

'We're Paying For This?'

By Mary Voboril
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SOMETHING'S WRONG.

It's 5:30 a.m., a gray and humid dawn, and 36 lawyers, investment bankers, media producers and other gung-ho, can-do, Type A New Yorkers are in Central Park, gasping for air.

There on a volleyball court, their bodies are streaked with sweat and crusted with sand. Some look . . . cowed. They keep a wary eye on Jack Walston, a hard-bodied former Navy SEAL who is pacing before them, obviously peeved.

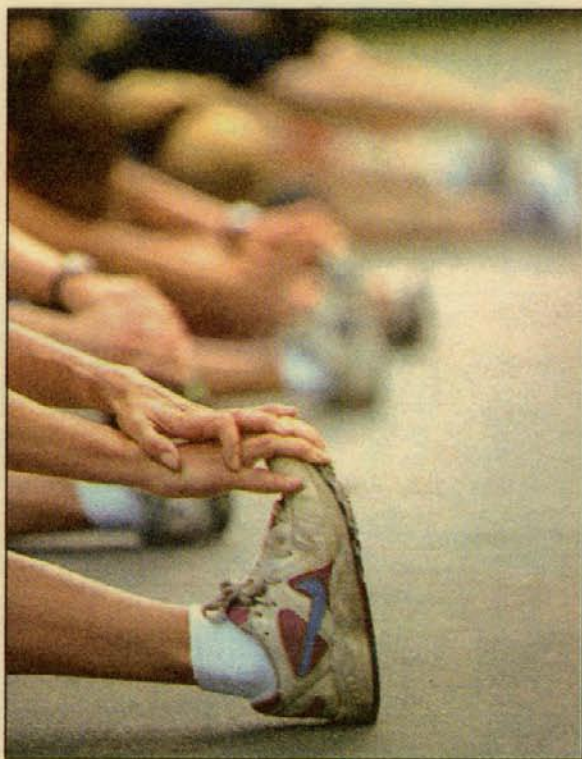
"Just what I need to start my day," Walston barks. "A quitter!"

A 53-year-old manager for a well-known securities firm had just packed up his Gatorade and walked off into the sunrise. He had just crawled, belly down, through a sand pit that in saner hours is used for beach volleyball, and he'd had enough of Walston and the Original SEAL Physical Training Course — a 10-day, \$450, no-refunds "boot camp" modeled after actual Navy SEALs workouts, reputed to be the toughest in the world.

In the sultry dawn, more words erupt from Walston: "I hate quitters!" He pauses a few seconds, the words hanging in the heavy air. Then, "Push-ups!" Instantly the group collapses. At Walston's instruction, they remain frozen in position, elbows locked, knees off the "deck," as he lectures about motivation ("Comes from within!"), mental toughness ("Something you can't buy!"), teamwork, self-discipline. Quitting. "Most of you," he points out, "work in professions where quitting is not tolerated." In SEALs PT, everyone is expected to give Walston "110 percent!"

At his feet, the group remains locked in push-up mode, push-ups not having yet begun. Arms begin to wobble. Sweat drips from smudged faces. Some members of Team NYC, as they call themselves, groan and sink to scabbed knees. Walston speaks: "110 percent! Is that clear!"

"Yes, Instructor Walston," the team replies, not



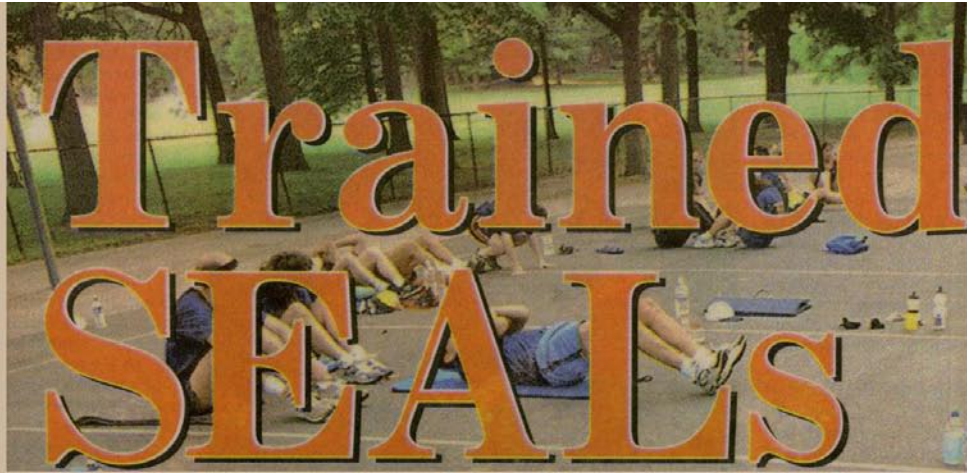
Trainees in Jack Walston's fitness boot camp stretch out, and prepare mentally for the strenuous workout ahead.

quite in unison.

The heat wave is on, and the temperature nudges toward 90 degrees. There were another 75 minutes to go. And another eight days of wresting bodies out of bed at 4 a.m. for a 90-minute workout beginning at 5:15. But also eight days of occasional exhilaration as some pushed past self-imagined limits, eliciting, from Walston, the words "Good" or even "Excellent."

The point was proven again and again: You can do more than you think you can, especially if you work

Trained SEALS



No quitters, no refunds, no kidding! Team NYC, participating in Jack Walston's Original SEAL Physical Training Course, goes on a less-than-leisurely run through Central Park on a hot, hazy and humid morning — only one part of a vigorous regimen.



"Punishments" include the "chase the rabbit" exercise, where trainees run in place with their hands on the "deck."

to mock us, to say "Shame on you!" and "Stop moaning!" and, always, to consider our teammates. In the sandpit, we crawled over each other like lobsters in a tank. So Walston made us chant, "Me, me! I, I!" Twinkies became a byword; supposedly that was our favorite food, given any sub-110 percent effort. So "flat" were we one day that Walston suggested we'd been at the movies, gorging on buttered popcorn. Without the popcorn.

"Hwun, two, three . . . easy, easy, easy."

Some threw up. Some were inattentive as to form, attracting "punishment" in the form of duck-walks or "chase the rabbit," in which you place your hands on the gravelly "deck" and run in place, tormented glutes high in the air.

"We expect you to do the exercises in the proper form," Walston later told me. "That way you get stronger, you see results and you can't cheat."

Sometimes we chased rabbits simply for shouting "Hoo-yah!," the official SEALs yell, with too little enthusiasm or unanimity. We chased rabbits for behav-

ing like a gaggle of self-obsessed New Yorkers hung up on individual performance. One hapless woman darted off alone in an unauthorized search for a restroom. For that infraction, the rest of us had to chase rabbits until she returned — or, more precisely, until Walston told us to stop.

"No one goes off alone!" Walston shouted. And, as with real SEALs, no one gets left behind.

So we quickly coalesced as a team, but not always an efficient one. One day, slowly, comically, awkwardly, we scaled an iron gate to reach our "obstacle course," a playground with a jungle gym and rubberized "deck." Someone darkly joked, "If this was wartime, we'd all be dead by now" — especially since someone eventually figured out that the gate was unlocked.

How hard was SEALs PT?

"Much harder than I ever anticipated," admits Carmen Brun, a Manhattan hotel manager and marathon runner. "But I knew if I stuck it out, I would gain something more important than a flatter stom-

ach: mental strength, which would help me in everything I do. I know now that I can push my body and mind further, even when I am tired or feel defeated.

"It was worth every cent."

One of Team NYC's top performers was Steven Lucia, 38, a trial lawyer who signed up for SEALs PT "to see if it was as tough as it purported to be, and to see if I could hack it." It was and he did. "They lived up to their billing when they said they give you as much as you can take. I went home every day feeling I'd had a hard workout."

Part of the dynamic that kept people coming back, several later said, was the ethos of team loyalty. The first Thursday we smoothly separated into groups of three, did our assigned exercises and sped off on team jogs. Those who finished first doubled back to join slower groups. In the light of the rising sun, we trotted to the volleyball court as a solid unit. Team NYC.

Finally we'd done something right.

Walston stood before us nodding. "I can guarantee you, teams in Houston take four times as long to get organized into teams," he said in approving tones. There was a hint, perhaps, of pride in our performance.

It didn't last. But at that instant, cloying as it may sound, I felt a flush of pride, too: Pride in Team NYC. Several later evoked this euphoric moment as the high point of the entire course.

"I enjoyed seeing people support one another," said Lucia, the lawyer. "It gave me the sense of being involved with a team in a way I have not experienced since I played soccer in college. . . . I was disappointed when I got to work and the same sense of teamwork that 35 strangers could muster in just a couple of days was not present in the office I have worked in for 11 years."

Two team members drove in from New Jersey. Two came from Brooklyn. One investment banker worked more than 48 hours straight, then arrived in a cab before dawn. Lawyer Deborah Lifshy worked until 2 a.m. one night and also showed up on time. "It's great to see people who I imagine may be seriously competitive and hard-driving at work being so supportive," Lifshy said. "I miss that in my work as a lawyer in a big sweatshop."

This, of course, was another kind of sweatshop.

"Hwun, two, three . . . Happy, happy, happy."

That second day — would it never end? — I clawed my way across the infernal sand pit twice, then bear-walked, weight on my hands. The next day my thighs ached and burned, but so what; we had to run wind sprints and jump in various insidious ways across a baseball diamond. The day after that, I, at 120 pounds, was paired with two men, 180 and 190 pounds. Two of us took turns carrying the third, as if he were injured. We switched off until each had been

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