

Women have 'Curves' : Members find results, support and 'no mirrors' at new program

By E.T. Robbins / News Correspondent

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When ABC's "Are You Hot? The Search for America's Sexiest People" debuted this winter, I didn't react well. I wanted to stick Lorenzo Lamas' fat-finder-laser-pointer in his ear, twisting it until he writhed in pain.

No, I'm not bitter.

But like thousands of other women, I've been battling body image issues all my life. Shows like "Are You Hot?" "The Bachelor" and even "American Idol" reaffirm the silly notion that in order to find fame, success, or love, it helps if you are a size 2. What's a girl to do?

I've tried many exercise programs over the years, joining gyms that in hindsight are scaled down versions of reality TV shows: chiseled men and teeny-weeny girls in spandex flexing their muscles at machines that require engineering degrees to operate.

Then I heard about Curves, an in-and-out-in-30-minutes fitness program just for women. Skeptical but curious, I stopped by the Framingham Curves in Nobscot before Valentine's Day. Sherbet-colored walls greeted me along with smiling women bouncing to upbeat music. They actually looked like they were enjoying themselves. Then I noticed the scale. The tape measures. My heart sank.

"I don't want to be weighed or measured," I blurted out to the girl behind the counter. "Can I still join?"

She smiled, "Of course. Some members choose to get weighed and others don't. It's up to you."

I prefer to measure progress by wearing clothes once relegated to the back of my closet, but I understand now why many members opt to keep track of numbers; the inches and pounds seem to drip off with little effort.

Let's face it — 30 minutes, three times a week (the recommended minimum in order to see results) is nothing. I'm happy to report that more items from The Land of Lost Jeans are seeing daylight. I'm not alone in my success.

Betty Rigney of Marlborough joined the Southborough Curves 11 months ago.

"I've lost 10 pounds without dieting and 14 inches. The time flies while exercising and the women are having fun."

With over 5,000 locations worldwide (making it the world's largest fitness franchise), Curves is quickly becoming the hottest topic in the Bay State. There are over 150 locations in Massachusetts from Worcester to Boston, Peabody to Cape Cod.

Laurie Bond, owner of Curves in Marlborough, Shrewsbury and Framingham, says the concept is a simple one.

"It's about strength training, something that is lacking in many women's workouts. The hydraulic machines are the safest thing next to water aerobics."

Eight to 12 machines make up the circuit. Designed specifically for women, each one targets a different

muscle group. In between each machine is a platform that you can jog or walk on — the goal is to keep your heart rate up. You spend 30 seconds on each one, moving to music, until a recorded voice prompts you to "change stations now." You go around the circuit two to three times depending on the number of machines.

Pat Monfette, owner of Curves in Franklin, points out the benefit of constantly switching machines.

"You don't feel like you're exercising. Often you're talking with the woman next to you and you're happy because you're finally doing something for yourself. So far, our members combined have lost a total of 2,119 pounds and 4,799 inches."

Monfette opened her Curves in April of 2001, often signing new members with four simple words, "No men. No mirrors."

Word-of-mouth endorsements have been the best (and often only) form of advertisement, although you may notice new TV commercials during shows like "Oprah!"

As for price? I signed on for a year, paid a one-time service fee of \$59 and then \$29 each month (prices may vary depending on location and how long you sign up for).

Bond has lost two dress sizes and nearly 20 pounds since she started working out at Curves in Milford in January of 2001. She bought the Marlborough franchise in July of that same year. The Framingham location opened in October of 2002, and Shrewsbury opened last month.

Bond admits that what makes her happy isn't necessarily when people lose pounds and inches.

"What I really love is when people come in and tell me that they're off their blood Pressure or cholesterol medications. Just the other day one of our members had a mammogram and the technician asked her if she had been working out because they saw the muscle definition in her chest and upper arms. It's amazing."

In November, Michelle Smith-Packard joined Curves in Sudbury to help her lose weight she had gained during pregnancy. She lost a total of 15 pounds and inches in her first month.

Smith-Packard says, "It's a very positive atmosphere that is more focused on health, well being, and what is right for you — not like a gym that only seems to be body conscious. I'm never going to be a size 8, but I can work toward the healthiest and leanest me I can be."

Perhaps a better TV reality show would be "Are You Healthy and Having Fun?" Maybe I can host it.