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Into the trenches

Fitness boot camps have become a popular way to drop the pounds

AMY FULLER
RECORD STAFF

Friday, June 27, 6:30 a.m., Victoria Park, Kitchener

Most people are still fumbling for the snooze button when Chris Walker orders his crew into action at 6:30 a.m. on a Friday.

"Twenty dive bombs!"

Six women drop to the ground, scraping their bellies across colourful yoga mats arranged in a semicircle in the park, by the kids' play area.

Legs taut, bums in the air, they swoop down and then up in an advanced version of the push-up. Walker paces a patch of grass in the middle and eyes their form. He's got a whistle, a stopwatch and a bullhorn, and in green camouflage he looks not unlike Tommy Europe of *The Last 10 Pounds Bootcamp* reality television show.

For a self-declared fitness maniac and drill sergeant, he's soft-spoken and easygoing. But he keeps them moving: a chart on his clipboard details drills for the lower body, upper body and abs. He adjusts the workout according to fitness levels.

As predicted by the results of a national survey of American fitness professionals in January, and helped along by *The Last 10 Pounds*, four to eight-week fitness boot camps have become a popular trend locally and elsewhere. Some women join pre-wedding or post-baby, but as many others sign up because they want a dramatic lifestyle change. The group setting helps them get going.

The women at Walker's boot camp -- homemakers, graduate students, a dental hygienist and a business analyst -- range in age from early 20s to 40s.

Bridget Pereira, 22, flashes an engagement ring, but she's the only bride-to-be. The others say they're here because it's something new, it's a more intense workout, and it uses natural movements rather than exercise machines.

Walker also has them keep a food journal and follow his Common Sense Eating Guide. And the outdoor setting beats the gym, apart from the mosquitoes. (He quips, "Bugs got lots of protein, so if you eat one it's not bad.")

The dive-bombs trigger a chorus of grunts and groans. Sweat dribbles down necks and off noses and the acrid aroma of bug spray wafts above picnic tables. Lynne MacDonald pipes up.

"You won't be able to lift your arms after this," says MacDonald, panting. The others call her Little Miss Chatterbox.

Walker rolls his eyes and snickers. "Oh good. Horror stories."

Chatterbox is a sassy, sinewy Waterloo mom who's been attending Walker's boot camp since April. She wears a T-shirt that features her cartoon namesake, and her ponytail bobs out the back of a white cap as they begin one-handed push-ups on the picnic tables and trees.

"You're workin' the chest," Walker says. "It's only 20 on each side. No big deal."

"Great -- now for the next workout, Chris is going to get us to all come over and help him move," Chatterbox says.

Walker giggles.

"Soon you'll be able to do these on the ground and enter bodybuilding shows," he counters, with a dubious degree of sincerity.

Monday, June 30, 7 p.m., a suburban Waterloo home



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Sandra Henderson of PHAT Weight Loss and Personal Training takes the personal approach a step further by bringing her boot camp to clients' homes. Henderson left her job at a gym because she felt limited by the set programming.

"I felt it was time to put my own personal stamp on training: weight loss coupled with fitness," she says.

On a warm Monday evening, she's at Chris and Liz Coggins' house in a leafy Waterloo neighbourhood. The Coggins initially hired Henderson as a personal trainer, but they like working out in a group, and more participants means a lower price. When a flood ruined the flooring in their basement office, they installed blue and green foam tiles for a home gym.

After two friends of the Coggins arrive, Henderson orders knee-ups and burpees, then some core-body exercises. Liz struggles with the bicycle move, grimacing and laughing.

"My legs are dead, right here," she says, patting her thighs. Meanwhile, Chris hefts a 45-pound Olympic bar and Nancy Jones wields hand weights.

"It's never the same stuff twice," says Jones. "It's amazing how hard you work with your own body."

Wednesday, July 2, 9:30 a.m., Waterloo Park

If anyone knows what a body can do, it's Pamela Bortmes, co-owner of Absolute Health and Fitness in Waterloo. She's mom to two boys and a girl and recently placed fourth in her division at the Ontario Physique Association's provincial figure competition. She also runs Stroller Bootcamp in Waterloo Park twice a week.

Her boot camp moms -- 10 of them on this particular Wednesday -- push all-terrain strollers with names like X-Country Cougar 2 Chariot. Some hold two kids happily sucking on sippy cups and wearing floppy sun hats.

Bortmes puts the moms through a regimen of cardio and resistance training: stroller lunges, sprints, squats and butt blasters. For a power-walk by the tennis courts, they attach bands to the bottom rung of the buggies and push up -- up -- up, their fists high in the air.

Then, legs flail and shoes thump on the boardwalk by Silver Lake. A mother duck and her eight ducklings swim to the edge to watch them work their abs.

"Awesome job, mummies!" says Natalie Ballach, who helps Bortmes with the class.

Only at the end of the hour do the babies begin to fuss. It's bottle time.

"Atticus, what do you think, dear?" says Joanne Lakin, a stroller camp regular who attended up to the 39th week of her last pregnancy. Her two-year-old son responds emphatically:

"Yes!"

Thursday, July 3, 6:30 p.m., Lester B. Pearson Public School, Waterloo

Those more concerned about bikini-readiness than baby fat gather Tuesday and Thursday evenings for Amanda Zettel's booty camp in a Waterloo playground. Thirteen women mirror Zettel, who wears pink camouflage and issues perky orders. Her best growly voice is more cute than scary:

"SINNNNNNGLESS!"

"Can you give me doubles? Yes you can!"

She laughs and hikes her pants up, then demonstrates a kick.

Zettel says women join for a variety of reasons, but tend to have a driven attitude. The workout is less intense than some others, though.

"I think the 'booty' of our title gives it a warmer feeling . . . a fun flavour," she says.

The group jogs into the sunset chanting, "Now this time is just for me, so I can look seeeeexy. Booty -- Camp, Booty -- Camp, BOOTY CAMP!"

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READY FOR A MILITARY-STYLE WORKOUT?

Local boot camps offer intense workouts to help you battle flab. Remember to eat before you go and bring a yoga mat and water.

For women:

Women's Only Fitness Boot Camp, with trainer Chris Walker. Three days a week (morning or evening) for one hour in Victoria Park, Kitchener. \$10 per class or \$120 per month. Bring five-pound weights. Contact: 519-743-4949 or see www.fitnesstrainingformenandwomen.com.

For you:

Personalized Boot Camp, with trainer Sandra Henderson. For brides, teens, friends or family, in your home or backyard. Price varies according to the number of participants, classes and location (eight classes for five people in town is \$20 per class). Contact: 519-503-9497 or see www.phatweightloss.com.

For moms:

Stroller Bootcamp, with trainer Pamela Bortmes. Monday and Wednesday, 9:30 to 10:30 a.m. in Waterloo Park. Meet in the parking lot by Lions Lagoon Splash Park. Bring your child and a stroller. \$85 for a flexpass: eight classes over 12 weeks. Contact: 519-886-1568 or see www.absolutehealthandfitness.ca.

For the beach:

Booty Camp Fitness, with trainer Amanda Zettel. Tuesday and Thursday, 6:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. outside at Lester B. Pearson Public School, 520 Chesapeake Dr. in Waterloo. \$159 for four weeks; \$299 for eight weeks. Contact: 416-893-0354, ext. 720 or see www.bootycampfitness.com.

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