

Vegans muscle their way into bodybuilding

By Mary Pilon, New York Times

HUNTSVILLE, Ala. – Jimi Sitko gets up at 4 most mornings, works out two to four hours a day and can bench-press nearly twice his weight. He has a shaved head and a brightly colored tattoo on his left arm, and he can easily be mistaken for a Marine separated from his platoon.

His apartment is filled with medals and trophies from bodybuilding competitions, snapshots of his tanned, rippled physique in full flex. His uniform is an assortment of sweat pants and hoodies, which he occasionally lifts when his abs look particularly fierce.

But most surprising is what is inside Sitko's stomach: tofu, fresh greens and plant-based protein powder.

Sitko is among a niche community of vegan bodybuilders.

As the popularity of veganism has spread in recent years – fueled in part by a flurry of food-focused documentaries like “Super Size Me,” “Food, Inc.” and “Forks Over Knives” – its imprint can be seen in industries like publishing (VegNews) and fashion (hemp tote bags).

It has even entered bodybuilding, perceived by many as a population of vein-popping men and women thriving off meat and artificial enhancements. Competitors like Sitko are forging a distinctive subculture of antibeef beefcakes who hope to change more of their competitors' eating habits.

As a vegan, Sitko, 29, does not eat meat, dairy or, he said, “anything else that comes from an animal.” As a bodybuilder, he spends hours at the gym lifting barbells, running on a

treadmill and sculpturing his 5-foot-11, 180-pound body. Then he spray-tans and parades before a panel of judges in a posing suit, known in the sport as a mankini. He is preparing for a competition in March.

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