



BY
GORDY MEGROZ
PHOTOGRAPH BY
EMILY SHUR

MUSCLE-BUILDING
POWDERS. LIBIDO-
BOOSTING PILLS.
BRAIN-ENHANCING
SMOOTHIES. HOW
TWO FLORIDA
GYM RATS MADE
TENS OF MILLIONS
OF DOLLARS IN
THE SHADOWY
WORLD OF DIETARY
SUPPLEMENTS.

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AT THE FAR END OF A PALM-LINED strip mall in Boca Raton, Florida, a crowd waits in line for a miracle. Roughly 300 people — mostly men, from high-school jocks to pot-bellied dads — know just what they're here for: more muscle, more energy, more libido. "I want to get really vascular," says a guy in his thirties, referencing the pipelike veins coursing beneath the skin of pro bodybuilders. He has short brown hair, hairless arms, and a T-shirt that reads, I MAY LOOK ALONE, BUT REALLY I'M JUST THAT FAR AHEAD. An older, balding man next to him says he just wants to feel younger.

Working the line is a bouncy brunette pouring plastic shot glasses full of Windex-blue liquid. Most of the guys grab one and toss it back, no questions asked. "It's a pre-workout," she says, "and it's \$35 inside." By "preworkout" she means it's designed to give you a jolt of energy before the gym. Exactly how it does this isn't a question anyone seems to be asking. Inside the store, Boca Nutrition & Smoothie Bar, are pills and powders that claim to do everything from boost sex drive to increase muscle mass and dissolve fat.

Boca Nutrition's owners, PJ Braun and Aaron Singerman, are greeting customers like old friends, with bear hugs and handshakes. Both men are absurdly muscular. Singerman, 36, is 6-foot-2 with slicked-back brown hair. He has a goatee and narrow-rimmed glasses, and his bulky frame fills out his blue T-shirt like an overstuffed bag. Braun, 35, who has black hair gelled into short spikes, is shorter and bulkier. Stretch marks scar his arms.

In addition to Boca Nutrition, the pair owns the supplements manufacturer Blackstone Labs, which they started in 2012. Since then the company has hawked tens of millions of dollars' worth of products promising to make men stronger, bigger, last longer in the sack, and even gain a mental edge. For the most part, their over-the-counter powders do exactly what they claim to do, in part because they sometimes include compounds not approved or even banned by the FDA. It's a legally dubious but common practice — and an easy way to make a killing while giving people the results they want. (Braun calls

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Braun, left, and Singerman turned Blackstone Labs into a powerhouse earning more than \$20 million a year.

this a mischaracterization: "We have always tried to produce nothing but cutting-edge and compliant products. As soon as we have any direction from the FDA on an issue it has not spoken on before, for better or worse, we respect its statement and adjust our products accordingly.") Blackstone has grown by 100 percent every year since opening shop five years ago. Its sales now top \$20 million annually, and it's featured in *Inc.* magazine's list of 500 fastest-growing companies. And Braun and Singerman are far from done.

"I am not even fucking close to satisfied with Blackstone Labs," Braun boasted in a video posted to Facebook last year. "I want to be the biggest company in the world."

Boca Nutrition & Smoothie Bar is their newest venture, a retail store that serves up various protein-packed shakes and sells Blackstone's full line of supplements. The sleek space, with shelves full of oversize bottles and racks of workout gear, is like a Whole Foods for gym rats. They opened the first store seven months ago in West Boca. Today is the grand opening of their second location, and devotees have shown up for discounted supplements and to meet a handful of celebrity bodybuilders flown in for the occasion, including Kai Greene, the most famous weightlifter since Arnold Schwarzenegger.

But among this crowd, Braun and Singerman are the real stars. They pose for photos and hype their cars, a Corvette and a Ferrari, both black and parked prominently out front. One of the fanboys is a 24-year-old named

Brett, who drove four hours to attend the event. "I couldn't help but show my support for PJ and Aaron," he says. A personal trainer from Palm Coast, Florida, Brett has used a wide variety of Blackstone products, including one called Ostapure, a supplement that contained steroid-like drugs called SARMS (selective androgen receptor modulators). The unlicensed drugs were developed by pharmaceutical giant Merck as a potential treatment for muscle wasting in cancer patients. But it was the drugs' muscle-mass-building properties that made them a big hit among weightlifters like Brett. Blackstone recently stopped selling Ostapure after being sued by another supplements maker hoping to clean up the industry. "The strongest product of theirs," Brett says a bit wistfully.

Inside the store, Braun shows me one of his latest creations, muscle-building pills inside a black bottle labeled BRUTAL 4CE in blocky letters that drip with blue icicles. "It'll make you a lot stronger and more aggressive in the gym," he says. "Let's say you're 35, 40 years old and your testosterone isn't as high as it used to be. This will keep your testosterone so high that you'll be like an 18-year-old!"

When I ask Braun how, he launches into a chemistry lecture. "Your body converts it into 4-andro [a testosterone booster], so it'll bulk you up," he says, noting that Brutal 4ce has the side effect of creating estrogen, which could give you what bodybuilders call "bitch tits." This can be countered, however, by taking an estrogen blocker. "Most of our

PREVIOUS SPREAD: PROP STYLING BY LAUREN MACHEN FOR RED EYE REPS. THIS PAGE: NEWSWIRE/AARON SINGERMAN



customers are pretty knowledgeable," he says, "so they know they need to do that."

As the festivities wind down, I grab a \$46.99 bottle of Cobra 6 Extreme, an amped-up version of their top-selling Cobra 6, a preworkout supplement formulated with various stimulants. At the checkout, a slim guy in his twenties, part smoothie barista, part pharmacist, looks at what I'm buying and asks me if I've tried it before. No, I say.

"So you don't know what you're getting yourself into?"

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"If you're not used to taking a lot of stimulants, you should start with the regular Cobra 6. You might not like the way this makes you feel."

IN THE U.S., dietary supplements are a \$38-billion-a-year industry. Sixty-five percent of men in America take one, whether to lose weight, grow hair, gain muscle, or keep an erection long into the night. There's a wide range of products, and most veer toward opposite ends of a spectrum. On one side are the homeopathic cures and the herbal remedies like echinacea, products that may not do much of anything besides drain your bank account. On the opposite end are the products that work precisely because they rely on pharmaceutical ingredients, many not listed anywhere on the label. In 2014, for example, the FDA recalled several weight-loss supplements with names like Super Fat Burner because they contained the prescription drug sibutramine, as well as phenolphthalein, a banned laxative linked to genetic mutations — but not before a rash of hospitalizations.

It's the supplements laced with prescription drugs that are more troubling. They result in 23,000 emergency room visits every year, and more than 2,000 hospitalizations. The supplements are often sold under names like Lean FX and Stiff Nights, and the ingredients are a list of acronyms only a chemist could decipher: DMAA, 17b-hydroxy 2a, or

17b-dimethyl 5a-androstan 3-one azine.

"We're talking about experimental compounds never tested in humans," says Dr. Pieter Cohen, a Harvard professor who published a 2015 study that found two-thirds of over-the-counter supplements contained one or more pharmaceutical adulterants, making them illegal. "The more likely it helps your workout," Cohen says, "the more likely it's going to adversely affect your health."

The FDA oversees the industry, but it's woefully outmatched. For starters, it employs only around 25 people in its dietary-supplement division, which is responsible for policing thousands of companies, many of which don't bother abiding by the few rules currently governing the market. Making matters worse is a confusing web of overlapping companies: One brand will buy its ingredients from another company, which in turn buys its raw ingredients overseas.

Manufacturers are supposed to register their ingredients with the FDA, but there's effectively no punishment if they don't. And the murky production chain provides a layer of deniability. The FDA sends out warning letters threatening to prosecute companies selling products with pharmaceuticals, but the agency rarely acts on them. Several companies, including Blackstone, stay ahead of the FDA simply by creating new supplements with altered formulas or even launching a new company to proffer the same old ingredients. ("Blackstone continues to innovate by researching new products and new ingredients," says Braun. "If anything, we would welcome clearer guidance from the FDA so we don't have to discontinue any products.")

"It's the Wild West," says Dan Fabricant, who was the FDA's director of the Division of Dietary Supplement Programs from 2011 to 2014. "In weight loss, sexual enhancement, and bodybuilding categories, if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is."

"IF YOU'RE NOT USED TO TAKING STIMULANTS, A SALESLERK WARNS, 'YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE THE WAY THIS MAKES YOU FEEL.'"

Blackstone, according to its critics, has exploited this system better than most, and exactly how it does this is a case study in how to game a failing regulatory system. For one, Braun and Singerman aren't shy about marketing their legally ambiguous products: They often advertise the active ingredients right on the label and promote them with ads full of young women who could moonlight in beer commercials. They're also constantly active online. Blackstone has some 25,000 Instagram followers; Braun has over 100,000. His account is littered with shirtless selfies and videos of him driving his Ferrari or pimped-out Jeep. He's also the star of a weekly YouTube show with his wife, the former pro wrestler Celeste Bonin, titled

Beauty & Braun, which covers the daily lives of the couple, from gym sessions to discussions about breast implants. Until recently he also hosted a daily question-and-answer session on Periscope called "Cardio Q&A," featuring Braun on a treadmill, chugging orange Pedialyte and answering a wide range of queries from Blackstone users. One time he doled out advice ("No matter how mature you think they are, it's not good to settle down with a 19-year-old girl"), but usually he just hyped his products. During one appearance, Braun announced the "dick pills" Blackstone was working on weren't coming along the way he wanted. "I've been working on that for a long time," he said. "But they will eventually come out."

TWO DAYS AFTER the Boca Nutrition opening, I visit Braun and Singerman at Blackstone HQ, an unbranded, 8,000-square-foot warehouse in Boca Raton. The office walls are covered in photos and framed bodybuilding-magazine covers, several of which feature Braun in full flex. On Singerman's desk is a bronze statue of a seminude Adonis-like man holding a barbell. It's a first-place trophy from the Mr. Olympia contest, which Singerman got at auction. "You hate to see that, because it means the guy who sold it was struggling financially and was forced to sell it," Singerman says. "But I love it."

Braun and Singerman each have a long history in bodybuilding. Singerman, from New Orleans, started hitting the gym when he was 13 and kept working out, even through a cocaine and heroin habit he picked up after dropping out of high school. At 27 he witnessed a friend overdose and die, so he got clean and doubled down at the gym. In 2005, he got a job as a personal trainer and started writing thousands of posts on bodybuilding message boards and eventually became marketing director for Ironmag Labs, a sup-

plements company owned by businessman Robert Dimaggio, who had become notorious for selling sketchy supplements. Singerman convinced Dimaggio to bring on Braun, whom he'd met at a bodybuilding competition, as the company's top sponsored athlete.

Braun, who grew up in Connecticut, had taken to the gym in order to try to impress his absentee father. "My father wouldn't be proud or say, 'Good job,'" says Braun. "He would just say, 'Oh, you know, there's always somebody better. You can do better.'" Braun went to the University of Connecticut but dropped out to become a personal trainer. Then he took up professional bodybuilding.

Blackstone's genesis was in 2012, when Braun helped Singerman sell 7,000 units of

MAGAZINE PHOTOGRAPH BY SHANA NOVAK

something called Super DMZ. The product contained two designer steroid-like ingredients, dymethazine and methylstenbolone, that few outside bodybuilding circles knew much about. Braun and Singerman, however, recognized that these prohormones, as they're called, were groundbreaking at helping gym rats get ripped. Their boss, Dimaggio, had helped create Super DMZ but turned it over to Braun and Singerman to hawk. "We were able to sell those 7,000 units in five weeks," Singerman explained in an online interview. "We gave Robert his money back and each made \$75,000." But prohormones hadn't yet been banned, so the pair ordered more and continued selling under the name Blackstone Labs. In just 10 months they made hundreds of thousands of dollars and moved operations from a makeshift office in Braun's townhouse into their current warehouse. "We bought more of the Super DMZ, sold it, and created a second product, third product, fourth product, fifth product, etc.," Singerman says in the same video. By the time prohormones were finally banned, in 2014, Blackstone was up and running with a full line of supplements, from postworkout muscle builders to meal-replacement formulas. "We've been fortunate enough to be the hot company," says Braun.

In their office, Singerman points to a small photo of the two men leaning against brown shipping boxes piled up to their armpits. "That's all Super DMZ," Singerman says proudly. "This was our original shipment."

The reason Super DMZ and prohormones finally became illegal has something to do with Blackstone's supplier. The product was being manufactured by a New York company called Mira Health Products. In 2013, at least 29 people developed varying levels of liver disease after taking a vitamin called B-50 sold by the company. After investigating, the FDA discovered B-50 and many of Mira's other products included high levels of pro-

"I NEVER FELT OLD UNTIL AFTER THAT... MY LIVER HAS SCAR TISSUE ON IT. DOCTORS CAN'T SAY HOW LONG I'LL LIVE."

hormones, which were not listed anywhere on the label. The FDA forced Mira to recall all those pills and officially banned prohormones, including the ones in Super DMZ — which Blackstone listed on the bottle. None of that stopped Blackstone from continuing to sell them. In fact, at nearly the same time, the company released a new product called Metha-Quad Extreme, which contained prohormones. It wasn't until September 2014 that Blackstone stopped selling prohormones altogether to abide by FDA regulations.

"We lost 30 percent of our total revenue," Singerman says. "But the following month we went back up, because the truth is that people always want the next best thing."

BACK IN THEIR warehouse, Braun and Singerman lead me up a flight of stairs to an open space with a long brown table and black swivel chairs. Here they're formulating the "next best thing." Another muscle-bound man, this one with a pink Mohawk and a lip ring, is scribbling symbols and numbers on a whiteboard. "This is our chemist, Bryan," says Singerman. "We're doing some really cool stuff with Bryan."

Bryan Moskowitz joined Blackstone in early 2015. Before that, Braun and Singerman formulated all the company's supplements. Neither of them has any formal education, so they hired Moskowitz, who has a master's degree in organic biochemistry from Georgia Tech and calls himself the "Guerilla Chemist." Moskowitz counts among his role models Patrick Arnold, who's infamous for creating three hard-to-detect steroids, two of which were distributed by BALCO, the lab linked to disgraced athletes Jose Canseco and Marion Jones — and whose founder, Victor Conte, was sentenced to four months in prison. Moskowitz looks up to Arnold enough that he even posted an Instagram photo of his and Arnold's faces Photoshopped onto an image of *Breaking Bad*'s Walter White and Jesse Pinkman in hazmat suits, having just finished cooking a batch of crystal meth.

Arnold is also credited with introducing the powerful stimulant DMAA to the supplements market. Eli Lilly created the drug in 1944 as a nasal decongestant but removed it from the market in 1983 because it caused headaches, tremors, and increased blood pressure. Arnold reintroduced it years later, in 2006, as a way for its users to get a jolt of energy before the gym. In one month alone, in 2013, the FDA received 70 reports of liver disease and one death caused by OxyElite Pro, a popular supplement with DMAA.

In the boardroom, Braun explains that Moskowitz helped design the company's lat-

est product, Brutal 4ce. The steroid that powers it, DHEA, is banned or prescription-only in just about every country except the United States. When I ask Oliver Catlin, the president of the Anti-Doping Sciences Institute and the Banned Substances Control Group, why it's still legal, he simply says, "I don't know. Ask Orrin Hatch."

Orrin Hatch is the powerful seven-term senator from Utah who pushed through a 1994 law in Congress called the Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act (DSHEA). The bill defines what a dietary supplement is: a vitamin, mineral, herb, or amino acid (basically, anything found in nature). And while it explicitly states that it can't be a

drug, the law also prevents the government from prescreening and preapproving supplements. So supplements don't require FDA approval the way, say, a cancer drug might, even though they may have the same active ingredient. Utah is one of the major producers of supplements. In fact, it is the state's third-largest industry, earning \$10 billion per year. Back when the law was written, the industry was mostly homeopathic products, but it has since boomed, and the law created cover for aggressive manufacturers willing to flaunt the regulations.

Also written into DSHEA are a series of loopholes that allow steroids sold prior to the law's passing to be grandfathered in, like the DHEA in Blackstone's Brutal 4ce — even though it'll get you banned by nearly every sporting league on the planet, including MLB, the NFL, and the NCAA.

"That's one of those things," says Singerman about sports testing. "When a high school athlete asks if it's OK to take [Blackstone's] Dust V2, I go, 'No, probably not.'"

Braun and Singerman are similarly unfazed about SARMS, the unapproved cancer drugs in Ostapure. "If you look at the actual literature," says Singerman, "it's all positive. I've used it plenty of times, and I like putting out products that I actually use."

When I ask them whether they're worried about the potential side effects of their products, Singerman is quick with a scripted answer. "We go through the available literature and studies," he says. But when I press him, his next response seems more honest.

"I am a libertarian," Singerman says. "I believe that it's the person's decision. As long as they're an adult."

But they have no way of knowing how different people might react. "One person could be fine, and another person could have a heart attack," says Dr. Armand Dorian, an ER physician in Los Angeles who often treats patients injured by dietary supplements. "It's rolling the dice."

Take Jesse Woods. In 2009, the 28-year-old went online and ordered a bottle of M-Drol pills from a Texas-based company called TFSupplements. Woods, who weighed 150 pounds, was looking to add muscle. "I'm a small-framed guy," he says, "so I was trying to bulk up." He did. In just four weeks, he'd packed on 20 pounds of muscle. "I got big for a minute," he says. "Then I got sick."

Five weeks into taking M-Drol, Woods left work early because his stomach was bothering him. When his wife came home, she noticed his eyes were yellow. "I'm taking you to the emergency room," she said. Doctors performed a battery of tests, ultimately determining that Woods was experiencing liver failure. What Woods didn't know is that M-Drol contained the steroid-like prohormone Superdrol.

Woods spent 32 days in the hospital. He threw up nearly every meal he ate, lost 30 pounds, and developed a pungent odor, a common side effect of liver disease. "I never felt old until after that," says Woods, who's

DO NOT TRY THIS AT HOME



How easy is it to create your own illegal, dangerous preworkout juice? We had an anti-doping expert give us a sure-to-get-you-ripped recipe, then we went shopping to find out. It took only a few emails with a Chinese lab to purchase the illegal stimulant DMAA. The rest we picked up at a few name-brand grocery and supplement stores on a two-hour shopping spree. Drinker beware.

—Keith Bearden

STIMULANTS

1. DMAA, 50mg
SIDE EFFECTS Increased blood pressure, cerebral hemorrhage, heart attack, stroke.

2. Powdered Caffeine, 300mg
SIDE EFFECTS Anxiety, sleep disruption, overdose.

3. Yohimbe, 300mg
SIDE EFFECTS Stomach upset, tremor, anxiety, high blood pressure, dizziness.

4. Vitamin B12
SIDE EFFECTS None.

AMINO ACIDS

1. Beta-Alanine, 4g
A nonessential element that helps buffer acid in muscles.
SIDE EFFECTS Tingling in body when taken in large doses.

2. L-Citrulline, 3g
An amino acid that draws water into muscles, increasing volume.
SIDE EFFECTS Headaches, but generally regarded as safe.

3. Creatine, 4g
A natural body chemical thought to improve muscle function in the short term.
SIDE EFFECTS Muscle cramping, nausea, diarrhea.

4. Silica, 700mg
Boosts nitrous oxide in the body and is a possible bone strengthener.
SIDE EFFECTS Can lead to dehydration without water intake.

FILLERS

Niacin and Sugar-Free Flavor.

now 35. "Now I feel sluggish. I just feel like I aged. My liver has scar tissue on it. Doctors can't say how long I'll live."

When he was released from the hospital, Woods sued both TFSupplements and its supplier, Competitive Edge Labs, settling for an undisclosed amount. But the lawsuit didn't stop companies from selling Superdrol.

Blackstone has yet to be sued by any of its customers, and the FDA has generally left the company alone. "We haven't really had problems with the FDA," says Braun. But that may be simply because the agency is backlogged. It's also far more effective to go after the companies supplying the illegal ingredients than the ones marketing the final product. It's the former that are dealing with the overseas suppliers that produce the untested or illegal drugs. Singerman admits to purchasing Chinese ingredients but says it's something that's taken care of by the plants that manufacture Blackstone's products. I ask him who they are.

"Well, Hi-Tech Pharmaceuticals is one."

HI-TECH PHARMACEUTICALS IS the best example of a duplicitous company thriving in a broken system. Its founder, Jared Wheat, has a history of hawking high-demand substances. In the early '90s, he ran a high school ecstasy ring in Alabama and served 32 months in prison for it. He started Hi-Tech in 1998, and by 2003 the FDA had already warned the company about its dietary supplements, some of which contained an unlicensed drug similar to the one used in Cialis. But that didn't stop Wheat. By 2005 he was selling supplements that contained the banned stimulant ephedra. In early 2006 government officials raided his offices and

seized 200 cases of supplements valued at \$3 million, and in 2008 Wheat pleaded guilty to selling adulterated supplements and committing mail and wire fraud. He was sentenced to 50 months in prison, but he continued to operate Hi-Tech from his cell.

When I ask Pieter Cohen how Hi-Tech continues to conduct business in such a manner, he says that allowing any company to regularly sell synthetic ingredients as supplements is due to a major failure on the part of the government. "They're not doing their job," he says.

For their part, Braun and Singerman maintain that everything in their supplements appears right on the label.

To test that claim, I sent the Cobra 6 Extreme I purchased at Boca Nutrition to Oliver Catlin's Banned Substances Control Group. When I received the test results, it turns out Braun is right: The product is now devoid of the banned DMBA, a stimulant very similar to DMAA, that powered it.

"So is it safe to take?" I ask.

"Not necessarily," says Catlin. The readings revealed a powerful mix of new stimulants. That could be due to a combination of the ingredients listed on the label — a formula that includes caffeine and theobromine (an alkaloid of the cacao plant that can be deadly in large doses). "Or it could be something else," he says. "We target drugs we are concerned about, like DMBA, when we screen products like these. But sometimes there are new, unknown compounds present that we can't see."

SOON AFTER MY visit to Blackstone Labs, and after four years of working together, Braun and Singerman are at war. Singerman

leaves Blackstone to pursue other projects. "But he still owns half the company," Braun explains, insinuating that the split is amicable. But the tone of their relationship quickly changes. "When the companies first split, I hoped we'd be friends again," Braun says during one of his online Q&A sessions. "But he did too many things."

Braun has since divested himself of Boca Nutrition, and Singerman has gone on to start a supplements company called Red-Con 1. He is also rebranding another, Prime Nutrition, with none other than Hi-Tech's Jared Wheat, who was released from prison in 2011. Braun has taken over day-to-day control of Blackstone, and despite the schism, the company is thriving. Blackstone has moved into a much larger, 14,000-square-foot space, and Braun has introduced several new products, including a long-awaited libido booster called Entice. But the most surprising of his new releases is Dust Xtreme, a preworkout supplement with DMAA, the infamous, banned stimulant popularized by chemist Patrick Arnold. It's a curious decision to sell the illegal ingredient, but Braun justifies it in a long video on Facebook.

"I believe that people should be allowed to take what they want to take," he says. "Are you completely safe if you have health conditions? No. If your blood pressure is high, should you be taking a product like this? Probably not. But these are things you should look at yourself. I believe we should all have the choice to put what we want in our body. You can go and buy cigarettes at any fucking gas station and they're guaranteed to kill you. You will die. So how dare the FDA come in and take away ingredients from us that give us awesome workouts?"