

BIKINI BODY

BRITISH IFBB BIKINI PRO
MICHELLE BRANNAN
EXPLAINS HOW TO GET IN TOUCH WITH YOUR BODY BY LEARNING TO SQUEEZE AND CONTRACT YOUR MUSCLES
PHOTOS BY MATT MARSH



motions and doing what was on my programme with little thought or feeling. So I decided to do an extra upper body workout each week and increased the weights a little to build some muscle but even after doing this my arms, shoulders and back still didn't come up to scratch.

Frustrated, I started to employ the strategy of isolating and squeezing that I had used in dancing. After all, if you can't even feel a muscle and squeeze it, how on earth can you exercise it properly using weights? Sometimes, certain muscles are just not recruited during exercises so you have to manually contract them or it just doesn't happen.

When I started learning how to contract the muscles in my upper body—side delts, back and triceps—I quickly noticed an improvement in my physique. Now, after consistent years of weight training I am able to bring a more balanced physique to the stage.

So my message this month is, if you have a lagging body part pay more attention to it and concentrate on the squeeze. Sometimes just doing more squats won't build a better backside, and more lateral raises won't build a nice shoulder cap.

Start each training session by looking in the mirror and squeezing each muscle group. If you are training shoulders then alternately contract your side delts then hold the contraction and remember how it feels. You want that same tension when you are training side delts with dumbbell lateral raises.

If you are training hamstrings, stand and squeeze your leg biceps, alternating between left and right. Then do some standing unweighted leg biceps curls. If your glutes don't fire, practise squeezing each buttock while walking or standing in queues (just don't wear tight trousers!).

Below are some pre-activation exercises I do to get my muscles firing. Remember, the most important aspect of weight training is not how much weight you can lift, but getting in touch with your body and learning how to feel the muscle working. **M&F**

Weight training is the perfect way to sculpt your body; it enables you to create a shape that cardiovascular training alone could never do.

But many people start weight training without knowing what muscles they are exercising or learning how to feel them working.

Instead they just throw weights around in the gym without fully focusing on the targeted muscles. This is a sure-fire way to hamper progress.

Ten years of Latin dancing taught me how to relax and contract specific muscle groups.

Latin dance is all about contrasting quick and slow movements so you need to be able to contract and relax your muscles quickly to be loose enough for the free movements and strong enough for the spins and lifts. So I would practise squeezing my legs to teach myself how to relax and contract so I could move quickly.

Then when I started weight training I realised my quadriceps development was far more advanced than other areas of my body and my lower body strength was more than double my upper body strength.

I set out to improve the other areas of my lower body and by employing a good weight-training programme and

squeezing I managed to do this.

Squeezing my glute muscles enabled me to get them working on certain exercises when my dominant quad muscles could have taken over. I would squeeze my glutes at any opportunity just to get used to feeling them work. I even did it when I was standing in a queue or walking in the street.

I also put a lot of thought into my exercises, learning how to feel the different parts of the leg individually. By using good form and continuing to squeeze my bum and hamstrings rather than just throw weight around my weaker lower body muscle groups gradually began activating and improving in shape.

A BALANCED BODY

Because I train purely for aesthetics, I regularly look in the mirror and ask myself what I need to work on and what training programme would help me to achieve my goals.

Being an IFBB bikini pro, training for symmetry and balance is my main focus and after a short period training it became apparent that although I had built a good pair of legs I had neglected my upper body.

I did train my upper body but not with the same care and consideration and it lagged behind my lower body.

I was guilty of going through the

“IF YOU CAN'T EVEN FEEL A MUSCLE AND SQUEEZE IT, HOW CAN YOU EXERCISE IT PROPERLY USING WEIGHTS?”

PRE WORKOUT MUSCLE ACTIVATION EXERCISES LEGS

STANDING ONE-LEGGED HAMSTRING CURLS

3 SETS X 20 REPS

STAND ON ONE LEG AND DO UNWEIGHTED CURLS. HOLD AND SQUEEZE THE HAMSTRINGS FOR THREE SECONDS.

STANDING GLUTE KICKBACKS

3 SETS X 20 REPS

STANDING ON A BENCH WITH STRAIGHT LEGS THRUST ONE LEG BACK AND SQUEEZE YOUR GLUTE MUSCLES. HOLD FOR THREE SECONDS.

STANDING QUADRICEPS SQUEEZES

3 SETS X 20 REPS

CONTRACT AND RELAX THE QUADRICEPS MUSCLES ON ALTERNATE LEGS.

SHOULDERS

SIDE DELT LIFTS

3 SETS X 20 REPS

STAND OR SIT IN FRONT OF MIRROR AND SQUEEZE YOUR SIDE DELTS AND LIFT AS IF YOU WERE DOING A FIGURE POSE. HOLD FOR THREE SECONDS. CONTRACTING LEFT AND RIGHT DELTS ALTERNATIVELY.

BACK

LAT CONTRACTIONS

3 SETS X 20 REPS

STAND STRAIGHT AND PULL YOUR LATS DOWN. HOLD FOR 3 SECONDS. TRY ALTERNATELY CONTRACTING LEFT AND RIGHT. USE YOUR HANDS IF YOU NEED TO FEEL.



Michelle Brannan is Britain's first IFBB pro bikini competitor. She won last year's British Grand Prix and is due to compete at the Bikini Olympia in Las Vegas this month