

Fitness+Muscle

Andy (left) and John taught me the truth: It's not indoor cycling. It's meditation.



SWEATING WITH THE OLDIES

What can a young man take away from a week of workouts with the over-60 set? We sent our 29-year-old fitness editor to find out. By Michael Easter

Noon on a Thursday, my new friend Andy emails to ask if I want to join him and some pals at a local sports bar for dinner. Sure, I reply, figuring it'd be a chance to meet some of the guys from the new gym I just joined. Plus, it's all-you-can-eat prime rib night.

By 7:30, the five of us are sitting around a table devouring slabs of rare beef. Andy, I learn, is a financial guy. Art's a retired urologist, Scott is from the dental industry, and John was an IT specialist with a medical lab. They all look fit, especially Art, who has the long, lean build of a Michael Phelps.

I ask Art what he does in the gym. "I don't go to the gym much anymore," he replies. "I own 10 acres of land, and taking care of that is my workout."

"You sure had a lot of 'workouts' after that winter storm back in 2000," says John. "No, that's not the right year," Andy says. "Sure it is," John insists.

Soon everyone is bickering and pointing their forks to make points and trying to remember the chronology. These four gentlemen, all over age 60, some retired, will be my mentors for the week. ▶

When my boss gave me the assignment to ditch my typically intense, CrossFit-type routine and start exercising with old folks, I was perplexed. What could the fitness editor of the world's largest men's magazine possibly learn from guys who can't even remember the last big blizzard?

"Would anyone like more prime rib?" asks the waitress.

"Yes, please," says Scott. *Unbelievable*, I think. *Where do these old guys put it?*

But when another massive strip of meat arrives, Scott takes two small bites and then asks for a to-go box. "I always order an extra one to split with my dog," he says.

I signal the waitress. Maybe there are a few things I can learn from these guys.

1/ Be social once in a while.

I meet Andy at Steel Fitness Premier, a big-box gym attached to an orthopedic center. Andy—bald, muscular, gold cross—is the mayor of the place. He's shaking hands, saying hello, and catching up with everyone.

Health club mingling is a new experience for me. Usually when I'm at the gym, I exercise with headphones and avoid eye contact.

But that's not an option when you're with Andy. As we work out, he introduces me to Jay, an orthopedist who sees me doing pull-ups and suggests I straighten my arm out in front of me, palm up, like I'm asking for change, and with my other hand pull my fingers toward my body. That may help me avoid elbow pain from imbalances caused by doing too many reps, he says.

Next I meet a guy who's doing a kettlebell carry while holding the kettlebell bottom up. Doing that requires you to grip firmer and stabilizes your shoulder, he says.

Then Andy interrupts a 70-something guy who's exercising harder than anyone else, doing mountain climbers at a savage pace. But the man is happy to take a break and share his secret to exercising into old age—basically, picking activities that feel good. In other words, forget about trying to motivate yourself with workouts you dread or doing exercises you hear are great but that don't feel right. Just do what you enjoy.

Before I realize it, 90 minutes have passed. I've only exercised for a third of that time, but maybe the mayor is onto something.

For one workout a week, I might unplug, forget the clock, and actually talk to people. The friendships I form and the tips I hear might keep me coming back for the long haul. In fact, researchers in Brazil found that people who interact with others during exercise are more likely to stick with it.

"Hey," says Andy as we're leaving the gym. "You want to grab a burger?"



2/ Don't make it rocket science.

I'm the kind of guy who plans and researches every little thing and can overcomplicate a trip to 7-Eleven for a gallon of milk. And since I'm in the business, that tendency applies to my exercise. I once spent more time planning a workout than doing the workout.

Andy is telling me about his all-time favorite stationary bike routine. "I pedal hard for a bit, then rest for a bit," he says, "and I keep doing that for 30, 45, or even 60 minutes."

I stare blankly.

"Yeah, like intervals," I say.

"I've been doing that workout for 35 years," he says, "and I've always called it 'exercise.'"

Point taken. At the end of the day, it's all just "exercise."

3/ Train to live, but live.

One day Andy was early, as always, for the indoor cycling class, warming up on his usual bike, when in walked this new woman who started pitching a fit because there weren't any bikes left.

If it were me, I'd have avoided her gaze and stayed put. The idea of conceding a

scheduled workout to someone who came late is as unthinkable as JFK telling Khrushchev, "You know what? Take Florida."

So I was surprised to hear what Andy did.

"I gave her my bike," he says. "I figured, I take this class 300 times a year. I'll be okay if I only take it 299 times."

Last year I flew home to spend Thanksgiving with my mom. That day I did burpees alone in the garage. My time with her is limited. In retrospect, I realize that it was one hour we could have spent reconnecting. This Thanksgiving, that won't happen.

4/ Use your strength.

My approach to fitness aligns with what's popular in the industry today—harder is better and improvement requires suffering. If this philosophy were a bumper sticker, it would read, "The harder the workout, the harder the man." No pain, no gain.

Then I meet Clair. He's 92 and goes to Steel Fitness Premier every day. Back in World War II he was drafted into the military, and as a paratrooper he would jump out of planes to fight the enemy on the ground in Europe.

OLD-MAN SOUP FOR THE SOUL

Cooking in the gym's hot tub was an opportunity to recover and soak up wisdom.



The idea of a gym workout causing “suffering” suddenly seems almost comical, and I start to feel about as tough as an overripe banana. Exercise can be uncomfortable, sure. It needs to be work. But my interpretation of suffering—quickly picking up heavy stuff in a temperature-controlled building next to a Wendy’s—is anything but.

In fact, this smiling old man makes me wonder why I’m really exercising so hard. In today’s comfortable society (no small thanks to Clair and his military colleagues), do tough workouts fulfill some existential need that men have to prove they’re really men?

I mention this to my friend, *MH* fitness advisor David Jack. “If you want to be tough like Clair, you can still exercise hard, but don’t leave your strength in the squat rack,” he says. “There are probably 100 people within a 5-mile radius of your gym who need the physical strength you have. Do some good in the world. Look for some volunteer opportunities to help them.”

Build strength not just for strength’s sake, but to serve. New bumper sticker?

5/ Be mindful of the importance of being mindless.

John used to take 13 indoor cycling classes a week—676 a year—until the gym cut its schedule back. I initially think this is insane. So when he invites me to join him for a class, I hesitate. Understand that I use cardio machines primarily to warm up for and occasionally cool down from weight workouts, and I’ve never spent more than 30 minutes on one. So I don’t know what to expect. John, who looks like an aging hippie with his white beard and spectacles, doesn’t help by confessing that he listens to rare live Jefferson Airplane recordings to help fight the boredom. I think of one of the few Jefferson Airplane lyrics I know: “...and all the joy within you...dies!”

But it’s not as bad as I expect. In fact, it’s more than just heart-boosting cardio. It’s head-calming meditation. As I pedal, I focus on my breathing and turn inward, brainstorming my career and troubleshooting my life, eventually just losing myself in the sweat and the cycling. It’s been a long time since I sat with my thoughts for 60 uninterrupted minutes. Most of my workouts are so focused that it’s a welcome change to just zone out. And the benefits are tangible: A study from Finland suggests that long cardio workouts actually improve brain health more than high-intensity intervals do.

6/ Warm up your body—and mind.

I’m at the gym waiting to meet one of the guys. To kill time I hop on an elliptical and turn on the TV. Next to me is Bob Barker’s doppelgänger—a slender, gold-skinned, white-haired, veneered gentleman. He’s working the stair climber at a fast-but-comfortable pace while flipping through a book.

“What are you reading?” I ask, remembering Old Guy Lesson #1.

“*The Winds of War*,” he says. “It’s a novel about World War II, but it’s historically accurate, so you learn a lot.” I tell him that the Second World War fascinates me, and I’ll be sure to read the book.

He lifts his bushy eyebrows and glares at the TV screen on my machine. It’s tuned to *Dog the Bounty Hunter*, courtesy of the last person who used it. Dog is tasing someone who appears to be a meth head.

Bob closes his book and heads for another machine, but he leaves me thinking. I have a bad habit of blasting through my cardio warmup. Reading a novel or the day’s news would not only stretch my mind but also ensure that I don’t go overboard: If at any point I have trouble reading, I’ll know my warmup is becoming too intense. And book learning keeps you mentally fit, of course.

7/ Know that personal records aren’t the only barometer of improvement.

I’m steeping in the gym’s hot tub with Andy and three of the other guys after a workout. They’re delighted to have a fresh addition to their old-man soup. Me? I’m wishing I’d worn a wetsuit.

When it comes to fitness, I’ve always believed that continually moving the dial forward is the key to improvement, and I say so.

“But here’s what’s wrong with that,” says Andy. “Let’s say your goal is to lift 200 pounds. So you work really hard and eventually reach your goal. Where do you go from there? You try for 210, then 220, but you can’t keep doing that forever.” Your quest for more, more, more will eventually lead to injury. “And once you’re hurt, you have to sit out, and you end up in worse shape than if you’d just stuck to that 200-pound weight.”

Why is Andy so sure of this? He’s been there, and he’s seen it in old friends who’ve spent time at the weight rack. In fact, he’s in this hot tub to make sure he recovers adequately. You can bounce back when you’re young, he says, but eventually you reach an age when the injuries stick and affect your long-term quality of life.

I stew on this awhile. I have no reason to push the envelope other than my ego and the upward curve on an Excel chart. Maybe there’s a lesson here too: When doing inherently risky exercises, such as deadlifts, maybe I should start valuing perfection over pounds. Instead of judging improvement by weight, perhaps I should gauge it by form, movement, and tempo. After all, who’s fitter? The guy who can lift 250 pounds until he tries for 260 and shatters, or the guy who can lift 200 pounds until the day he dies?

8/ Stay fit, stay young.

After spending hours hanging out at the gym with these gentlemen, I’m shocked at how they seemed to “de-age” before my eyes. What I perceived as old just a week ago no longer holds. Andy, Scott, Art, John, Clair, Bob Barker, and their fellow gym geezers move well and live with vitality.

Then it occurs to me: They aren’t the same breed of seniors I see shuffling into the diner for 4:30 dinners, or the ones camped in front of casino slots with oxygen tanks on their motorized chairs. These guys are enjoying the benefits of decades of healthy living, having watched their diets, controlled their weight and, most important, stayed active.

Suddenly, “old” doesn’t seem so age-spotted and off-putting to me. Exercise—no, smart exercise—creates a new type of aging, and in 40 more years I wouldn’t mind being just like these guys.