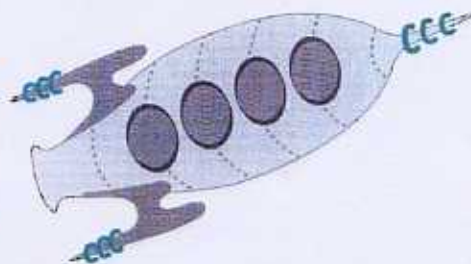




BLAST



Stubborn Back Flab

Ms. Bikini Universe Melissa Hall lets you in on her top-secret tips to melt away love handles and sculpt a gown worthy back in four easy steps.

BY PEGGY HALL | PHOTOGRAPHY ALEX ARDENTI

The thought of wearing a bathing suit (let alone a bikini) in front of thousands of spectators would make most women shudder. But for those who have trained and dieted, it's an opportunity to showcase all their hard work. For veteran figure competitor Melissa Hall, the 2005 Ms. Bikini Universe Pageant, held in Miami Beach, was her time to shine.

With her slender, fit physique, vivacious personality and dazzling smile, it's no wonder that Melissa placed first in the tall class and also won the overall title of Ms. Bikini Universe. What may be surprising, however, is how she prepared for the show. "I can easily add muscle," explains the Minneapolis native, "so for this competition, I did only two days of weight training each week, along with extra cardio sessions." With years of weight training neatly tucked under her 23-inch belt, Melissa focused on shaping and toning her muscles rather than adding size and mass.

One thing that remained constant was her competition diet. Melissa usually eats five or six small meals a day

consisting of protein, unprocessed carbohydrates, a moderate amount of healthy fat and plenty of green vegetables. "As my diet progresses, I slowly begin to limit things like peanut butter, sugar, alcohol and diet colas to get better results." But even as competition approaches, Melissa still practices moderation. "I do cheat on select foods like peanut butter and the occasional Nitro-Tech protein bar," she admits. "But if you vary your protein choices and add seasonings to your foods, you'll be less prone to cheat."

So what's the extra edge that helped her win the Ms. Bikini Universe title? "I enjoyed every moment while on stage," she recalls. "When you start to worry about winning, it can take away from your ability to shine." And shine she did. This former cheerleader and dancer loves to perform and cuts no corners when it comes to contest preparation. "When I first started out, I hired YoungQuest Fitness to learn how to do things the right way," she explains. "Hiring a personal trainer is an investment in your health. Looking and feeling good is priceless!"

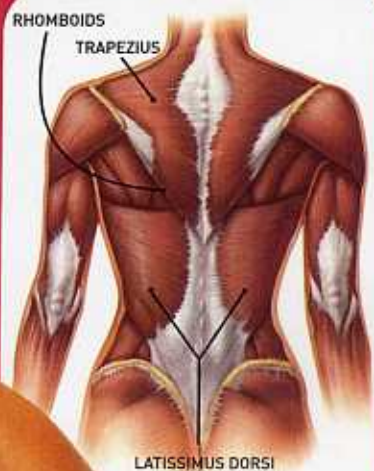
One of Melissa's standout features

is her strong and shapely back. "I love how a nice, fit back looks in a low-cut dress," she says. "It's also important to train your back to prevent injuries. Many people encounter back problems as they age, but weight training can be a preventive measure if you do it properly."

Here, Melissa demonstrates how to sculpt your back in four easy steps. The bent-over exercises work the lower back more extensively, so Melissa recommends starting with these first while the lower back is strong and fresh. If you're new to working out, you can train your back twice a week on nonconsecutive days. Melissa suggests doing deadlifts and pull-ups on day one and good mornings and bent-over rows on day two. Start with two sets of 12 to 15 reps and work up to three or four sets of 12 to 15 reps each. Intermediate and advanced exercisers accustomed to training one body part per week can do all four moves on back day, executing three or four sets of 12 to 15 reps. Another option is to superset, or alternate between two exercises with little or no rest.

"I love how a nice, fit back looks in a low cut dress."

Where It's Working



Cover Girl Exposed: Melissa Hall

Fitness model and figure competitor
Ms. Bikini Universe 2005

I grew up in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where I still reside.

In high school I played volleyball for one year. I sat on the bench quite a bit unless they needed me to serve the ball. I really had a powerful serve!

What I love most about the fitness industry is traveling and meeting people from not only the

U.S. but around the world. Fitness is a language in itself and I have so many friends because of it.

My favorite exercises are walking lunges and deadlifts. When I complete a good leg routine, I feel like I've done cardio as well.

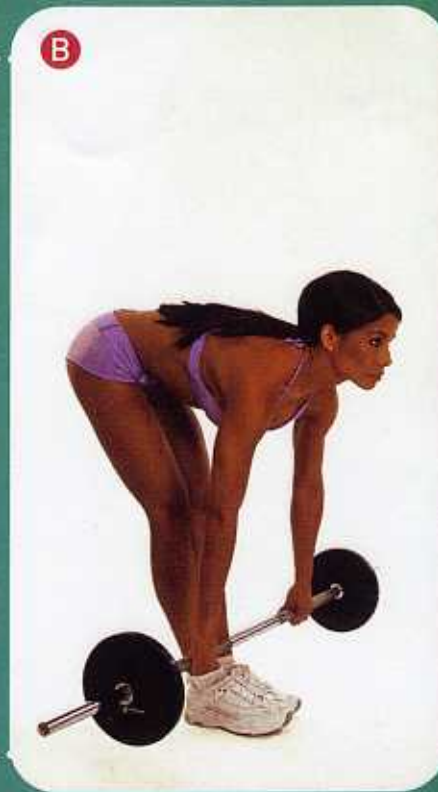
My best feature is my laugh. It's pretty boisterous and slightly obnoxious. Many people can't believe such a loud noise can come from my frame.

The question I'm most asked is what ethnicity am I? My mother is Caucasian and my father is

African-American.

I'd love to work out with Jay Cutler. I want to see what type of workout he would put me through and if I would be able to walk the next day!

The hardest event I've had to train for was my first national fitness competition. I had only one regional competition under my belt, so I hired a trainer and choreographer to assist me. It was a great investment, as I finished 7th out of 100 competitors.



stiff-legged deadlift

Holding a barbell (beginners should start at about 20 pounds) with an overhand grip, stand up straight with your feet close together. Keeping your arms relaxed, your spine straight and your head lifted, inhale and slowly lower the barbell toward your feet. Soften your knees to avoid locking out the joint. Exhale and lift your chest, returning to your starting position. Deadlifts not only work the deep muscles at the lower and mid-back but also target the hips, glutes and hamstrings.



Melissa's Menu

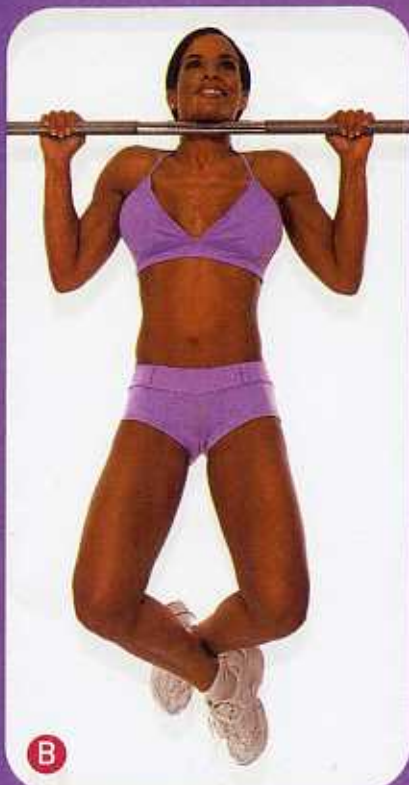
- 7 A.M.: $\frac{1}{2}$ cup oatmeal with strawberry protein shake
- 10 A.M.: 3 rice cakes with 1 tbsp peanut butter; 5 scrambled egg whites with seasoning
- 1 P.M.: 1 chicken breast, $\frac{1}{2}$ cup rice, $\frac{1}{2}$ cup green beans
- 4 P.M.: $\frac{1}{2}$ protein bar
- 7 P.M.: 6 oz orange roughy and large romaine salad with homemade balsamic vinegar dressing and Dijon mustard
- 10 P.M.: Chocolate protein shake with 1 tsp peanut butter

Melissa's Favorite Munchies:

"Cheerios have worked out really well for me," she says. "They taste great, are a good source of carbohydrates and are easy to tote in a Ziploc bag. Louis Rich turkey bacon is the other food that has made my diet more manageable. Sometimes I have it for dinner, along with scrambled egg whites."

good morning

With an overhand grip, hold a 30-pound barbell across your upper back (never the neck). Keeping your feet together and abdomen engaged, inhale and arch your back slightly as you slowly lower your chest until your torso is parallel to the floor. Exhale and smoothly return to your starting position. Good mornings work the lower and midback, as well as the glutes and hamstrings.



pull-up

This is one of the best exercises to create an attractive V-taper, but it's also one of the most challenging. The results are worth it, so stick with it. Grasp a pull-up bar with a wide overhand grip. Lift your feet off the floor and cross your ankles. Inhale to prepare and, as you exhale, engage your abs and pull your chest toward the bar. Next, lower with the movement under control. Beginners, feel free to use assistance from either a spotter or pull-up machine as necessary. Hard-core exercisers, just pump out as many as you can to failure to constitute one set. Be sure to move in a controlled manner or gravity will do the work in place of your muscles. Pull-ups work the entire back, with special emphasis on the lats, rhomboids and biceps.

Tips from a Bikini Queen

For maximum results, be sure to follow Melissa's top tips for sculpting a shapely, sexy back:

- Use a comfortable weight so you can squeeze and contract your muscles to help create definition and separation.
- Use nonexplosive movements, and focus on isolating the muscle and concentrating on form for best results.
- Rest 30 to 60 seconds between sets, and use this time to stretch the muscle you just worked to create a lean, sculpted shape.



bent-over barbell row

Take an overhand grip on a 30-pound barbell and stand with your feet hip width apart and knees bent. Keep your chest lifted, your back straight and your torso at a 45-degree angle. Inhale to prepare and, as you exhale, contract your abdomen and pull the bar straight up until it touches your rib cage. Squeeze your shoulder blades together at the top of the movement. Lower the weight with control. Focus on moving the weight with your back muscles rather than your arms. ■