

HEALTH & WELLNESS

## Forget the Hotshot Trainer With the Six- Pack, Boomers Want Mature Fitness Coaches

As older people hit the gym in record numbers, demand rises for trainers in their 50s and 60s; 'It's hard for someone who's young to understand.'



*By Hilary Potkewitz*

After dieting and losing more than 30 pounds, Lynne Ranieri hired a personal trainer to help her exercise properly and keep off the weight. But there was a catch. “I did not want a perky, 20-something in Spandex telling this 60-something year-old body to do things it shouldn’t—or couldn’t—be doing,” Ms. Ranieri says.

Terry Hemphill, who is 66, also was uneasy about hiring a much-younger trainer. A few years ago, he beat a tropical illness and needed a fitness pro to help him rebuild strength and agility.

“I didn’t want a young hotshot trainer,” Mr. Hemphill says. “Even if they’re super talented, it’s hard for someone who’s young to understand what happens when your body ages.”

Everything worked out. Ms. Ranieri found trainer Carol Michaels, 62, in West Orange, N.J., and has been a

client for more than six years. Mr. Hemphill has been working out with trainer Jesse Garcia, 58, since 2015, when they were matched at DIAKADI Fitness, a gym in San Francisco.

Demand for older personal trainers is on the rise nationwide as baby boomers hit the gym looking to stay in shape, recover from surgery or improve their physical fitness. While many older gym members are eager exercisers, some are reluctant to put themselves at the mercy of the young sprites and Adonises who typically staff health clubs. That's creating an opportunity for trainers in their 40s, 50s and 60s. Of the 25,000 students who earned a personal-trainer certification through the International Sports Sciences Association last year, 10% were more than 40 years old and 5% were over 50. Just five years ago, the number of students in that age range was "almost zero," says Andrew Wyant, president of the association. "It's a huge change."

The number of gym members who are 55 or older surged to more than 13.5 million in 2016 from 8.5 million in 2006, according to the International Health, Racquet and Sportsclub Association. "Health-club operators know their biggest opportunity is with older Gen-Xers and baby boomers who have the time and the money to spend on their health," says Meredith Poppler, a spokeswoman for the IHRSA. "One way to attract that older population is with a staff that they can relate to."

Kim Evans, fitness coordinator at the Spring Lake, Mich., Fitness and Aquatic Center, has witnessed the shift. A former aerobics instructor, Ms. Evans, 62, kept teaching group exercise classes after joining club management as a way to stay active and connect with members. In recent years, people from the classes started asking if she would work with them one-on-one.

"Many of them shouldn't be in a group class, they need more personal attention," she says. But instead of booking a session with one of the club's young trainers, they'd make a beeline for Ms. Evans. "I realized they really relate to me because I'm the same age. There's an instant rapport," she says.

She recently added personal trainer to her resume and now has about 10 clients. John Planteroth, 68, started working out with Ms. Evans a year ago when a nagging pain in his hip turned out to be osteopenia, and his doctor advised strength training. Mr. Planteroth had

never belonged to a gym before and needed a trainer to tell him what to do.

“I’m a retired IT manager. I’m a nerd,” he says. “I was nervous about getting some young guy who was an athlete. Kim is exceedingly good at figuring out how much I can take.” Mr. Planteroth says he has become stronger and his golf game has improved. Sort of. “I can hit the ball a lot farther,” he says. “That’s good if it goes straight—but bad if it doesn’t.” His wife Betsy, 67, started joining him in training sessions about two months ago. The couple works out with Ms. Evans twice a week. Ms. Evans recently hired another trainer for the club—a retired Coast Guard officer in her “maybe late-50s,” Ms. Evans estimates. “She’s had a hip replacement! I hired her specifically because she was older.”

The movement has inspired some second careers. In recent years, fitness-accreditation programs have seen a jump in middle-age students. The American Council on Exercise, which certifies about 20,000 personal trainers each year, reports the share of graduates over age 40 has more than doubled in recent years to 12.5%, according to Cedric Bryant, the group’s president and chief science officer.

“I prefer to think of myself as ‘mature’ rather than middle-aged,” jokes 46-year-old Allen Blunt, a regional fitness trainer in Southern California for the gym chain Orangetheory Fitness. He received his personal-trainer certification in 2015 after a career in software sales. Mr. Blunt manages and trains about 75 personal trainers for Orangetheory and estimates that about 8% of them are in their 40s or older. “When members come across a trainer or coach that’s in their same age range, they’re pleasantly surprised and there’s a sense of camaraderie that happens,” he says. Nancy Westbrook, a former timber-company executive in Hillsboro, Ore., became a personal trainer eight years ago, when she was 56. “Once I sold the timber business, I was like, ‘What’s my identity?’” she recalls. She joined a gym, worked with a trainer, lost 25 pounds and dropped 8% of her body fat. “It gave me great confidence and I wanted to share that with people,” Ms. Westbrook says. Now 64, she has worked at two gyms and found advantages to being the oldest trainer in the room. She has about 15 clients, who all specifically asked to train with her, she says. “They know I’m not going to criticize their bodies. I’m not scary to them,” says Ms. Westbrook, who also is a nutritionist. “We can talk about everything from menopause to hormones to pooping.” Many clients

connect with older trainers' life experience, says Mr. Garcia, the trainer at DIAKADI in San Francisco. A former professional dancer, Mr. Garcia was working as a massage therapist until a health crisis led him to become a personal trainer in his late 40s. He has had two open-heart surgeries, several ankle operations and has lived with HIV since the 1990s, he says.

"A lot of my clients beat themselves up because they feel like their body is failing them," Mr. Garcia says. "I'm able to show them that no matter what we have to fight against because we're getting older, we can do this. And they know I'm not B.S.-ing them." Training for the Long Run

"Nearly every gym in America is looking for a personal trainer at any given time," says Andrew Wyant, president of the International Sports Sciences Association, a fitness-accreditation organization. ISSA guarantees job placement to the 25,000 students who complete its personal-training certification course each year. Some quit over the pay (median income was about \$39,000 in 2017, according to the BLS), others can't handle the irregular hours and many ultimately are frustrated by the constant hustle for clients, Mr. Wyant says. Older trainers—those in their 40s, 50s and 60s—may be different. "Anecdotally, the retention rates of more mature trainers tend to be better," says Cedric Bryant, chief science officer of the American Council on Exercise, another fitness-accreditation organization. "That age group has typically been trained that once they've made a decision to invest in a career, they're not going to jump to something else if things aren't immediately meeting their expectations."

Many have professional experience they can draw on, says Allen Blunt, regional fitness trainer for Orangetheory in Southern California. "The older trainers that come in tend to have a stronger sense of who they are and why they're there," he says. "They can manage finances better." Though there is scant data on career longevity for middle-age trainers, hiring managers are starting to take notice. "Now that I think about it," says Kim Evans, fitness coordinator for the Spring Lake, Mich., Fitness and Aquatic Center, "younger trainers have come and gone and the older trainers are still here."