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Finito endures pain to gain perfect shape

Trimming. At his Mr Uganda debut in November 2021 at Horse Power Gym in Muyenga, Mbajja emerged last among welterweights. "Since my first stage debut I had lost weight but struggled to lose fat." But all those lessons shaped him for the future. For the 2022 Mr Kampala, he dropped into lightweight, coming second.

What's missing? Mbajja's body symmetry was one of his winning factors at the 2025 Mr Central Championships. PHOTO/ABDUL-NASSER SSEMUGABI

BY ABDUL-NASSER SSEMUGABI

BRIEFLY
Nickname: Finito
Official coach: Hamid Kayanja
Trains at: Core Fitness Gym, Ntinda
Sponsor: Suplex Gym
Divisions: welterweight, middleweight, light heavy
Honours: Mr Central, 2025; Mr Uganda 2025

Hussein Mbajja, the reigning Mr Uganda, never dreamt to be a professional bodybuilder. But nowadays, it is the sport that defines him more than anything else.

Nicknamed Finito, he started working out in 2010, but his goal was to simply enhance his physic and strength as an aspiring rugby player.

By then Mbajja was pursuing his Bachelors in business computing at Makerere University Business School (MUBS) in 2009 while playing prop for the university rugby team.

"I was inspired by Isaac Kimera, who was drafted into the Warriors team while still in high school. He had an amazing body," Mbajja said.

He started working out in a gym located at the old Nakivubo Stadium and in a small gym at MUBS.

"I also played for the Buffaloes but it wasn't too long before I quit. I couldn't handle the pressure and physicality of the game," Mbajja remembers.

But he did not stop lifting weights until he joined Cranes Bank in 2012, when he no longer worked out consistently. "Still, people admired my body."

In 2014, he joined East Coast, a gym in Naguru, mostly renowned for boxing, where he met competitive bodybuilders. He watched more bodybuilding events, mainly Mr Kampala and Mr Uganda through the generations that inherited the dominant Ivan Byekwaso and Isaac Mubikirwa, among others. "But I was simply watching guys flaunting amazing bodies."

At University of Pain gym in downtown Kampala in 2017, Mbajja met more bodybuilders like Mubikirwa, Ricky, the Tiktoker, among others. But in 2018, he felt bored. "I was tired of doing the same thing month after month. Nothing more."

But Hamid Kayanja, the lead trainer at Shaq Gym in Kireka, had a better idea. "Choose between bodybuilding or powerlifting and start training for competitions," he advised him. Mbajja chose bodybuilding. And started training with a purpose.

Makeover

"He came when he was extremely fat. I think it was a round 2020. I started him with a dance class before we started doing weights," Kayanja recalled. "He became consistent because of the results he was seeing."

He then introduced him to intense, rigorous, sometimes painful, training to shed that fat belly and tone the abdominal muscles, lats, biceps, etc.

"It was a complete makeover. I used to do gym but ate anyhow. Now I had to first reset the body to its factory settings before I rebuilt it for competition. It wasn't easy at all," Mbajja said.

He dropped from 96kg to 70kg. "It took me some time to lose that fat and build enough muscle. Without quick results many give up." But it takes time, money and discipline.

Then after about a year, Mbajja wanted to train for the stage.

"I told him that that requires more serious training and strict dieting to impress the judges," Kayanja remembered.

A good trainer guaranteed, Mbajja paid Shs300,000 to Lameck Muwanga, an experienced bodybuilder, for a dieting plan.

Still, he had to trust the process, and maintain discipline. "Because the body you messed up with fat for 15 years couldn't simply change overnight."

Mbajja and his trainer said diet contributes 60 percent to maintaining a good, healthy body, while gym work and lifestyle contribute 30 percent and 10 percent respectively.

"Because anyone can go to the gym. But most people eat recklessly. They don't want to quit their beer, posho, junk, etc."

Eat this, not that

People say bodybuilders eat a lot, but Mbajja said it's wrong. "We eat more value than volume. We have food scales: 100g of rice (about a handful), 160g of protein a day. Few people can manage this.

"If I need a whole chicken, I'll eat it in four portions, each 160g. And only chicken breast and drumsticks off-season; and only chicken breast when preparing for an event."

That's why bodybuilding is expensive, he said. Because bodybuilders need fewer carbs and more protein, but protein is expensive.

While your plate is dominated by rice and posho, a bodybuilder's plate should be dominated by eggs, chicken, beef, fish—especially Nile Perch—all expensive.

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But generally, it takes time to study what works for your body and what doesn't. They might recommend 100gm of carbs, and find out that 150gm won't be bad for you either. For sometime. You can resort to 100gm towards the event so that you retain a good size without accumulating too much fat. It's trial and error.

Messy debut

It was 2021. The world in the middle of two covid-19 lockdowns when Mbajja made his first stage appearance. "It was a deadly debut. It was the first time I ever lost 20kg. The body was shocked."

He subjected himself to extreme deficits: very few carbs, more proteins, more water. "After the first month, I was literally a skeleton, with protruding jaws. My spouse even tested for HIV, suspecting I might have caught the virus."

His 93kg became 70kg. But he was far from competition shape. "I just became loose but my muscles weren't sharp enough. My diet plan did not emphasise the importance of proteins. So, instead of eating about 30 boiled eggs a day, I ate about four."

On his debut, at the 2021 Mr Kampala Championship at Qibz Gym, Kyebando, Ward 1, he weighed 71kg. He finished fourth among five welterweights, behind Francis Ssemuyaba, fellow debutant Yasin Kibirango, and Lubega, who qualified for the final, where the unlikely Daniel Mwesigwa took the top crown.

"My muscle size and definition weren't good enough. Stage fright also cost me a lot. I panicked, pulled off poses before the judge's cue. I was nervous."

Post-competition error

After weeks of pre-competition starvation, a bodybuilder's body craves everything. "But if you are not serious, you may die because the body needs time to regain its normal settings."

If your stomach is picky, Mbajja warns, you may need only sugary juice, yoghurt, and some sweet bread, for at least the first week after competition.

You must avoid oily, fried stuff. But most debutants go to competition venues with bags of the foods they have missed for months. Most pay a hefty price: terrible fevers and stomach aches.

"I almost died. At home my had filled the table with pilau, fried chicken, chips, juice; all my favourites."

He ate as though he was in competition. The following morning, the same body that had craved anything, rebelled. "I was rushed to hospital with a terrible running stomach, fever, and headache. I threw up almost everything."

That is when colleagues told him that he should have waited before resuming normal meals. It was a lesson learnt the hardest way.

Finally

At his Mr Uganda debut in November 2021 at Horse Power Gym in Muyenga, Mbajja emerged last among welterweights. "Since my first stage debut I had lost weight but struggled to lose fat." But all those lessons shaped him for the future.

For the 2022 Mr Kampala, he dropped into lightweight, coming second to the more experienced Azam Kisekka (RIP). At his second Mr Uganda attempt at Mt Zion Hotel in downtown Kampala, Mbajja came second in the category.

"I felt deflated. I wanted to take a break. I was improving but I wasn't hitting my goal of competing in the final, after spending all that much money, research and time."

But sometimes just when you feel demoralised, your dream drifts closer. At the inaugural Mr Central Region Championship—which replaced Mr Kampala—in September 2023, Mbajja produced his best version, defeated all welterweights, eventually making his first appearance in a final.

Rose Gardens, Bweyogerere was near his home area and he enjoyed some fan vibes. In the final, he beat experienced opponents like Hassan Ssentongo, David Ssetaba, Kisekka, before finishing a close second to 2019 Mr Kampala Godfrey Lubega.

"It was painful. Everyone knew I had won. But the judges…" It's the closest he came to overall gold. "The best my body has been conditioned ever." He posed well, exuded confidence. Almost everyone rooted for him. But the judges, perhaps, preferred a seasoned competitor.

From then on, Mbajja became a serious contender, eventually winning the 2025 Mr Central crown at UMA Multipurpose Hall in September. Light heavyweight Simon Kyagulanyi and lightweight Abdul Musana took silver and bronze, among others.

"We don't consider size alone. Your upper body must match your lower body and Number One scored highly here. Number Two was not bad but comparably, it was 80 vs 20 percent," Kenyan legend Paul Mwangale, who was chief judge, endorsed Mbajja's victory.

Ex-champions Lubega and Mwesigwa did not compete. But Mbajja refused to call it his advantage. Three months later, he clinched the Mr Uganda crown in December 2025, in Gulu. "I was in fine form. I could have beaten anyone," Mbajja said of his biggest victory ever.

Unbeatable Kenyans

After two local events in three months, Mbajja had chosen to miss the Mr. 001 Championship in December 2025. He felt too drained to travel nearly 1200km by bus to Mombasa.

"But I'm very grateful my employer, Engineering Solutions, bought me a return air ticket as a gift for winning Mr Uganda."

He reached Mombasa weighing 81kg but Steven Ssali, a coach and judge, advised him to trim to middleweight (76-80kg) where the weight range was narrower than in light heavyweights (81-90kg). On the event's eve, Ssali took him through rigorous workout under the punishing

Mombasa heat until he dropped to 80kg, just within the middleweight limit. "That workout almost killed me."

At the prejudging stage, Mbajja faced 20 highly competitive middleweights. "Just finishing among the top eight was an achievement."

On stage, he finished sixth among the eight middleweights, though he says he deserved top three.

At the East African Championships in Eldoret, in December 2023, Mbajja finished seventh in the welterweight category. "I was in good shape but such is the level of competition there."

Mbajja said Kenyans also beat Ugandans due to experience. "Most of them are 38 and above, no wonder many also compete in the Masters. We are competing against guys like Mwangale, who always tormented Ivan Byekwaso, seasoned guys like Dennis Otieno, Wallace Ragu, among others." In fact, Peter Ochino, who won Mbajja's middleweight category, also won the Masters crown in Mombasa.

Small Token. Mbajja flashing a dummy cheque of Shs5m worth of prize money for the top gong at the 2025 Mr Central Championships. Mbajja hoisting his trophies PHOTOS/ABDUL-NASSER SSEMUGABI

Managing stress, mental drain

The hardest season for natural bodybuilders is that three months of rigorous workouts and strict dieting ahead of competition.

"We lose weight, become slim, frail and lose the confidence of appearing in public. We suffer mood swings, become easily irritable due to the sharp decline in dopamine." Dopamine is the hormone responsible for pleasure and satisfaction.

"That's why it's wiser working out during day when gyms are less populated to avoid unwanted attention. Otherwise, you may pick up a fight with anyone."

During that time the muscles are weak, yet you need to train even harder to attain or maintain competition shape.

Yet Mbajja still must go to the field and meet customers in his main job.

"It's quite hard. But I must do it because it's my main income source, and customer satisfaction is nonnegotiable." He is exempted from work in the last three weeks to the competition.

Even with the Kenya Bodybuilding Federation disbanded, Mbajja said Kenyan bodybuilders still perform better than Ugandans because they have endorsements from their gyms and beverage companies. "That obviously gives them a competitive advantage over us. You don't want to go into a competition with that stress of 'where shall I get the protein? how will I pay my bills, etc.?'

"We are always in calorie deficits, hence mentally stressed. So, you need creatine, amino acids, fish oil to compensate for that deficit. Otherwise, stress will shrink your muscle volume, and affect your competitiveness."

Natural vs steroids

Another Kenyan advantage over Ugandans is performance enhancers. When we met in February, Mbajja was offseason and weighed 96kg. But if he wanted to trim for competition, he could lose only five kilogrammes using anabolic steroids, for instance. This could give him a bulky and dry body, ideal for gold. That's what most Kenyans do, lately.

In 2020, the Anti-Doping Agency of Kenya banned three, including 2015 Mr Kenya Michael Otieno Obuya after failing doping tests.

In 2024, another bodybuilder Gachau Njoroge confessed extensively using drugs to maintain his physique, meanwhile warning others about the same.

But Uganda-based bodybuilders are natural. So, they must undergo the stressful routine of dietary limitations, strenuous workout to lose fat and attain the right conditioning. In the process, one may lose about 16kg. Not that the Kenyans are cheating. "Nowadays, the adverts clearly indicate that the events are open to even steroid users," Mbajja said.

The steroid temptation is real for any ambitious bodybuilder. But it has repercussions. Ordinarily, clean bulking is much easier and affordable. One cycle can cost you about Shs1m and gives you 10kg in muscle mass in about 12 weeks. Yet the same money spent on creatine—a natural protein supplement—may give you only two kilogrammes in muscle mass in the same time. "You see the world of difference."

But in the long run, steroids become expensive. "These drugs affect your organs: the heart, liver, kidney, etc. So, you must undergo medical review almost every month. And you need more drugs to support your organs." Plus post-cycle therapy to revert the hormones to normal. Yet some users become addicted, worsening the health and financial risks.

Building personal brand; goals

Having won the Mr Central and Mr Uganda crowns, Mbajja is targeting the international stage. But he said that will depend on sponsorship.

"I spend at least Shs2m in preps," Mbajja said, reserving special thanks to his official sponsors Suplex Gym and Core Fitness Gym, Ntinda, where he has trained free since 2023.

"But the prize money we get at local tournaments doesn't make a difference. We're mostly driven by passion because even those who work as gym instructors don't earn enough because clients still undervalue fitness instruction. Someone who easily splashes Shs600,000 in a bar in one night won't give it to the gym instructor for a month."

To mitigate those deficits, Mbajja is trying to enhance his personal brand to secure some endorsements.

"But I have to first change mindsets and convince potential sponsors that bodybuilders are the best figures to make adverts for drinking water, milk, yoghurt because we understand the value of those foods to the body more than anybody else. But it's confusing that it's musicians who make those ads." To fast-track his goal, Mbajja has offered to volunteer for an energy drink company, and a lemon powder maker, but they did not buy the idea. But recently, a popular mattress maker gave him an opportunity and he is hopeful one day he will secure a good deal.

WHAT SPORT IS THIS?

Bodybuilding is a sport centered on developing a highly muscular, symmetrical, and lean physique through progressive weight training, strict nutrition, and proper rest. Instead of focusing on raw athletic performance, competitors are evaluated on stage by a panel of judges based on muscle size, definition, proportion, and stage presentation. Bodybuilders lift weights to create microscopic tears in muscle tissue. During rest, the body repairs these fibers, making them larger and stronger (hypertrophy). Diets are meticulously tracked. Bodybuilders generally cycle through two phases: a bulking phase followed by a cutting phase of calorie restriction.

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