



# RÜHL'S SHOULDER TRAINING OF

The man with the biggest delts in bodybuilding history is back from retirement. Germany's **Markus Rühl** shares how he built his bolder shoulders.

By Peter McGough, Special Features Editor  
Photos by Kevin Horton at Apollon Gym, Edison, NJ



How wide is **Markus Rühl**? Well, walk around him a couple of times and that's your cardio for the day.

Markus Rühl stood onstage at the 2007 Mr. Olympia as one of the event's best-placed spectators witnessing the several standing ovations accorded fourth-place finisher Ronnie Coleman. The acclaim for the eight-time champ generated because it was generally accepted that this outing was to be his swansong. However, known only to a few, Markus had also decided this would be his last contest. Gentleman that he is, he didn't pre-announce it because he didn't want to rain on Ronnie's end-of-an-era parade.

Truth is that the previous two years had been tough for the then 35-year-old German mass monster. In 2005 he'd torn his right pec and hadn't been able to train in the balls-to-the-wall blitzkrieg style that he'd become legendary for. Having finished fifth at the 2004 Mr. Olympia, his placings had faded since then — indeed he was destined to place out of the top 15 at this, his last contest.

Compounding his decision to retire was the extra responsibilities he took on when he and his wife Simone opened a new gym and supplement store in their hometown of Plungstadt, about 20 miles from Frankfurt in southwest Germany.

So on Sept. 29, 2007, the 15-year bodybuilding career of Markus Rühl, which was launched at age 20 in 1992 with a 160-pound frame, was over ... the same juncture, coincidentally, as legendary NFL quarterback Brett Favre.

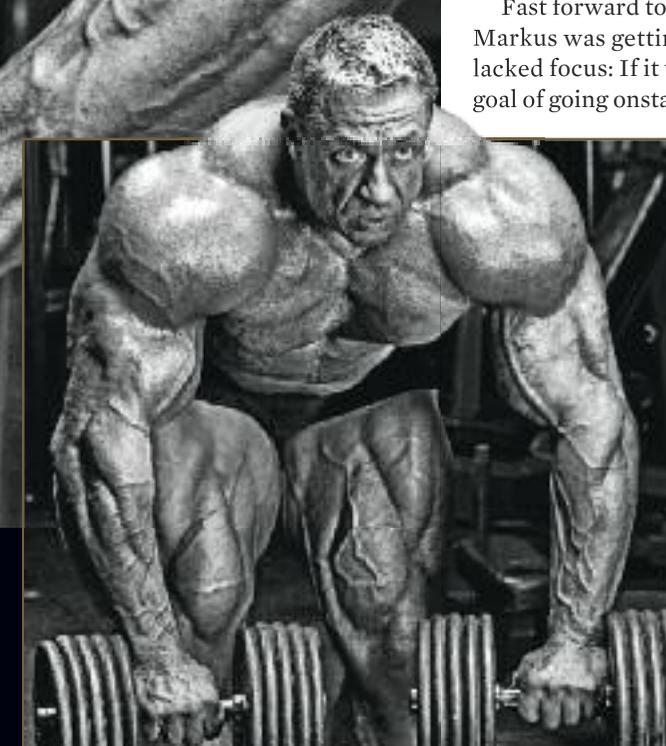
Fast forward to November 2008 and Markus was getting edgy. His training lacked focus: If it wasn't done with the goal of going onstage to hear thousands

erupt in rendering his signature anthem, "Roooooool! Roooooool!" what was if for? Also, he'd signed with a major supplement company, Ultimate Nutrition, in 2007 and it seemed wrong to not be available for contest-ready photos to advertise their wares. Simone sensed his dilemma and said, "Markus, you need to compete again, don't you?" A sheepish (as sheepish as a 310-pound human can be) Markus nodded yes.

### SHOULDER TO THE WHEEL

And so the beast that is Markus Rühl returned to means-to-an-end gym action where none of his exertions are more ferocious than the onslaught he reserves for his delts. For someone who has arguably the best delts the sport has ever seen — they're certainly the widest — you may be surprised to hear Markus reflect, "It took me a long time to make progress with shoulders; the bodypart that grew the best when I was a beginner was biceps."

Markus is in no doubt that "The basic pressing movements are the ones that build real size and lasting muscle. That means squats for quads, benches press for pecs and overhead presses for shoulders." He's also adamant that a combination of heavy weights and high-volume work is the key to building 3-D delts of the Rühl caliber. He expands on that maxim, "My best results have always come from getting the ultimate pump, and I accomplish that only by lifting the heaviest poundage possible while using perfect form for as many sets as it takes." In this *MuscleMag* exclusive we follow him through his five-exercise delt-frying routine.



### 8 RÜHLS OF DELT TRAINING

- » For maximum gains you must train for the ultimate pump.
- » To achieve the ultimate pump you must use heavy weights with moderate to high volume. That requires a number of exercises, sets and reps, so don't expect that just a few sets will do the job.
- » Begin every delt workout with a heavy pressing movement when your muscles are freshest. Presses are compound moves that require multiple sets of joints, thus recruiting additional muscles. This enables you to go heavy and fully stimulate the muscle.
- » After warm-ups, every set should be taken to muscle failure.
- » Strict style is paramount to achieve the maximum muscle-building effect for each rep. Heavy weights combined with sloppy form is a recipe for injury.
- » Peak contractions (holding the weight for 2-3 seconds at the top of each exercise where the target muscle is fully contracted) adds intensity and causes greater muscle stimulation. Therefore, using a full range of motion is critical.
- » Rest at least two minutes between each set to allow full recovery to take place from one set to the next.
- » Change your shoulder routine every 2-3 months so that your delts don't become used to the same workload.

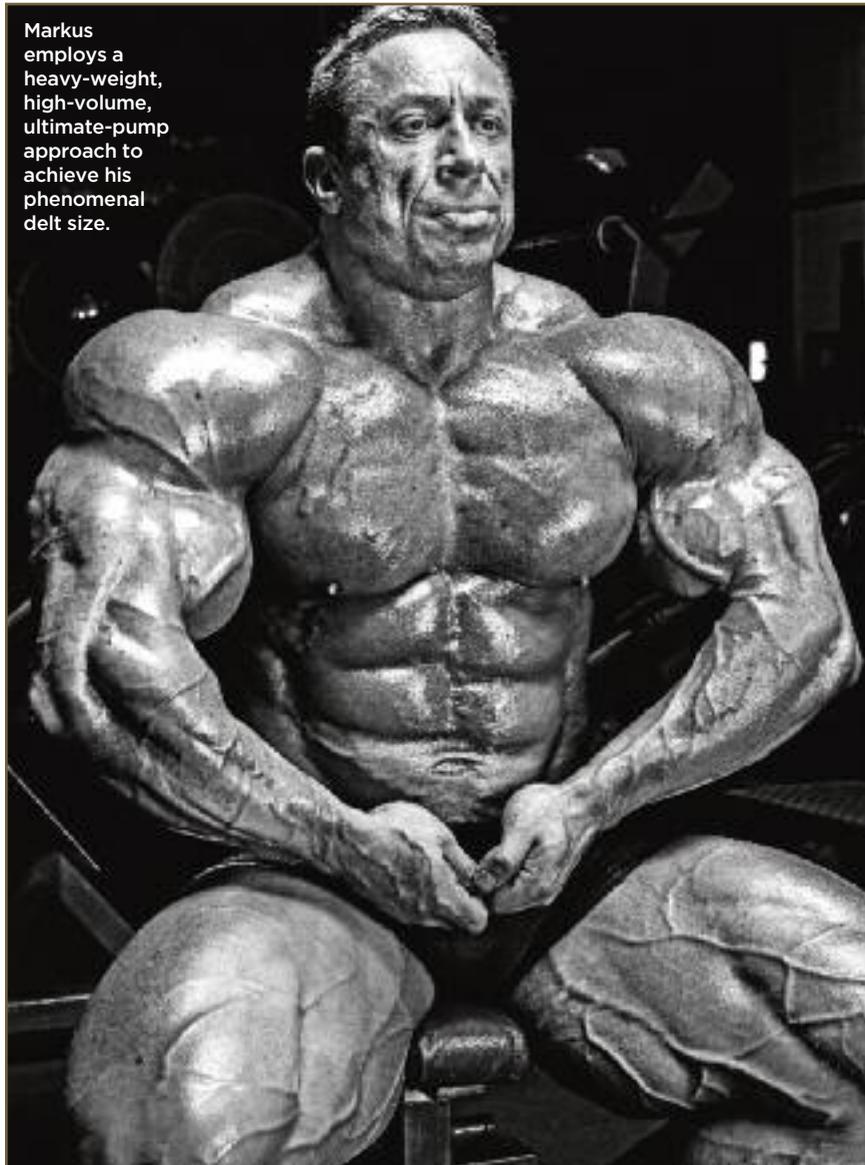
## IN OVER HIS HEAD

The aforementioned “heavy-weight/high-volume/ultimate pump” philosophy is most graphically in evidence with Markus’ opening shoulder salvo: overhead dumbbell presses. As far as he’s concerned, “My delt workouts always start with a pressing exercise. At this point my delt muscles are fresh, so the pressing movement means I can use maximum weight to stress all three deltoid heads and force them into new growth.”

He begins his dumbbell presses with a light set of 30 reps to “get the blood flowing into the shoulder region” and then begins to pyramid up in weight for seven sets. Reps go from 16 to four on the last set, at which point he’s handling 175-pound dumbbells. Execution is really strict. Markus lowers the weights to nose level and holds for 2–3 seconds before exploding to the

arms fully extended position. He explains, “The range of motion that places the delts under maximum stress on this exercise is from the point where the dumbbells are at nose level to the fully outstretched position. If you take the dumbbells lower than nose level you lessen the stress on the delts. In addition, holding for 2–3 seconds at nose level means you can’t bounce the dumbbells upward — from that dead start you explode to utilize full shoulder power. Be sure to use a training partner on this exercise.”

Apart from warm-ups he takes about two minutes’ rest between each set during his delt routine. As Markus sees it, “You have to make sure your delts have recovered between each set in order to be strong enough to give everything for the next one. If you rush it, the whole routine becomes an endurance event and not a muscle-building project.”



Markus employs a heavy-weight, high-volume, ultimate-pump approach to achieve his phenomenal delt size.

## MARKUS RÜHL’S TRAINING SPLIT

DAY	BODYPART(S)
Monday	Quads, hams
Tuesday	Chest
Wednesday	Back
Thursday	Shoulders
Friday	Arms
Saturday	Calves, abs, neck
Sunday	Off

## MARKUS RÜHL’S DELT ROUTINE

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS <sup>^</sup>
Overhead Dumbbell Press	1* 7	30 16–4
Alternating Front Dumbbell Raise	4	10–12
Standing Lateral Raise	5	15–12
Bent-Over Lateral Raise	4	12–10
Dumbbell Shrug	5	12–6

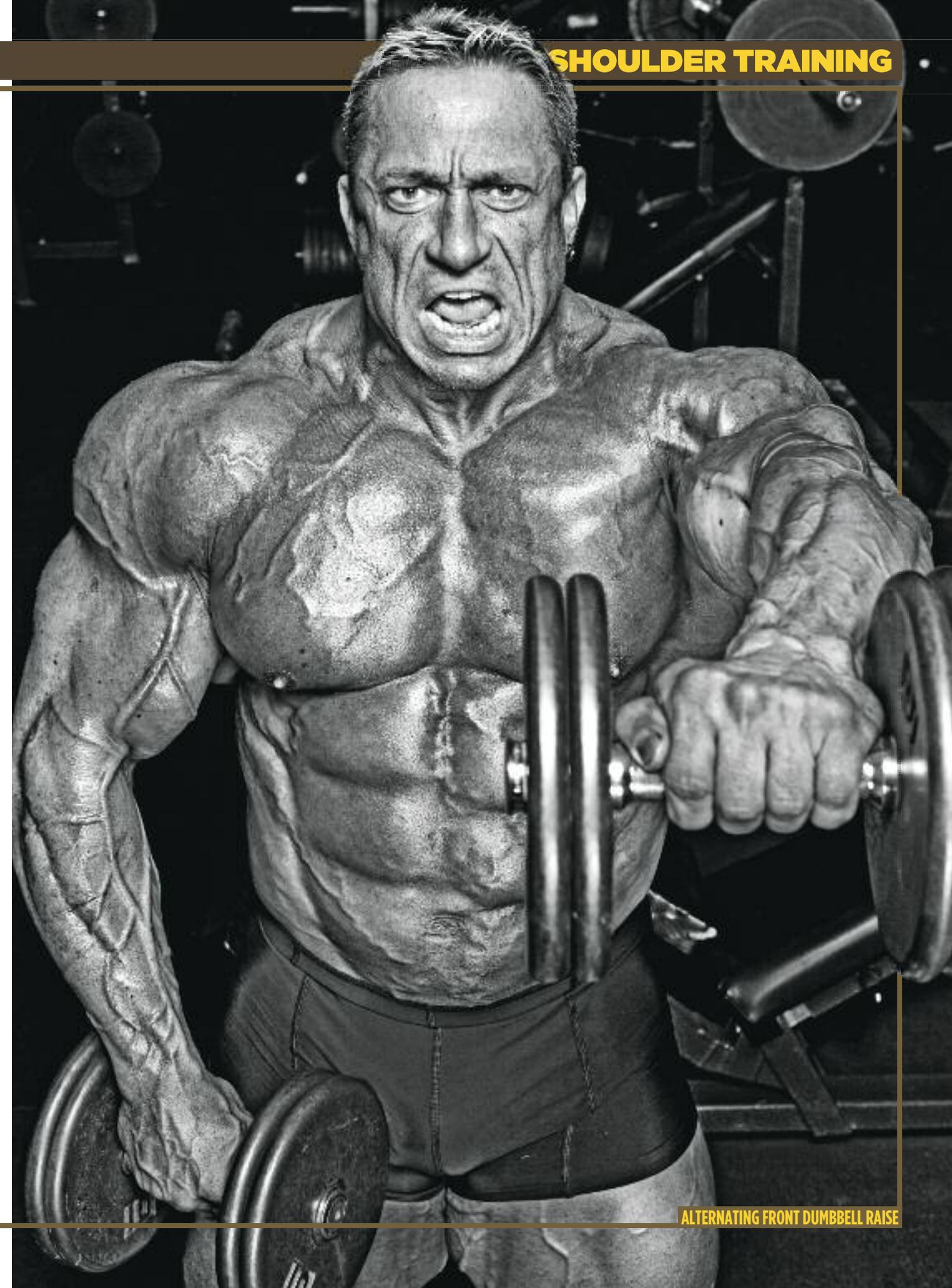
\* Warm-up set  
<sup>^</sup> On most exercises, the weight is increased on successive sets, so the number of reps completed decreases.

## FRONT MAN

Markus’ second delt exercise is alternating front dumbbell raises. He describes them as follows: “This movement isolates the front delts, an area you need to develop to attain full and round shoulders. Along with having that shelf look from the front, big front delts are important during all side poses.”

The starting position for this exercise sees Markus holding the dumbbells in front of his upper thighs, standing erect. Keeping his arm straight, he slowly raises one dumbbell to just above shoulder level and holds for 2–3 seconds before gradually returning to the start to duplicate the rep with his opposite arm. While many bodybuilders don’t hold the top position, Markus adds that it “exerts a peak contraction and adds intensity and greater muscle stimulation to each rep.” He also emphasizes, “It’s extremely important to use strict form on all straight-arm movements. Do that and you’ll force the front delts to grow.”

He does four sets in the 10–12-rep range using 55-pound dumbbells, after which time his front delts look like they’re ready to explode.



ALTERNATING FRONT DUMBBELL RAISE



**STANDING LATERAL RAISE**

**THE SIDESHOW**

Next up is standing lateral raises. “I know it’s no secret but this is the most effective movement there is for bringing out the middle delts,” says Markus. “And if you want true width you have to have the most developed middle delts you can.”

Grasping a pair of 60-pound dumbbells, he lets them hang at arms length against his sides, and then in controlled fashion, without any movement of the upper body or hips, he raises the weights outward to a point where they’re just above shoulder level. As he raises the dumbbells, he turns his wrists slightly so that at the top position his thumb is below his little finger. This ensures maximum stress is placed on the middle delt. At this top position Markus holds the dumbbells for 2–3 seconds before slowly returning to the start position for the next rep. He does 15 reps with 50 pounders and then does another four sets, working up to using a pair of 60-pound dumbbells for 12 reps.

As a final payoff to standing laterals, Markus adds, “Another benefit is that this exercise also helps you carve out the difficult to attain separation between the delts and biceps.”



**BENT-OVER LATERAL RAISE**

**BENT INTO SHAPE**

Fourth item on Markus’ meaty delt menu is bent-over laterals. With this move he’ll vary the style, sometimes lying facedown on an incline bench set at 45 degrees. Today he prefers the standing bent-over version. “Most people say this exercise is solely for the rear delts. While targeting the rear delts is a priority, I also feel that because the other two heads have been stimulated to a high degree, you get a pump throughout the entire shoulder area.”

Grabbing a pair of dumbbells, he bends his knees and bends forward from the waist as far as is comfortable. With the dumbbells hanging at arms length, his palms facing each other and without moving his torso or legs, Markus slowly raises the dumbbells in an arc out to his sides. He advises, “To complete the movement to shoulder level, the elbows have to be slightly bent. As you move toward shoulder level, turn the wrists slightly so your thumb is lower than your little finger. This just puts that final tweak of stress on the rear delt.”

At the top position he holds for a count of 2–3 to effect a peak contraction. Then, he slowly releases the weights under control back to start the next rep. After the initial set of 12 reps he does another three sets of 12 reps with a slightly heavier weight.

Markus emphasizes, “The priority here is to not worry about the amount of poundage but concentrate on doing the movement correctly and squeezing at the midpoint for an intense peak contraction so that you really take the rear delts to their limit.”



## RÜHLS OF CONCENTRATION

The most important rule for developing delts, and in fact any bodypart, is to master the mental art of concentrating on mak-

ing the weight build muscle and not getting caught up in using a poundage that's heavy just for the sake of piling on

the plates. Sloppy style won't build a muscular physique. The mind-muscle connection is fundamental. As you

train on a particular exercise, visualize how it's making the muscle fibers grow bigger and bigger with each rep. Another mental discipline I follow

is before each workout, I go into my office alone for 15 minutes and preview what I'm about to do and get my mind and body ready for the work to come.

Once I start training, there's no talk or jokes, and I'm totally focused mentally and physically for the next 90 minutes or so.

— Markus Rühl

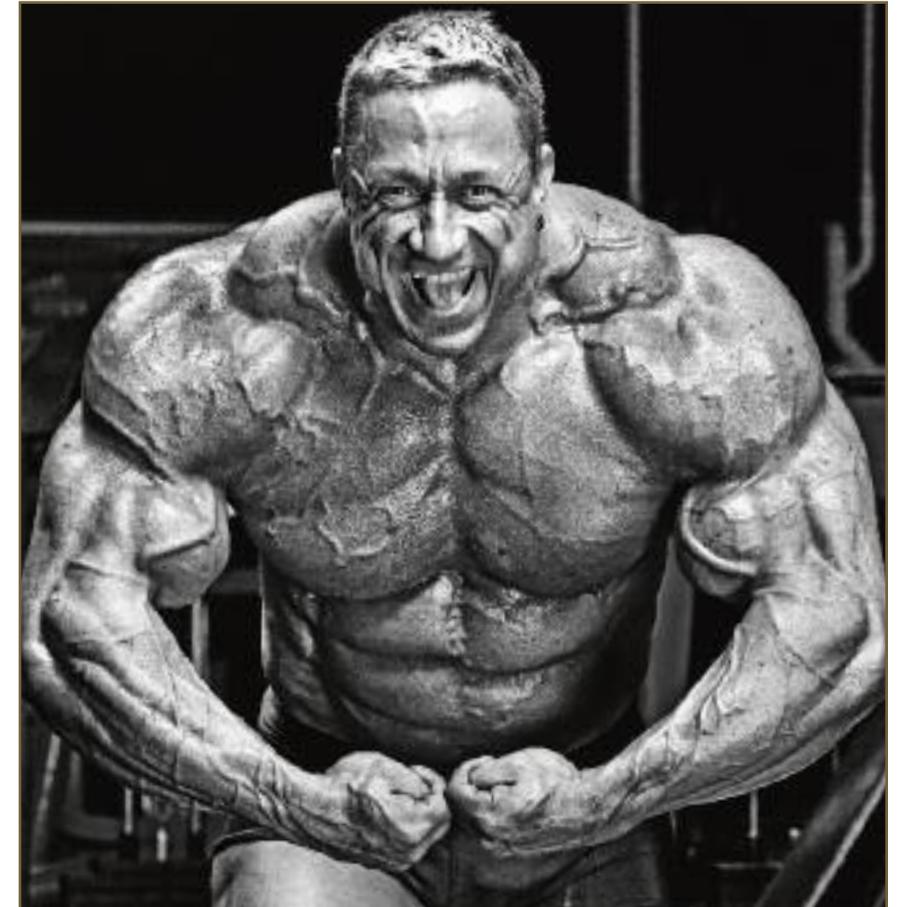
## MONSTER TRAPS

With his delts screaming "Uncle!" we come to the final exercise of the German juggernaut's shoulder routine: dumbbell shrugs. If you wanted proof that Markus Rühl is not a follower of the Michelangelo's David school of physical culture, hear him out on shrugs: "This is the exercise that gives you a neck like a friggin' cow and traps like the Hunchback of Notre Dame."

He continues, "Some guys train traps with back, but good traps set off the whole shoulder region so I prefer to work them with my delts. Quite apart from the visual effect of large traps, you need to develop them to add stability to the entire shoulder girdle and so avoid injury when doing your heavy pressing movements."

For his first set Markus takes a pair of 95-pound dumbbells and holds them at his sides with his palms facing his hips. He lets his shoulders sag down as low as possible. Then, keeping his arms straight and using only the power of his upper traps, he raises his shoulders as high as possible. At the top position he holds for a peak contraction before returning to the starting point. He does 12 full-range-of-motion reps. He then does another four sets with reps going from 12 to six on the last set in which he's using 200-pound dumbbells. The workout over, he's dripping in sweat as he comments, "When shrugging in the offseason I use two short barbells and put 225 pounds on each."

Markus offers some final advice on delt training: "The shoulder muscles are very complex and you have to be very precise in how you hit them. You must use correct form and go to failure on each set. It's all about shocking them into growth. That's why I always recommend you change your shoulder routine every 2–3 months so they don't become used to the same workload."



## NEW RÜHL

After his 2007 "retirement," Markus is circumspect in discussing how long he's back for this time. "I'll go from year to year now. As long as I'm filled with the desire to train with 100% intensity for the ultimate pump and I keep fighting with my body to make it improve, I'll go on." Again, he cites Simone's influence as a major factor for him returning to flexing action: "For me to return to competition Simone has become the main force behind our gym and supplement business. She's a very strong person and, as well as being my wife, she's my business partner and my best friend."

In his comeback contest, the 2009 New York Pro, Markus finished third to qualify for his ninth Mr. Olympia shindig. It's great to have him back in bodybuilding's

show of shows as Markus has carved out a unique place in the bodybuilding landscape. As much as experts (and myself included) sometimes decry the pursuit of extreme mass and pine for a return to a more classical approach to bodybuilding, you tend to throw those considerations aside as a smiling 285-pound Markus, complete with the cheeky spiky hair, marches out to rewrite the "WTF" dimensions of physical possibility. And, of course, the whole tableaux is accompanied, compounded and completed by the roof-raising chants of "Roooooo! Roooooo!" all of which combine to make his stage presence one for bodybuilding's highlight reel.

Welcome back, Markus. Long may you "Roooooo!" 🍀

For more information on Markus, visit [www.ruehl24.de](http://www.ruehl24.de).



DUMBBELL SHRUG