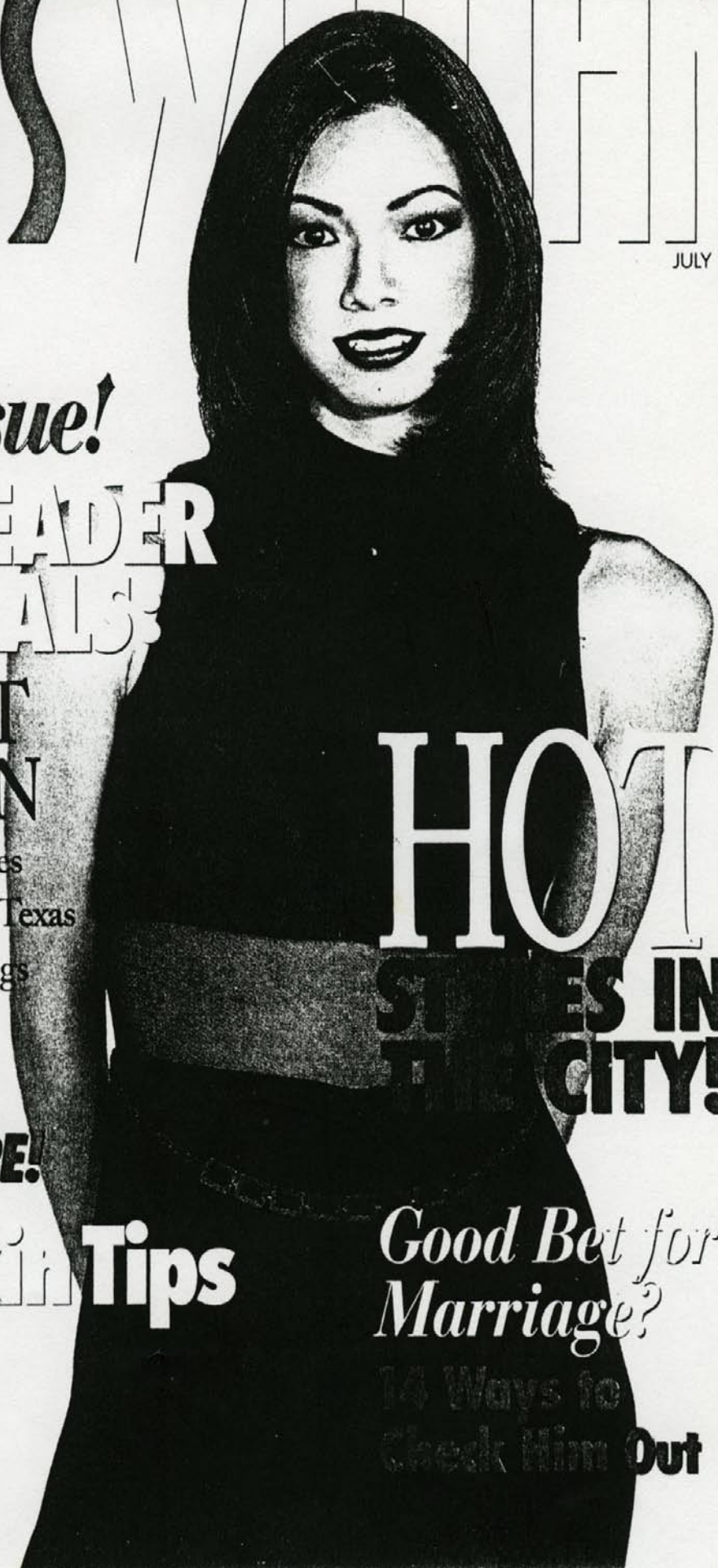


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JULY 1998



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By Russell Thorstenberg, Jr.

*Wanna
know
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REAL SEALS

FORM TWO LINES IN FRONT OF THE PULL-UP BAR. Help the person in front of you if they can't do six pull-ups," orders Instructor Jack Walston, a wiry 30-something man with brown hair and a Fu Manchu mustache. In the pre-dawn fog, 22 men and women ages 19 to 60 wearing identical blue T-shirts with gold letters reading "SEAL P.T. Course" scramble to obey.

"Let the women go to the front so they can help each other," a male voice from the ranks calls out.

"Who said that?" Walston barks. The group freezes. "No one gets different treatment. You work as a team to help everyone achieve their goals. Is that clear?" Walston demands, his dark eyes burning.

"YES, INSTRUCTOR," 22 voices shout together.

It is such a guy-thing, standing at attention, diving to the ground

to "give me 20" pushups, all the while getting in-your-face criticism. Further, the regimen is so intense that minor injuries, such as scraped knees and elbows, twisted ankles, even broken toes, are not improbable. Jack Walston, ex-Navy SEAL and founder of The Real SEAL P.T. Course, is unapologetic: "We don't pretend this program is for any but a fraction of the public." But 60 percent of enrollees of this military-style exercise course are female.

Why would women muster for calisthenics and drills appropriate for soldiers on operational readiness? And that's the program for general consumption. You want hard? Walston's company offers a four-day course on the Galveston beach for SEAL-wannabes to simulate Hell Week in the Navy training. It is literally at the limit of human endurance.

Why would anyone do that?

Like many things learned in military training, the answers gradually become clear in the way the images of the instructors change from shadow to substance at dawn.

MOTIVATION

"Fall in," Walston's authoritative voice calls to a group of men and women standing near their cars in Houston's Memorial Park. There is not a hint of light in the sky at 5:14 a.m. this first Monday of SEAL P.T. Boot Camp. The only illumination is an orange background glow from sodium-vapor street lamps. The chatter stops as participants grab their water bottles and exercise pads and jog to a clearing in the loblolly pines. "Fall in now." There is more urgency to the assembly, but it is not good enough. "Too slow. Drop and give me 20. One, two, three..." At 20 pushups, there are moans of fatigue. "On your feet. Too slow. Drop and give me 20." Few of these "trainees," men or women, can do more than a dozen true pushups, but in the first minute of the first day they've strained through 40.

After cajoling the group into two lines, Walston, standing at parade rest with three other equally fit men, explains the rules. "This is Instructor Dave Casale, Instructor Bob Spanos, and Instructor Jeff Ehrich. You will address us as "Instructor," not "sir." You will be here on time. You will wear the class-issue blue shirt. Before we begin, are there any injuries?" One man raises his hand.

"Twisted ankle, sir."

"No running for you. But drop and give me 20 for calling me sir."

Walston and company launch into a mixed series of calisthenics with no rest

between sets. When the class takes a water break, gasping for air and sweating profusely, several people sneak glances at the time: 5:32 a.m. They've only been here 17 minutes of the hour-and-a-half class, and they're already worn out. Negative thoughts begin: What have I gotten myself into?

"You're probably thinking, 'What have I gotten myself into?' Also you may be wondering about my refund policy. The answer to that is simple: NOTHING; ZERO; FORGET IT." Walston's message is that there is no King's X or time out. One way or another, you will be punished for quitting.

Over the next 10 days of calisthenics, jogging, team relays, soccer, and mud crawls, every trainee will face total exhaustion, perhaps several times in one session. Most are accustomed to taking a break when fatigue melts willpower, but skipping a set or two is not an option here. The standard of performance is each person's limit, and virtually every exercise is continued to exhaustion. The instructors lead by example, but they have endurance beyond reason. Trainees may pause when they truly cannot continue, but only for a few seconds.

After multiple experiences of mind-numbing, head-hanging fatigue, the trainees find that if they push themselves, improvement is certain and rapid.

Motivation is rewarded; surrender is punished.

DISCIPLINE

A few days later, a minute before class is to start, a white minivan races into Memorial Park and squeals into a parking place. A blue-shirted female trainee jumps from the vehicle and starts to run to the assembling class.



RUSSELL THORSTENBERG



RUSSELL THORSTENBERG

*At 20 pushups,
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moans of fatigue.
'On your feet.
Too slow.
Drop and give
me 20.'*

"Hey!" Instructor Spanos calls out. "The speed limit is 20 through here. Now drop and give me 20." The woman, still on the parking lot, hesitates in confusion and embarrassment. "Right there," Spanos demands. Before the echo dies, she is face down on the asphalt, pounding out her punishment. Later, Walston gives a short lecture on how lack of consideration for others is one of society's ills.

A circle of courtesy and compliance exists in Boot Camp. Trainees stand at attention or parade rest. When running in a column on the jogging trail, the trainees move off the path when overtaking early-morning runners, wishing them "Good morning!" A Houston Police car cruising Memorial Park calls out an amplified "Hello, SEALs" and the squad shouts back "Hooyah, H.P.D." Class members make a habit of arriving early, learning everyone's name, advising others of future absences, and a dozen other courtesies not common among relative strangers.

One morning a loud wanderer near the class and confrontationally asks, "What have we got here, a bunch of Boy Scouts?" A few trainees grumble, but Instructor Casale cuts them off by holding up his balled fist, the signal for quiet. Later he explains that the only way to win a confrontation like that is not to be drawn in. "A misconception by the public, and some in the military, is that the

SEALs are a bunch of steely-eyed killers, spoiling for a fight."

Discipline, as taught in SEAL P.T., is more than instant execution of orders: it amounts to habitually doing the right thing. The late football coach Vince Lombardi could have created the class motto: "You don't do things right once in a while; you do them right all the time."

TEAMWORK

A standard action-movie plot involves an ex-Special Forces hero operating as a lone wolf against a platoon of bad guys. Real SEALs, and the Real SEAL P.T. Course, do the opposite: everything is done as a team. One of the course's objectives is to work together, a self-fulfilling goal. The problem is that the class doesn't have much time to become cohesive. They have only 15 hours together, less than the first day at actual boot camp.

The instructors give drills that require teamwork for proper execution, usually in the form of athletic competition. The members of a subgroup can win if they assign the right people to the right task. Most often, the correct strategy becomes apparent only after the dust has cleared.

One session involved dividing the class into four-person teams for a race. Each team had to cross a soccer field four times carrying

a different member each trip, performing calisthenics before every crossing. The seemingly obvious strategy, carrying the lightest member first, turned out to be wrong. The calisthenics were the most exhausting part of the drill, and by the time the heaviest person was carried, the other three were too tired to trot. If they had started with the heaviest person when they were fresh, the lightest person would have been manageable on the last crossing.

Another contest was to devise a way for every person to touch the top of an eight-foot pole. While it was possible for one member to climb on the back and shoulders of another, the best solution was to form a ramp of bodies, with four or five people sharing the load.

The most visible part of the teamwork philosophy is the support the class gives to each member straining to complete measured exercises: "Come on, Penny." "You can do it." "One more." Such support is wonderfully helpful when body and mind are weak with fatigue. Teamwork is the most unusual facet of this exercise class, and arguably the most useful.

Not every trainee is a happy camper. The second Tuesday of one Boot Camp, the class is crawling on their elbows and knees across the soccer field, a deliberately demeaning exercise. In the middle, a woman stands up. "I'm not going to do this," she says defiantly. The instructors explain that she has 30 seconds to join the class or go home. Her classmates rally around, encouraging her to continue, but the rah-rah group spirit is one of the things she doesn't like. She drives home and drops out of the program.

The benefits of the course, beyond the obvious physical improvement, appeal to a wide cross section of society. Those who are "fitness-challenged" are put in a Level One group that concentrates on gentle calisthenics, but just as much motivation, discipline, and teamwork. After the two weeks, many in Level One Boot Camp, and some in Level Two, take the course again. Those who successfully complete Level Two (and who have the right attitude) are invited to join the Lifer program and work out for an hour with one of the instructors at 5:30 a.m. or 5:45 p.m. every weekday.

Walston's company, with 11 employees, holds classes in the Houston area at Memorial Park, Hermann Park, Clear Lake, and Tomball, and is now offering a class in Dallas. Their office is in La Porte, phone 281-471-4977. The company has a Website at www.sealptcourse.com with class information and photos.

The women in the SEAL P.T. Course performing dozens of flutter kicks, eight-count bodybuilders, and dive bomber pushups have nothing to prove except to themselves. They have the same desire as the exhausted guy next to them: they want to be the best.



RUSSELL THORSTENBERG

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