

# Health Active Living Fitness

## Working Hard to Be Miss Fits

By Linda Black

It is dawn, 6 am precisely. The sun rises from a metallic sea, magenta sparks gradually coloring the pale sky above Ocean Park. On the beach a man slowly scans the sand for lost rings and coins; a young woman in yoga gear spreads out a blanket. Another tranquil day, but for the activity on the double-sided stairs that lead down to the beach.

And even before you see it, you hear it: the rhythmic pounding of a dozen sets of sneakers up the stairs, across the wood-planked stairwell, down the other side, and up again. Boot camp.

Not the military kind, no army fatigues here; some skinny cotton T-shirts, some well fitted sweat pants, even a couple of spandex tanks: Miss Fits Boot Camp. Don't let the name fool you; this is no bend and stretch class. This is hardcore.

Boot camp style fitness programs are fashioned after military camps and refer specifically to the boots worn by cadets. Over the past three or four years, boot camps have become a mainstream part of the exercise world. They have gained popularity because they fit a balanced, often extreme, workout into one-hour sessions, usually daily.

Indeed, they've become an exercise genre unto themselves, with programs geared to teens, juvenile offenders, brides-to-be, even employees of corporations.

Certified trainer Nisa Counter, who has been teaching for more years than she cares to admit in print, says she started Miss Fits long before the current trend began. While she provides an intense daily one-hour workout, Ms. Counter does not take the approach of many camp leaders who hire ex-military drill sergeants to bully clients into shape.

Instead, she has designed a routine that motivates women toward a more healthful lifestyle. The camp is exclusively for women, as Ms. Counter recognizes that wearing form-fitting clothing, no make up, and dripping with perspiration, makes some women self-conscious around men.

The women participating in this particular month-long camp range in age and occupation from a high school senior whose mom is working out alongside her, to a bride-to-

be who signed up for eight months, to a 60-something Manhattan executive.

The first day of boot camp, you don't weigh in you measure in. Ms. Counter, a green-eyed, lean and long-limbed blond, doesn't believe in scales. She talks inches, not pounds, but if her program is followed, results are guaranteed. She encourages participants to eliminate white sugar, pasta, bread, dairy, red meat, caffeine.

Like many boot camp trainers, Ms. Counter prefers to take it outdoors and explore the various landscapes of the Vineyard — even though this may require taking unusual precautions. "Hey mister, watch my girls with that hook," Ms. Counter warned an early morning fisherman whose line whistled through the air near the nearby heads of 16 boot campers who were lined up in a row working out.

Her camp routine includes uphill lunges at Owen Park, running zigzags between a line of orange cones on State Beach, counting out 900 lunges back and forth between goal posts at Veteran's Park, power walking along Beach Road from Inkwel to Little Bridge, then doing an aerobics workout using the bridge rails for balance.

For Ms. Counter, exercising and training are a part of a lifestyle that she has followed for years. A lifelong vegetarian who never drinks, she will not ask of anyone anything she is not prepared to do. She spends the hour inspiring, cajoling, encouraging.

But she is also ruthless about promptness, because providing a full-hour workout is important. Get accustomed to not going back to sleep. Rumi, in a quote about early morning, writes: "The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you, don't go back to sleep..." So when the hands of the alarm clock move toward buzz point, know that you will be rushing out — without that first cup of coffee — in sweats and sneakers, ready to get to work.

She pushes hard, but knows how to accommodate the varying fitness levels of participants, and takes particular care with individual issues or injuries. Suffering chronic back pain from an old injury, she is uncompromising about warming up before working out and stretching afterward.

During an hour of weight lifting, when every woman in the group is complaining,

Miss Fits director  
Nisa Counter.



PHOTOS BY NISA COUNTER

Jennie Schlossberg (front) and Jackie Willey do walking lunges on Little Bridge on Beach Road.

she yells: "Oh good! You guys feeling that? Great! I thought maybe you were made of stone. Just three more sets of eight."

Even when she stays indoors, she does not follow the typical fitness club routine. Instead of the treadmill, she assigns her camp to march with weights on their shoulders, up and down the five flights of stairs in back of the Mansion House gym where she is based.

As a reward for the strenuous daily workouts, the final day might be spent in appreciation of both the cardiovascular benefits and beauty of the Island. It is a chance to power walk the West Chop loop, to enjoy the views past the Yacht Club with its scattered boats, the old houses tucked behind the evergreens, the small meadows of sea grass-

es leading down to a beach strewn with driftwood and shells.

On the final morning of boot camp, each woman is measured in comparison to her first day's record: waist, hips, breasts, thighs, upper arms.

There are many success stories. Even those women who have not meticulously avoided the list of contrabands, who still give in to one cup of coffee a day, or an occasional chocolate chip cookie, realize some improvement. At the very least, they usually admit to feeling stronger, more empowered, and proud of themselves.

Linda Black is a freelance writer and performance poet with a background in broadcast journalism. She lives in Oak Bluffs.



Boot camp participants learn the importance of stretching after exercising.



Boot campers line up for knee bends as part of their lower body workout.