



The Only Constant Is Change

How group fitness is evolving

BY LAWRENCE BISCONTINI, MA

Many of us instructors have been in the business since the last century. We remember barefoot fitness, leg warmers, warm-up shoulder circle exercises, and a complete hour dedicated to one specific discipline, even taught to an LP record or 8-track tape. Today's face of group fitness is revamped, reworked and rethought. At no time in history has the pulse of group fitness been so strong, or so varied. From pre choreographed and freestyle programming, to schedule printing and naming, to the evolved job duties of the group-exercise professional, the industry faces exciting evolutions more than ever

before. Unique classes now appear around the world that never would have existed on group schedules in the previous century and, ironically, there is even a spiraling movement, returning us to original trends like the fascination with barefoot training.

Throughout this progression, AFAA has evolved as well, including updating its *Basic Exercise Standards and Guidelines*, revamping its Primary and Personal Fitness Trainer certifications, and offering more detailed Specialty Workshops than ever before, created by industry leaders and field experts.



not to mention much more demanding for me as an instructor to utilize knowledge of the body in a creative and helpful way." Alternatively, Vanessa Bennett, Group Fitness Instructor for Fitness First in Sydney, Australia, chooses to teach pre choreographed Les Mills programs exclusively because, she says, "the music is fantastic and the programs get maximum results, all while saving me time by not having to think about creating choreography."

This versatility in approach also applies at the club level, where a major overhaul in programming pervades the environment vis-à-vis years ago. Before the millennium, typical class formats were dedicated to a slot of 60 minutes, usually for just one discipline, like the hour-long slots of "step" and "sculpt," for example. Even the briefest of searches on the Internet for group schedules from major clubs around the world reveals two major trends that are supplanting that older format.

New Trends

First, fusion programming permeates many schedules in the interest of offering more benefits in less time. "The number one reason why people tell us that they don't attend fitness classes is *time*," says Veronica Enriquez of Holiday Gym and Spa in the Philippines. "So we offer more benefits in one concentrated session to reduce their excuses." Enriquez says she teaches a fusion of yoga and Pilates, "in order to give the benefits of *both* disciplines in a condensed amount of time." Instead of the aforementioned hour of step and additional hour of sculpt, for example, one of the most popular classes among Equinox Fitness Clubs throughout the USA is their "Cardio Sculpt" class which fuses both strength and cardiovascular benefits with a variety of equipment in *less* than an hour.

Second, shorter, "express-style" classes dominate many schedules. June Kahn, 2009 IDEA Instructor of the Year and Pilates Coordinator for Life Time Fitness® in Colorado, tries to "create options of various formats delivered in shorter time frames to give members an opportunity to try something different. The 30-minute time frame is the perfect vehicle to allow them to experience cross-training and still accomplish an effective workout." Ankie Feenstra, owner of The BodyWork Gym in Mykonos, Greece, agrees. "Shorter classes limit the number of excuses people have when claiming they have no time to attend class. Instead of having to spend two full hours in the gym for different benefits of each hour, shorter classes allow people to get more done in less time."

The Names Have Changed

The very names of group fitness schedules have also evolved. Whereas many clubs in the 1980s used to print "Aerobics Class Schedules," these titles gave way around the turn of the century to "Group Fitness Schedules." Today, however, options like "Movement Menus" and "Group Wellness Programs" appear at leading facilities like Johns Hopkins Hospital in Maryland and the YMCA of Greater Seattle, reflecting the emphasis on classes that incorporate an expanded, holistic approach to classes geared toward wellness over fitness. Furthermore, the use of the terms "menu" and "program" over "schedule" offers more of a flexible approach when making choices toward improving their total wellness. Scotty Esquibel, Group Exercise Director for Cooper Fitness Center in Dallas, Texas, agrees, saying that "*schedules* show when trains arrive and planes depart, but we are in the business of offering people *menus* dedicated to helping them become champions of living." Whereas classes used to be held in the "Aerobics Room," those names have also evolved to such terms as "Movement Studio" and "Zen Den" for mind-body classes.

The Art of Scheduling

Classes traditionally scheduled back-to-back on paper were oftentimes flawed from their conception. For example, offering a sculpt class from 8 a.m. until 9 a.m., followed by a class scheduled from 9 a.m. until 10 a.m., cannot deliver an ideal customer service experience because exactly at 9 a.m., when the first class officially ends, and at 9 a.m., when the second class officially starts, there

Today's group-fitness instructors can choose from among three basic approaches to programming: the freestyle format, the pre choreographed format, and a combination of both styles. Lyndsay Murray-Kashoid, instructor at exhale® mindbodyspa in Dallas, Texas, adopts the freestyle format of creating her own routines and sourcing her own music for each class. "I like to have freedom to adjust intensity or focus to the level and needs of the participants," she says, "because differences in age, experience, energy level, injuries or special conditions are often present in a group class. It is beneficial to have leeway to create the optimal growing environment for the guests...

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is always a less-than-ideal transition. Sometimes the 8 a.m. instructor exceeds the allotted time by a few minutes. Sometimes equipment must be put away. Similarly, the next instructor has to prepare equipment, music, class configuration and lighting for the 9 a.m. class. A newer trend avoids this by scheduling transition time. Earl Jimenez, Group Fitness Manager for Gold's Gyms in the Philippines, states that “scheduling the overlap promotes member cooperation because everyone knows exactly how much of the hour should be dedicated to each class because it's in print. Furthermore, they know how much time to allow for the transitioning of people and equipment, providing a positive, healthy atmosphere among people from both classes.” Figure 1 shows an example reflecting this new trend.

FIGURE 1	
8:00–8:50	Cardio Sculpt
8:50–9:00	Transition Time
9:00–9:50	Group Studio Cycling
9:50–10:00	Transition Time
10:00–10:25	Abs/Back Express
11:25–11:30	Transition Time

Evolving Responsibilities

Group fitness responsibilities have also evolved. Whereas toward the end of the last century, many instructors used to specialize in one particular class, many of today's instructors teach a variety of classes. The current economic situation, the development of class types, new fitness equipment, recertification requirements, and competitive job security in some markets all account for this burgeoning instructor versatility. Jamie G. Smith, Dance Fitness Specialist & Creator of Latin Blaze® fitness programming, agrees, claiming that “living in a thriving yet ceaseless technology-based world, the demand for variety, versatility, stimulus and excellence is at an all-time peak, so instructors have to keep expanding. In order to fully meet such expanding instructor qualifications and needs, fitness professionals need to rise to the occasion each day.” Kathy Stevens, MA, Educational Director and member of AFAA's Education Advisory Board, says that instructors must be different from the last century because “fitness now has a broader base of participants and participant goals (babes to boomers), as well as a much more diverse selec-

tion of activities both indoors and outdoors. This, coupled with the unstoppable influence of cyberspace information delivery systems, continues to change the way fitness professionals learn.”

In light of these changes, AFAA's resources have evolved. The afaa.com web site now offers more diverse educational tools than ever before, including TeleFitness®, DVD and music options, homestudies and revised textbooks. Even the updated “AFAA Certified Fitness Professional's Code of Ethics” reflects evolved instructor roles: “I will...be an unbiased advocate for lifestyle change” and “I will accept the challenge of my professional growth and will update my practical and theoretical foundations through continuing education.” These two statements underline the expanded responsibilities of instructors today.

In addition to the updated “AFAA Code of Ethics,” AFAA's Primary Group Fitness certification has also become cutting-edge in the industry. Unique in fusing theory with practical components in its testing, the Primary certification now reflects the vast skills, disciplines and approaches necessary in today's instructor, appropriately mirroring the unique changes in the industry. Given that today's instructor faces a crowd quite different from that of the 20th century, the Primary certification's last revision was made, according to Stevens, to test more adequately the skills needed by today's versatile instructor. AFAA has made changes to meet the needs of the fitness industry as it evolves to include new disciplines, markets and modalities, and to stay current in the areas of health and fitness research and guidelines.

Not only have the names of schedules changed, but also creative classes themselves prove popular. Barefoot classes abound, back with refined protocol, programming and education for shoeless movement, found in programs such as Stacey Lei Krauss' “willPower™ & grace,” Patricia Moreno's “IntenSati®,” and David Mesirow's “Beaming™.” Other unique fusion formats include Charles JoJo Tyler's “Yoga4Soul Bootcamp,” Shannon Fable's “Core Off the Floor,” and Feenstra's “3 × 20” which fuses equipment-based Pilates and mat-based movement with cardio.

The group fitness world is more varied today than ever before. With expanded roles and tools, now is truly a historic time for fitness instructors to experience and embrace such evolution. AF

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