Size Matters

Joe Westmoreland had all the right moves. Wasting syndrome is a real bitch.

May 1, 2000 By Joe Westmoreland

“Go to a gym,” my doctor ordered. “Build lean muscle mass. You’re wasting away.” So it was time to hit the weights again. I chose the gym closest to my apartment with tons of big, beefy, beautiful gay guys. Tons of big, beefy, beautiful gay guy attitude, too. But their attitude slides right off me. I’m invisible.

Or else I’m the skinny guy following the hunky trainer around like a puppy. When I first joined, he showed me how to work the machines. I just want to tone up, I told him. “Well, you can do that too,” he said, “but these machines will make you big.”

“Stick With the Winners” reads a sign above the water fountain in the locker room. I like the locker room because it’s full of those beefy guys with no clothes on -- my reward for coming. I slip my jeans off and just show my skinny thighs, then pull my shorts on quickly. My eyes dart around for a glimpse of flesh.

My workout takes two hours. The first hour is stretching and a sit-up routine, half of which is staring at the ceiling daydreaming, thinking of Miami Beach, my boyfriend, my liver. I also do leg lifts and side curls. I start off slowly but do them over and over. My trainer told me to watch myself in the mirrors that line the wall to make sure I keep good form and don’t strain. I get too self-conscious, though. The good thing about the mirrors is that you can watch other guys working out without their knowing you’re watching. A lot of guys watch themselves -- pose and flex and huff and puff. It reminds me of a French Quarter disco in the late ’70s, where, in the afternoon, drag queens would dance in front of the mirror. They’d be lip-syncing and practicing their steps, getting their routines together.

I ride the exercycle to get my blood flowing and build stamina. I watch the four TVs hanging from the ceiling as I ride and watch the other people doing cardio. I see the guys I’m in love with, the ones I’d have sex with in a second. I see other guys out of shape, some fat, some skinny, some OK -- or just not perfectly toned or muscular. We look at each other and look away.

The second half of the workout is for strength training. Sometimes when I’m pumping the machines I feel strong and muscular. Then I catch myself in the mirror and get embarrassed. How can I go to the same gym as these sexy guys? But I do. I plop myself in the middle of it. Put myself in an environment that will make me try harder. Find an uncomfortable situation and stay there

until I’m comfortable. “Stick with the winners.”

Don’t get me wrong. I like muscle. I even like attitude up to a point. And I certainly like being surrounded by big, beefy men who feel good about themselves. I’d like to be surrounded by some big, beefy men and get a good feel.

The steam room? I don’t go there. I’m too ashamed of my body -- especially the Hickman catheter that I had in my chest for three years. It’s out now but sometimes it feels like it’s still there: a phantom Hickman. Like when your arm has been cut off and you still try to use it. Or your best friend dies and you still want to call him on the phone 10 years later to say something funny.

I save my favorite machines for last. I get instant gratification from the work I do on my shoulders. I could pump and pump my chest, butt, legs and no one would notice, but my shoulders pump up right away. I wear sleeveless t-shirts and everyone says, “Joe, you look so good. Have you been working out?”

I used to worry that I was cheating because my doctor had me on steroids -- to help me build my lean muscle mass. HIV eats away at my blood cells, my liver, my legs, my arms. And my full, round butt. The crime of the century: *AIDS stole my butt*. But I still have my shoulders. They give me something to show for all the time I spend watching big, beefy, beautiful men go by while I build my lean muscle mass.

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