

Zelna's victories are not only in court

Jean Meiring, Johannesburg Bar

Few advocates have the courage – or occasion – routinely to appear on stage in a bikini. Zelna Pretorius, a junior at the Durban Bar, is anything but run-of-the-mill. Since 2003, when she first chanced upon the world of competitive bodybuilding, she has made a habit of bringing home the laurels.

IN SEPTEMBER 2013, Zelna's hard work was crowned when she represented South Africa at the World Ladies' Fitness Championship held under the *aegis* of the International Federation of Bodybuilding and Fitness (IFBB) in Kiev, Ukraine.

She was also represented South Africa at the NABBA Universe Championships,* in Southport, England, in October 2013.

She attained the fourteenth place in her category – out of twenty-four athletes.

On the strength of that achievement, Zelna was invited to the NABBA World Championships, in Belfast, Northern Ireland, in June 2014.

"When I started competing, I participated in the bikini category. Although the bikini category falls under the IFBB," Zelna explains, "it caters for women with a softer athletic physique and less muscle than bodybuilding proper."

One imagines Zelna must frequently trot out this patient explanation to colleagues and others who don't understand the *minutiae* of the sport.

The point is borne out by the photographs in an article *Marie Claire UK* recently did on Zelna. While her body certainly bespeaks many hours spent in the gym, it lacks the muscularity ordinarily associated with bodybuilding.

How did it all come about, I wonder.

"As I was preparing to take the black belt exam in karate," Zelna recalls, "I decided to take to the gym to improve my strength. There, I saw a poster advertising a bodybuilding show.

"I was intrigued. I decided to enter – in the bikini category.

"I took part and finished third. I enjoyed it so much that, once I had obtained my black belt and been awarded South African colours in karate, I gave up martial arts.

"I was determined to compete successfully in my newly chosen sport."

From 2004 to about 2008, Zelna did just that, raking in a number of medals and prizes in bodybuilding competitions in South Africa.

"In 2013, after a few years in which I didn't compete, I participated in seven shows. At that stage, because of my absence, I wasn't sure what federation and what category was best suited to my physique.



Photo: Jean Meiring



Photo: Ben Myburgh



Photo: Jean Meiring

Zelna and her trainer, Chris Scott, who passed away recently.

“Since I had become too muscular for the bikini category, I was moved to a category known as fitness bikini and, eventually, to the category toned figure. The toned figure category is for more athletic, toned physiques. However, participants must remain feminine in appearance; they do not have the hardened bodybuilding look.

“It’s in that category that I’ll be representing South Africa in Belfast.”

And what did Zelna make of her new-found success?

“Since I’d not competed for some years, I didn’t expect to receive South African colours so quickly after my return.

“On an international level, the standard is much higher than locally. One meets a broad spectrum of amazing athletes and people. For me, participating internationally was truly the highlight of 2013.”

YET, NONE of this comes easily.

“In order to be ready for competitions, I adhere to a strict diet and follow a strenuous training regime.

“The main component of my training regime is weight training. I do this for an hour per day five days a week – under the guidance of a trainer. Daily, I also do forty-five minutes of electrical muscle stimulation (EMS) therapy.”

And what does the sometimes perhaps staid legal world make of her sporting sideline?

“Owing to the fact that I participate in bodybuilding wearing a bikini, initially I was concerned that people would be prejudiced against it or that it would be seen in a bad light.

“However, the overwhelming majority of my colleagues, some judges, judges’ registrars and clients have been hugely supportive and have urged me to continue competing.

“Some people have responded by saying, ‘You don’t look like an advocate.’ Then, I’d ask, ‘So, what does an advocate look like?’ They wouldn’t have an answer.

“Of course, I understand it’s perhaps an unusual sport for most and many people can’t understand why I’d want to get on stage in high heels and a bikini.

“However, that’s just the end result. Most people don’t realize the science behind bodybuilding and the immense

amount of preparation and dedication involved. It’s that which attracts me to the sport.

“We all have an authentic self. Most people simply choose not to reveal it, rather following the crowd. I have no problem being different. Most importantly, I must be comfortable with what I do and must know who I am. I’m not a crowd pleaser.

“Of course, I have heard that some people make comments behind my back, but these have been few and far between and, I believe, due to ignorance of the fact that the form of bodybuilding I do is a recognized and highly organized sport which requires preparation like any other sport.

“First, being an advocate is what I do – it’s my occupation – it’s not *who* I am. For me, it’s important to be balanced. Doing only law doesn’t make you balanced.

But how does Zelna manage it all?

“I don’t have children. This certainly makes my life easier: I can be a bit more selfish with my spare time.

“I schedule my training around my work not my work around my training. I have two trainers who assist me in my exercise regime and keep a check on me.

“Mine is a very demanding schedule, especially during competition time. Also, I adhere to a stringent diet.

“At work, I have a wonderful secretary, Mrs Liebenberg, who is eighty-two years old – and amazing. I also have a part-time assistant.

“However, when I have urgent work, training must take a back seat. The, when work is quieter, I fit in training sessions I missed.

“My friends understand that during competing season my social life comes second.”

SOME MONTHS after our initial conversation, Zelna and I speak again. In the meantime, she has garnered a list of new achievements.

In May 2014, she was placed first in a local competition of the NABBA Federation and was crowned the overall winner in ladies’ fitness bikini. This won her a slot at the world championship due to be held in Korea.

“My trainer was thrilled since I had been preparing for two different world championships that took place within the span of a month – in two different categories.

“It was a terrible time for me. Among other difficulties, my trainer as well as a friend and colleague Rob Sichel fell ill.”

Bravely, Zelna competed at a further world championship in Ireland in June.

She was placed third out of 22 athletes.

Yet, only the week before, both her trainer and Sichel passed away.

“Both their funerals took place the day before my show. I dedicated the show to them.”

Two weeks later, Zelna took part in the world championship of the WFF in Korea, and was placed second in ladies’ fitness bikini.

This, it would seem, is but the start of a brilliant career. **A**

* NABBA stands for National Amateur Bodybuilding Association. While it started in the United Kingdom, it now has a presence in many countries across the globe, including in South Africa.