

# TO PRECHOREOGRAPH, OR NOT: THAT IS THE QUESTION

Three approaches to group fitness programming

BY LAWRENCE BISCONTINI, MA

As group fitness schedules across the globe evolve, three distinct types of programming emerge. The first consists of an exclusively freestyle approach in which instructors develop their own content and descriptions for classes. The second group is situated at the other end of our continuum, and consists of the prechoreographed approach in which instructors buy into programming that comes complete—from moves to music. The third finds itself in the middle. It offers instructors set templates for class organization, but the instructors have freedom to fill these templates with options from a variety of organization-approved selections. Today's instructors choose from among these three approaches, sometimes exclusively selecting one, or sometimes choosing to follow two or all three. Here, industry experts shed light on the strengths of these methods.

## FREESTYLE

The freestyle approach to fitness has existed for many, many years as numerous instructors like to be exclusively in charge of their moves and music. A distinct advantage is that they do not have to follow anyone else's programming and can show their own creativity. A disadvantage is that instructors, especially when they are new, lack a support system in developing their own programs.

Because many instructors teach at multiple facilities, they often feel the need to reinvent their moves and music, not only to keep classes feeling fresh, but also to avoid giving the same product at the competing clubs for which they teach. June Kahn, 2009 IDEA Instructor of the Year, chooses only this freestyle approach, stating, "I need the freedom to communicate information in the most effective way for each class. I like to be able to interact, use their names, and make individual references and progressions as appropriate to empower them to the fullest, avoiding any possible repetitive stress syndrome from an otherwise nonchanging program."

Instructors may also choose the freestyle approach for marketing reasons. "If I taught the same land or aqua class all over the city," says Michele Regev of Los Angeles, "there would be no special reason to join my classes at a particular place because my product would be the same everywhere. We have to follow

AFAA's Standards and Guidelines, while simultaneously standing out and offering unique options. Nothing is special and unique in programming that appears all over the city."

### PRECHOREOGRAPHED

The prechoreographed approach to fitness has existed for centuries. In ancient Greece, trainers used the same movement patterns for all men, regardless of their particular sport, as they prepared for competitions. Many exercisers today can recall following a long-playing recorded program, matching movements to music with Jane Fonda's early exercise routines, which treated everyone in the same way. Judi Sheppard Missett's Jazzercise® enjoyed tremendous success as it virtually taught prechoreographed movement to music with a "song and chorus" approach. As popularity increased, subsequent instructors went on to memorize the routines created by other developers and the movement grew.

Today, prechoreographed programs have evolved in many ways from those early times. In programs such as Les Mills International and Body Training Systems, instructors sign up (and pay up) to receive beautifully produced DVDs, professionally printed manuals, continuing education credits and legal, real-artist music. An advantage is that instructors do not have to develop their own music and moves. As actors learning roles, they receive a script prepared by award-winning instructors, and their task is to commit this to memory. Chalene Johnson, CEO of Powder Blue Productions, says that "prechoreographed programming allows instructors whose strong suit may be personality, motivation and connecting to focus on what they do best and leave the creating, testing and development up to the experts." Lyndsay Murray-Kashoid, who teaches choreographed "Core Fusion" classes at Exhale Spas, agrees: "I teach classes choreographed by someone else because I like the advantages of having a game plan for every class. This gives me peace of mind so that I can focus on making every session count and keep a balance to the workout, and, for the guests, that provides an element of predictability that allows them to follow me more efficiently."

Emma Barry, Creative Director for Les Mills International, claims that prechoreographed programming offers instructors proven, winning support. "The world is different for the independent instructor," she says, providing these comments:

- You are alone
- If you are bad or new, there is no system to support you to be better
- If you are good or seasoned, there is no one to replace you when you are not around
- You lack the camaraderie of like-minded people on a mission
- You may not be great at delivering the "end-to-end" process involved in creating and delivering a group fitness experience—and most people aren't
- The robust testing and absolute focus is missing, so that often means inconsistency.

### FUSION METHOD

The third style of programming fuses the two approaches, giving instructors room to make more choices from lists of approved content and music. Five current and successful programs of this type are Balletone® (under Creative Director Shannon Fable), Turbo Kick® (created by Johnson), Latin Blaze® (originated by

Jamie Smith), ¡Ay Caramba! (designed by Manuel Velázquez) and Zumba® (cocreated by Beto Pérez). These teacher trainings offer instructors tools to create their own classes, including music, base moves and preset choreography to get them started.

Fable says that this is different from prechoreographed programming, teaching instructors how to *create* successful choreography instead of just supplying it. "Teaching them the *why* behind the *how*," she says, "this approach creates a system by which they can teach multilevel classes without the need for everyone following the same, unchanging choreography." Joy Prouty, Zumba Education Specialist, says, "we give instructors a proven template to follow and then let our instructors choose what they teach, never using more than four moves per song: Z = M/C<sup>2</sup> (Zumba = Music/Core Steps and Choreography)."

### THEME AND VARIATIONS

Deborah Puskarich, Group Exercise Director of Cooper Fitness Center at Craig Ranch in Dallas, accepts two of our three approaches. In addition to being a freestyle instructor, she also teaches template programs like Zumba. "Coming up with my own step choreography is a *creative* challenge for me, and learning the Zumba program is a *learning* challenge. Both types of challenges make me a better instructor." Maureen Hagan of GoodLife Fitness Clubs in Canada accepts all three approaches. "I teach Les Mills because it provides me with a world-class program that I can teach, making [me] feel supported as part of a world-wide team. On the flip side, I teach template and my own freestyle classes because it gives me the opportunity to be creative, as it challenges me to develop new exercises and teaching techniques. I enjoy the best of all worlds with variety in my career."

### THE CHOICE IS YOURS

Today's instructors can be more versatile than ever given current expanded group class schedules. As we prepare for teaching different varieties of classes, putting preparation time into all of them sometimes does not prove possible. Johnson advocates both freestyle and prechoreographed formats, claiming, "I think there will always be freestyle classes, but prechoreographed workouts were a necessary evolution of our industry. For instructors who want to teach multiple, different formats, it is unrealistic to assume we have the time or the talent to master all of them. Why not let someone do the work for you in one or two of those formats that you know will be successful and flawless?"

Whatever approach we instructors choose, the industry offers support in our quest to be both popular and professional. From live trainings, to Internet webinars, to live convention sessions, the fitness tools are more available than ever. Because clubs today offer more diverse and creative programming schedules, there is definitely room for these three major teaching approaches to coexist in harmony.

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