

—Feature—

Artistic, firm and strong — body by Odom

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Leisa Odom drinks her coffee black these days, even though she would much rather have it with cream.

"I know the fat content of a serving of half-and-half," she says, leaning closer as though she is sharing a secret. "And it's not pretty, OK?"

As a female body builder preparing for a summer competition, Odom eats as little fat and sugar as possible and works out every day. The regimen is more than strict, she says, adding that it will grow even more so as May approaches.

As drivers in Chapel Hill know, runners are abundant in this town. Down at the intramural gyms, aerobic classes are nearly always full, and health clubs in the area are far from hurting for business. But when it comes to the dedication involved in body building, very few students are willing to go far.

Leisa Odom is.

Talkative 25-year-old Leisa is not quite what most might expect of a body builder. Her petite, athletic frame weighs in right now at about 133 pounds but looks much smaller because of high muscle density. Before May, Odom must weigh about 11 pounds less so that the muscles she has worked so hard to develop show up well for competition.

Odom, who admits to possessing a "twisted" sense of humor, laughs and jokes her way through a discussion of her sport, always making clear an opinionated respect for it.

"Muscle doesn't have anything to do with femininity," she says. "You can be strong, and you can be muscled, and you can still be very feminine. Femininity is something you have or you don't."

Odom says she is doing everything she can to promote the sport and to dispel myths about it. "The big misconception is 'If I go and lift weights I'm going to become huge, and I'm going to become muscle-bound, and I'm not going to be feminine anymore — I'm not going to be a woman.' That doesn't happen."

Odom says "bulking up" is virtually impossible for a woman unless she has a hormonal imbalance or related genetic problem.

"I consider myself very much a woman," she says.

Although the ideal female form changes about every ten years, Odom said she believes the voluptuous and "anorexic" looks are gone for good. "Considering the other positive health benefits, medically speaking, I think the athletic body is here to stay," she says.

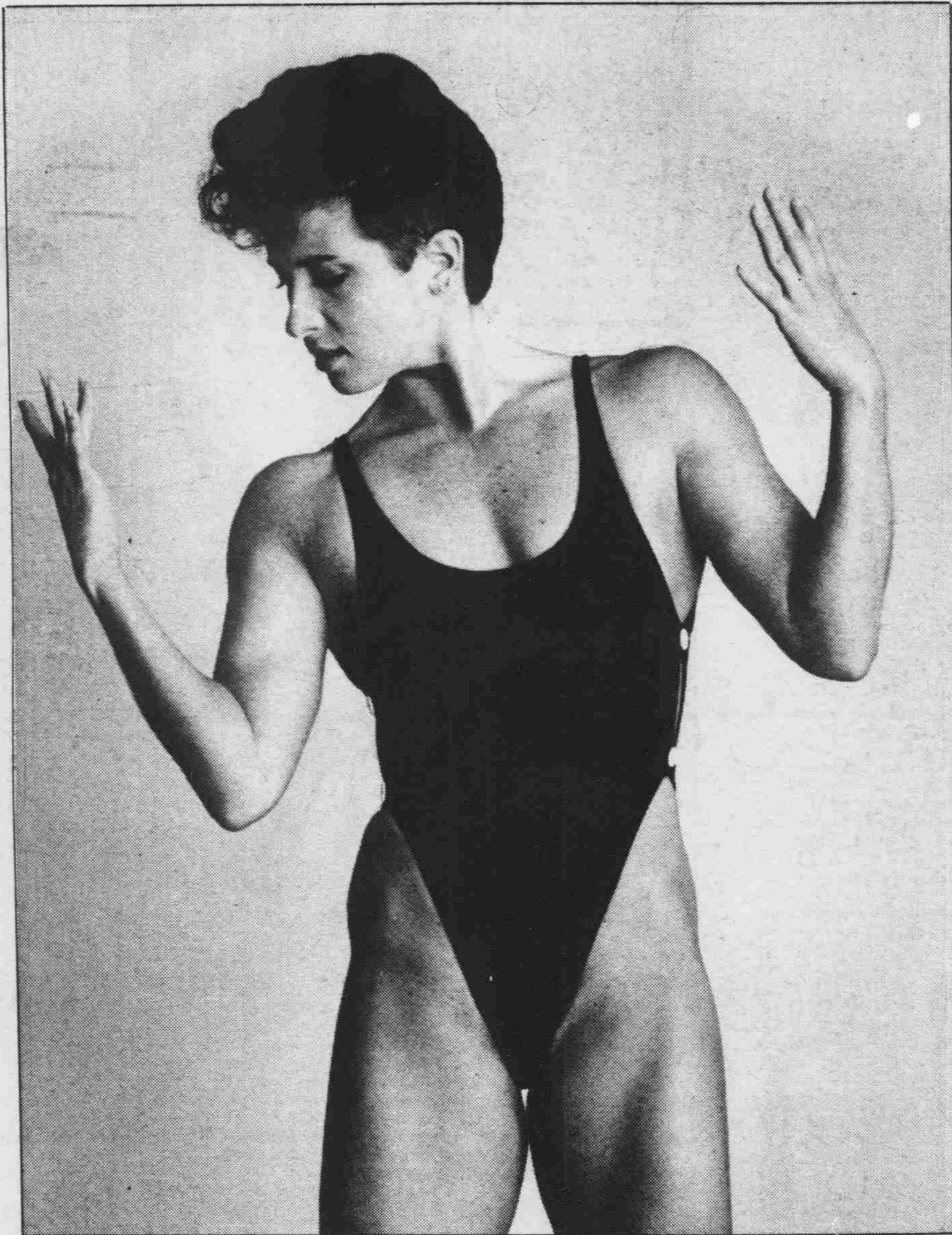
For Odom, the sport is not only athletic but artistic as well. "Body building lets me convey what I want to, both athletically and artistically, at the same time. When you shape and mold your body, you're almost like a sculptor of sorts," she says.

In November 1981, Odom went to a health club in south Florida to make some changes in her life. "On the first day I walked in there, I walked in to get in shape, 'cause I was a mess," she says.

At that time, Odom says, she was "a late-night partying thing." She smoked cigarettes, and the only exercise she had ever gotten was by cheerleading in high school.

Six years later, Odom is a highly competitive body builder with a 1986 Western Carolina Regional Championship heavy-weight title under her belt.

Leisa grew up in Bakersville, a small town in western



Body Builder Leisa Odom

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North Carolina near Spruce Pine. She said the area was not very fitness-oriented, and neither was she as a child. After graduating from Mitchell High School, Odom went to Lees-McRae College in Banner Elk, where she got a degree in science. Then she left to spend a year in Florida. That year turned into three.

Now she is a part-time student at UNC, working as a waitress at the Angus Barn in Raleigh and doing some modeling on the side. She plans to dive in as a full-time student at the journalism school next fall.

Although she plans to keep training, school will be her main concern. "My first priority is going to be just to graduate, to make my parents ecstatically happy," she says, laughing.

But she is certain about continuing to train. "What I hope to do is not work at all, go to school full time next year and still have my training, because I will not give up my training. I'm just adamant about it. I've got to have it. I will have it, that's all there is to it."

While drive is an asset for body building, Leisa says it can cause problems in relationships.

After dating a competitive body builder in Florida, she began dating, for the first time since she started lifting,

a man who was not an athlete. "It caused a lot of problems because it (took up) time," she says. "Time is always a big factor, and I put (body building) first and I make no excuses about it." She says she would still date a man who was not a body builder, but a relationship would be easier if he is committed to the same pursuits she is.

Odom says the attitude of the men in the gym toward her is one of respect.

"There are exceptions, but there are very few. I get real serious, and I concentrate when I lift," she says. "Most of the attitude I get — 95 percent — is just that of incredible respect from the men, and I like that."

For the time being, Odom has put men on the back burner. "I don't really have time for a relationship," she says.

"You see, body building is a lifestyle. It isn't something you put in your gym bag and you do it and then you come home and it's over. It's not like that at all," she says.

"It's the only sport — now think about this — that you wear." She sits back. "I like that," she says. "I like that."