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Test-Driven by Trainers

By JENNIFER STEINHAUER

Ever walk by a gym and watch an exerciser hard at work with a personal trainer sweating or groaning through pushups, sit-ups and bench presses and wonder about the allure of it?

Perhaps you have assumed that personal trainers are too expensive and time consuming, that you would never know how to find one or that if you did, the trainer would spend the whole time either barking at you to push harder or lecturing you about the evils of *crème brûlée*.

Indeed, after a whirlwind of sessions with six personal trainers, I found that exercising one on one can be a gratifying experience, or it can be a humiliating hour spent half-dressed.

The point of this tour was simple: finding a good trainer who could help assess my fitness goals and devise a program that I could do on my own. I saw my six trainers over a period of eight days. (Do not try this; it is exhausting and virtually all trainers agree that it is unsafe. If you want to sample different trainers — and you're not facing a deadline — spread sessions over several weeks.) In those eight days, one trainer, a man, giggled as I struggled to run in place while attached to a bungee cord; another patted me on the behind and said I was a "good girl!" after a strenuous set of weights. I also found people who changed the way I do sit-ups for life.

Personal trainers are a popular option for people who want to maximize their workouts. Worldwide 13,000 trainers have been certified by the American Council on Exercise after passing a written exam. In 1990, there were just 2,000. Thousands more trainers are not certified.

It would be impossible to write about all the types of personal training available in New York, but these sessions give a glimpse at what you get for your money. Prices generally range from \$40 to \$125 for an hour and the cheapest can often be the best. Most trainers are affiliated with fitness centers or will meet you at your own gym or in your home. I did not tell any of my trainers I was writing an article until after each session ended.

In SoHo

Day four took me to the SoHo Training Center, a modest little jewel in a downtown office building. Antonio Valladares, who padded in from a nap in the back to train me that morning, nodded sympathetically when I told him about my sore tendons. "You have to communicate your goals and I'll help you achieve them, we'll have fun," he said.

I stared at him. He actually looked as if he would be more comfortable sipping a latte in a Williamsburg café than bossing me around, but as it turned out, he took me through a challenging and balanced workout.

We pumped our way through weights for all body parts, constantly interspersed with tough abdominal work. As I lay flat on my back he told me to focus on a point above me and go to work. Mr. Valladares, whose background is in the martial arts and yoga, was careful and thorough about stretching. I was beginning to see that trainers focus on weights and expect you to do your cardio on your own. As Mr. Valladares put it "Why should you pay someone \$40 to watch you walk on the Stairmaster?"

SoHo Training Center 110 Greene Street (Prince Street); (212) 219-2018. Memberships: \$599 a year. Training sessions: \$40; packages available.