

Workouts that work: Personal trainers tailor programs for older clients



Ken McGagh/Daily News staff

Sandy Greenwald of Framingham does a one leg/one arm exercise on the cable machine with encouragement from personal trainer Mike Sylvester at Gold's Gym in Marlborough.

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MetroWest Daily News

Posted Nov 09, 2008 @ 10:12 PM

Last update Nov 09, 2008 @ 11:00 PM

Your waistline is expanding and your 401(k) is shrinking.

Invitations to join AARP arrive every month and you wake up feeling grouchier than Don Rickles.

You know you should get into a gym to restore body and soul. But what middle-ager wants to heave barbells next to sweaty guys in tank tops.

Sandy Greenwald does and feels "totally energized."

For the last three years the psychotherapist who directs a Franklin area counseling service has been a regular at Gold's Gym in Marlborough, working out three days a week under the supervision of personal trainer Michael Sylvester.

Greenwald, who hadn't been in a gym in years, started regular workouts in 2005 to get in shape for a tour of Tuscany, Italy, that required her to walk 8 miles a day. "I've always found ways to avoid going to the gym. I knew I wouldn't do it on my own," she said.

After scouring newspapers to find a gym that would suit her, she chose the MetroWest Wellness Center in Framingham where she grew to appreciate Sylvester's approach. When the Fitness Circle in MWWC closed, she followed him to Gold's Gym in Marlborough.

Throughout the hour-long workouts, Sylvester guides her through a series of what he calls movement "progressions" that "mimic the basic patterns of human movement."

Rather than building bulky muscles that only impress other bodybuilders, he directs Greenwald through exercises such as lunging from side to side or the "dippin' bird" which requires her to squat up and down on one leg.

Sylvester, who earned a degree in exercise physiology and is a licensed physical therapist assistant, named his program "Core Essentials" because it mixes several disciplines to improve balance, fitness and emotional wellness.

"I'm trying to blend many fitness disciplines including physical therapy, yoga, pilates and others," he said. "We're implementing fitness movement patterns that mimic the challenges we have in daily living, recreation and sports."

Greenwald can see and feel the results.

"I'm much stronger in my entire body. I've improved my balance, flexibility and endurance," she said. "I'm in better shape than my friends. Workouts with Mike produce a real sense of well-being. If you're not feeling that great when you come in, you'll feel great when you leave."

And Greenwald credits Sylvester for customizing a workout that suits her needs and keeps her coming back.

"Mike is different from other trainers. He doesn't squeeze you into a cookie-cutter program. Before we began, he did a thorough examination to make a plan tailored to my needs. He knows my body and made a program that keeps me safe. In short, Mike makes fitness fun," she said.

For 30 years Louise Boland has been promoting the health benefits of exercise since April 1, 1978, when she laced on sneakers and promised herself "to run every day for the rest of my life."

Now, 24 Boston Marathons later, she is president and owner of Focus on Fitness, a state-of-art health club on 63 Fountain St., Framingham.

A Holliston resident with two children, she said one of her goals is "to instill a love of fitness to help other women feel as good as I do."

While the 15,000-square-foot facility serves people of all ages, Boland and her staff have developed special programs to address what, she said, "the fitness industry calls the Aging of America."

"It's an astounding fact but specialists say only 17 percent of Americans exercise. What's going to get them thinking about the benefits of exercise a heart attack," she said.

Boland said she's "inspired" by the participants in her Wednesday morning fitness class for older women, including members in their 80s.

"As we get older, we need to keep our bodies strong. I'm not interested in bulking up older members but giving them the muscle tone to help avoid injuries," she said. "Exercise is preventative medicine. Joining a fitness club is the best investment you can make in yourself."

As a fitness trainer, Sylvester said he's trying to go beyond the limitations of older approaches, based on competitive bodybuilding, that make little sense for older clients.

In the past, many trainers taught programs that required them to lift weights or use machines to build muscle mass for major body parts while paying little attention to clients' ages or actual needs.

Sylvester said, "In the last 50 years people just concentrated on strength. If a newcomer went into a gym or YMCA, the accepted standard approach was to run them through a Nautilus (equipment) circuit," he said.

"They'd be told to perform exercises that weren't designed to replicate human activities. They'd be isolating muscles because that's what they've been told to do by the bodybuilding culture for 100 years."

As an example, Sylvester questioned the utility of leg-extension machines which isolate specific muscles in an unnatural movement rather than strengthen them with natural movement.

"When in life do you ever bend your knee but not your hips?" he asked. After reading, attending fitness workshops and consulting with physical therapists, Sylvester designed in 2005 his Core Essentials approach that aims to strengthen the muscles of the trunk which connect to the spinal column, pelvic girdle and rib cage.

When he trains clients, he has them perform variations of six "templates," or series of movement "progressions" such as squatting, lunging or moving from a supine position. Resistance is often provided in the form of large balls, cables or small dumbbells.

And Sylvester rejects the practice that people who are training or working out on treadmills or bikes should zone out watching television.

Especially in the gym, he wants to promote "mindfulness" by shutting off what he calls "the monkey brain," which causes the constant distractions that fragment awareness and keep people from living in harmony with themselves.

"The point is not to be divided, not to be somewhere else in your own mind," said Sylvester. "It's so much more fun and mindful when you're not sitting on a machine and counting reps or running on a treadmill and watching Oprah. I think fitness is education."

To learn more about Michael Sylvester and his "Core Essentials" program, call 508-292-8117 or visit www.CoreEssentials.biz.

Sylvester hosts a cable television show, "Core Essentials," On Monday evenings at 9 p.m. It can be viewed on Cable Comcast's channel 9; on RCN's channel 3; and on Verizon's channel 43.

To learn about Focus on Fitness, call 508-820-0424 or visit www.focusonfitness-ma.com.