
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Blind Spots

Bodybuilder Coco Kissack shares her story of a dark descent into the world of steroids and side effects.

By Maureen O'Hagan

January 2014



Ali: Courtesy of Coco Kissack

At first, her vision started to go.

There was blurriness and vertigo. And everywhere she looked, there was a floating spot.

She was putting on weight. Watery, puffy weight. She was just plain uncomfortable in her clothes, and she sweated right through them. That was new. Even when her coach had her eating something like 5,000 calories a day on a strict bodybuilding regimen, she hadn't gained like this before.

Meanwhile, she was losing her voice.

"I convinced myself it was the air conditioning," she recalled.

She felt angry. Aggressive. Completely lacking in patience.

One by one, Coco Kissack brushed each of these problems aside.

The vision? It must be her mascara, she thought. Or her contact-lens solution. Or maybe she needed a new prescription.

Her short fuse? Purely situational—a temporary problem caused by life's upheavals. She had just moved from Winnipeg to Toronto, Canada, leaving old friends behind. She had left a longtime job as a Winnipeg bus driver and was dealing with the emotional aftermath of a breakup. And in the midst of all this, her daughter, pregnant at age 19, was moving back in with her. Who wouldn't be stressed out?

Kissack simply didn't believe the drugs were causing her problems.

Kissack bought new mascara, new contact-lens solution, new eye cream. Her symptoms continued. She got a new prescription. Nothing changed. Finally, a doctor told her she had central serous retinopathy, a disease that is associated with steroid abuse. He looked at her bodybuilder's physique. Was she using?

Nah!

The truth is, she was. But Kissack simply didn't believe the drugs were causing her problems.

"I went to the source of all knowledge on everything: the Internet!" she would later recall. "I could find absolutely no

proof that steroids were affecting my vision. As a matter of fact, all the Internet experts (guys on bodybuilding sites) were pretty adamant that steroids couldn't possibly be the cause."

And so it was that Kissack began a journey that would change her life. Today, more than two years after getting off the drugs, she's on a crusade.

Steroid Culture

This isn't a story about how steroids mess you up—though Kissack now acknowledges that steroids did, indeed, mess her up. Royally. It's also not about casting judgment on the strange world of bodybuilding, though Kissack's life is wrapped up in that world, even today.

It's a story about blind spots. In trying to be tough, trying to excel, trying to become a top-level competitor, Kissack was blinded to something that, in hindsight, seems so obvious: don't put weird stuff in your body.

A lot of us wouldn't consider ingesting or injecting strange chemicals, yet the use of anabolic steroids is reportedly growing, and not just among competitive athletes. The drugs have become part of military culture, according to news reports. You can find threads running through law-enforcement circles. And how do you think some bikini models get their poppin' abs?

What percentage of models? No idea. How many cops? There's no way to know. But look around and you'll find plenty of anecdotes. In Arlington, Texas, last year, the [bust of a steroid ring](#) revealed police officers among the customers. Same thing in Louisiana. And in [New Jersey in 2010](#), a newspaper investigation found nearly 250 officers and firefighters from dozens of agencies obtained anabolic steroids and other hormones through a single doctor—many using their department health insurance. The DEA has a pamphlet titled [Steroid Abuse by Law Enforcement Personnel](#). Purveyors of these drugs have even placed ads in law-enforcement magazines.

As for the military, there are some estimates. In a 2008 Defense Department survey, for example, 2.5 percent of Army personnel admitted illegally using steroids. That's not a huge percentage, but does it capture all users? Unlikely. At Joint Base Lewis-McChord, in Washington state, some soldiers told investigators that steroid use was rampant. Several estimated that half of one battalion had tried these drugs. It was so common, they said, that it was done openly, according to a story in [The Seattle Times](#).

"No one really hid this," Seth Manzel, an Army veteran who served from 2004 to 2005 in Mosul, Iraq, was quoted as saying. "I walked into a squad leader's room one time, and he was with another soldier who had his pants down around his ankle. He had a needle and was injecting that soldier."

Given the demands of the job—regularly carting around loads that can top 90 lb., for instance—it's not all that surprising.

"If a captain sees his soldiers getting stronger at a quicker rate, that's not necessarily a bad thing," Manzel told the *Times*.

Cops, too, look for ways to maximize their physical edge on bad guys. But steroid use isn't all about performance. For some, it's purely cosmetic.

Indeed, the leaned-out, pumped-up look that anabolic steroids deliver is decidedly in at the moment, a part of the pop-cultural zeitgeist. One need look no further than Snooki of *Jersey Shore*: "My ideal man would be Italian, dark, muscles, juice head, guido." Ditto for her housemate Jwoww. "Tall, completely jacked, steroids, like, multiple growth hormones. That's, like, the type that I'm attracted to."

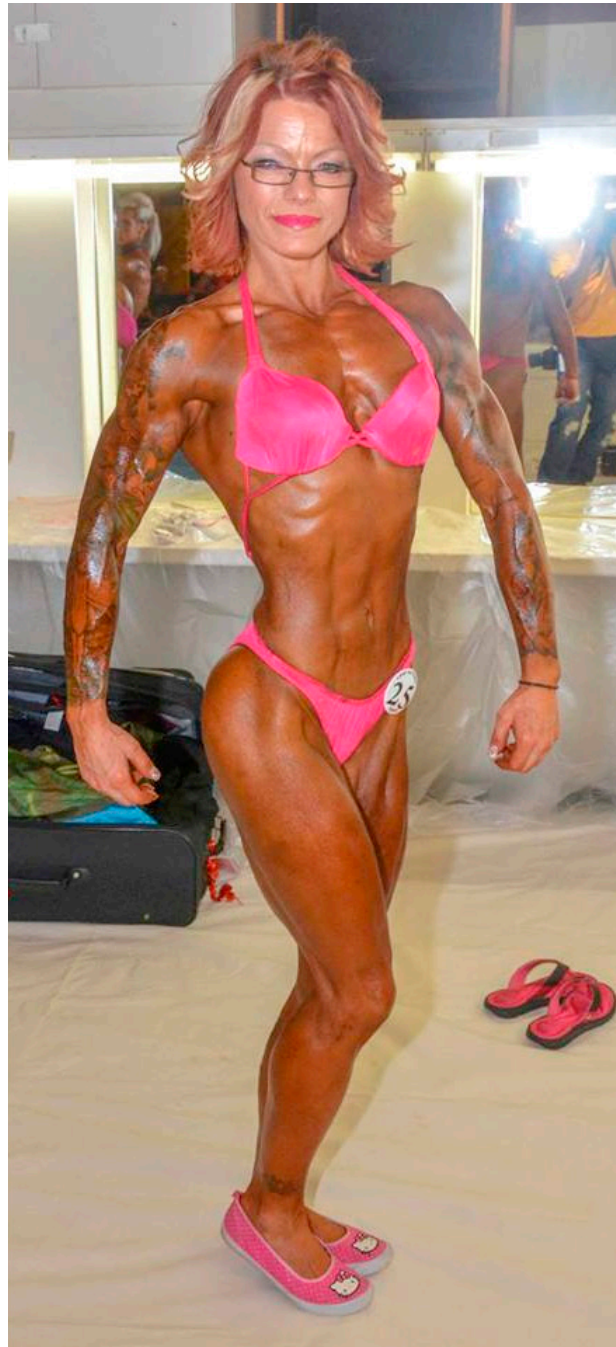
And, of course, steroids have long been a big part of the bodybuilding world.

The Slippery Slope

Kissack's Internet pals didn't think the drugs were doing any harm. Members of the medical establishment think otherwise. Steroid abuse has been linked with kidney and liver damage; it can raise blood pressure and increase the risk of heart problems; it can give men breasts and shrink their testicles. Need we say more? OK, one more thing: anabolic steroids are listed as "probably carcinogenic" by a major cancer research group.

Kissack entered this world through the back door. A former cardio junkie, she had gotten into weightlifting when she was trying to improve her running times. She found she liked pumping iron a lot better than pounding pavement and began training in "physique sports."

In her first competition, as a novice in Canada, she placed second. Afterward, people told her she could have won if she had just a little bit more muscle. That's when a coach gave her a "magic envelope" filled with pills that promised to help her burn fat and build muscle.



Kissack had some success competing clean, but once she saw results with steroids she never looked back.

"My delts popped like crazy!" she recalled. "It worked great."

Kissack said she didn't know what, exactly, she was taking—a statement that may strain credulity. In any case, she said she was furious when she learned it was methyl-1-testosterone (MIT). She had been telling people she was "natural"—that is, competing clean.

"I felt like a liar," she recalled. At that point, she figured because she was already doing drugs, she might as well do more.

"It's not a clear thought process," she now concedes.

Over two years, working with different coaches, she tried Anavar (oxandrolone or oxandrin) and Nolvadex (tamoxifen); she added human growth hormone (HGH); she used testosterone and Deca-Durabolin (nandrolone).

Pills led to needles. Dosages increased.

"I was so caught up in wanting to be the best, wanting to be a pro, I wanted to do everything I could to get as big as I could. I was almost hungry for it, anxious to try it."

It's easy to judge Kissack. This was female bodybuilding, for God's sakes, not the Olympics. Millions of dollars were not at stake. So why even go there?

Part of it was just who she was.

"I think bodybuilding is an extreme sport, and I think that a lot of the personality types that are attracted to it are a little bit extreme," she explained.

And Kissack was in the middle of a culture that (not unlike CrossFit) dismisses some of the medical establishment's conclusions. Bodybuilders simply think they know better.



Along with the PRs came more unwelcome changes: acne, hair growing out of her moles and terrible insomnia.

The anti-steroid information is just media hype, they say. If you're smart, and take the right dose, in the right combinations, at the right times, the drugs won't hurt you.

People who are into "gear," as the drugs are sometimes called, are really into gear. They spend endless hours online looking for the latest info, the best dosages, the proper cycling. They chat incessantly online, where you can easily find how-to guides on juicing for beginners. YouTube will teach you how to inject.

There are many ways to gain muscle naturally through hard training and proper nutrition. Most of them are a long-term investment. Anabolics are another thing entirely, providing results that are clear and immediate.

"They work," Kissack said of the drugs. "That's why people do them."

Kissack was hitting one PR after another. But it wasn't just her body that was changing. The drugs can quickly affect your thinking, too.

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—Coco Kissack

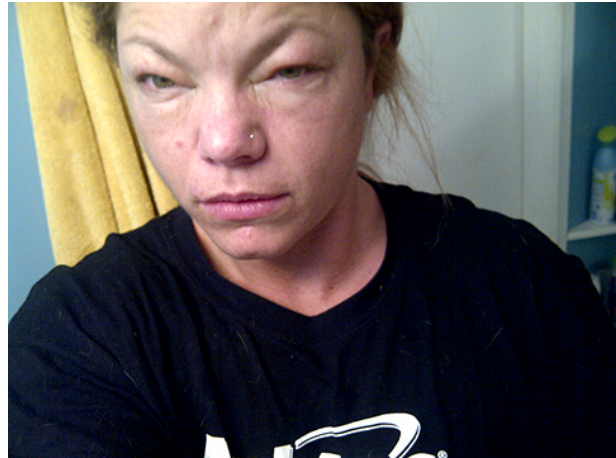
"It's probably four or five days before you get that invincible feeling," she said. "You have all of this stuff going though you that makes you feel more: more powerful, more strong, more determined, more ambitious.

"Without (the drugs)," she added, "you're just less."

The Needle and the Damage Done

Kissack was getting stronger, no question. But at the same time, her body was beginning to fail.

Her hair was falling out in chunks. Her vision was deteriorating. A specialist found cysts on her eyes and diagnosed



Almost blind, unable to walk up stairs without gasping for air, face swollen beyond recognition—and still Kissack kept using.

her with central serous retinopathy. It usually goes away in about six weeks, he said. But Kissack's vision just kept getting worse. As a city bus driver, this was serious. Eventually, her eyesight got so bad she had to give up her commercial driver's license.

Could it be the steroids? Nah.

She was unable to sleep.

"The insomnia was crazy," she would later write on an anti-steroid website. "I was taking sleeping pills, and pain killers at night ... then Clenbuterol and caffeine all day ... when I did sleep, however fleeting, I had to prop myself up on pillows, when I lay down flat, my lungs would fill up and (I'd) start choking. I started getting nosebleeds at about this time, and coughing blood ... and bleeding from my rectum."

On the site, she lists PRs including a 205-lb. bench press and a 720-lb. leg press, as well as conditions including a torn biceps tendon, sciatica and joint pain.

She consulted her "friends" in bodybuilding chat rooms about some of these symptoms. They told her not to worry. Just "stick to the plan."

By the time Coco's daughter, Kitzi, moved in, Coco had changed so much Kitzi didn't even recognize her. Her jawline was more square, more masculine. She had hair growing out of moles. Her back was covered in acne. Kitzi was tasked with the grim duty of regularly popping her mom's zits.

"The whole thing made me so sick," Kitzi recalled.

One day, the two of them decided to go swimming. Coco was a mess. She had trouble catching her breath and was nearly blind.

"She was feeling along the walls of the pool, all big and jacked in this little bikini," Kitzi recalled. She was disgusted.

One day, in the middle of a squat, a cyst burst in her eye. She ignored the blood.

Coco's moles began exploding. She could barely make it up the stairs, she was so breathless. One day, in the middle of a squat, a cyst burst in her eye. She ignored the blood. All she felt was anger that she had dropped the weight.

Coco now sees she was an addict.

"When a meth user starts losing her teeth, does she suddenly stop?" she asked. "It's the same sort of an idea. You get so wrapped up in it, that's all you know. The idea of losing control and strength in the gym when I had lost so much in everything else in my life, it was unimaginable."

She did as instructed and upped her dosages.

End of the Line

In October 2011, Coco and her daughter were building an IKEA bookcase together. She asked Kitzi to get inside the bookcase to hold it up so she could screw the parts together. Kitzi refused, afraid it was going to fall on her. The two began arguing.

Coco's temper flared, and she shoved her pregnant daughter. Kitzi fell, belly first, onto a helmet on the ground.

"That was pretty much the final thing," Kitzi recalled.

She gave her mom an ultimatum: stop using steroids or she'd never see her grandbaby.

Coco was stunned.

"It was almost like for a moment of clarity it hit me," she recalled.

She decided to quit. But how? She was addicted, physically and emotionally. She searched the Internet and could find no solid guidance. She called Alcoholics Anonymous, and they said they couldn't help her. She tried Narcotics Anonymous, and they said the same. She saw a doctor who had no experience dealing with a woman on steroids.

She quit cold turkey.

"The depression that hit me was extreme," Coco recalled.

She was nauseated, and angry. She had tremors and nosebleeds and light sensitivity. She wanted to jump off a bridge. She spent three days that October in a closet, shaking, with her dog sitting beside her. In November, she remained mired in depression and confusion. But eventually, her head began to clear. By February, her vision had improved. By March, she started to feel "normal" again.

Eventually, she started seeing the drugs in a completely different way. When people are competing in bodybuilding, she realized, "they look great on stage. But you see them a few weeks later and they put on 25 or 30 lb. They say it's post-competition depression. But it's also the drugs, and they don't want to admit it."

In the two years since that confrontation with Kitzi, Coco has become an anti-steroid crusader and freely tells her story in the hopes that others don't go down the same path. She's featured prominently on a website dedicated to a teenager, [Taylor E. Hooton](#), who committed suicide after using anabolic steroids.

Her health, she said, has returned. She ran 5 km without any problem. Her eyesight isn't as good as it was, but she can see. She's not as big as she was when she was using anabolics, and her bench press isn't as good. But "my love for the world is back again," she said.

She's still competing in bodybuilding—clean, she says. In July 2013, she entered the Canadian Nationals, placing sixth in the middleweight division.

That, she said, "was huge."



About the Author

Maureen O'Hagan is a Seattle-based journalist who is the recipient of numerous national writing and reporting awards. Skeptical by nature, she tried CrossFit for a newspaper story in 2009. Now she's hooked.