By Barbara R. Saunders

Understand the lapsed athlete's specific training needs.

Back in the Game

Do you wish you had more clients who love physical challenges, thrive on setting training goals and have high expectations for themselves and you? Former high-school athletes represent a neglected market for personal fitness trainers. Many ex-athletes successfully maintain an active lifestyle and incorporate recreational sports or exercise into their adult lives. Those who don't make up a distinct market that can be rewarding and fun to serve.

Most consumer fitness advice misses the mark for yesterday's track star or football player. Likewise, many of the strategies trainers use to motivate novice exercisers or train budding athletes are not appropriate. Understanding the lapsed athlete's self-sufficient mindset, training legacy and learning style can help you reach out to this type of client.

The Good and Bad

Adults now in their 30s and 40s benefited from an educational philosophy that valued competitive sports as a means of teaching leadership skills and creating "well-rounded" people. Joining sports teams was encouraged, not just for "jocks," but also for college-bound students hoping to beef up their college applications. They enjoyed the benefits of physical activity while studying for a career.

So why did these athletes lapse? The 1970s brought another revolutionary change: the first personal computer. Technology changed the way Americans worked—and also deprived them of work-related exercise. A white paper prepared by RAND Corporation researchers Darius Lakdawalla and Tomas Philipson of the Irving B. Harris Graduate School of Public Policy, University of Chicago, proposes that technological change is 60 percent responsible for the increases in obesity that have occurred since the mid 1970s. Changes in food consumption account for about 40 percent of the change (Lakdawalla & Philipson 2002).

These once highly conditioned competitors graduated into possibly the most sedentary work world in human history, and many have no clue how to readjust their exercise regimes.

Self-Sufficient Mindset

Sue Bozzo, 33, of San Francisco, says that people seem surprised when she tells them she was a "jock" in high school. She broke records in track, played tennis and performed well enough in basketball to be recruited by Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. When she settled on a premed major, she dropped basketball and joined the track team instead, expecting a less demanding training schedule. She developed an eating disorder and overtraining syndrome, which interfered with her performance and ended her collegiate sports career.

"I'm self-sufficient enough to try new sports," she says, mentioning volleyball as an activity she enjoys casually with friends. She doesn't feel any urgency to seek help from a professional. However, she imagines that working with a personal fitness trainer might increase her motivation: "The social contact would be nice—having to meet someone for an appointment," she says. "And it would be helpful to have specific goals."

My own experience as a former athlete illustrates the same hesitancy to seek professional guidance. I became a certified personal trainer in 1992. A multiple-sport high-school athlete, I thought sharing my passion for athletics with people who hadn't yet discovered its joys would be rewarding. However, I had difficulty getting my business off the ground, so I put the certificate on the shelf and accepted a full-time position as a writer and editor.

Four years later and 40 pounds heavier, I had a problem. The strategies I had always used to train for various sports didn't work for getting back in shape. The light recommendations I read in magazines—30 minutes of cardiovascular exercise three times a week, supplemented by 20 minutes of weight training—seemed too "soft" for my athletic self-image. I still thought of myself as a "jock"—able to achieve physical superiority and become measurably faster, stronger and more skillful than nonathletes. I hired a trainer who taught me that exercising for health and fitness and exercising for performance were different processes.

My trainer understood that, unlike a person entirely new to working out, I had as much to unlearn as I had to learn. For example, as a 16-year-old basketball player, I always consumed Doritos, Twinkies and a Pepsi before practice. The interval training and drills were extreme and exhausting. After practice, I ate pizza. I knew I couldn't adopt that kind of diet. I also learned that "extreme exhaustion" shouldn't be the goal of every workout. My trainer taught me why rest, injury prevention and stretching are important. He also explained how I could use adaptation to my advantage and get better results by varying my workouts.

Performance Habits and Mentality

Former athletes are accustomed to approaching physical activity from a perform-

ance angle. The core difference between performance and fitness training is the goal. Athletes tend to measure progress and success against absolutes: time, distance, and comparison to or competition with others. This is why it's important to help these clients set personally meaningful goals, such as improving body composition or lowering cholesterol and blood pressure.

Jill Kinney is founder and director of new business for Club One, a California company that operates a network of fitness clubs and provides management and consulting services to corporate fitness centers. A former ski racer, Kinney says she'd like to see more fitness programs incorporate athletic training approaches. Some clubs in her network offer sport-specific training programs led by trainers with sports conditioning and coaching backgrounds.

The Performance Max package—which includes fitness and performance assessments, individual and group training, and dietary counseling—is "intended to take people back to the style of training . . . not to a competitive performance level."

Many athletes learn to sacrifice their well-being to short-term competitive goals. The case of the Olympic gymnast who finished her routine after breaking an ankle is a classic example of the all-or-nothing mentality many former competitors carry with them. This legacy of exercising through an injury creates a particular training challenge.

Terri Carden is a graduate of a personal training program at California State University, Hayward, and the owner and operator of TC Fitness Concepts in Oakland, California. She notes that her former-athlete clients can stretch her skills. One client, who played high-school football, frequently asks, "Why am I working these muscles? I never had to do this before." His understanding of anatomy is limited, and he retains movement patterns he learned incorrectly decades ago. As a result of past injuries and subsequent unsupervised training, he has overuse injuries that limit range of motion in his shoulders. Carden appeals to his training needs as well as his self-concept. She incorporates techniques that some professional athletes use to prevent injury and improve performance. These methods include Active Isolated Stretching, Touch for Health (a combination of acupressure and massage) and Pilates.

Carden goes the extra mile for her client because she empathizes with him. A competitive high-school cheerleader, she once took a fall while attempting a kick. She took it easy for a month but didn't seek medical treatment. She continued to push through the pain to pursue other sports in addition to cheerleading. When she began to suffer recurring bouts of sciatica and instances of her lower back "going out," she saw a chiropractor. His assessment revealed the damage: She had fractured her tailbone, her sacrum area was unstable and scar tissue had built up.

In addition to that fracture, Carden has at different times suffered tears to her hamstring and rectus femoris and broken her ulna and radius. "The chiropractor told me I would never dance again. That was the first time I joined a gym," she remembers. Today she studies dance and is training for her first fitness competition. She attributes her comeback to sessions with an experienced trainer who helped her work with her injuries. He also taught her how to monitor her responses to particular training stimuli. Instead of pushing through pain indiscriminately, she now uses better judgment. Mild discomfort is acceptable, but swelling, pain that interrupts sleep, and weeklong moderate or severe pain are red flags.

Dennis Millward, a San Francisco chiropractor, enjoys working with ex-athletes. "People with a history of training at something are more open to being active participants in their recovery," he says. "The fun part is that they tend to have specific goals, be more educated about and aware of their bodies, and be able to provide [a practitioner] with more information." However, he warns that "our history of training, mistraining, traumas and habits" determines physical potentials as well as expectations. Clients sometimes train from what he calls "an older body model"—a sense of themselves that is outdated or exercise concepts that are obsolete. The "weekend-warrior syndrome" is one example of training from an older body model. The "warrior" remembers herself, kinesthetically and psychologically, as a person who can run 10 miles—a goal that may no longer be appropriate. Another example is the client who resists giving up deep knee bends, full sit-ups and other exercises that are now contraindicated.

TRAINING STRATEGIES FOR THE LAPSED ATHLETE

- Use drills from the client's sports history. Instruct an ex-basketball player to "run lines," for example.
- Work out with the client. Former athletes often enjoy the friendly competition and sense of solidarity.
- Recreate the team experience by training in group sessions.
- Give your client a sense of "training for something" by working toward a 5K or other competition.
- Use a periodized program. Motivate the client while teaching a healthy balance between cycles.
- Ask the client to complete goal sheets and logs. Accountability promotes discipline and will increase your professional credibility.
- To appeal to the client who appreciates the science of training, offer training tools like heart rate monitors or arrange a maximal oxygen consumption/uptake (VO_2max) test.

Kinesthetic Connection

Educators have identified four learning modalities—visual, auditory, tactile and kinesthetic. Each individual has a predominant or favored style. Visual learners most effectively process what they see; auditory learners what they hear; tactile learners what they handle or manipulate; and kinesthetic learners what they experience while engaged in gross motor movement. Kinesthetic learners are often

enthusiastic and successful athletes (in fact, many who choose physically active occupations—like personal trainers—are kinesthetic learners). "Good at sports" is one of a list of signs that teachers use to recognize kinesthetic learners.

While not all athletes are kinesthetic learners, those who are can present some distinct challenges and opportunities. For example, the elementary-school student who had difficulty sitting still without fidgeting and had a tendency to eat or chew gum in class was likely a kinesthetic learner (Linksman 2000). Recess made the school day more bearable. The modern office presents some of the same frustrations for the person who prefers to be moving. More than their visual, auditory and tactile peers, many kinesthetic learners tend to snack at their desks just for something physical to do. A successful training program for these clients might include midday workouts and stretches that can be done while sitting at the desk.

The ease with which they learn physical skills means that kinesthetic learners sometimes find common gym routines boring. To counter this, include some advanced or complex program elements. For example, plyometrics or power training might be appropriate for the right client.

Be a Coach

Serving former high-school athletes presents distinct challenges. Like any other clients, they want a trainer who can help them achieve their potential. However, their preset standards may be a little bit higher than average. By taking time to understand their mentality, physical history and unique learning ability, you can help them clear the hurdles and get back in the game.

Barbara R. Saunders is a freelance writer based in San Francisco. She is ACSM-certified as a health/fitness instructor and holds a bachelor's degree in psychology from Stanford University.

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