

like Madonna's, arms like Mobama's, curves like the Jessicas' (Alba, Biel, Rabbit)—it's pointless to deny that these are also strong, strong women and more pointless to ponder whether these ladies have done a biceps curl (or thousand). Less substantiated but most alluring are rumblings that, pre-photo shoot or red carpet event, some celebs suck down vinegar shots to dehydrate muscles and enhance definition; others slather themselves with testosterone cream to encourage bulk. Sounds gross—and is dangerously dumb!—but these are the same pre-competition tricks employed by pro bodybuilders, who, just like movie stars, will often do whatever it takes.

Ramona Braganza, an L.A.-based trainer whose clients have included the aforementioned Jessicas (except Rabbit—she's just drawn that way), Halle Berry, and Anne Hathaway, admits to being “from the school of nuts and bolts. Fancy stuff is great, but there's nothing like free weights.” Two weeks before this year's Oscars, Hathaway (who, when she wasn't dancing onstage with host Hugh Jackman, sat front-row center) asked Braganza for some last-minute fine-tuning for her shoulders and arms. No surprise here: “I didn't recommend that she go to Pilates for eight days,” Braganza says. “I said, ‘We need to hit the weights!’ Yoga is great for the stretching aspect, and core work is really important, so Pilates is great for that, but it doesn't give you enough bulk to look defined. You still need to go back to the old way of building and shaping a body.”

Take the standard squat: According to Ebben, this exercise primarily engages your quads and glutes, but your hamstrings are working to stabilize the knee and your torso muscles are active, training your core with every rep. Add a pair of dumbbells (so long, recession-unfriendly machines) and “you're balancing and controlling that mass in all three planes of movement, resulting in increased balance.” Better balance and a stronger core? Sounds like you could ditch the yoga and Pilates classes, do some squats (or other free-weight routine), and get a lot more bang for a lot less buck. “Yes, absolutely,” Ebben says. “That's a very sophisticated understanding you have.”

Why, thank you, Doctor. I think I'm ready for my workout.

Renowned muscle factory Gold's Gym was “the grandfather of institutions back in the '70s and '80s, [known] for building great bodies,” Braganza says. “It's where it all started for me and for a lot of people.” I show up at Gold's (about half the price of other bare-bones Manhattan gyms) for my first session with Joy, a seasoned weight trainer currently prepping for her first bikini-required fitness competition. Standing at the training desk, fidgeting like a schmo, I try to

remember the last time I was in a gym. Oh, yeah: I worked at one! Years ago. I never left the front desk. Joy ushers me past the shiny, happy ellipticals and over to the clink-clink-meets-bad-techno of the free-weight room. I get more than a few sidelong glances from the testosterone pit-stained set—and yeah, it's intimidating. But here's something I didn't expect: They look a little anxious too. As if I might run back to the slumber party and spill who grunts the loudest. Joy starts me out with basic squats and lunges. The tricks are proper form, remembering to squeeze the glutes and abs, concurrent breathing. Staring at myself in the mirror, hands on hips, lunging up and down, I'm suddenly reminded that I've done this before, but instead of a mirror, I'd faced a Cindy Crawford VHS workout tape. Back then, I'd bound down the stairs wearing bike shorts and a sports bra, rearrange the living room furniture, and raid the pantry for makeshift weights while my mom lovingly rolled her eyes.

“Do you ever do these?” I ask Joy.

“Yes, but... I do them with weights.”

For now, I'm thinking my body is enough weight to lift. I'm really feeling this, in all sorts of muscles that have long since given up on me, and Joy won't let me stop. I miss Cindy.

Joy could probably out-lift most of the guys I know. But according to Linda Baltes, a military officer with a background in biochemistry, women who exercise like men are working out for the wrong body. Baltes is partnering with George Snyder, the creator of the early-'80s Miss Olympia female fitness competitions, for this summer's launch of an exercise program (unnamed at press time) that claims you can swap out the treadmill for her and Snyder's “lunge cycle” routine, which, Baltes explains, is both aerobic and anaerobic, meaning it gets your heart rate going and builds muscle at the same time. “These lunges aren't your traditional, I'm-gonna-stand-in-front-of-the-mirror-and-dolunges,” Baltes says. “I see these women who never get off the treadmill or the elliptical—I call them ‘cardio queens’—and they never, ever change their bodies. Cardio is for your heart, it's not for your muscles. Yes, it's good if you need to burn calories; that's why people are drawn to it.” But the lunge cycles, she says, burn an equal amount of calories and tone the thighs, butt, and hips—areas that men don't typically focus on. “So if you could get that same result, get your heart rate up, and end up with stronger muscles,” she says, “why would you spin your wheels on a treadmill when you're not reshaping your body?”

It's a compelling thought—who wouldn't want to tell cardio to take a hike and still reap the rewards of that very hike? But even if it sounds too good, lunges aren't

going anywhere. And neither are good-old-fashioned, just-try-to-deny-'em, can't-barely-lift-'em, when-can-I-drop-'em free weights.

I've been back at Gold's a few more times, enough to discover that personal trainers actually use the phrase, “Feel the burn!” even if they're kidding. Joy has been dutifully counting my chest presses, shoulder presses, leg curls, rear delt flies, cable flies, biceps curls, crunches, reverse crunches, push-ups, and pull-ups while kindly reminding me to breathe. At our last session, I'm doing lateral raises and focusing so intensely on squeezing my abs, keeping my back straight, knees bent, and remembering to both inhale and exhale that I'm oblivious not only to the guys around me (and the contorted faces I hope I'm incapable of making), but also to how much it hurts. By the time I'm done, I feel—dare I say it?—empowered. And a little like Jell-O. By now, Joy's caught on to my pathetic trick of asking questions (so, what color bikini?! after every other rep, so she's upped the weights and totally stopped listening. I'll thank her later. ●

STEEL YOURSELF

Bust a move the great weight way: Try these three expert-approved body builders

BUTT-BUSTER: THE SQUAT

Increase the lower-body benefits of the average squat by adding two five-pound handheld weights. Don't forget to squeeze your abs, glutes, and thighs (and exhale!) as you come up. Try three sets of 10 to start. Increase the load once it gets too easy.



BEST FOOT FORWARD: THE WALKING LUNGE

Like a standard lunge—just take your dumbbells along for the walk. Aim for 10 steps with each leg. “Find your rhythm, take your time, breathe, and keep moving. As you build confidence, pick up the pace without losing your form,” says former pro bodybuilder Nina Curtis.



TOTAL BODY: THE PUSH PRESS

Holding a body bar (a lighter barbell) at shoulder level, dip down into a half-squat, and as you come up, push the bar straight overhead. Bring back to shoulders and repeat for three sets of five. “This is a must to balance your entire physique,” Curtis says.

