



COSTA FITNESS

Professional Training Systems

A COSTA FITNESS GUIDE

THE PREP BLUEPRINT

The complete beginner's guide to stepping on an NPC stage. Category selection, prep structure, mandatory poses, peak week, and everything between the decision and the stage.

AUTHOR

Bernardo Costa

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READ THIS FIRST

Before the diet, before the posing, before the tan. A first-time prep decision gets made for the wrong reasons more often than not. This is the filter.

Most people who sign up for their first show do it for one of two reasons: they hit a physique milestone and want a deadline to push further, or they watched a show and decided they wanted to stand on that stage. Both are fine motivations. Neither is a reason to prep in the next twelve weeks.

A bodybuilding prep is not a fat loss phase with a stage at the end. It is a specific project with a specific output: a conditioned, posed, tanned, peaked physique ready to be judged against other conditioned, posed, tanned, peaked physiques. The diet is one input. Posing is another. Stage presence is another. Your baseline muscularity, which was built over years before you started the prep, is the largest one.

THE FIRST FILTER

If you are not already lean enough that your abs are visible when you wake up, and you do not already have a base of muscle that looks like you lift seriously, you are not ready to prep. You are ready to build. Building takes years. Prepping takes months.

WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR

This is for the person who has been training seriously for at least three to five years, has built a legitimate base of muscle, and is now seriously considering stepping on a stage for the first time. It will also serve a competitor who has done one or two shows and wants to tighten up the framework.

It is not a substitute for a coach. If you are prepping for the first time, you should have one. What this book does is give you the language, the structure, and the expectations so that you show up to your coach already knowing what prep is and what it asks of you.

WHAT THIS BOOK WILL NOT DO

It will not give you a meal plan. It will not give you a training split. It will not tell you how many grams of carbs to eat in peak week. Those answers are individual and they are what a coach is for. What it will do is explain the structure inside which those answers get made, so that when your coach says something you understand why.

A NOTE ON FEDERATION RULES

The division rules, mandatory poses, and judging criteria in this book reflect NPC and IFBB Pro standards at the time of writing. These rules evolve. Before you sign up for a show, verify the current rules for your division on the official NPC website. Use this guide as the framework. Let the federation give you the final word.

WHAT PREP ACTUALLY IS

Prep is four overlapping projects running at once. Most first-time competitors only prepare for one of them.

Prep is often talked about as if it is a diet. It is not. It is a coordinated, simultaneous execution of four distinct projects, each of which matters on show day and each of which requires its own preparation.

THE FOUR CONCURRENT PROJECTS

Conditioning

The physical reduction in body fat that reveals the muscle underneath. This is what most people mean when they say "prep." It is the longest and most uncomfortable piece. Your diet, cardio, training, sleep, and stress management all feed into this one output. Your coach will manage it with you.

Presentation

Your ability to present the physique you brought. This is posing. A better-conditioned competitor who poses poorly can and does lose to a less-conditioned competitor who poses well. Posing is a skill. It is trained. You should be working on it from the day you decide to compete, not the last four weeks.

Stage Craft

Everything around the posing: the walk on, the walk off, your stage presence during comparisons, your confidence between rounds, how you handle the callouts, your facials. The judges watch you the entire time you are on stage, not just when you are hitting a pose.

Logistics

The tan, the suit, the shoes (for women), the venue, the entry fees, the travel, the hotel, the food you bring, the supplement timing, the water, the carbs. Logistics do not care that you are focused on the diet. The week of the show, logistics become the prep.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU

You need a conditioning plan, a posing plan, a stage craft plan, and a logistics plan. First-time competitors who only have a conditioning plan show up to a show that they are not actually ready to execute. Build all four.

HOW LONG IT TAKES

Most beginners will need between 16 and 24 weeks of dedicated prep, assuming they are starting from a genuinely lean off-season condition. If you are not already lean, you need an additional diet phase before prep even begins. Do not compress this.

STARTING BODY FAT (MEN)	STARTING BODY FAT (WOMEN)	MINIMUM PREP LENGTH
10 to 12 percent	18 to 20 percent	16 weeks
12 to 15 percent	20 to 23 percent	20 to 24 weeks
15 to 18 percent	23 to 26 percent	Diet down first, then prep
Over 18 percent	Over 26 percent	You are not ready this year

Body fat percentages are estimates, not targets. What matters is the visual condition: how much of your musculature is already visible at rest. If you cannot see separation and your abs are not present when relaxed and cold, add time.

CHOOSING YOUR CATEGORY — MEN

The NPC runs five men's divisions. Each one is a different sport with different judging criteria. Picking the wrong one is the single most preventable mistake a first-time competitor can make.

MEN'S PHYSIQUE

BOARD SHORTS · NO LEG POSING · AESTHETIC AND SYMMETRY-FOCUSED

The most beginner-accessible division. Athletes wear board shorts, so legs are not judged directly. Emphasis is on V-taper, shoulders, small waist, and overall aesthetic appeal. Conditioning is moderate; judges do not reward dry, shredded looks in this class.

MANDATORY POSES	Front pose, back pose, quarter turns. Hands generally on hips.
BUILD TARGET	Wide shoulders, tight waist, capped delts, upper chest, visible abs.
CONDITIONING	Lean with visible abs and separation. Not grainy, not shredded.
COMMON MISTAKE	Bringing too much size or being over-conditioned. Both lose.

CLASSIC PHYSIQUE

POSING TRUNKS · FULL PHYSIQUE · OLD-SCHOOL BODYBUILDING

Created to reward the Golden Era look. Athletes wear posing trunks, legs are judged, and conditioning expectations are higher than Men's Physique but lower than Bodybuilding. Height-to-weight caps keep the division tight and symmetrical. Posing is full bodybuilding posing.

MANDATORY POSES	Front double biceps, side chest, back double biceps, abdominals and thighs, and a favorite classic pose. Quarter turns in comparisons.
BUILD TARGET	Small waist, full chest, wide shoulders, clean legs, symmetry over mass.
CONDITIONING	Hard and dry but not stringy. Visible striations in glutes and hams.
COMMON MISTAKE	Exceeding the height-to-weight cap. Know your cap before you build.

MEN'S BODYBUILDING

POSING TRUNKS · FULL MASS AND CONDITIONING

The oldest division. Maximum muscle, maximum conditioning. No height-to-weight cap. Athletes compete within weight classes (Bantamweight through Super Heavyweight). This is the division for the competitor who has built serious size over many years and is ready to show it.

MANDATORY POSES	Seven bodybuilding mandatories. Posedown at finals.
BUILD TARGET	Muscle mass, density, conditioning, fullness. Size first, then conditioning.
CONDITIONING	Dry, grainy, deep separation. Full glute striations expected.
COMMON MISTAKE	Competing before the base is big enough. This is a long-game division.

CLASSIC MEN'S PHYSIQUE (212 EQUIVALENT) & WELLNESS-ADJACENT

WEIGHT CLASS OR SPECIALTY DIVISIONS

NPC also offers weight-class-restricted divisions and specialty categories at larger shows. For most first-time competitors, the three above are the meaningful choices. Discuss with your coach whether a specialty class applies to your structure.

HOW TO ACTUALLY PICK

Stand in front of a mirror in the smallest pair of shorts you own. Take an honest front double biceps. Take a back double biceps. Take a side chest.

- If your upper body reads aesthetic and your legs are a weak point, Men's Physique is the move.
- If your physique reads proportional top-to-bottom with a classic V-taper and a small waist, Classic Physique is the fit.
- If you are noticeably bigger than your training partners and your legs carry real mass, Bodybuilding is the division.

DO NOT LET EGO PICK YOUR CATEGORY

Men's Physique is not a lesser division. Bodybuilding is not a better division. They are different sports. A strong Men's Physique competitor beats a weak Classic Physique competitor every single time. Pick the division you can win in, not the one that sounds the most impressive.

CHOOSING YOUR CATEGORY — WOMEN

The NPC runs five primary women's divisions. The differences between Bikini, Wellness, and Figure are sharper than most first-time competitors realize.

BIKINI

TWO-PIECE SUIT · HEELS · FEMININE AND BALANCED

The most accessible women's division and the largest in participation. Judges reward a balanced, toned, feminine physique with shapely glutes, a small waist, and a lean but not shredded appearance. The face, hair, and stage presence are all scored heavily. Heels are worn.

MANDATORY POSES	Front pose (one hand on hip), back pose, quarter turns. Walking presentation.
BUILD TARGET	Glutes, shoulders, small waist. Legs lean but soft, not striated.
CONDITIONING	Tight and conditioned. A lean midsection with visible glute shape and a slight glute-hamstring separation, but without the hardness, graininess, or striations expected in Figure. Figure-level separation in Bikini loses.
COMMON MISTAKE	Coming in too lean, too hard, or too muscular. All three lose.

WELLNESS

TWO-PIECE SUIT · HEELS · LOWER-BODY-DOMINANT PHYSIQUE

A newer division that rewards a fuller lower body relative to a smaller upper body. Glutes, hamstrings, and quads are the show. Upper body is lean and feminine but not the focus. If you carry your muscle in your legs and glutes naturally, this is likely your division.

MANDATORY POSES	Front pose, back pose, quarter turns. Emphasis on glute presentation.
BUILD TARGET	Glutes, hamstrings, sweep of quads. Smaller upper body by comparison.
CONDITIONING	Lean enough to show glute shape and hamstring line. Not shredded.
COMMON MISTAKE	Building too much upper body. In Wellness, that counts against you.

FIGURE

TWO-PIECE SUIT · HEELS · ATHLETIC AND MUSCULAR

Figure rewards a proportional, athletic, muscular physique. More muscle than Bikini, more balanced than Wellness, less mass and conditioning than Physique. Judges look for the classic V-taper, capped delts, a tight waist, and visible muscle quality without the hardness of Women's Physique.

MANDATORY POSES	Figure quarter turns. Distinct posing posture with hands positioned off the hip.
BUILD TARGET	Shoulders, back width, small waist, balanced legs. Full muscle bellies.
CONDITIONING	Lean with visible separation. Light abs acceptable but not required.
COMMON MISTAKE	Posing like a Bikini competitor. Figure posing is its own language.

WOMEN'S PHYSIQUE

TWO-PIECE SUIT · BARE FEET · MUSCULAR AND CONDITIONED

More muscle than Figure, harder conditioning, and posing drawn from bodybuilding. Competitors wear a two-piece suit of their choosing, compete barefoot, and present through quarter turns plus a set of mandatory poses during comparisons. Many shows also allow a short individual posing routine to music. This is a division built over multiple off-seasons; the muscle and detail expected here take years.

MANDATORY POSES	Front double biceps, side chest, back double biceps, side triceps, and abdominals and thighs. Quarter turns during comparisons.
BUILD TARGET	Full muscular development top-to-bottom. Back detail, shoulder cap, arm development, clean legs with visible separation.
CONDITIONING	Hard and dry. Visible separation throughout. Abs present. Glute-hamstring tie-in and glute detail expected.
COMMON MISTAKE	First-time competitors skipping Figure and going straight here. If you have not already built Figure-level muscle, you are not ready for Physique.

WOMEN'S BODYBUILDING

TWO-PIECE SUIT · BARE FEET · MAXIMUM MUSCLE AND CONDITIONING

The most muscular women's division. Full bodybuilding posing, weight classes, and mass-dominant judging. Years in the making. Outside the scope of a first-time prep.

HOW TO ACTUALLY PICK

The same honesty check applies. Take a front, back, and side photo in a two-piece suit.

- If your upper body is lean and your glutes and legs are your strongest feature, Wellness.
- If your physique reads balanced and feminine without dominant muscle, Bikini.
- If you have shoulder cap, back width, and visible muscle quality, Figure.
- If you have been training seriously for many years and carry hard, dry muscle across your whole frame, Physique.

POSING STYLE IS CATEGORY-DEFINING

A Figure competitor who poses like a Bikini competitor scores as Bikini, even with a Figure physique. Posing style is not cosmetic; it is category identity. Learn the correct posing for your division before you

HOW TO STRUCTURE A PREP

A prep is not a smooth curve from start to stage. It is a series of phases, each with a different purpose. Treating them as one long diet is why most first preps stall.

This is the phase map for a 20-week prep for a beginner. Timelines shift based on starting condition, but the structure is stable.

20

WEEKS OUT

Phase 1 — Base Cut (Weeks 20 to 16)

Moderate deficit. Cardio low. Training volume maintained. The goal is to drop initial body fat without triggering hunger, fatigue, or hormonal suppression early. Posing practice begins now; one session per week minimum.

15

WEEKS OUT

Phase 2 — Grinding Phase (Weeks 15 to 10)

Deficit deepens as the body adapts. Cardio increases incrementally. Training intensity remains high but volume may drop. Posing practice moves to two sessions per week. Photos taken weekly. This is where most first-time competitors underestimate the mental load.

9

WEEKS OUT

Phase 3 — Conditioning Phase (Weeks 9 to 5)

Conditioning is the main output now. Fine adjustments to macros, cardio, and recovery. Weak points become visible and are trained with extra attention. Posing practice three to four times per week. Tan practice begins. Suit is ordered if not already in hand.

4

WEEKS OUT

Phase 4 — Polish Phase (Weeks 4 to 2)

Conditioning is mostly locked in. The remaining work is presentation, hardness, and micro-adjustments. Full posing runs daily. Stage walk rehearsed. Travel, food, and logistics finalized. Coach runs the diet; you run the posing.

1

WEEK OUT

Phase 5 — Peak Week (Chapter 07)

Water, sodium, carbs, and training are manipulated to bring the physique to its tightest presentable state on show day. This is its own chapter because it deserves it. Do not improvise here.

TRAINING DURING PREP

The principle: keep the stimulus that built the muscle while fueling less. Most of your strength will maintain longer than you expect; some will drop as deficit deepens. Priority exercises stay. Filler exercises fall out. Volume is maintained where possible; frequency may reduce in the final weeks.

This is not the phase to learn new lifts or push PRs. It is the phase to execute the lifts you already know well, with intensity where you have it and with precision when you do not.

CARDIO DURING PREP

Cardio is a tool, not a virtue. It is used to create or deepen a deficit when food is already at a sustainable minimum. Beginners often start with low-intensity steady-state for 20 to 30 minutes three times per week and build from there. Your coach will manage the exact progression. The rule: the smallest dose that produces the required rate of loss, held as long as possible.

CHECK-INS AND TRACKING

Weekly photos in the same lighting, same poses, same time of day. Weekly weight trend (not single-day weight). Waist measurement. Subjective notes on hunger, sleep, energy, libido, mood, training quality. These feed into the adjustments. Without this data, your coach is guessing.

THE MENTAL PHASE MAP

Week 20: motivated. Week 15: gritty. Week 10: tired. Week 7: the wall. Week 4: locked in. Week 1: nervous energy. Every first-time competitor hits the wall between weeks 8 and 10. Knowing it is coming is half of getting through it.

THE MANDATORY POSES

Every division has a set of mandatory poses. These are not suggestions. They are the standardized positions the judges use to compare physiques.

MEN'S BODYBUILDING — THE SEVEN MANDATORIES

Men's Bodybuilding competitors execute all seven mandatory poses during prejudging, followed by a posedown at finals. These are the reference set every Bodybuilding judge uses.

1. FRONT DOUBLE BICEPS

Feet planted, one leg slightly forward. Arms up and flexed in a wide arc. Quads hard, abs tight, lats spread. Showcases arms, chest, abs, quads simultaneously.

2. FRONT LAT SPREAD

Hands on waist, thumbs in. Flare the lats outward and down. Chest up. The V-taper pose. Shows back width from the front.

3. SIDE CHEST

Turn 90 degrees. Back leg on toes, calf flexed. Clasp hands and flex the chest. Bicep of the front arm pops. Shows chest, arm, hamstring, calf.

4. BACK DOUBLE BICEPS

Feet planted. One leg extended back on toes, calf and hamstring flexed. Arms up like the front double. Shows back thickness, hamstring, calf, glute.

5. BACK LAT SPREAD

Hands on waist. Flare the lats. One leg extended back. Shows back width from the rear, glute-hamstring tie-in, and calf.

6. SIDE TRICEPS

Turn 90 degrees. Clasp hands behind, press the back arm straight, flex the triceps hard. Back leg on toes, calf flexed. Shows triceps, chest, hamstring, calf.

7. ABDOMINAL & THIGH

Arms overhead and behind the head. Crunch the abs, extend one leg forward, flex the quad. Shows abs, serratus, quad.

CLASSIC PHYSIQUE — THE MANDATORIES

Classic Physique uses a reduced set of mandates plus a favorite classic pose. Quarter turns are performed during comparisons. The division does not use the full seven bodybuilding poses.

1. FRONT DOUBLE BICEPS

Same execution as Bodybuilding. Arms up, lats flared, quads hard. The opening mandatory.

2. SIDE CHEST

Turn 90 degrees. Back leg on toes, calf flexed. Clasp hands, flex the chest. Front bicep pops.

3. BACK DOUBLE BICEPS

Feet planted, one leg extended back. Arms up. Back thickness, hamstring, calf, glute all engaged.

4. ABDOMINALS & THIGHS

Arms overhead, crunch the abs, extend one leg, flex the quad. Abs and thigh separation on display.

5. FAVORITE CLASSIC POSE

Competitor's choice. Common picks: vacuum, classic side pose, moonlight, or a signature Golden Era stance. This is where presentation and personal style show up.

QUARTER TURNS

Performed during comparisons. Front, right side, back, left side. Maintain composure and classic lines at every stop.

MEN'S PHYSIQUE — PRESENTATION

Men's Physique does not use bodybuilding mandates. Competitors present through front and back turns, with quarter turns in comparisons. The emphasis is on V-taper, aesthetics, and stage presence. Legs are not flexed. No most muscular. Hands are commonly placed on the hip, but that is stylistic; the rules are about the turns and presentation, not the hand placement.

FRONT POSE

One hand on hip, other arm relaxed or also on hip. Slight stagger in feet. Lats flared subtly. Chest up. Light twist toward the judges.

BACK POSE

Turn around. Hand(s) on hip. Lats flared. Glutes tight but not over-flexed. Shoulder blades pulled down.

QUARTER TURNS

Quarter turn right, quarter turn back, quarter turn front, back to starting. Maintain the same posing shape at each stop.

BIKINI — PRESENTATION

FRONT POSE

One hand on hip, one relaxed. Body in an S-curve: hips shifted, shoulders turned slightly opposite. One leg forward and slightly bent. Smile and eye contact with the judges.

BACK POSE

Hand on hip. Back arched subtly. Glutes engaged but not over-squeezed. Look over the shoulder. Feet offset with one leg slightly bent.

QUARTER TURNS

Turn to each side with the S-curve maintained. At each stop, the back is slightly arched, the hip is popped, and the head is turned toward the judges.

WELLNESS — PRESENTATION

Wellness quarter turns are similar to Bikini but the posing emphasizes the lower body. The hip pop is more pronounced. Back poses hold the glutes and hamstrings as the primary showcase.

FIGURE — QUARTER TURNS

Figure uses its own distinct posing. Hands are off the hip and held in a posing position with the upper body held tall and wide. The goal is to present athleticism and muscle quality, not softness or feminine curve.

FRONT STANCE

Legs planted wider than Bikini. One hand at the side, slightly flared out. Lats spread to create width. Shoulders down and back. Chin up. No smile required; confident look.

BACK STANCE

Same wider stance. Lats flared hard. Glutes tight. Shoulders broad. The V-taper is the point.

QUARTER TURNS

At each turn, the lats stay flared and the posture stays tall. No S-curve. No hip pop. Figure is upright, athletic, and wide.

WOMEN'S PHYSIQUE — MANDATORIES

Women's Physique competitors perform five mandatory poses in comparisons, plus quarter turns. Many shows also include an individual posing routine to music. Athletes compete barefoot in a two-piece suit. The poses borrow from bodybuilding but are their own ruleset.

FRONT DOUBLE BICEPS

Arms up and flexed. Legs planted. Quads engaged. Abs tight. Lats spread.

SIDE CHEST

Turn 90 degrees. Back leg on toes. Hands clasped. Chest flexed. Hamstring and calf engaged.

BACK DOUBLE BICEPS

Arms up. One leg extended back. Back detail, hamstring, calf, glute all visible.

SIDE TRICEPS

Turn 90. Back arm straight and flexed. Back leg on toes.

ABDOMINAL & THIGH

Arms overhead. Abs crunched. One leg extended, quad flexed.

QUARTER TURNS

Performed during comparisons. Front, right side, back, left side. Hold clean lines at each stop. This is where overall shape and balance get compared across the lineup.

POSING CUES THAT ACTUALLY WORK

Posing is the highest-leverage skill you are not yet good at. These cues are what actually changes the pose when you are in front of a mirror and it is not clicking.

UNIVERSAL CUES (ALL DIVISIONS)

- **Feet first.** Every pose starts at the feet. Wrong foot placement makes every other correction invisible.
- **Breathe out into the pose, not in.** Holding air distends the belly and flattens the chest. Exhale, then flex.
- **Flex from the floor up.** Calves, then quads, then glutes, then core, then upper body, then face.
- **Pull the shoulder blades down.** Almost every first-time competitor shrugs. It collapses the neck and kills the frame.
- **Eyes up, chin level.** Looking at the floor reads nervous. The judges need to see your face.

FRONT DOUBLE BICEPS

- Squeeze the biceps into a peak, but do not bury them behind the head. Keep them visible to the judges.
- Flare the lats as you flex the arms. Two things happen at once.
- Cross-squeeze: flex the right bicep harder by thinking about squeezing the left tricep, and vice versa. The contralateral cue tightens the upper back.

FRONT LAT SPREAD

- Thumbs tucked into the obliques. Hands press down and out.
- Push the lats forward like you are trying to touch the judges with them. Do not just flare; project.
- Chest up, belly button pulled back. The taper only reads if the waist stays tight.

SIDE CHEST

- Back leg up on the toe, calf flexed hard. The front leg bears the weight.
- Hand clasp is not a grab. Gently press the top hand against the bottom and drive the bicep upward.
- Lift the rib cage. If you slump, the chest disappears.

BACK DOUBLE BICEPS

- The leg you extend back should be on the toe with the hamstring and calf both flexed. Do not bend the knee deeply.
- Pinch the shoulder blades together to show upper back thickness. Then arch slightly to hold the mid-back detail.
- Flex the glute on the planted-leg side. It will read on camera and from the judges' angle.

BACK LAT SPREAD

- Hands on the obliques. Push out and down hard.
- Slight forward lean. This is the only mandatory where a small forward hinge shows more of the lats.
- Calf flexed on the rear leg. Always.

SIDE TRICEPS

- Back hand locked straight. Press it hard against the imaginary wall behind you.
- Front leg lifts the quad and pushes it slightly forward. Back leg on the toe, calf flexed.
- Lift the chest and keep the front shoulder high. Most competitors collapse this side.

ABDOMINAL AND THIGH

- Hands behind the head, not crossed tightly. Elbows forward slightly to cradle the ribs.
- Exhale and crunch. Abs disappear the moment you inhale. This pose is held on empty lungs.
- Extend the stronger leg. Flex the quad from the hip, not the knee.

BIKINI, WELLNESS, FIGURE — PRESENTATION CUES

- **S-curve in Bikini/Wellness:** feet offset, hip popped on the planted side, opposite shoulder dropped slightly. The line from ear to opposite ankle should read as a soft curve.
- **Figure stance:** feet wider, no hip pop, chest up, lats flared. The line is wide and tall, not curvy.
- **Face is part of the pose.** Soft smile or confident neutral. Never clenched. Never vacant.
- **Walk between poses.** Transitions are scored. Walk with intention, not hurried, not theatrical.

MEN'S PHYSIQUE CUES

- Hand on the hip should look natural, not a death grip. Fingers relaxed.
- Subtle lat flare, not a full spread. This is not a bodybuilding pose.
- The twist of the torso toward the judges is where V-taper is created in this division. Practice the angle.

THE SINGLE MOST USEFUL DRILL

Record yourself posing and watch it back without sound. Your eyes will find what the mirror hides: shrugged shoulders, held breath, asymmetry, dropped chest. Do this every posing session. A mirror flatters. Video does not.

PEAK WEEK

The seven days before the show. The week that ruins more physiques than it saves. Here is how it actually works and how to not mess it up.

Peak week is the manipulation of water, sodium, carbohydrates, and training in the final days before a show to present the physique at its tightest. It is not magic. It is not a crash. It is a controlled sequence of small inputs that shift the appearance of the physique the judges see.

THE PEAK WEEK LAW

If you are not already in stage condition going into peak week, peak week will not rescue you. It adds polish to a finished physique. It does not build one. A bad peak week can ruin a great physique. A great peak week cannot fix a bad one.

THE FOUR DIALS

Water

Most first-time competitors over-manipulate water. The modern approach is to keep water intake steady or slightly elevated through the first half of the week, then taper modestly in the final 24 to 36 hours. Hard water cuts produce flat, stringy physiques on stage more often than they produce peaked ones.

Sodium

Sodium should be kept stable throughout the week, not cut. The old-school "sodium load then cut" protocol is generally avoided by evidence-based coaches because the rebound is unpredictable and the downside risk is high. Stable sodium with controlled carbs does more than any sodium manipulation.

Carbohydrates

The carb load is the centerpiece of peak week. The goal is to fill the muscle bellies with glycogen so that they are round, full, and hard on stage. A typical structure: reduce carbs mid-week to slightly deplete, then load carbs in the 48 hours before the show. The exact grams, sources, and timing depend on the individual and are set by your coach.

Training

Training volume drops significantly. The goal is to maintain muscle fullness without creating fatigue or inflammation. Full-body glycogen-depleting work early in the week, followed by tapering and a final light pump session the morning of the show or the night before.

A REPRESENTATIVE PEAK WEEK STRUCTURE

DAY	TRAINING	CARBS	WATER	SODIUM
Monday	Full body depletion	Low	High	Normal
Tuesday	Light upper	Low	High	Normal
Wednesday	Light lower	Low / start loading	High	Normal
Thursday	Posing only	Moderate load	Moderate	Normal
Friday	Posing & photos	Full load	Reduce gradually	Normal
Saturday (Show)	Morning pump-up	Measured by the look	Sips as needed	Light

This is a generic template. Your coach will adapt it based on how you fill, how you hold water, your training response, and your body composition entering the week. Do not follow this table without coach oversight.

THE "LOOK" CHECK

Starting Thursday, your coach should be seeing photos of you multiple times per day. Morning, mid-day, and evening check-ins with a phone photo under consistent lighting. The adjustments (another serving of rice, another hour of water reduction, another half-hour of walking) are made based on what the body is doing visually, not what the plan says on paper. If your coach is not adjusting mid-week, they are not coaching peak week; they are reading a script.

WHAT GOES WRONG

- **Spilling over.** Carbs too high, too fast. Muscles blur, waist distends. Correction: reduce carbs, wait, reassess.
- **Flat.** Carbs too low or water cut too hard. Muscles look shrunken. Correction: eat a clean, fast-digesting carb meal and reassess in two hours.
- **Watery.** Usually cortisol from stress or sleep loss, not literal water retention. Correction: sleep, reduce stimulants, minimal intervention.

- **Cramping.** Often an electrolyte shift from aggressive water or sodium manipulation. Correction: sip water with a pinch of salt.

THE RULE OF SMALL MOVES

In peak week, small adjustments over hours beat big adjustments over days. If you are tempted to change two things at once, change one, wait four hours, and reassess. The competitor who panics late in peak week loses; the one who adjusts in small doses wins.

SHOW DAY

Execution day. The physique is done. The work now is logistics, calm, and presentation.

THE MORNING

Wake up on time. Do not sleep in. Check yourself in good light. If you are where you want to be, stick to the plan. If you look flat, a small meal early can help fill by prejudging. If you look spilled, walk it off and wait.

ARRIVING AT THE VENUE

Arrive earlier than you think you need to. Expect delays, schedule changes, and line-ups for the backstage tan touch-up. Bring everything. Your kit matters.

SHOW DAY KIT

- ☐ Competition suit (and a backup if possible)
- ☐ Heels (women)
- ☐ Tanning touch-up kit + tan protectant (bed sheet)
- ☐ Gloss / posing oil approved for your tan
- ☐ Resistance bands for backstage pump
- ☐ Meals pre-portioned: rice cakes, nut butter, dextrose candy, salted snacks
- ☐ Water bottle (small amounts)
- ☐ Towel, flip flops, robe
- ☐ Phone + charger + portable battery
- ☐ Athlete check-in paperwork, membership card, payment for last-minute fees
- ☐ Hair and makeup kit (women)
- ☐ Headphones and a playlist

BACKSTAGE PUMP-UP

The goal of the pump-up is to fill the muscles, not exhaust them. Light bands, high-rep push-ups, curls with a light dumbbell. Stop before you feel burned out. Hands, shoulders, chest, back for men's divisions. Arms, shoulders, glutes (via body squeezing and banded work) for women's.

PREJUDGING

This is where the placings are decided. The nighttime show is a presentation; prejudging is the competition. Hit every pose fully. Stay on during comparisons; the judges may look at anyone in the line at any moment. Do not relax mid-line.

FINALS

Your routine (if required), the posedown, the awards. By now the placings are set. Enjoy finals. Compete with presence, not panic.

THE SHOW DAY MINDSET

The work is done. The physique is the physique. What is left is presentation. A calm competitor who poses clean beats a nervous competitor with marginally better conditioning. Your job on show day is to present what you brought, cleanly, confidently, every time the judges look.

THE MORNING AFTER

What you do in the two weeks after the show matters as much as the prep itself. This is the phase most first-time competitors handle the worst.

The morning after a show is the most dangerous day of the year for a first-time competitor. Months of restraint collapse in the face of restaurant menus, desserts, and the emotional release of being done. A day of overeating becomes a week. A week becomes a month. Fat regain outpaces lean regain. Confidence drops. Within six to eight weeks, first-time competitors are often in worse shape than they were a year before prep started.

The solution is not to white-knuckle a diet after the show. It is to have a plan for the post-show phase before show day arrives.

THE REVERSE DIET

A reverse diet is a controlled, structured increase in calories over the weeks following a show. The goal is to restore training performance, normalize appetite, rebuild glycogen and body water, and return hormonal markers and recovery to baseline, all while limiting rebound-driven fat regain. It typically lasts 4 to 12 weeks depending on how deep the prep went.

THE FIRST 48 HOURS

- Enjoy the post-show meal. One meal. Not a 48-hour binge.
- Expect to look watery and soft the next morning. This is normal and it passes.
- Return to structured eating by day two. Not a deficit, but structure.

THE FIRST TWO WEEKS

- Calories increase by 150 to 250 above peak week in the first week.
- Cardio reduces to maintenance levels.
- Training resumes with moderate volume and a focus on rebuilding fullness.
- Weight will climb. This is water, glycogen, and food in the gut. Not fat regain.

THE FIRST MENTAL PHASE

The post-show depression is real. After months of hyper-focus, structure, and external validation from the scale and the mirror, the absence of all of it creates an emotional vacuum. Prepare for it. Have a next training goal within two weeks of the show. Have a non-physique project to pour energy into. The goal is not to immediately re-enter deficit; it is to give the structure somewhere to go.

DEBRIEF WITH YOUR COACH

Within two weeks of the show, sit down with your coach and review honestly:

- What did the peak week actually do to your physique?
- What did the judges' feedback say?
- What are your structural weak points for the next off-season?
- Would you change category next time?
- Were the sacrifices worth the result?

The best competitors run this review every time. It is how one show becomes a career rather than an experiment.



BUILD THE PHYSIQUE. THEN BRING IT.

Prep is four months of executing well on a physique you already built. If you do the work on the front end, the stage takes care of itself.

AUTHOR

Bernardo Costa · Costa Fitness LLC

ONLINE

@costafitnessllc

COACHING

In-person and online prep coaching in Allen, TX and worldwide

DISCLAIMER

This guide is educational. It is not medical, nutritional, or personal training advice. Consult your physician before beginning any prep, diet, or training program. Every competitor's physiology is individual. Work with a qualified coach.