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Drop Down and Give Me More Than She's Doing

By **ABBY ELLIN**

Published: February 7, 2008

JOE DUFFY, a cross-country skier who skis marathons, considers himself fit and motivated. About three years ago he decided to focus on strength, balance and endurance. He knew his workouts would be more interesting if he had people to compete against. So instead of visiting the gym on his own, Mr. Duffy and his wife, a former marathoner, [exercise](#) twice a week with a group of seven to nine people and a personal trainer at 501Fit in Minneapolis.

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Alan Zale for The New York Times

IN THIS TOGETHER Brandy

“It’s an hour and a half workout, and if I did it on my own it would seem like three hours,” said Mr. Duffy, 58, the chairman of Duffy & Partners, a design firm in Minneapolis. “When I do it with the group, it seems like it’s 30 minutes.”

Though it sounds like an oxymoron — personal training in a group? — it is a growing trend at large [health clubs](#) and small gyms alike. A survey by the IDEA Health and Fitness Association, an organization for fitness professionals, showed that 71 percent of personal trainers had two or more clients per session in 2005, up from 50 percent in 1999; 44 percent said they had groups of three to five clients, up from 43 percent nine years ago.

Hendelman, foreground, and Courtney Gordon motivate each other when they train at a health club in Armonk, N.Y.

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Groups can be made up of friends, couples or strangers, and the average number of participants is around six. Besides the significant cost savings — depending on the size of the group, it can cost as little as \$20 a session, compared with as much as \$100 for individual training — the group dynamic can help foster camaraderie and lure more people into the club. While trainers and patrons say that it's a lot of fun, group training sessions can also feel a

bit like being back in the proverbial sandbox. Competitive streaks can turn friendly companions into huffy ones. Those hoping to impress the trainer cut corners to complete assignments first. And a “boys against the girls” dynamic explains quite a bit of the behavior.

For the last three months, Russell Bryant, 31, a Denver entrepreneur, has been training in a group of six to eight people led by Courtney Samuel, the owner of Bodies by Perseverance, in Denver. He pays \$30 for an hour session. “The competitive part of me wants to finish first for personal reasons,” he said. “There’s one girl that’s in really good shape — she was a dancer for a pro team — so I’m always trying to compete.” If he sees a woman doing much better than him, “I’m like, ‘You better step it up, Russ.’”

Casie Collignon has been exercising with her best friend, Emily Ahnell, for a year and a half on Monday and Wednesday nights with Mr. Samuel. “Emily and I are both naturally competitive people and it helps our work out,” said Ms. Collignon, 30, a lawyer.

But one time, the routine had been especially grueling and Ms. Collignon thought that her friend had outperformed her. “I got a little pouty,” she admitted, so much so that she stormed out of the gym instead of catching a ride with Ms. Ahnell. “I didn’t want to talk to her so I just walked home,” Ms. Collignon said. (Mr. Samuel says this happens a lot with his group-training clients.)

Mr. Samuel said he was especially fascinated by how behavior breaks down by gender. “Men want to win by any means necessary, even jeopardizing their form,” he said. For example, if the task is to complete two rounds of 20 push-ups, instead of doing the exercise properly, they’ll go halfway down to finish first, he said. His female clients, on the

other hand, are usually slower, have great form and don't cheat. But, he said, "Their competitive spirit begins to rumble if they see someone cheat."

There is plenty of research on teamwork and competition to explain why the desire to be seen as "the best" supersedes the need to get into shape. "You don't want to be last, so you ratchet it up — that's the human spirit," said Dr. Leonard Zaichkowsky, a sports psychologist at [Boston University](#).

Julie Rennecker, Ph.D., a behavioral scientist in Austin, Tex., has examined group interactions in the workplace. Typically, she said, people try to differentiate themselves at all costs. They also compare themselves with one another. According to a 1998 report in the journal *Leisure Sciences*, this social comparison can inhibit people who are embarrassed by their limitations, or who don't like to display too much of their bodies.

Not all group sessions devolve into tournaments. People who work out together can feel accountable to their peers — what [psychologists](#) call social facilitation — and they are helpful and motivate one another. Sylvia Burrell, a trainer at Lady of America in Manor, Tex., sees this behavior at her gym.

Ms. Burrell has two group sessions of five women, each of whom pays \$30. The women in one session check in with one another daily. "They go down the list until the last lady calls the first, a kind of pay it forward," Ms. Burrell said. Those women are more successful than the other group, and have collectively lost 23.5 pounds since December.

For group personal training to truly work, experts say, instructors must place like-bodied people together. This makes sense: who wants to work out with someone who bench presses 180 if you're at 30? Many trainers say they do group people by ability, but often friends and family members would rather work out with someone they know.

"Pitfalls can occur if the group is not homogeneous," said Carol Scott, the chief executive of ECA World Fitness Alliance, an industry organization that offers training and workshops for fitness professionals. She also recommends that groups be no larger than six; other experts say smaller is better.

Some say true homogeneity in workout groups is impossible. "Two people are not going to

be equal,” said Joe Dowdell, the founder and an owner of Peak Performance, a personal training gym in Manhattan. “So a danger is that the one person who doesn’t have the capabilities may push themselves in a manner that’s not conducive to a good training effect.”

Much of the way a person reacts depends on personality. Type A’s might find friendly competition energizing; others might wilt. Rich Roe, a certified personal trainer who does individual and small-group training in San Diego and Los Angeles, said group training can be a “disaster” for noncompetitive people. He recalled a weight loss contest between two clients. For a while it worked, then one took a big lead and the other felt like giving up.

But sometimes disparities can be exhilarating. For four years, Doreen Goniou, 49, has been working out at Form and Fitness in Mequon, Wis., with three men whom she did not know before. She finds the male-to-female ratio exciting. “By the 10th or 12th rep I can feel myself failing,” she said, “but then I’ll look over and see a guy doing it and I think: ‘I can do it. I’m not going to be wimpy because I’m a girl.’ ”

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