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Finding a fitness plan that fits

By Richard Seven

Seattle Times staff reporter

Sweating is the easy part of training. The hard part is honestly assessing your capability and commitment and accepting the slow, steady (and safe) path. In that regard, you must navel-gaze a bit and ask: Who am I? What am I? How can I get from here to where I want to be?

Focus, say experts, provides the best shot at achieving lasting goals in a health and fitness world littered with delusions, injuries, overtraining, plateaus, fads, burnout and shortcut reasoning like, "more is better."

"People have this notion that, 'I've run a mile, so I know everything about health and fitness,' " says Dr. Dan Tripps, director of sports performance at the Center for Cardiovascular Wellness at Swedish Medical Center. "In reality, they have sorted things out mainly through myths."

Tripps, on the other hand, knows a lot about fitness and sports science. He has coached swimmers and triathletes, served as president and executive director of the Olympic Scientific Congress held in conjunction with the 1984 Olympic Games and was the U.S. representative to UNESCO's Sport for All project.

He also is director of Seattle University's Center for the Study of Sport and Exercise and is an "achievement psychologist" who pushes concepts such as intention, attitude and perseverance. He helps athletes through issues related to anxiety, attention,



JOSH NASH / THE SEATTLE TIMES
Sean Machak, left, and McLean
Reiter assist Dr. Edward Noonan
after his aerobic capacity test at the
Center for Cardiovascular Wellness
at Swedish Medical Center. Test
results will show Noonan how to
maximize his performance with
exercise tailored to his level of
fitness.



JOSH NASH / THE SEATTLE TIMES Noonan, left, consults with Dr. Dan Tripps, director of sports performance at the facility, about his test results.

goal-setting and motivation, but the Swedish center sees a wide swath of people, from hard-core athletes to those seeking to use exercise as medicine.

People, he says, tend to fall into four general categories:

- Rehabilitating or recovering from injury or illness.
- Staying healthy enough to gracefully handle daily life.
- Becoming fit enough to challenge the body.
- Being athletic enough to compete.

Each category comes with its own set of parameters in terms of commitment, physical ability, nutrition and often-overlooked components such as rest. By defining where you fit and what you want, you can decide what's required (and if you really are up to the physical or psychological task). Think of it as a teeter-totter: The grander the goals, the greater the commitments weighing on the other end. As with everything, look for balance.

For instance, says Tripps, an overweight and sedentary 60-year-old with high cholesterol levels would likely fall into the rehabilitative category. He must start with a fundamental lifestyle change and start with low-impact exercise like walking or recumbent cycling. The pace would start slow and rise gradually.

On the other side of the spectrum, a hard-charger who wants to compete in a triathlon must commit considerable training in the specific legs of cycling, running and swimming. His or her nutrition and psychological investments needs need to match the challenge. Too often, those investments don't stack up to the dreams. Too often, says Tripps, the details of what is required get blurred and lumped into one amorphous blob in our hurry-up culture.

"So many people are trying to achieve things on the extreme ends (like marathons) of the spectrum when it is not even close to the world in which they are living," he says. "Everyone has to define who they are in these areas and then accept what's required. Not who or what they fantasize they are."



JOSH NASH / THE SEATTLE TIMES With all of the equipment attached, Dr. Edward Noonan is set to begin an aerobic capacity test.

Information

The center offers a series of tests aimed at giving clients a view of current health markers. The so-called "fitness assessment," a two-hour test, costs \$295. The more indepth "athletic assessment," which also includes developing sport-specific training programs, is an additional \$100.

The center also itemizes tests and costs should a client just want to know, say, how strong he/she is, or take a VO2Max test, which measures the volume of oxygen you can consume while exercising at maximum capacity. To learn more about the Center for Cardiovascular Wellness, call at 206-320-3977 or go to www.swedish.org/cvwellness and link to Sports Performance Services.

They also need to be patient. Tripps sees much evidence of overtraining, which leads to burnout or injury. He also sees a lack of specificity. That means you don't train for the 100-meter dash by walking five miles. You also don't run like crazy three days in a row, take two weeks off and then go

all out again.

The Center for Cardiovascular Wellness has a well-stocked gym that helps patients rehab, but Tripps' division aims more at athletes and people who use fitness as a preventive tool. His staff performs physical assessments by not just testing static measures like body fat percent and blood pressure, but also how they process oxygen and how strong and flexible they are. The tests provide a baseline and in some cases a dose of reality.

Once they get a good look at the clients' physical picture, Tripps or his staff find out what they want to achieve and develop a plan to get there. Anyone in a hurry would be disappointed. The path is always incremental and detailed.

"You need to stress the body to improve it, but what we know scientifically is that there is a window of adaptation," Tripps says. "The brain pays attention to how you move and makes predictions on what that movement is attempting to do. So the goal is to give the brain a predictive measurement so it will make the physiological adaptations into the future."

The goals aren't always cut-and-dried. One participant showed poor cardiovascular fitness and said he wanted more energy. Tripps' staff assigned him to work his heart rate in an "endurance" zone for specific durations and frequencies for a three-month period. A married couple knowledgeable and active went through the process mainly to lose weight the right way, through better nutrition and a combination of cardio and resistance training. The center also works with college volleyball players and top-flight rowers.

Tripps says everyone is a "performer" whether he/she races the 400-meter hurdles, rows Lake Union or wants to walk up two flights of stairs. No matter who or what they are, it comes down to specificity and progression.

And patience.

"Training takes time. If you rush it, it will break. The hardest thing I have to do is design training modules of 12 or 16 weeks. So many people don't want to think that far ahead."

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