



# SKS Bikinis – From Fitness Clothes to Competition Suits

by Rachel Payne

## MARIO SUAREZ

**Owner:** SKS Bikinis, Competition Suits for Bikini & Wellness & Swimwear, 15 years

**Website:** [sksbikinis.com](http://sksbikinis.com)

**Instagram:** @sks\_bikinis, @sks\_micro\_bikinis

### PERSONAL LIFE - THE EARLY YEARS

My family is from Cuba. I was the first generation born in the United States. We originally lived in New York and then moved to Miami. I was the first one to graduate High School and then college. For 18 years I had a salt water aquarium & pond business, then I decided to switch gears.

### BUSINESS CAREER

I started out buying and reselling women's fitness clothes in 2005, setting up vendor booths at various events including but not limited to fitness events. At one of these events, I had the opportunity to purchase some bikinis to resell that proved profitable so I continued purchasing bikinis wholesale and reselling them.

### NPC SHOWS

A friend was doing a photo shoot of a girl from Venezuela. She was competing in the NPC with a goal to get her IFBB pro card. She saw that I had swimwear and asked if I could make a suit; of course, I said yes. I had made a few swimwear suits, but this would be my first competition suit. Her name is Michelle Lewin, internationally renowned fitness influencer and model.



Until I met Michelle, I didn't know anything about NPC bodybuilding competitions, but once I created that first suit, I started researching. I discovered the most popular suit maker in the area was CJ's Elite. Cynthia James was a real pioneer in the business and I modeled my suit making business after hers. I worked hard to learn how to work with various types of fabrics, understand the measurements, sew and bling out the suits. I began going to the local shows in the West Palm/ Fort Lauderdale area and realized there were all these girls wearing suits but there weren't any suit makers at a lot of the shows. That was a gap I saw SKS Bikinis being able to fill.

Like I said, I modeled my business after CJ. I saw that she was at the shows and helpful to the girls if there was a problem with their suit. The goal is always to help the athletes get to the stage. I quickly figured out, that's the role that I need to start playing if I want to be successful. I was already at the show to help my customers, but once I was at the show, whether they were a customer or not, I would help others if they needed it. At that point, it didn't matter whose suit they're wearing, it's just a matter of getting the athlete on stage in time and feeling confident their suit is making them look great.

Once I started making the suits, I dropped the active wear. Competition, cost of the inventory, and changing styles in active wear made it obvious that focusing my attention on the posing suits and custom swimwear based on competition bikini cuts would be a better path. I created a template for a timeless bikini. I can add to it, but it never really goes out of style. A triangle top, scrunch bottom, all adjustable. It was perfect for competitors, but I also offer the custom swimwear because competitors want something to wear to the pool or beach but couldn't really purchase something off the rack. It rarely fits them correctly and the competition cut is just so much more flattering. At the time, very few stores allowed you pick and choose top and bottom sizes. A lot of them were being sold as sets. To this day, I still offer custom suits made to your individual measurements.



“ I created a template for a timeless bikini. I can add to it, but it never really goes out of style. ”

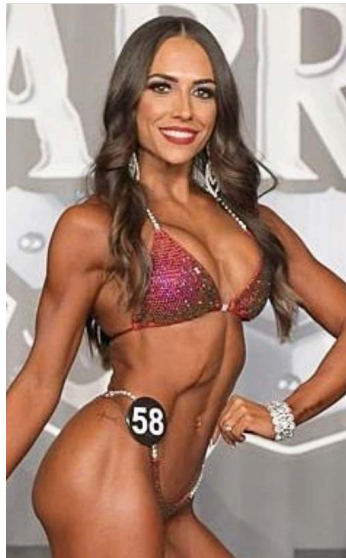
### How has it been for you as a straight male in a female dominated business?

As far as I'm aware, I think I'm one of three males who make suits in the United States. I'm very good at what I do. Less than a handful of times have I made a suit that was off by a little bit. And I've made and sold thousands. I've been very fortunate and don't let the fact that the business of making competition suits is female dominated affect me. The success I've had with SKS Bikinis keeps me moving forward with plans to grow my business.

### IMPACT OF COVID

COVID's impact on my business was two-fold. Pre-COVID, I had about 15-20 girls that I sponsored. Currently, I have 5. When COVID shut down all the shows and travel restrictions were in place, my business took a hit. I streamlined my services to just selling the competition suits and swimwear, and a few accessories and moved to Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Its central location allowed me to travel to a number of shows that had not been shut down, within a 3-4 hour driving distance. I had just purchased a camper and it ended up coming in pretty handy as a means of saving costs.

Prior to COVID I had a big presence in Russia, partially due to an ex-girlfriend. For the first three years of the Russia NPC show, every girl that won, despite there being another major suit making company in Russia, all three girls who got their pro cards in bikini were wearing SKS Bikinis. Up until 2019, in addition to traveling to Russia, I traveled to shows in Florida and the southeast, as well as California and Texas. Currently, I primarily travel and sponsor between 11-13 shows a year in Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, and Tennessee.



### Is your business 100% online?

The business has changed over the years. In the early years, when I was in South Florida, I had a physical location. I had a warehouse and a showroom, where the girls could come in to purchase swimwear off the rack, get fitted, try on competition suits, and see the fabrics and the rhinestones. It was very convenient. Later, I also got a lot of business by going live on social media while I was making the suits. I would start working and people could watch me. The girls would send messages while I was sewing and I would stop and answer their questions. I did that pretty consistently about three to four days a week and it really helped increase sales and get my business name out there.

I believe that if you're purchasing a competition suit that is designed custom for you, you should be able to talk with the person who is going to be making the suit. An athlete can contact me through social media or through my website. I want my customers to have a great experience. I can send them pictures of the fabrics and walk them through choosing the rhinestones and connectors so they get exactly what they want. My sales either originate online or are follow ups from events and and I still count them as online because that's how I get customer contact information, measurements, and the order is placed. Either way, I would go as far as saying 95% of my business is online and of that competition suits make up about 50% of that. I sell almost as much of the SKS Micro Bikini line as I do the competition suits, approximately 40%. During COVID, I was selling a lot more swimwear. People were just hanging out at their house and the Micro Bikini line skyrocketed, accounting for 85% of my business during those two years. The SKS Micro Bikini line sells all over the world. The last 10% is mostly posing practice suits, swimwear and accessories.

“ To this day, I still offer custom suits made to your individual measurements.”

### NEXT STEPS

I moved to Alabama because of location and there were no other suit makers in this area. I continue to focus on establishing my business here. I enjoy it here. It's centrally located, I can drive easily to where I need to go, and I can bring my dog Coco with me in the camper when I travel to the shows. For 2024, I plan to reintroduce tank tops for women and t-shirts for men and SKS string backpacks. Athletes that are awarded SKS Bikinis gift certificates at the shows will now be able to use them towards the purchase of any products I have at the table or a suit.

### What do you do when you're not making bikinis or at bodybuilding shows?

I am a sales manager for a heavy equipment and demolition company in Tuscaloosa. I spend time with my dad, my dog, and enjoy traveling.

*Mario, I really appreciate you taking the time to talk with me. I love being able to showcase SKS Bikinis because you've been so supportive of NPC shows in numerous domestic states and internationally and we look forward to seeing you throughout the 2024 season!*

