

Ready to Hop on Board?

By Tina Anderson

Are you a trend spotter who likes to be on the cutting edge of each new fitness modality? Or do you need to be convinced that a trend is valid before you embrace it? Either way, it's time to focus your attention on the core board, which is taking the concept of functional core training to new heights.

What Exactly *Is* the Core Board?

The new core board program and equipment developed by Reebok offer users three-dimensional motion on an oblong platform. The platform has feet that hold the board in place on the floor while the platform itself reacts to movement. Participants must adjust their balance in response to the platform's instability. Training on the board develops total-body power by emphasizing the abs, torso and core muscles through endurance and reactive exercises. Mentally combine a wobble board and a step, add the ability to twist, and you have an idea of the board's potential.

Pros of Core Board Training

It is a tall order to enhance athletic performance and improve form in all the movements of daily living. But several of the program directors and instructors interviewed for this article cite these benefits as the main advantages of this new core-training program.

Marco Borges, owner of M Cycle Gym in South Miami, has had great success with his core board classes, which he says provide a “total-body workout.” “It’s the only class during which you can realistically do everything and actually touch on major components like strength, agility, flexibility and balance. A lot of people who can

only take a couple of classes a week have to decide between a cardiovascular, sculpt or Pilates class. If they skip or miss one class a week, they’ve lost an important component of their overall fitness. With core board training, I can give participants a little of everything. In one class, they get a completely balanced, explosive and dynamic workout. I think that’s one reason my members enjoy it so much and are asking for more classes.”

Pat Lovette, aerobics director at the Casperkill Country Club in Poughkeepsie, New York, and Sheryl Nay, fitness director at Broadwater Athletic Clubs in Helena, Montana,

both report that core board training has worked well in their group classes. Both use the device with a wide range of clients and say it works especially well with seniors.

“Group fitness participants enjoy the new challenge and are seeing results. This program benefits such diverse groups,” explains Nay. “Senior citizens can work on balance skills, while elite athletes can improve performance. Men really enjoy it, because we have kept the exercises simple and strong. The core board is a tool that helps people understand functional fitness, core/lumbar stabilization and the benefits of working all the core muscles as a group. Exercisers learn carry-over skills that will affect the quality of their lives now and as they age. This kind of functional training can prevent injuries, increase performance, improve balance and challenge mind-body coordination. In addition, the medical community has been interested in what we are doing with the program and has actually referred patients to us.”

Lovette emphasizes that, in addition to helping clients, the core board format can aid instructors. She says the format is infinite in its applications, affording fitness professionals a high degree of creativity. “Core board training really allows us to think outside the box,” she says. It represents a departure from the standard 32-count phrasing, following the beat of the music, building a combo or keeping heart rates elevated. Because movements on the board need to be precise, the focus is on creating exercises that require balance and increase everyday mobility and strength. “I love the fact that students can be working really hard to maintain balance on the board and not even realize they are stretching various muscles,” Lovette says. “And I don’t know of any other format that can address this element of fitness and sports so well.”

TEACHING TIPS

Start With 30- or 45-Minute Classes. “It is a mistake, not only to schedule this class for an hour, but also to have instructors teach this new concept for an hour,” says Lovette. “It’s better to focus and make sure the participants grasp basics than to fill an hour when they really aren’t capable of performing the exercises properly for that long. We have 30-minute classes tacked on to something else, like step or high-low impact.”

Create a Class Using Different Aspects From the Different Types of Core-Training

Formats. Reebok offers several core-training formats, including Sports Core, Power Zen, Basic Core and Hard Core. Borges includes a little bit of each format in all his classes, striving for a balanced yet fun workout. Lovette begins her classes using exercises that work the abdominals so everyone activates core muscles from the start. She then translates the core training to vertical movements, making it easier to explain the overall concept.

Be Willing to Work Off Beat, Using Music as Background Rather Than as a

Pacesetter. Athletic moves, balance and precision can’t always be timed to a beat, so be sure to offer rhythmic variety.

Formulate a Ready Response to Participants’ Questions About the Core Board

Format. If your class participants haven’t yet asked about core training, they soon will. Expect questions about the board’s benefits and what exercisers can expect from and during a core board class. Be ready to give them credible information in terms they can quickly understand. Take advantage of their curiosity in order to gain future class members.

Impart the Fun of Core Board Training! Nay says that once you have overcome some of the challenges of this new format, you and your participants should revel in the possibilities. “All of this has been really challenging for instructors. Some have struggled to learn this new style of instructing and motivating. But they have adapted well, and the skills they have learned are improving their presentation abilities in other types of classes. I’ve seen them become better coaches and leaders, so that has been a fun surprise.”

Cons of Core Board Training

Although all those interviewed enjoy using the board, not everyone has had overwhelming success with the program. One fitness director (who prefers to remain anonymous) had to relegate the board to circuit classes after members quickly lost interest in the full one-hour core board class format. She attributes this lack of enthusiasm to the challenge of using the board in a group fitness setting. "It's very complex to use and much better suited to one-on-one or sport-specific training. In addition, I don't think 'overnight' core board instructors can properly translate technique in a group setting. Even our highly experienced staff had trouble. Most participants didn't feel challenged on or didn't understand the concept of the board without some individualized attention."

Another problem that directors have encountered is finding a good time slot on the program schedule. If you don't have enough boards for prime time at a large club, you may have to schedule the class in an alternative slot, which may not have the sizzle to sell a new concept. Other instructors found that the board itself was actually intimidating to older clients, who feared falling.

Even those who have enjoyed success with core board training cite some difficulties: "It's a hard concept to sell at first," explains Nay. "Core board training isn't like anything we have ever done before. Because it takes a bit of time and patience to learn how to use the boards correctly, participants can get frustrated and not really get the point of the program. Also, because core board training is so new, it is a bit difficult to grasp and master, even for veteran instructors."

Meghan Umlaus has been teaching on the core board in several Boston clubs since the device was first introduced in early 2001. She loves it but also understands the complex nuances

of teaching and explaining the format. "I think one of the problems is that, unlike in step or other classes, there may be no immediate gratification. If [participants] don't sweat like crazy, they may shy away from the workout or think it's not effective. People often look and feel silly when they first start using the board. Group fitness participants don't enjoy feeling inadequate." Umlaus has seen several core board training classes dwindle in size for these reasons.

"It's hard to communicate the potential of this program to the average exerciser," Lovette adds. "It takes time to develop the [required] motor fluency, and many participants just aren't patient enough to stick to it. If exercisers aren't engaging their core, the workout may feel too easy."

The other problem Lovette has encountered is trying to teach this very precise format to the inconsistent, recreational or casual exerciser who is already somewhat sloppy in movement form and execution. "This type of participant may just want to sweat and feel a burn somewhere," she says. "A class that requires precise and controlled movements may not be appealing." Several of those interviewed agree that to see long-term gains from this type of training, participants must be patient and first master the basics.

Umlaus and others also say that conducting large core board classes with a lot of inexperienced participants may not be practical or even safe. These professionals recommend that classes be kept small (fewer than 15 participants) so the instructor can give virtually every participant hands-on correction and personal attention. Equipment costs and storage can also make the program difficult to implement.

You can overcome some of these challenges, Lovette and others suggest, by promoting the core board format as a unique entity unlike any other work-

out. They also say you should highlight the fact that core board exercises will challenge muscles in completely new ways, which may not be obvious at first. Instructors should also remind exercisers that these new ways will enhance participants' natural reactive movements during daily living activities, such as lifting kids or groceries. To get the word out about core board training, participants should be encouraged to try a couple of classes, since experiencing this format is entirely different from watching it. Word of mouth is paramount to increasing class size, since exercisers will go to classes that produce results.

What You Need to Know Before Teaching

Talk to instructors who teach core board training. They will tell you to teach the format after you have practiced, then practiced again. You cannot fake this format. "You absolutely have to be able to explain—in layman's terms—what you're working, why you are working it, where they should feel it and what movements will or will not activate the muscles," explains Umlaus. "You can't cut corners. You have to plan really well. Form is everything."

One of the biggest mistakes instructors can make is to think of the core board as an extension of the step or as a step that "moves around," warns Lovette. "Instructors must realize that we don't choreograph a bunch of 32-count phrases or take moves that work on the step and try to use them on the board."

Borges puts it in simple terms: "It's a great tool with great programming, but as with any tool, it's only as good as it is applied. The success of launching and maintaining this program will be determined by the instructors who are teaching the classes."

Lovette is equally cautionary: "My instructors are required to attend

in-house training in addition to the Reebok training (see the sidebar below for information on the Reebok training program). They have to understand the concept of functional fitness; the quality, purpose, initiation and sequencing of movement from the core; and how to communicate these concepts so participants can effectively execute the moves. This is a tall order for instructors, so they must be willing to leave their comfort zone.”

Nay likes to remind her instructors that this class requires a combination of teaching and coaching skills. “The skills an instructor uses to teach traditional classes are not the same skills needed to teach core classes. Instead of cuing moves or choreography, the instructor is cuing body mechanics and core bracing for several levels of difficulty, while paying very close attention to safety. We all had to learn new terminology for correcting ‘movements in space,’ which require much more coaching than traditional formats or even a mat Pilates class.”

Another thing to remember is that while core board training may share some similarities with Pilates, yoga or sculpting classes, as Nay is quick to point out, those formats are taught on a stable surface and not in a reactive manner. “Core Reebok works your body

actively and reactively. Participants have to use balancing muscle groups to complete all the moves. Consequently, fewer repetitions are required to achieve results. This is unique to core board training.”

Since the emphasis of core training is on correct technique, not choreography, music plays a very different role in a core board class. Nay describes her core-training philosophy as “quality, not quantity, of movement,” which de-emphasizes the music. She points out that someone with very long levers needs more time to complete a move and may not be able to keep up with a specific beat. With this in mind, music is often used only as a background tool.

So, having heard the pros and cons of core board training, are you ready to hop on board?

Tina Anderson is a certified fitness professional, continuing education provider and communications specialist who was willing to exit her comfort zone as a new core board exerciser in preparing for this article. She is also the training coordinator for Star Trac Academy and a master trainer for Precision Cycling. Contact her at pctrainings@earthlink.net.

© 2002 by IDEA Health & Fitness Inc. All rights reserved.
Reproduction without permission is strictly prohibited.

FINDING INSTRUCTOR TRAINING

Currently, Reebok Instructor Core Board Training is available exclusively through Reebok University, which developed the program. For details on upcoming workshop dates and locations, contact Dana Prieto at (800) 627-2210, ext. 109, or check out www.clubreebok.com.