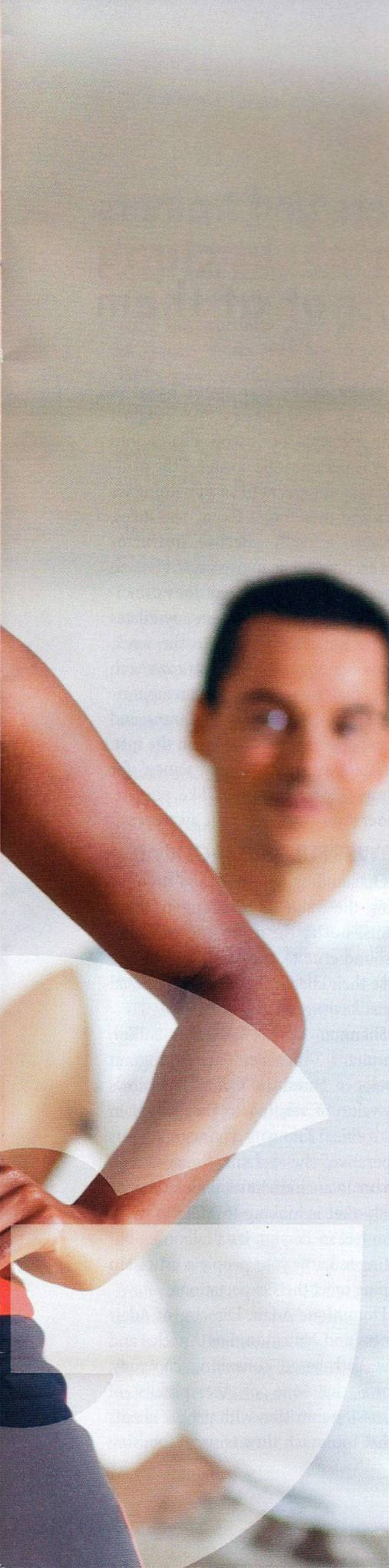


SMALL MAKES

Small Details That Make Big Changes in Group and PT Sessions

BY LAWRENCE BISCONTINI, MA



As group fitness instructors get ready for our classes, we put countless hours of preparation into the principal components like program design, music, equipment and practice. While these are the major, necessary aspects of group fitness experience, there are also minor aspects of classes that make big differences in the total results for each participant. Mindy Mylrea, recipient of the 1999 IDEA International Fitness Instructor of the Year award, says, "When group fitness leaders create classes that are safe and effective, that's our job. But there are *little* things that we can do to effect *big* differences, and cream rises to the top." And to those little things in the personal training and group fitness world we now turn.

THE PRESHOW

Setting the stage for a class or personal training session can involve introducing a special theme that pertains just to that day. Patricia Moreno, creator of sati Life, an instructor training program based in New York City, often sets the stage before her sessions by writing key words across the mirrors in the studios with large, nonpermanent markers. She writes out the theme for a particular class using such words as "intensity," or "empowerment," and then references this throughout the class. Similarly, Douglas Brooks, exercise physiologist and personal trainer based in Mammoth Lakes, Calif., says, "I often suggest that trainers give their clients a focus for every workout. Whether it be to concentrate today on 'breathing,' 'speed' or 'balance,' they should always have one special thing that is unique for that session as a particular focus."

Kayoko Takada, owner of "Pilates Alliance" and programming director for Athlie Gyms in Tokyo, Japan, suggests arriving early (when appropriate) and setting up the room to be able to greet the guests as they arrive, standing at the door and bowing to each one. "This gives eye contact with each person and lets everyone feel special, like I have been waiting for everyone. If they have something special to tell me [like pregnancy or injuries], they feel comfortable doing so upon entering instead of having to call it out later in front of the room when everyone will hear."

SMART STARTS

Twenty-two year veteran presenter, product/programming consultant and author, Jay Blahnik (based in Laguna Beach, Calif.), agrees with Brooks, and always tries to incorporate education from the warm-up. He states, "I am always looking for ways to provide teachable moments that provide almost invisible education, creating a focus of the day in each class. For example, in my running class, I may say, 'The focus today is efficiency. Spend time during your workout today thinking about how you can be more efficient in your posture, foot strike, arm swing and breathing.' Setting the stage with a theme allows me to imbue education into any class."

DURING

The center of the session or class is where we spend the most amount of time with our clients, so demonstrating some “cream” skills in the body of a class or session focuses our attention to even the most minor of details in the “show” aspect.

MANIPULATING THINGS, NOT PEOPLE

During the group experience, Steve Feinberg, creator of Speedballfitness.com based in New York City, changes both the volume of music and brightness of lighting *several* times in each class. “Just as a Broadway production changes sets and moods, class should do the same. Not only do I want to dim the lights when everyone is supine, but also match the lights and volume to the intensity of the class to match the peaks and valleys.”

Just as Feinberg manipulates the look and feel of a class experience, Calvin Wiley, dancer and choreographer based in New York City, manipulates the orientation of the students. Wiley oftentimes will change where the “front” of the room is in order to force students outside of their normal comfort zones. Furthermore, he often splits the room in different ways, forming both “performers” and “cheerers” watching the production as the participants run the choreography before switching their roles.

Jeff Bornman, celebrity trainer based in West Hollywood, Calif., believes that personal training sessions set themselves apart from others when they offer a client the chance to draw a connection between a condition in their life and a condition that is manifesting in their body. One tool he uses is to focus on a body part, muscle group, or a specific exercise or activity that can be expanded into a metaphor for life. For

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example, legs (which *stand under* us) can be used to represent understanding. At one point in the workout he may say, “This is just like life; being strong is important, but it takes flexibility in our understanding (legs) to use our strength most effectively. Invariably,” he says, “clients come to a future session excited to share a realization they had ‘after thinking about our legs discussion last week.’” Bornman shows that simple, costless tools can imbue additional value into personal training sessions.

These examples of group dynamics show how instructors and trainers can manipulate the sights, sounds, and feel of class and session dynamics.

SMART IS ATTRACTIVE

Keli Roberts, recipient of the 2003 IDEA International Instructor of the Year award, based in California, weaves science into her workouts. Uniquely known for researching the strength routines she teaches, Roberts creates intense workouts people love. Her ability to fuse that science-based information into the classes she teaches while making people sweat is uncanny. She says, “I study research first to know how to maximize benefits and minimize time, and then I practice a lot before taking that preparation to classes. When I teach, I try to explain *why* we are doing a particular sequence so people understand that they’re not just moves, but moves based on science-proven information.”

Interjecting theory into practice proves to be a sign of many of the industry’s great teachers and trainers. Pilates master June Kahn, recipient of the 2009 IDEA International Fitness

Instructor of the Year award, based in Colorado, incorporates the original eight concepts of Joseph Pilates into every experience she creates. “The principles are not meant to be something we learn and then forget about,” she states, “because a really effective instructor uses each principle in two ways. First, an instructor can bring *any* of Joe’s principles into play at any time, in any Pilates progression, and apply it to the work. Second, a really good instructor can relate that same principle metaphorically to something in life and transcend the experience of just being on the mat. I relate the principle of ‘balance,’ for example, to many things like posture, moderation and kinesthetic awareness.”

POWERFUL IS PRACTICAL

Outstanding teachers and trainers know the value of teaching to their clients, not at them. Instead of trying to sound erudite, they discover ways to make their clients *feel* education instead of just *hearing* it.

Shannon Fable, fitness author, consultant, manager and program developer based in Colorado, knows the value of relating to the people in the room. “Knowing your students is imperative,” she explains, “because each person is an individual with a unique reality that is looking to YOU to make them feel successful. It’s a tall order, but getting to know your people is crucial in helping meet their expectations.”

Dominique Adair, Director of Adair Fitness and Nutrition, Los Angeles and New York-based consulting company, knows that one of the pitfalls of discussing nutrition with private clients is that too much time is spent focusing

on numbers, calculations and grams. "People leave understanding math but not understanding what kinds of food make healthy choices," she states. To help solve that kinesthetically, she schedules practical time in grocery stores with her clients. Walking by specific samples of raw, macrobiotic, organic and local foods, she lets people see and taste what they are discussing. "This allows my clients to learn how to think for themselves to make healthful choices," she says.

ENDINGS

The last minutes of a personal training session or class are as important as the first five minutes because these are the moments that people will take away. Maybe deviations from the original plans occur in the class body to accommodate the actual abilities of the participants, but, like the warm-up, the ending can be scripted and rehearsed.

Petra Kolber, recipient of the 2001 IDEA International Fitness Instructor of the Year award and spokesperson for Yes! Fitness Music, based in Redondo Beach, Calif., says, "The start and finish has to be prepared and polished because these are the 'lasting impressions' that people will remember." Kolber also believes that the beginning of class actually starts from the "preshow, the moment you step foot inside the gym. How you treat everyone you come into contact with as you make your way into the studio or onto the gym floor will tell the people around you a lot about what they can expect from you as an instructor, trainer and human being."

Leslee Bender, creator of the Bender Academy of Training based in Reno, Nev., teaches evolved, science-based Pilates movements with and without equipment. During her

classes and workshops, participants learn different levels of exercises, which she calls "selective stabilization." The magic occurs at the end of her classes, however, when she plays a special song and weaves all of the moves learned thus far into one graceful, but unexpected, production song. Bender makes class seem like disconnected movements until the surprising final flow.

Lisa Wheeler, National Creative Manager for Group Fitness at Equinox (headquartered in New York City), does the same with Broadway-influenced dance-based movement. During class, participants think they are learning blocks of choreography until she reveals in the final five minutes the Broadway show from which the choreography derives, and even more excitement ensues.

Whether we study the preshow, the start, body or endings of our sessions, putting thought and preparation into the small details outlined here by some of the industry's great teachers and trainers will help set ourselves apart from the rest in today's competitive market. Ultimately, cream rises to the top when we prepare and polish as many aspects of our craft as possible, including these often ignored details of the experience. AF

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LAWRENCE BISCONTINI, MA, is an AFAA Contributing Writer and Certification Specialist. He received the 2010 IDEA Inspiration Instructor Award and established fitness history by receiving multiple Instructor of the Year Awards from ECA (2010, 2009), IDEA (2004), Can Fit Pro (2004) and ACE (2002). Lawrence discusses the contributions of those mentioned in this article in his book, *Cream Rises*. Find Lawrence at www.findlawrence.com.

