an abs vacuum into one of history’s best front double biceps poses. After leaping into bodybuilding’s collective consciousness with a second-place heavy finish at the 1990 Nationals, the then-25-year-old Pennsylvanian seemed destined for IFBB pro stages. It wasn’t to be. In eight contests over the next five frustrating years — often just missing his peak — he placed third in five additional pro qualifiers and fourth twice, but that initial runner-up spot was his high-water mark. He last competed in 2000. From the ’90s era of American pros, such as Flex Wheeler, Kevin Levrone and Chris Cormier, Fletcher and Matlock were the best who never joined the party.
Always Amateur

**AHMET ENÜNLÜ**

Renowned for his balanced thickness and dense abs, the all-time greatest Turkish bodybuilder won the middle-height class of the 1970 IFBB Mr. Universe two months after turning 22, but lost the overall to Columbu. Over the next five years, Enünlü won his division in the IFBB Mr. U again (in ’74) and was second twice and third once. Then, he took his class and the overall at the WABBA Mr. Universe in ’77 and ’78, and NABBA's U in ’79. Out of a field of 15, the Turk scored an impressive fourth in a non-IFBB pro show behind legends Sergio Oliva, Serge Nubret and Robby Robinson, but, feeling he deserved first, he reportedly refused the prize money. Enünlü won the light-heavy class of the 1982 IFBB World Championships (the successor to the Mr. U), defeating Maldonado, yet he still chose to remain an IFBB amateur, competing in the World Championships year after year, finishing second among light heavies in 1989 at age 41. In his final contest (so far), 30 years after his first Mr. U victory, he won the over-50 trophy of the 2000 World Championships — his seventh class victory in a global contest.

**RORY LEIDELMeyer**

Choosing the winner and runner-up for this list was easy, for there are only two who not only could've been competitive in the pros, but also could’ve potentially vied for a Sandow. The Holland-born son of a bodybuilder who trained with Chuck Sipes and Bill Pearl, Leidelmeyer was already a muscle magazine cover model when, at 22, he became Mr. California in 1980, defeating future pros John Brown and Gary Leonard in the tall class, and short-class winner Bronston Austin Jr. With his symmetrical thickness, Leidelmeyer literally seemed like the next big thing. When, the following year, he finished a close second in the Mr. America light-heavy class to overall victor Tim Belknap; it was deemed a mere delay of the inevitable. In 1983, weighing 224, his was either the best or second-best physique at the Nationals (Mike Christian, Rich Gaspari, Matt Mendenhall and Ron Love are among the famous who placed behind him), but another surprising phenom, 216-pound Bob Paris, was judged number one and he too was a heavyweight. Again, it seemed merely a deferment, but in retrospect, it marked the then-25-year-old Leidelmeyer’s zenith.

He looked untouchable in photos leading up to contests, but thereafter increasingly muddled conditioning pushed his dream progressively further away, as he was judged the fifth best heavyweight at the 1984 Nationals, sixth in 1986, ninth in 1987 and — making a comeback at 36 — 14th in 1994. Today, Leidelmeyer (who has recovered from bone cancer) works as a personal trainer in Southern California and photos of him from the ’80s continue to inspire. His rare combination of aesthetics and mass prompt a new generation to proclaim, “I want to look like that.”
There were two 22-year-old, 5'11" phenoms at the 1982 Nationals. One, Lee Haney, won the contest and went on to collect eight Sandows. The other, Matt Mendenhall — second behind Haney and ahead of five future pros in the heavy class — was destined to remain amateur, despite several close calls and an X frame coupled with traps-to-calves density universally labeled “can’t miss.” There followed a fifth in the heavy class of the aforementioned 1983 Nationals and a frustrating second again in that contest in 1984 (ahead of Leidelmeyer). He won the heavy class at the 1985 USA (ahead of Dodich), but lost the overall, and then at the World Games, he was runner-up once again. In 1986, you could see the frustration taking its toll after Mendenhall learned he was bridesmaid for the third time at the Nationals (and fourth time in a pro qualifier), this time to a smaller but leaner Gary Strydom. It seemed someone always showed up in the shape of his life to edge past Mendenhall for the biggest trophy, while he was a bit blurry. (He later learned he had a lingering yeast infection, which caused water retention when carb loading before contests.)

After an 11th at the ‘87 Nationals and a 10th in ‘88, he vanished, but returned to enter his seventh Nationals in ‘91, weighing 255 and competing in the deepest amateur class ever. He placed fifth among heavyweights, but these are the guys who beat him: Kevin Levrone, Flex Wheeler, Paul DeMayo, Ronnie Coleman; and these are some of the guys he beat: Chris Cormier, Bob Cicherillo, Edgar Fletcher. It was Mendenhall’s final contest, as he retired from the stage at 31, the same year and age as eight-time Mr. Olympia Lee Haney. Today, Mendenhall is a physical therapist in Denver, remembered as someone who had the potential to be the world’s greatest bodybuilder — if he had only turned pro.