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A DAY IN A
LIFE OF A
"FITNESS"
PROFESSIONAL

EXPLORING
the **HUNGER** Brain

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CERTIFICATION: Yes, it Really Does Mean Something Important and Specific



Is your fitness or wellness career headed where you want? Have you invested the time, training and effort in yourself to reap the kind of rewarding job you deserve? Or, do you just grab whatever comes your way? Because so many new fitness instructors start out as bundles of energy and enthusiasm, they sometimes falter right out of the gate, when they

discover that yes, indeed, this industry is professionalized—loaded with tough, benchmarking stages—and really does require that you develop a well conceived plan involving education, quality training, and a world-class nationally recognized certification. We tend to think that AFAA's is the best certification you can get, and over 300,000 certified instructors would be inclined to agree.

For more than 30 years, the fitness industry has come together with an understanding that certification means you've achieved a national standard set by a respected board of professional experts, leading authors and professionals in the field. It means you've done your homework, studied hard, passed the toughest tests, and have committed to advancing your knowledge with continuing education in years to come. It means the following: accredited exam process, obtained only through monitored practical and written examinations, and continuing education required to maintain certifications.

But lately, there's trouble in fitness paradise. The word "certification" is now being used to signify something much "softer," less rigorous, less of a recognized standard. As fitness professionals, you have to ask yourselves the following questions:

1. Is the certification accredited?
2. Is the curriculum accredited?
3. Are there prerequisites?
4. Is there a monitored practical exam?
5. Is there a monitored written exam?
6. Are there ongoing continuing education requirements that need to be earned within a specific time frame?
7. Is a current CPR/AED certification required?

The more questions you answered "no" to, the "softer" the certification. Please keep this in mind.

In this issue, you'll get the best advice around to continue doing what you want and do it well. Meet our cover man, Lawrence Biscontini—a regular contributor to *AF*, popular presenter here and abroad, and an all-around good guy who exemplifies the best of the fitness industry. It's a joy to feature him on this cover. Be sure to read Jodai Saremi's article about this generous, big-hearted professional, whose give-first-and-get-back attitude about work has obviously struck a balance with a benevolent universe.

Then consider the pros and cons of being either self-employed or working for the boss in Lorraine Bossé-Smith's article. Round it out with tips on growing your fitness business from Cherryh Butler.

Finally, focus on what you want to do and develop the plan to get you there. That fire-starter energy and boundless enthusiasm is best held in a cauldron of highest quality training and education with recognized credentials.

Meg

LAWRENCE



Citizen of the World

BY JODAI SAREMI, DPM

When people think of Lawrence Biscontini, his bright smile and contagious energy are the first two things that come to mind. He has a tremendous following in the fitness industry for his knowledge of exercise programming and customer service: When he speaks, people listen. And when he teaches, people flock to his classes. He is certified in just about every format in existence and has branded a number of fusion workouts of his own: Yo-Chi[®], Aqua Shakti and Buddha Camp, to name a few. What many people don't know is that Biscontini wasn't a born leader and he wasn't genetically gifted for fitness. His life has been a journey *toward* fitness.

"From a Dad who died of heart disease when I was 18, to a brother who died of a heart attack at 38, and a mom who had open heart surgery, I learned that just 'cause you come from unhealthy genes, doesn't mean there's nothing you can do when you're in your jeans to move towards wellness." Biscontini was a self-described fat, nerdy, sedentary youth whose favorite activity was eating ice cream. "I'm still shocked that people think I have something to say in this field of fitness and wellness," he says with humility. But the death of his brother was a wake-up call that got Biscontini into a gym where he discovered aqua fitness and T'ai Chi. Like many overweight individuals, he had the same fears of the gym and exercise. "I chose these because they were non

To contact Lawrence Biscontini or get information about his products, please visit FindLawrence.com.

BISCONTINI

aggressive, non-offensive, didn't require special equipment, nobody tackling me...no sweating was involved. ...They were relatively easy, accessible, nonintimidating and effective for me." He correspondingly started eating less and making healthier food choices. This magical combination of circumstance and the will to change brought him onto a career path he never imagined.

"My dad wanted me to be an international diplomat based in speaking languages...now I'm a globetrotting fitness professional." Biscontini started leading exercise classes at Bucknell University in 1986, where even the faculty attended. He took the initiative to get certified—at a time when few instructors bothered—because he wanted to be sure that he would do "successful work" and not hurt anyone. He also obtained a personal training certification, which gave him a deeper understanding of how the body works and how exercise affects the body. Biscontini furthered his education with a master's degree in Spanish and Education Methodology from the University of Kansas. He traveled to Spain and Italy during college, and consequently took a job with American Airlines as the supervisor of Flight Attendant training. However, this did not satisfy him as much as teaching aerobics and fitness. Over the next 10 years Biscontini worked on obtaining certifications from AFAA, ACE, Reebok University, Resist-A-Ball® (aka Mad Dogg Athletics), AEA, SCW-Fitness, canfitpro™, NASM and ACSM to help him become a well-educated, well-rounded trainer. The effort paid off when he landed a job in Puerto Rico running the Golden Door Spa's Wellness Program. Because of his dedication, *Condé Nast Traveler* magazine rated the Golden Door as the number one spa in the world for its innovative programming.

Biscontini continued to explore programming ideas and became known as a "fusion" specialist, blending such practices as yoga, T'ai Chi, Step and aqua aerobics into a variety of fun, innovative workouts that target a variety of needs. On his own he tries to balance cardio, strength and mind-body practices each day; therefore, he has applied the same ideas to his work. "Yo-Chi has worked really well in terms of spreading the word of mind-body to people who otherwise may not have thought of yoga or T'ai Chi, since it showcases some of the benefits of two beautiful, graceful disciplines." The power of ambiance goes to work in Yo-Chi Glow sessions, which begin in the light and finish in the dark with glowstick wrist bracelets, leaving "not a dry eye in the class when they turn the lights back on." Biscontini has even delved into teaching silently, through visual cues only, in his Shakti

and Aqua Shakti programs, which fuse almost all different types of mind-body disciplines with nontraditional, inspiring music, and allow the intense power of the orchestrations and lyrics to speak to the participants directly. All his formats are barefoot to emphasize getting into the feet, "since we tend to live in our heads," Biscontini says. And he incorporates Joseph Pilates' principle of centering into all exercises because it is "the start of all things."

In his own life, Biscontini tries to honor the principle of yogic ahimsa (noninjury to self and others). "I believe that whatever the fitness form one chooses, there has to be an element of mindfulness, from yoga to 'Cardio Killer Combat Kickboxing.' I believe we need to eat, love, laugh, move, breath, balance, and think a little bit every day." He also chooses foods that make him feel like the "best Lawrence possible in terms of giving energy to others," and makes his own blends of teas and infusions, which he grows, dries, ferments and bags, to take with him on his travels. In fact, tea, chocolate and fitness are among the list of things that make him very happy. But when he starts obsessing, he remembers the words of Jesus, who said, "be less concerned with what goes into the mouth as what comes out of the heart." His philosophy is nicely illustrated in his new cookbook, *Meals & Musings: Tidbits from a Travelling Philosopher* (FG2000, 2012).

Because he doesn't teach regularly anymore, his workout videos and DVDs are especially useful to those who may not be able to catch him in person at the next convention or spa demonstration. For people who prefer to read and absorb information at a more leisurely pace, Biscontini's wisdom is available in print. His first exercise-focused book, *Yoga Fundamentals: A Fitness Approach*, was written in two parts, based on his initial studies in the U.S. and then in India (SCW-EDU, 2001 and 2003). Next he was approached by June Kahn to collaborate on *Morning Cardio Workouts* (Human Kinetics, 2007), which opened the gates to a wealth of information he felt compelled to share. He went on to publish *Qi Gong and T'ai Chi Fundamentals: A Wellness Approach* (FG2000, 2007), *The ABCs of Fitness* (FG2000, Jan 2008), and *Running the Show: Onstage and Backstage* (FG2000, Dec 2008). All proceeds from his self-published book sales (and any other merchandise on his website) go toward The Saint Joseph Villa, in Flourtown, Penn., a charity that supports retired nuns and people of all faiths, located on the East Coast of the U.S. As a product of the Catholic school system, Biscontini feels it's important to give back to those who dedicated their entire lives to teaching and raising children of all faiths.



AWARDS

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|------|---|------|--|
| 2012 | CanFitPro International Presenter of the Year Award | 2005 | ECA Award for Most Mindful Program: Yo-Chi® |
| 2010 | Inner Idea Inspiration Award | 2004 | (August) CanFitPro Specialty Presenter of the Year |
| 2010 | ECA Best Male Presenter of the Year Award | 2004 | (July) IDEA Group Fitness Instructor of the Year |
| 2009 | ECA Presenter's Choice Debut Premier Award | 2003 | <i>Fitness Magazine</i> names Lawrence one of the USA top 10 personal trainers |
| 2007 | Best Mind-Body Program Development for Athle, Japan | 2002 | ACE Group Fitness Instructor of the Year |
| 2006 | Best Corporate Wellness Trainer for Xerox Greece | | |

"I've opened my own doors and had plenty slammed in my face," says Biscontini. In other words, it wasn't easy climbing the ladder to success—which has made him very interested, now, in the education process of training professionals. "I want to help today's interested hopefuls bypass all of that and become more effective at what they do...because nobody ever mentored me formally." To that end, he runs a mentoring program via VideoSkype on his website.

Biscontini's global business of training fitness professionals came about

rather gradually. While being bilingual helped, he tailored his company, Fitness Group2000 (FG2000), in Texas back in the late '90s, with the purpose of putting together a team of caring fitness professionals willing to take the fitness programs to developing countries. "These terrific people went just for having their expenses taken care of, and usually for no or close-to-no compensation."

Biscontini travels at least once per year using airline miles to take programming to developing countries at no cost to them as part of his message, volunteer effort, and

humanitarian ideals of giving back and paying it forward. "I think it's silly that some countries don't get information they need about current standards and guidelines in the fitness industry, just because they can't afford the latest textbooks, DVDs or expensive presenters," he says. Over the years, international companies who *could* afford to compensate him got wind of this message and booked him, so he has grown his international business, both for charitable and for-profit efforts, rather organically. He never has to actively pursue any jobs, and receives random calls out of the blue from people who seek him out on their own: "I already have a waiting list for my waiting list and I'm very, very blessed and grateful," says Biscontini. As he garnered a reputation for what he's done for spas, the spa world now knows his reputation too; one-third of his consulting work comes from spas, one-third from mentoring, and one-third from large and small fitness chains.

Although Biscontini is happy to share his secrets to success, he adds, "It's great to remember that not everything should be for profit." In addition, he emphasizes the fulfillment he's found in fitness by working with others. "It's one of the best things in the world to have even one person after a fitness class tell me we connected," Biscontini says.

Biscontini likes to pay it forward. In his book, *Cream Rises: Excellence in Private and Group Instruction* (FG2000, 2012), he honors those from whom he has learned, such as Mindy Mylrea. "I do owe a great deal of thanks to industry greats who graced me with their expertise and found time for me: Len Kravitz, Petra Kolber, Lisa Wheeler, Sara Kooperman, Gin Miller, Douglas Brooks, Stephanie Montgomery and Mindy Mylrea." Biscontini can add his name to this impressive list without reservation, as he lives by his father's words, "It is far more important to try to make kings than to be one." AF

JODAI SAREMI, DPM, is AFAA certified in group exercise and personal training. She is a contributing editor for *American Fitness* and enjoys writing about a variety of health and fitness-related subjects.