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SEPTEMBER 2005

TRAINING DAY

Before the bell rings on the NYSE, some Wall Streeters have already run themselves ragged. Megan Deem infiltrates Central Park's secret sect: boot camp for the financial set

While I am, nominally, a fitness editor, anyone who knows me can attest that my experience in that area is more academic than practical. There are simply very few nonpassion-related occasions for which I'll get sweaty and out of breath.

I'm content to sit at my desk researching the latest sports medicine studies, but no matter how amazing the results, the need to personally re-create the findings rarely overtakes me. Clearly I'm not the top candidate for a two-hours-a-day, 10-day, crack-of-dawn boot camp led by Jack Walston, a former Navy SEAL, in New York City's Central Park. But my editor said the words that would prompt any single 31-year-old Manhattan woman to dig through her closet for a pair of running shoes: "It's where all the finance guys work out. Maybe you'll meet someone."

Where the Boys Are

She was right. The group that assembled at 4:30 A.M. (!) under a street lamp on West 63rd Street consisted of a majority of men (15 versus seven women)—almost all of whom were married, engaged, or otherwise committed. Nearly everyone toiled on Wall Street as a trader, portfolio manager, or corporate attorney—and seemed already to possess a Navy SEAL level of physical fitness. Patricia introduced herself by saying that she had run the Boston Marathon two weeks earlier. Joe, a trader, completed 12 Ironman triathlons in 2004 (just to see if he could) and was using boot camp "to whip [myself] into shape for a 303-mile Hospicare fundraising run from New York City to Pittsfield, Vermont." I had peaked with a 10K race eight years ago.

I shouldn't have been so shocked. When I'd called to register, I asked the woman taking my information if the class was really as difficult as it seemed from the website: *We offer a hard-core calisthenics workout that is very basic in nature yet will cause you to cry out for mercy!*

"What's your current exercise routine?"

"An hour of Pilates twice a week."

"You might want to start running right now, like on your lunch break."

"Super... Anything else I should know?"

"Some people throw up from the exertion. It's more often the men than the women, though, for whatever reason."

I got as far as making an inspirational jogging mix for my iPod and listening to said inspirational mix while sprawled on my couch, staring at the shrink-wrapped cover of the video *The Original Navy SEALs Physical Training Course: Advanced Level Two*, which Walston had sent to help me prepare.

Walston founded the Houston-based Original SEAL P.T. Boot Camp in 1997 after nine years in the military, five of them as a SEAL. A few weeks each year, he brings his course to New York City (his next trip is in October); he also leads hiking and biking trips in Belize and Vieques. Each day's activities vary



among running, calisthenics, and more running (see box on next page). He doesn't advertise, but word of mouth reached Manhattan's finance community long ago, attracting alpha males eager to prove themselves in yet another arena. Walston is 39 with the body of a very fit 23-year-old, the kind of guy who runs a 150-mile bicycle race (the Houston to Austin MS 150). That's something we have in common—I don't have a bike either.

Navy SEALs (official motto: "The only easy day was yesterday"; my motto: "I'll exercise tomorrow") undergo a training program that many military experts regard as the most difficult in the armed forces. Among other requirements, SEALs must run four miles, in boots, in 30 minutes or less, swim two miles in the ocean in no more than 75 minutes, and complete the 5.5-day Hell Week with only four hours of sleep—total. Walston has modified the SEAL routine (you get to wear sneakers, for example) and promises faster, better results for less money than you'd spend working out for as many days in a gym with a personal trainer (the two-week NYC program costs \$695 for new students). The bursts of running and endless cycles of push-ups, lunges, and squats are intended to "force you out of your comfort zone," Walston says. "Running can be uncomfortable and most people don't like it, which is why we make them do it." He is not about just sculpting delts out of doughy student shoulders, however. "Knowing who you are and what you're capable of doing is much more important than how your body looks." >

And So It Begins

On the first chilly, pitch-black day in May, I arrived at the designated meeting spot outside Central Park. Our instructions were to bring a 32-ounce bottle of water and an exercise mat (I also grabbed my keys, proof of health insurance, and 20 bucks for a quick cab ride to the hospital). Peter, a classmate who's taken the course almost a dozen times, suggested ditching the mats. "You're not going to want to carry anything when you run the big loop around the park"—a 6.1-mile-long road that includes a section called the Great Hill. We hadn't even begun and already I felt nauseated.

Later, as I was holding myself at the top of my fifteenth full-body push-up, having already run 1.5 miles and traversed a sandpit (twice) on my stomach, perspiration dripping on the pavement and asphalt carving a topographic map into my hands, Walston barked from above, like an angel—of mercy or death, take your pick—"I'm not here to make you quit. If you do, it will be because you decide to quit."

I didn't want to be the weakling who gave up, so aside from working on my mental game (an internal monologue along the lines of *You can do it* and *He doesn't want to kill you*), I reinforced my outside as best I could with repeated trips to the sporting goods store. Among other essentials, I purchased: weight-lifting gloves (to protect my palms from the asphalt during push-ups and squat thrusts), a long-sleeve shirt (to shield my arms when we pulled ourselves on our stomachs over dirt and rocks), bike shorts (to add a layer of protection under my wind pants, from the sand in the beach volleyball court that we used for crab-walking and sit-ups), and on the second evening, a padded backpack capable of holding the 20 pounds of sand we'd be carrying for the remaining eight days.

The military ethos worked in my favor. On day three, while we were running the long loop—toting the sand—I slowed to a stop. One group member actually barked, "Leave no man behind!" and another grabbed my pack. These guys were so eager to make their workouts more intense that they probably would have carried me had I asked.

I started going to the office with wet hair because my arms were too exhausted to hold a blow-dryer, but I was having a harder time ignoring my sore leg muscles—until I overheard a conversation among my classmates on the miraculous healing power of ice baths. According to Fabio Comana, an exercise physiologist at the American Council on Exercise, cold reduces postexercise inflammation in the muscles, minimizing soreness. It may also work just because after two minutes, your legs are too numb to feel anything. I started soaking twice a day for 15 minutes at a time. I'd wear a wool ski cap to hold in heat, sip steaming herbal tea, and read the tabloids. Swap the bathtub for a hot tub and it was practically après-ski chic.

I'd given up on finding a date at boot camp after the first 20 minutes. (Sweaty, grumpy, and gasping for air is not my best look.) Instead, I was building a camaraderie with my classmates that continued throughout the 10 days and beyond. In most workplaces (unless your boss is Tony Robbins), you don't receive pats on the back simply for showing up. At boot camp, every morning team members would tell me what a great job I was doing, cheer me on, and generally make me feel as though I could be a real SEAL, not the girl stranded prostrate

on the ball field while the team waited on the sidelines for her to pull herself across it. My overwhelming sense of pride rivaled that of my win at the regional social studies fair in eighth grade.

Welcome to the Gun Show

On the tenth day, as I was lowering myself into the ice water, I noticed a bulging bicep in my left arm. I started bragging about the two concealed weapons under my sleeves, flexing for anyone who'd look. My face felt leaner and my thigh muscles were firm. My parents, who called daily to make sure I hadn't collapsed, noticed that I seemed in better spirits than I had over the previous months, and by the second week my energy level was soaring (it had dipped at the beginning of the program). According to my home scale, despite all that exercise I'd dropped only two pounds. My editor quickly reassured me that certainly some lost fat had been replaced by muscle, which is why there wasn't a more dramatic difference.

Unfortunately, I gained a scaring pain in my left foot at the end of day seven; I hobbled through the rest of the course ("Leave no man behind!" By the end, three men and one woman had quit). According to my newly acquired orthopedic surgeon, Benjamin Nachamie, MD, I had a stress fracture in my heel. "People die during the real Navy SEAL boot camp, you know," he said. "It's actually kind of impressive that you went from going zero miles to six, but the body can't take that kind of impact if you don't work up to it." (This is why using that iPod mix for actual training would have been a good idea.) Especially if, like me, one spends most of her time in stilettos. When a person runs, her foot flexes as it strikes the pavement to absorb the stride's shock (two to three times her body weight—plus sand). According to Nachamie, as an elite runner's foot hits the ground, it bends back almost parallel to her shin. With my good foot, the best I can muster is a little more than 90 degrees. So in addition to the improved self-confidence and toned upper arms, I also took away a useful calf-stretching exercise. (Stand facing a wall, a foot away, forearms resting on the wall and feet flat; hold for three minutes. Repeat four times during the day.) Nachamie issued me a brace (weight: four pounds, or twice what I lost in boot camp) and told me that my injury would need six weeks to heal. At which point I plan to go to the gym—for real. After getting up at 4 A.M. to run six miles while carrying 20 pounds of sand, rising at 6 A.M. to jog unencumbered on a treadmill will be like a spa vacation. And when Walston returns to New York City next month, I'll be ready. Hooyah! □

For info on the Original SEAL P.T. Boot Camp, visit www.sealpt.com.

THE SEAL-WANNABE WORKOUT

- Run 0.8 miles
 - Do two minutes of push-ups
 - Do two minutes of full sit-ups
 - Run 0.7 miles
 - Do two minutes of jump squats
 - Do two minutes of squat thrusts
 - Run 0.7 miles
 - Complete a three-part circuit of sit-ups and leg lifts; push-ups and squat thrusts; and step-ups onto a bench and jump squats.
 - Run 2.5 miles
- Run from station to station, spending no more than five minutes at each until you have done 300 reps of each exercise.