

Arnold's bazaar

By Lori Kurtzman
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Let's begin with a disclaimer: The written word cannot do the Arnold Fitness Expo justice. Such an experience must be seen, heard, touched -- and, yes, smelled -- to be understood.

If you do not attend this year's expo, you'll not have the pleasure of hearing a pretty woman with impossibly long eyelashes describe the post-workout benefits of a 6-pound jug of chocolate milkshake-flavored powder. You will not see the bejeweled bikini that can be yours for \$450, nor the humble thong you can negotiate down to \$5. You will not eat free beef jerky. You will not take a shot of "100% Pure Liquid Egg Whites."

You will not wonder why the world around you smells of tanning lotion.

For some, the expo is the main event of the Arnold weekend. As many as 40,000 people pile into the Greater **Columbus** Convention Center daily to meet fitness celebrities and load up on creams and pills and neon-colored sports drinks from 700 vendors.

They wear tank tops and mom jeans and superhero costumes. The ladies in the booths wear almost nothing at all. Yesterday, one man showed up with a Mohawk glued to his head.

"I know you're probably just bored out of your mind, " a young man told his pouty girlfriend, but how could she be? Lou Ferrigno, the original Hulk himself, was there! An all-natural sugar-blocker was for sale! The Mohawk guy was trying really hard to do a chin-up!

Law student Stefan Green, 24, of Grandview Heights, pushed his way through the bodies yesterday and said anybody heading to the expo today should plan to spend all day there. There is no moving quickly in the showroom. You will squish, sideways, through walls of folks waiting for a free sample of a protein bar. Your body will touch theirs. Eventually, you won't even mind.

Or maybe you will: "Too many people, " gasped Patrick Carlson, 33, a prison worker from Butler, Pa., who just wanted to check out some pre-workout supplements. He plodded through the crowd and said this was his first and would probably be his last expo.

Perhaps it is best to be a guy who doesn't have to wait in line. Arnold Schwarzenegger weaved through the expo with the help of maybe 50 security guards yesterday. He passes through once a day to pose for pictures at sponsor booths. It takes 30 minutes but freezes all other activity inside the hall.

Onlookers gape. They shout out his most-memorable movie lines. They chase him and beg for autographs. They take hundreds of blurry pictures and tell him they love him.

"You'd have thought the president of the United States was coming through, " a man in the crowd said yesterday.

If you do not attend this year's expo, you'll have no idea what this is like.