

## Online Trainers Keep Their Distance

By ELIZABETH WEIL

SCOTT MADDIX, a self-described “computer potato,” went without consistent exercise for years, in part because he found gyms and their trim clientele intimidating. “I historically have been a fairly antisocial type,” said Mr. Maddix, a 35-year-old shipping clerk. “The idea of doing any exercise that required being in front of other people has been a problem for me.”

But recently he set a goal: to walk the Rock and Roll Marathon in San Diego in June. “Of course I had no idea how to train,” he recalled. “I spent a couple of weeks trying on my own. Then I scouted around and found Richard.”

Richard is Richard Cotton, a personal trainer who started [www.myexerciseplan.com](http://www.myexerciseplan.com) two years ago. Plenty of trainers, both online and off, lack the credentials to back their enthusiasm, but Mr. Cotton was once the chief exercise physiologist at the Scripps Clinic and Research Foundation and a spokesman for the American Council on Exercise.

His system is typical of online training programs: clients answer a series of questions covering health history, exercise history, favorite activities and their goals. Mr. Cotton’s program then generates personalized workouts retrievable from his Web site. Clients can keep track of their progress on the site, post questions on his online forum or call during “office hours.”

For Americans seeking to get fit on their own time, online personal training is increasingly popular. Eight percent of 75,000 personal trainers in the United States are now coaching clients online,

according to Idea Health and Fitness Association, a professional organization of 20,000 trainers.

Mr. Cotton’s clients pay \$60 a year, compared with hourly rates of as much as \$100 to \$150 that some trainers charge for a session at a club or a client’s home. And working with a trainer via the Internet does not require a trip to the gym, so it appeals to those who are pressed for time.

Whether online training is effective is another question. Many exercise physiologists and other fitness experts doubt that customized workouts offered online can get many sedentary Americans doing arm curls at home, no matter how many encouraging e-mail messages are sent.

Others caution that without working face to face with a client, a trainer cannot correct improper form or properly goad a person to finish a demanding set. But some people say that being accountable to a coach, even one they have never met, inspires them to get moving.

Mr. Cotton admits that his 1,000 virtual clients are not buying a lot of personal attention. In fact he urges his charges to post questions on his Web site’s forum, where his staff members may respond.

Other trainers, with far fewer clients, offer a somewhat more hands-on approach. Kelli Calabrese, an exercise physiologist who was named online trainer of the year by Personal Fitness Professional magazine, trains 50 people online, in addition to 26 she coaches near her home in Long Valley, N.J. She has the time to respond promptly to her clients’ e-mail messages and also tailor her recom-

mendations to their needs each week. She charges \$49 a month.

One of her Internet clients is Jim Cameron, 43, a software consultant who travels constantly. “When I’d say, ‘I’m going to be in Benton Harbor, Mich., at a Courtyard Marriott, and they have a universal gym and a treadmill,’” Mr. Cameron said, “Kelli worked out new ideas with what I’d have available.” And when he would sign on to [www.kellicalabrese.com](http://www.kellicalabrese.com) to print his workout, it would come with tips.

For Mr. Cameron, knowing that Ms. Calabrese was charting his progress helped him to stop making excuses. “The thing that got me hooked was the accountability,” said Mr. Cameron, who has lost 70 pounds through the program.

While some active people turn to online coaching to ramp up their training for a race, for many others it is a tentative first step toward basic fitness. Valerie Midkiff, 39, is a mother of three from Hillsboro, Ore., who thought the trainers at her gym miscalculated her skills. “They were living in a very fit world, and I wasn’t,” she said. “They started me working with 30-pound weights.”

For guidance she turned to Lynn Bode, the owner of Workouts For You, an online training service in the Midwest. After filling out a personal history, she received a customized regimen that recommended starting with three-pound weights.

“When I worked out on my own, my pride would not have allowed me to

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pick up a three-pound weight because I thought, 'Oh, it's so little,'" Ms. Midkiff said. Before long she was using 10-pound weights, and she started jogging, which she hadn't done since college.

Still, critics say online trainers cannot make up for never seeing their clients.

Mark Nutting, a 25-year veteran of the fitness industry and a spokesman for the National Strength and Conditioning Association, described the practice of a client filling out a questionnaire and then receiving a workout as irresponsible. The problem, he said, is that people tend to overestimate how much they already exercise and fudge details about their health.

'I don't go by what they wrote,' he said, 'because half the people, when you get them out there for a workout, they'll say, 'Oh, did I tell you about my shoulder surgery?''

Other critics concur. Joe Barron, a founder of Definitions, the chain of high-end Manhattan gyms that specialize in personal training, said there is no substitute for someone 'engaging you, person to person, pushing you and monitoring your activity.' It is worth noting, however, that a substantial number of Americans who exercise do so unsupervised. Over 20 million home fitness videos and DVD's are sold in the United States each year, according to DSN Retailing Today, a trade publication.

An online trainer -- unlike a fitness guru on a video -- can hold people accountable for their progress. And that is what people like Mr. Maddix say they need most. Thanks to myexerciseplan.com he now strides down the sidewalks of San Diego for an hour almost every weekday, and each Sunday he takes an increasingly longer walk. Mr. Maddix said if his new exercise regimen had depended on meeting up with a brawny taskmaster, he would have quit. For some, the greatest shortcoming of online training may be its greatest virtue: in some ways, it is not personal at all.

**URL:** <http://www.nytimes.com>