



PROFESSIONAL  
EDGE

YEARS OF WISDOM  
FROM THE TRENCHES

BY LAWRENCE BISCONTINI, MA

BEST KEPT  
{SECRETS}

Fitness industry trade secrets from the trenches in both group fitness and personal training sometimes come at quite a price. One of the most advantageous benefits of *American Fitness* magazine is the opportunity readers have to glean tips, tricks and tidbits of researched information from the industry's best group fitness leaders and personal trainers right here, allowing for immediate implementation with clients and classes.

In addition to research, AFAA prides itself on a strong practical component. Consequently, access to first-hand information from professionals in the industry who know how to address what-to-do-when type issues also provides a great service for readers. This article explores some of the best practical advice tips from friends and colleagues of the author.

## FROM THE WORLD OF GROUP FITNESS

Violet Zaki, founder of Zakifitness, has a black belt and works as a life coach and Equinox instructor based in New York. Her tip: "Focus most on connecting with students and home exercisers [by] creating an experience in the group fitness environment. Stay connected with them via social media. You should focus on building your tribe, transcending mere movement."

Valerie Grant works as a Somatic educator and guild-certified Feldenkrais® instructor, based in Pennsylvania. Her tip: "I ask all of my clients to begin *any* type of class by becoming aware of their bodies before we start. In supine, for example, I invite them to notice the contact with the ground, mat and floor, or wherever their body touches heavily and/or feels light. Awareness is something we must both teach and evolve among our students. After the session, I ask them to check in with that supine position again and notice any differences our work has brought to the forefront of their awareness compared to before we started moving. Helping them become self-aware can be more important than any particular movement pattern during the work section of any class."

Steve Feinberg, CEO of Speedball<sup>SM</sup> Fitness, is also a boxing coach based in New York City. His tip: "My students, clients, and Speedball Fitness teachers alike from around the world have taught me that there isn't a right way to move, even though we have specific techniques and biomechanics/kinematics to consider. What is right for Lucy's alignment and range of motion may not mirror Roberto's needs, so I've learned to be less rigid with what I consider 'right' and simply work to help them take responsibility for what 'feels' best and safe, offering benefits over risks. No more do I enforce *one* way to do anything."

Christos Niaros works as an AFAA Certification Examiner, Pilates coach, and BOSU® Master Trainer, based in Athens, Greece. His tip: "Try to put more technology in your trainings. I use activity trackers with my clients that make it [easier] to track physical activity, food intake and sleep, and it's not only about tracking their lives...it is a great nudging strategy to promote self-control and behavioral changes."

Irene Lewis-McCormick, reality television star, fitness instructor, and author of Human Kinetics' *A Woman's Guide to Muscle and Strength*, lives in Des Moines, Iowa. Her tip: "Consider cueing based on what participants are doing in front of you instead of standard cues that may be redundant or unnecessary. If they are breathing, it's not necessary to cue them to breathe. Instead take your cues to the next level by giving them an educational cue as to *how* to breathe, giving 'if/then' statements like, 'If you are breathing this way, then here is what you get...' Too often we spend our time giving students cues that aren't functional at all. If, for example, everyone's set-up position is appropriate for squats, there is absolutely no need to spend time talking about 'toes facing forward.'"

This author's tip: Use the word "movement" instead of "exercise" with clients because it makes them more responsive than calling what we do together just "exercise." Let's guide them to see that every single part of their day is based on maximizing movement efficiency...not just when we are together. I used to use the word "exercise" and realized they just rolled their eyes and ate more and moved less. But now I try to get them to see that movement is mandatory and exercise is optional.

## FROM THE WORLD OF PERSONAL TRAINING

Mike Bracko, MS, sports physiologist based in Calgary, Canada, brings research to his trainings. His tip: "Try to get more sleep. Increasing the amount and quality of sleep has been shown to improve sports/fitness performance, and help prevent weight gain. Gradually increase the amount of sleep you get by 5- to 10-minute increments over two to three weeks until you are getting 7.5 to 9 hours of sleep on most nights."

Douglas Brooks, MS, exercise physiologist for BOSU and Real Ryder® and director of athlete conditioning for Sugar Bowl Ski Academy in California, concentrates on both an inward and outward focus. His tip: "For every exercise or movement drill I coach, rather than me always telling the athlete/client what to do, it begins with the [participant] taking ownership of the 'set-up,' then dialing in on the 'exercise or drill focus' personalized to them, and finally, attaching a mental focus. So, the



athlete or client says, for example, 1) for set-up, teaching points are ‘hip-width stance’ and ‘avoid medial knee collapse’; 2) personalized performance focus is ‘get the hips through’; and 3) mental focus is ‘consistent mechanics replication through the last rep.’”

Fabio Comana, MA, MS, is an exercise physiologist and faculty instructor at San Diego State University. His tip: “Master delivering uniquely different experiential services to build your tribe. Encourage clients, through word-of-mouth, to build your brand, and then rely on various social media channels. In this [day] and age, trying to build your following through social media is no longer effective (given how many minutes people actually view versus how many events are posted daily) unless you have something truly appealing.”

Len Kravitz, PhD, coordinates refereed research and works as program coordinator of exercise science at the University of New Mexico. His tip: “Get clients into the habit of learning—and using—their own ‘Body Check’ system of self-assessment. This empowers students to be more engaged with their exercise performance. After teaching a skill and watching the client(s) perform, I ask them to remember to Body Check. Common cues include ‘Are your abdominals engaged?’ ‘Are your knees tracking over your toes?’ ‘Is your chest upright?’ and ‘Are you looking forward?’”

Leslee Bender, CEO of the Bender Training Academy, calls Florida home base. Her tip: “Train smart if you want to be in it for the long haul! Overtraining or teaching unsafe training will ultimately lead to injuries that will negatively affect you or clients. Continuing education is key because not all modalities are safe for all populations! Stop training the hip flexors in ‘core training,’ and realize that [the] burn you feel is not your lower abs but the hip flexors being overused, which is so common in many programs today.”

Panos Balatsinos, owner and director of Persona Grata in Athens, Greece, has been preparing the country’s personal trainers and group instructors for years. His tip: “I’ve learned in over 15 years of experience in the industry that each client needs to stay tuned to the reasons *why* he or she does movements (from research-based information), and trainers need to constantly discover the things that keep their clients truly motivated on a daily basis.”

### IN SUMMARY

The 12 preceding tips from industry leaders in both personal training and group fitness shed some light on common threads in the industry today, which

include the fact that clients and classes are demonstrating a mindful integration with movement in an effort to become independent champions of living. Nowadays clients are becoming more participatory in their own training by learning how to hold themselves accountable for movement while increasing their awareness of community. AF

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**LAWRENCE BISCONTINI, MA**, has been learning from the best in the business by observing and gleaning techniques from his peers for over 30 years. As a “connector” in the industry, Lawrence consistently pairs unique talents with respective resources. Find Lawrence at [www.findLawrence.com](http://www.findLawrence.com).

TIP:

USE THE WORD  
“**MOVEMENT**”  
INSTEAD OF  
“EXERCISE” WITH  
CLIENTS BECAUSE  
IT MAKES THEM  
**MORE RESPONSIVE**  
THAN CALLING WHAT  
WE DO TOGETHER  
JUST “EXERCISE.”