

MD EXCLUSIVE

VICTOR CONTE

INTERVIEW

PART II

By Flex Wheeler



FLEX ONE ON ONE

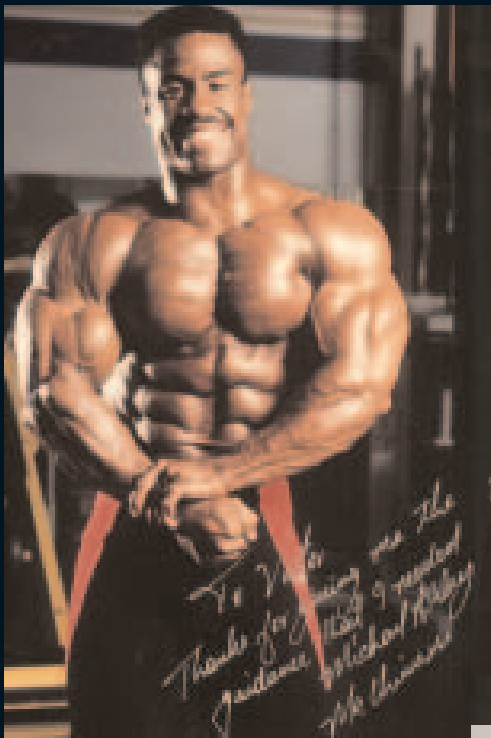
This month, my ongoing conversations with Victor Conte focus on the early days of BALCO's involvement with pro bodybuilding and the explosive inside information regarding what he actually told the Feds on the day of the historic BALCO raid. Victor takes us back to the very first tests and findings of his research on elite level bodybuilders. The results of his studies were surprising to say the least. He also says that the world's interest in the BALCO case primarily revolves around issues of integrity, which he claims are at the very center of the scandal. Read on for Part II of my Victor Conte expose.

"In my opinion, the federal investigators and prosecutors in the BALCO case have essentially been doing the exact same thing they are accusing the athletes of doing, which is 'cheating to win.'" —Victor Conte

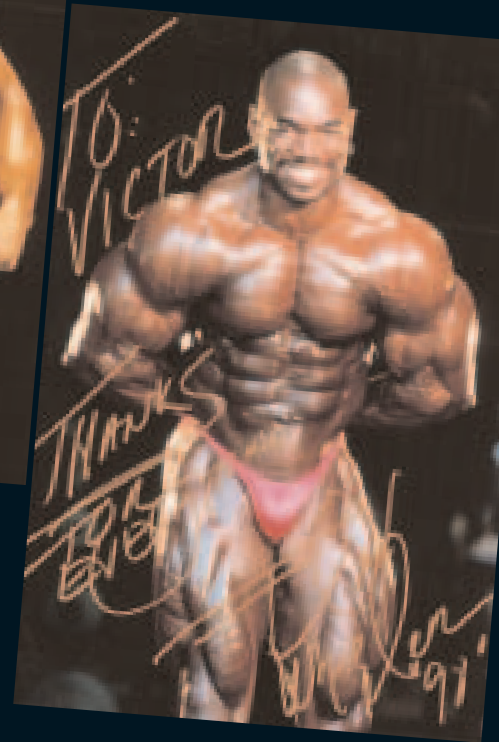
CHEM LAB 101 AND THE DAY OF THE HISTORIC BALCO RAID

FW: I know that you started providing nutritional consultation to elite Olympic and professional athletes back in the mid-1980s. When and how did you get start working with professional bodybuilders?

VC: The first professional bodybuilder I ever worked with was



Left to right; Michael Ashley, Milos Sarcev, Flex Wheeler



Michael Ashley, who won the Arnold Classic back in 1990. I was introduced to Mike in early 1994 by Richard Goodman, a gym owner and bodybuilding photographer in the Bay Area. In mid-1994, I conducted a case study of Mike's blood zinc and magnesium levels during the competitive bodybuilding season. Bob Lefavi, PhD, from Armstrong State College in Georgia was a co-author and the results were published in March of 1995 in the *International Journal of Sport Nutrition*. The article was called "The Effect of Zinc and Magnesium Supplementation on Erythrocyte Levels in a World-Class Athlete." Exercise-induced zinc and magnesium losses place intensely trained athletes at risk of suboptimal zinc and magnesium status. The purpose of this initial case study was to assess the effects of zinc and magnesium supplementation on red blood cell levels in an elite bodybuilder ingesting inadequate amounts of these minerals.

Mike was on a strict diet of 3,900 calories, containing only 4.2 milligram of zinc and 255 milligram of magnesium daily. This was established from a three-day dietary recall questionnaire. When the study began, he start-



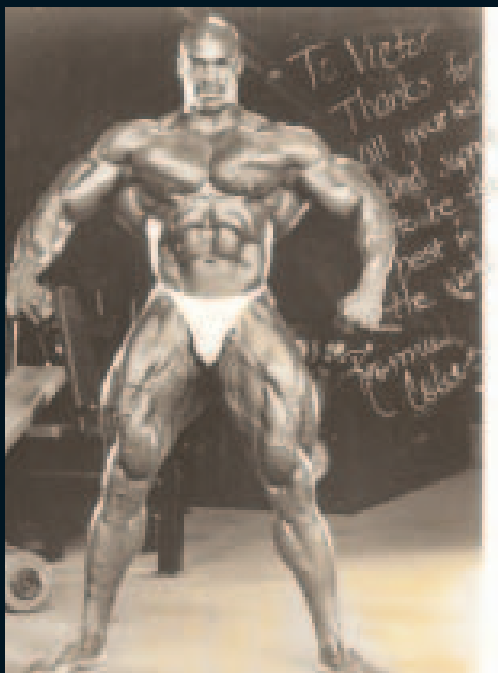
"I was very curious as to what the biochemical profile of some of the world's best bodybuilders would look like. So, I offered all of the competitors a comprehensive blood and urine workup..."

ed ingesting 25 milligram of zinc and 450 milligram of magnesium on an empty stomach at night. His blood was collected at baseline and again after 45 and 90 days. Mike's levels of both zinc and magnesium started out at the low end of the normal range and consistently increased at 45 days

to approach normal levels at 90 days. These results suggested that nightly zinc and magnesium supplementation may help maintain adequate stores of these minerals in intensely trained bodybuilders with suboptimal intake. This initial case study data collected from Mike is what eventually sparked the development of ZMA, which was first conceived of in August of 1996.

FW: I first met you in May of 1998. You were at the San Francisco Pro Invitational bodybuilding show and I was there simply as a spectator. After the show, the BALCO research team came and collected blood and urine samples from about 25 of the top IFBB pro bodybuilders. Who set that up?

VC: Back in early 1996, we sent a specimen collection kit to IFBB pro Milos Sarcev, performing a complimentary mineral and trace element analysis for him. Milos knew that by



identifying his specific mineral and trace element depletions, we could more precisely determine the appropriate dosages needed for his supplementation program. After a short period of time following our recommendations, he no longer had problems with cramping and his strength levels increased. At the beginning of 1998, we also provided a complimentary mineral analysis for a local Bay Area IFBB pro named Emeric Delczeg. Milos and Emeric were both competing at the 1998 San Francisco Pro Invitational, so we decided to attend

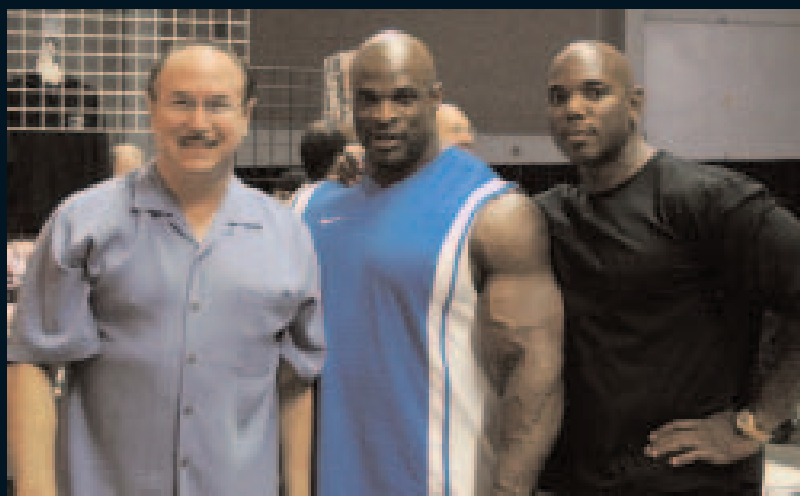
On the right, Victor Conte with Madeline Wheeler, and eight-time Mr. Olympia Lee Haney and below with now eight-time Mr. Olympia Ronnie Coleman and Flex Wheeler.

the show. On the Friday afternoon before Saturday's show, we attended the athlete's meeting with both Milos and Emeric. BALCO had already compiled a database of elite Olympic and professional athletes, including more than 250 NFL players. In effect, BALCO was well respected and had been featured in several of the prominent bodybuilding magazines.

The word got around that I was there and toward the end of the meeting I was asked to give a brief impromptu talk about the research we had been conducting with elite athletes. I agreed, and began explaining to the group about how it was possible to design an individualized supplementation program based on comprehensive blood and urine testing. At one point, Milos jumped up and started telling the guys about the many benefits he had been receiving from following the specific supplementa-

tion regimen that was recommended. I was very curious as to what the biochemical profile of some of the world's best bodybuilders would look like. So, I offered all of the competitors a comprehensive blood and urine workup including, blood chemistry, complete blood count, and anabolic steroid profile, as well as BALCO's routine blood and urine mineral and trace element analysis.

A few of the bodybuilders, including Kevin Levrone, had some very intelligent and compelling questions. But, Ronnie Coleman's brief statement seemed to have the greatest effect upon the group. Showing his huge respect for Milos "The Mind" Sarcev, Ronnie simply said, "If Milos thinks it's a good idea, then when and where do I show up!" To my surprise, 24 of the top IFBB pros in the world at the time, including Mike Matarazzo, Gunter Shlierkamp, Chris Cormier,



Kevin Levrone, Claude Groulx, Roland Kickingner and Ronnie Coleman showed up early that historic Sunday morning. In my opinion, their enthusiastic participation contributed to the most extensive body of medical data ever collected on world-class professional bodybuilders.

FW: I was unable to have my samples collected that Sunday, however, I did come back up to BALCO about two weeks after that show and give you a blood sample. So, now that it's evident you know all of our dirty little

secrets, are you going to kiss and tell? Without giving up confidential information on anybody, can you tell us if there were any interesting patterns or trends you discovered about pro bodybuilders in general?

VC: First of all, let's talk about the trends and patterns we found for their plasma mineral and trace element levels. The bodybuilders' samples were collected early morning while the athletes were in a fasted, rested state. In general, we found that the mean aver-

"In short, pro bodybuilders routinely put themselves under tremendous physical as well as psychological stress, which causes significant losses of minerals and trace elements that can have negative effects on their strength training and recovery."

age of the 24 pro bodybuilders was well below the normal mean average for zinc, magnesium, copper and iron. Usually, a level of one standard deviation below the mean indicates a depletion. Using that criteria, 20 (83 percent) were depleted in zinc, 15 (62 percent) were depleted in magnesium, 13 (54 percent) were depleted in copper and eight (33 percent) were depleted in iron. These findings certainly did not surprise us. We had previously collected samples from more than 250 NFL players and found a similar profile. In fact, we had known that strenuous exercise and stress caused significant bodily losses of minerals and trace elements since the early 1980s.

For example, in a study conducted by the U.S. Department of Military Medicine involving 270 Navy Sea, Air and Land (SEAL) trainees, the researchers found the trainees to be

deficient in both zinc and magnesium. The dietary intakes of 34 percent and 44 percent of the trainees were below the RDA for Mg and Zn, respectively. The blood plasma concentrations of Mg and Zn were also significantly below the "normal range" for 23 percent and 24 percent of the trainees, respectively. The normal ranges used in this study were based on two standard deviations, which means that those found to be below the range were deficient and not just moderately depleted. Plasma zinc, iron and copper levels were also measured in a study involving another group of 66 Navy SEAL trainees before and after a five-day period of sustained physical and psychological stress called "hell week." The trainees pre-post plasma zinc levels decreased by 33 percent in only a matter of days.

In short, pro bodybuilders routinely put themselves under tremendous physical as well as psychological stress, which causes significant losses of minerals and trace elements that can have negative effects on their strength training and recovery.

FW: So what you are basically telling me is that stress is a bitch! I certainly heard that. Enough about nutrition and all that for now, all of these guys are still alive and kicking, so apparently you didn't find anything too alarming in the research data that was collected. In general, was there anything you found that would give us any real reason to be concerned?

VC: We were actually quite surprised by the blood chemistry data that we collected on the IFBB pros. Because of the unique requirements of participation in the sport of bodybuilding at the elite level, we expected to find a pattern of extremely low HDL cholesterol levels, very elevated liver enzymes, massively high hematocrit levels (percentage of red blood cells to total whole blood volume) and abnormal kidney function test results. Without disclosing the specific medical data regarding any of the athletes

that participated in our study, we did advise one of the 24 bodybuilders to immediately discontinue all aspects of his bodybuilding program and seek medical attention for some serious kidney abnormalities we found. This bodybuilder lived across the country from BALCO at the time, and for whatever reason, he failed to follow our recommendation and soon thereafter ended up in the hospital. Before it was all over, he was forced to have a kidney transplant. A kidney was promptly donated by a family member, who certainly demonstrated an act of love and saved his life. So, that's the bad news regarding our findings. I wanted to get that disclosure out of the way so that we could talk about the relatively good news.

We certainly didn't find a blood chemistry profile that most people might have predicted, i.e., a profile that would indicate "walking death." Yes, we did find some of them to have moderately reduced HDL levels, moderately elevated liver enzymes and slightly above normal hematocrit levels. But, in the majority of cases, we were actually able to give the pro bodybuilders positive feedback regarding the status of their overall health. This assurance of good health seemed to provide a sense of relief that was greatly appreciated by most of them.

FW: What would you say was the single most interesting thing you discovered while doing your research with the IFBB pros?

VC: We asked the pro bodybuilders to fill out a very comprehensive health questionnaire at the time their blood and urine samples were collected. They were specifically asked to disclose all of the substances they were taking at the time, including the precise dosages and frequencies. Most would think the bodybuilders would be unwilling to provide us with that information, however, all of them readily did so, and for a very good reason. They were informed that we had the ability to test their urine samples for most performance enhancing substances. We also explained that, in the



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past, many of the anabolic agents athletes informed us they were taking, turned out to be either completely fake or a substance other than what was indicated on the label. This was finally their chance to find out if what they were taking was actually the real deal or not.

I'm here to tell you that many of the pros were not very happy with what we revealed to them. In fact, most of them could not wait to get off the phone and “go and take care of some serious business.” In short, many were being ripped off. Some of the oral substances turned out to be nothing more than placebo pills. A more common finding, was an athlete taking what they thought was a more exotic and expensive substance, which

in fact, was nothing more than less expensive testosterone. Instead of stacking several different types of anabolic agents, most of what they were taking was testosterone. As a result of this type of deception, two of the pros had serum total testosterone levels of 20,966 and 10,881 ng/dL, with a normal range of 260 to 1,000 ng/dL. So, as they say, “Buyer beware.”

FW: I know that the BALCO legal case isn't over yet and that limits your ability to talk about certain issues. However, as a final question for this segment, I would really like to ask one question about the case. It was widely reported you made a confession during the raid of BALCO Laboratories on September 3, 2003. Straight up, the feds say that you named names and told them about the specific drug use of many top-level athletes from track and field, football, and baseball. What exactly did you tell the feds about the elite athletes you had worked with on the day of the raid?

VC: Flex, I will tell you straight up, as you put it, that I did not make a confession to the federal agents on the day of the BALCO raid as was reported. I provided no specific information about the drug use of any athlete involved. In short, the BALCO scandal revolves around one thing—cheating to win.

The case is about more than steroid distribution and/or money laundering. It's about the issue of people willing to “do whatever it takes” in order to win. It's not really about the half of a shoebox of anabolic substances that were found, or the piddly amount of \$100 that's in dispute regarding the laundering charge. The BALCO case is primarily about the issue of integrity; it has also been fueled by the number of high level sports celebrities involved. In my opinion, the federal investigators and prosecutors in the BALCO case have essentially been doing the exact same thing they are accusing the athletes of

doing, which is cheating to win. The agents who conducted the investigation and raid of BALCO, were basically cheating to win from the very start of the case. It began with their misrepresentations in the affidavits that were filed in order to get the search warrants. It continued with the agents going through the BALCO trash on a weekly basis.

Believe it or not, we found out they were doing it because after the agents looked through our trash each week, they were illegally dumping it back into another business' dumpster across the freeway from BALCO. We initially got a call from the business owner who was very upset that our trash was being routinely dumped into his trash container, which left him with zero space for his own trash. He had found many items that clearly identified that the trash was from BALCO Laboratories. We told the poor man that we didn't do it, we didn't know who had done it and that we were sorry about what had happened. We went and picked up our trash from him, brought it back to BALCO and looked through it. We could immediately tell what was going on and obviously realized that we were under police surveillance. About three weeks later, the same man called and said that our trash was in his dumpster again. He was really mad this time and threatened to call the police. So, again we went and retrieved our trash from him, and once again, each and every tied garbage bag had been opened. At that point, we decided it was best to call and file a police report before the man called and did so himself. We filed a report that day and a story about these incidents ended up in the local Burlingame newspaper shortly thereafter. We later found out that as a result of the federal agents reading this news story and realizing we knew about their investigation, they were forced to raid BALCO prematurely. Apparently, their assumption was that we would begin to cover up what they might have considered to be evidence. We still can't figure out why the feds were

foolish enough to routinely break the law by dumping our trash in someone else's container. This trash episode, which caused the feds to blow their cover, was the first indication of how these agents operated.

Let's get back to the issue of whether or not there was a confession made. On the day of the BALCO raid, after the SWAT team of agents had stormed the building and secured the premises, the lead agent asked me if I was willing to talk with them in the conference room. I agreed to do so, not realizing at the time what a stupid

“They even asked me if I would be willing to “wear a wire” and make contact with specific people. I told them ‘absolutely not.’ This rather intense meeting in the kitchen lasted at least 45 minutes, during which I repeatedly told the agents I would not cooperate with them in any way.”

thing it was to do. I had never been in any kind of serious trouble with the law before (ok, maybe I'd had a speeding ticket or two) and apparently had not watched enough of “Law and Order” on television. I initially told the agents I would only be willing to answer questions I felt comfortable answering without an attorney present. During the interview, I refused to answer many of their questions and each time they just promptly moved on to the next question. I had no clue at the time that the agents would seize this as an opportunity to completely fabricate things and put them into their report. Toward the middle of the interview, the lead agent asked me if he could make a list of the athletes I had worked with at BALCO. I was agreeable because I assumed he was talking about the completely

legal medical and nutritional testing and consultation that we provided. He then put three headings on a piece of paper. Those headings were Track and Field, Football and Baseball. The agent started saying athlete's names out loud and writing them down under one of the three categories. They seemed to already know most of the athletes' names who I had worked with.

After the agent completed making his list, he then quickly moved on to the next question. Well, was I ever outraged when I saw the memorandum of interview they had prepared about two weeks later. The agent stated in his report, that I had told him I gave performance-enhancing drugs to all 27 of the athletes in the three categories on his list and that I knew it was illegal at the time I supposedly did it. This report was signed by two agents, so I fully realized then that this is how these agents collectively operated. Talk about cheating to win! Much of what was in the report was completely fabricated. I had not made many of the statements that appeared in their report. The next thing I knew, the report had been conveniently leaked to the *San Francisco Chronicle* newspaper claiming I'd made a “confession.”

Late in the afternoon on the day of the raid, I was sitting in the BALCO front lobby when the agents asked me to come back into the kitchen. I followed them down the hall and when I entered the room, there were two narcotics agents, two IRS agents, plus BALCO's vice president. So, there were a total of six of us in the room at the time. After some small talk, the lead agent started asking me whether or not I would be willing to assist them with their investigation of others involved with BALCO, including coaches, doctors and athletes. I flat out told all of them that I was not willing to cooperate with them in any way regarding their investigation. They even asked me if I would be willing to “wear a wire” and make contact with specific people. I told them “absolutely not.” This rather intense

meeting in the kitchen lasted at least 45 minutes, during which I repeatedly told the agents I would not cooperate with them in any way. To my amazement, there was absolutely no mention of this meeting in any of the police reports. Even the team leader's master report, which provided a minute-by-minute account of all activities that took place during the entire raid, made no mention of this rather lengthy meeting in the kitchen. So, according to the entire team of 26 special agents that raided BALCO that day, it's as though this meeting never happened.

In conclusion, please note that I signed a declaration under penalty of perjury and filed it with the court regarding the specifics of what was discussed in this meeting in the BALCO kitchen. So, there is a public record regarding what I know actually occurred. As Mark Twain once said, “A lie gets around the world before the truth gets its boots on.” Look. I'm not saying that I did not provide athletes with performance-enhancing substances. What I am saying, is that during the interview that took place with the agents on the day of the BALCO raid, I provided them with no specific information regarding the drug use of any athlete involved. As I stated before, the BALCO case is really about people cheating to win and that certainly includes more than just the athletes. As they say, “quitters never win and winners never quit.”

I will continue to help athletes enhance their performances by providing them with effective nutritional supplements and consultation. I look forward to the future and feel that I have a lot to contribute to the world of sport.

Editor's Note: After this interview but prior to press time, MD learned that Victor Conte had been sentenced to four months in prison and four months in home detention as part of a plea deal with federal prosecutors. The sentencing stemmed from Conte's guilty plea in July, 2005, to charges of money laundering and steroid distribution. Several other charges were dropped.