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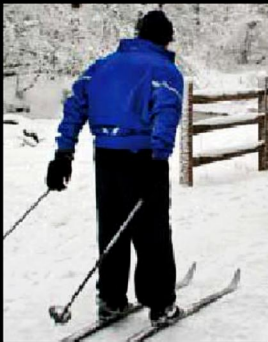
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BY: DAVID WALLACH



CROSS TRAINING

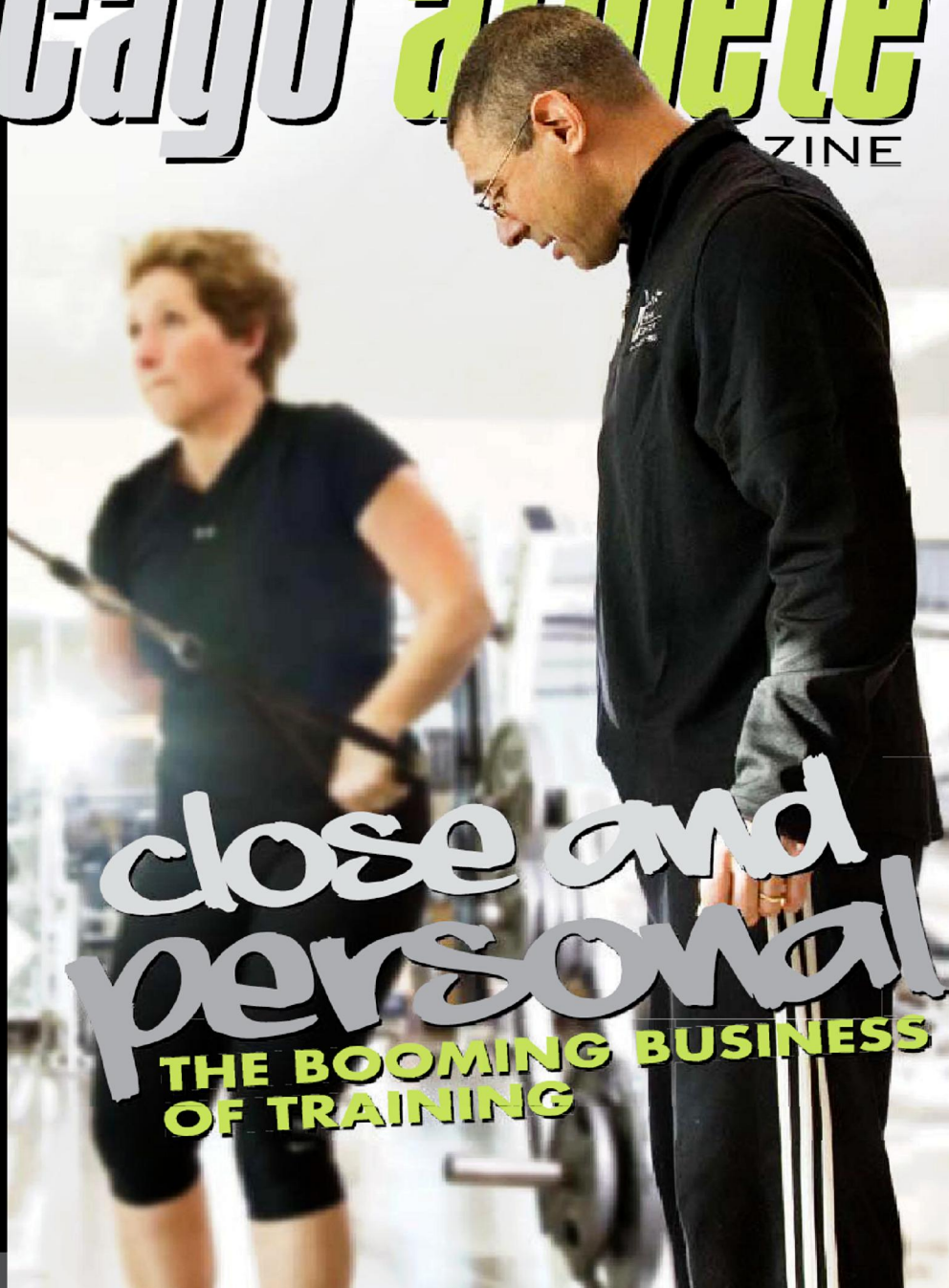
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close and
personal
**THE BOOMING BUSINESS
OF TRAINING**

TRAINING a personal trend

BY JAMES H. EWERT JR.



Lara Mele's is available by appointment only and she spends a good part of her day listening to whatever her clients feel like talking about, offering advice only as needed. Yet, hiding behind the calm and patient front, Mele's stern demeanor and demanding practice regimens can break down a client - only to build them back up again, stronger, leaner, more confident and ready to overcome just about any physical challenge. Mele is a personal trainer, endurance sport coach, and co-owner of a burgeoning Chicago-based independent personal training business, Infinity Multisport.

"You do become sort of a friend to your clients in many ways because you see them regularly, they have this one-on-one time with you, and they do tend to tell you things they wouldn't necessarily tell other people," Mele says. "I think you can be friends, but you definitely need to maintain a level of professionalism with clients and not be something other than a person who just sort of listens when they need someone to talk to. People that you do build a relationship with and are getting something out of it are willing to pay you to keep coming back and then they're going to send their friends to you."

A Chicago native with a Masters in Exercise Science from the University of Illinois Chicago and numerous certifications, Mele has been

personal training in one form or another since college. She first started as an entry-level trainer at a local health club before moving up to a training manager, then to fitness director, and after that, to general manager. Though, it wasn't until she was working as a regional manager at a health club that she finally had enough of the health club administration scene.

"As you start moving up from being someone who is just a personal trainer into more administrative work you start to spend more time in an office than with people doing what you really want to do," Mele says. "Then, last year, another coach and myself decided to leave the company we were with and go out 100-percent on our own."

It's been a little more than a year now since Mele and her training partner Maurice "Mo" Willis started Infinity Multisport, which specializes in crafting highly personalized training workouts and classes for endurance athletes preparing for marathons or triathlons, as well as individuals seeking a more private workout setting than a crowded public gym. Mele admits it's been harder than she initially expected, but said the business has continued to grow slowly and steadily since the beginning.



"I want to make sure that every time we add a client, a program, a class, whatever; that we have enough resources between myself and another coach to actually handle that," Mele said. "We've actually been growing slowly and steadily, which quite frankly, is just how we want it. I'm not going to complain."

Mele and Willis aren't alone, however, with the gradual and continued success they've experienced with Infinity Multisport. Personal trainers all over the country are seeing general increases in clients looking for everything from a more personal and trusted voice to advise them on what to tone and how to trim it, to boot-camp style instructors and classes that whip bodies into shape. Even in-home training specialists and highly intensive endurance sport coaches are grappling with how to manage rising requests for their services without sacrificing the quality and attention to detail they give each individual client.

Infinity Multisport charges between \$80 to \$100 a month for basic, one-on-one strength training, \$120 to \$150 a month for endurance-sport group training, and anywhere from \$200 to \$280 a month for full one-on-one triathlon coaching, depending on the extent of the package.

What was probably most difficult adjustment for Mele from working at a large club to operating her own independent business was obviously not having the ample recruiting resources and facilities a large health club provides, she said. But now on her own and thriving, Mele and Infinity Multisport are able to offer clients a much more dynamic and personally crafted workout than a client could receive at a typical larger health club.

"I think you get comfortable when you work for someone else and you work for a club where you get people fed to you through them," Mele says. "We sort of thought that we were going to open up our own business and it was going to be like gangbusters, and it's not. I think that's somewhat a function of the economy, but people want to know 100-percent what they're getting and what to expect."

According to a 2010 U.S. Department of Labor report on personal training and fitness jobs, the industry is expected to increase at a rate much faster than the average for all other occupations. The Labor Department expects personal training jobs to grow by nearly 30 percent and predicts that 75,000 jobs will be added to the industry by 2018, putting the projected total of personal training jobs at just under 340,000.

Chicago-based personal trainer Sunny Ammons is just one of those 75,000 new trainers expected to hit

the workforce in the next decade. After attending the National Personal Training Institute in Chicago earlier this year, Ammons began working as a trainer at a local franchised gym, and said that though she has ambitious goals, she's trying to take her work slow and focus on maintaining a good and reliable reputation as a trainer—a path similar to the one Mele took.

"I also think people increasingly view exercise AS A HEALTH ISSUE, NOT JUST A LUXURY, and they're willing to invest in that." - Drew Surinsky

"It's an industry where people have big dreams, big egos, and fall hard," Ammons says.

Ammons says she enjoys being able to work in a non-sales gym where trainers aren't asked to walk the floor and solicit clients, but feels like the industry is definitely trending towards smaller boutique-style clubs with high-end private trainers.

"That's where I want to be, all private, high-end, in-home training," Ammons said. "I want to be so exclusive you have to try out before you can train with me. I'd love to be able to work with kids in a fitness program at a public school, but everyone knows there's not enough money in that."

It's really important at the beginning to focus on personal training as a business and a way to make a living, Ammons says, but that's only a small part of why she got into the field.

As an entry-level club trainer, Ammons' clients are charged \$55 per hour-long session by the club, of which she takes home \$30, but as she continues to network and gain her own personal clients, she charges \$60 per hour, all of which she takes home.

"I like people and I like working out, so it's a great opportunity for a career," Ammons said. "But there's really a lot of bad information out there, people telling you to do this and not that, take this pill and get skinny, and the bottom line is that I know I have a lot of positive, useful, and good accurate information. I feel like that's really why I'm doing this."

As the personal training and fitness industry continues to grow and experience modest surges in potential clients and revenues, trainers and coaches must expect and work around a converse increase in competition from new trainers entering the business and the constant pressure from other private and corporate health clubs seeking to regain and maintain their own shares of the marketplace -- a fact some trainers are more worried about than others.

Mele, for example, doesn't foresee new trainers entering the market negatively as the gap between people who wave a certificate and say they're trainers and trainers and coaches with considerable credentials and experience remains disparate. Though, some trainers contacted for this story declined to comment amid concerns that the proprietary and trade secret information they spent years developing would be rendered negligible if more widely known and distributed.

"There are many more triathlon coaches than there used to be, and I'm aware of their presence," Drew Surinsky, a Chicago swimming and triathlon coach says. "I don't see much backstabbing or mercenary behavior among triathlon or swim coaches. Coaches who work hard on their programs seem to survive. There are probably a few more adult swim specialists than there used to be, but there are likely few enough good ones that there is enough business for everyone."

Surinsky said he's been independently coaching swimmers and triathlon athletes for so long it's difficult to even say when he first started. For the past several years Surinsky has been managing his own personal training business, Nice Guy Training, and says while the industry is competitive, the fact that many of the established and recognized coaches see each other frequently keeps relations civil. If anything has affected his bottom line, Surinsky says it'd be the economy before it would be competition from new trainers. To keep his services affordable, Surinsky emphasizes small group programs over one-on-one classes.

Surinsky's private swim lessons and strength training sessions are \$75, custom triathlon training plans \$150 a month, and group swimming workouts average around \$20 per hour with groups usually limited to 12. If it's any indication of his confidence in the future of his business and the personal training industry, Surinsky says he's let the law license he spent years in school for expire.

"I also think people increasingly view exercise as a health issue, not just a luxury, and they're willing to invest in that. Exercise really is medicine," Surinsky says. "That's the way it was discussed in grad school, and 'exercise prescription' is now a commonplace term."