

Crunch time: ab work to benefit St. Jude kids

BY JOHN HANC | Special to Newsday

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When Eryl Farella heard about a fundraising competition that involved doing crunches nonstop for one hour, she had an immediate gut reaction. "I was excited," said Farella, who lives in Jericho. "I love crunching . . . I think I came out of the womb crunching!"

Done everywhere from bedroom floors to boot camps, the abdominal crunch has long been an exercise staple. But rarely has the crunch been tapped for such high-minded fundraising - in this case, to benefit St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. That's exactly what the health club chain Lady of America has done, organizing a national Ab Crunch Challenge on March 29, with a goal of raising \$1 million for St. Jude, which is in Memphis, Tenn.

The event will be held at 200 Lady of America and Ladies Workout Express clubs around the country, including eight on [Long Island](#). Members and nonmembers, male and female, are invited. Though doing a crunch may be within reach of most people, doing them nonstop for 60 minutes is not for everyone.

"It is very difficult," says Tony Parziale, manager of two Ladies Workout Express gyms in Hamilton, N.J., and Lawrenceville, N.J. Parziale is a two-time Guinness World Record holder for the most sit-ups in an hour: 4,181, in 2001, and 5,083 the next year. In 2004 Parziale hit on the idea of "endurance crunching" to raise money for charity. "I lit a spark, and it caught flame," he recalls.

In March 2005, women from his two gyms - who dubbed themselves the Crunchettes - performed thousands of crunches and raised \$10,000. They repeated the event locally in 2006 and last year expanded it to a few regional clubs, one being a Lady of America in West Hempstead.

That's where Roberta Hirsch of [Floral Park](#) first heard about it. "I thought, 'There's no way I could do this,'" she said. Instead, she volunteered to be a crunch-counter and worked the floor at the gym last year, where 11 women participated and nearly \$3,000 was raised.

For this year's competition, club manager Vita Zorbo convinced her to move from counter to Crunchette. "She said, 'I think you can do it,'" says Hirsch, who has lost 65 pounds in the past year through diet and exercise.

A more confident Hirsch started training for the challenge in January. She began with 5 minutes, has moved up to a half-hour and says she'll be ready to crunch for an hour by month's end. Though no one is disqualified for improper form - the goal, after all, is to raise money for a worthy cause - Parziale says there's a correct way to crunch, to reduce risk of injury and minimize fatigue:

Feet flat on floor, knees bent 45-90 degrees. Hands across chest, thumbs underneath your chin "to prevent the neck from rolling forward and compromising the cervical spine." Curl up, shoulder blades breaking the plane of the ground to the point where you feel the abdominal muscles engaged. Then lower. For information on participating in the Lady of America/Ladies Workout Express Ab Crunch Challenge and to find LI locations, check [ladyofamerica.com](#).