Aqua Fitness is Riding a Wave of Popularity

BY JILL BARKER, AQUA AND LAND FITNESS INSTRUCTOR

Stop thinking of your pool as a home for swimmers. Think of it as a gymnasium where a whole new breed of exercisers can get a great workout.

Traditionally, the water has been a haven for those who get in shape by swimming laps. But aqua fitness uses the pool differently. It's a vertical workout that doesn't rely on swimming skills to reap its benefits.

The fact that aqua fitness doesn't demand total submersion and exercisers can keep their hair and face dry, makes it popular with non swimmers. Marketing your water exercise classes as a fitness option is an excellent way to increase the popularity of the pool to water resistant clients.

Riding the Wave of Popularity

In the last 10 years, Canada has experienced a boom in aqua exercise. Beaconsfield Recreation Centre, located on the western tip of Montreal island, started by offering three classes a week in the early 1980s. Their current program consists of 13 classes a week that are bursting at the seams. Class sizes range from 10 to 30 participants all of whom are devoted aqua fitness fanatics.

This rise in popularity is echoed in swimming pools across the country. Unlike other fitness classes, water exercise offers its participants a total body workout that is deceiving in its intensity.

The Power of Water

Resistance, buoyancy and water depth are just a few of water's attributes that can be manipulated to create a total body workout. By working against the water's resistance, aqua fitness not only trains the heart, it also builds muscular strength and endurance.

Travelling through the water places more demands on the body than travelling through air. It takes extra speed and power to move through the added weight of the water. The muscles of the arms and legs work harder to initiate and maintain movement while the heart and lungs respond to this demand by delivering much needed oxygen to the working muscles.
Movements in the water are generally bigger and slower than those done on land. They call upon the body to move with force and power through the weight of the water. The push and pull of the water against the body increases as the participant moves, causing additional drag, current and resistance.

Getting Your Sea Legs

Moving through the water in an upright position is not as easy as it looks. The body doesn't move the same way in the water as it does on land. Land movements are largely regulated by the laws of gravity. In the water buoyancy takes control.

Contrary to gravity, which pulls the body down, buoyancy pushes the body up. Depending on body composition and the depth of water, the effect of buoyancy is different for each individual. The amount of body fat and where it is distributed plays a big factor in whether the participant is a floater or a sinker.

Water depth also plays an important role in the ability to move through the water. The deeper the water the more difficult it is to gain control of the movements. Gravitational forces are decreased up to 90 per cent when the body is standing in neck deep water. No matter how hard participants try to keep their feet on the bottom of the pool, the forces of buoyancy are pulling to the surface. Running, walking, changing direction and performing large or small movements can be challenging.

Making Waves

Working out in navel to nipple deep water offers the best workout for most exercisers. Sinkers can afford to go a little deeper, but floaters are advised to stay in shallow water. Water shoes also increase traction and make travelling movements easier to accomplish. All aqua fitness enthusiasts should wear shoes in the water.

Moving the arms against the force of the water can also add intensity to the workout. The water's resistance acts like a pair of hand-held weights. Keeping the arms in the water and adding force to arm movements will add extra punch to your workout.

Perhaps the biggest, and least publicized advantage of aqua fitness is its ability to increase core strength. Maintaining postural alignment while the water is pushing and pulling against the body from all different angles is a challenge. This struggle to maintain proper posture against the forces of the water increases back, abdominal and oblique (the sides of the trunk) strength.

What About Weight Loss?

A few years ago, a highly reported piece of research stated that swimming was not an effective way to burn fat. While this study made the news numerous others have since discounted its claims.

New research has shown that for decreasing body fat, rhythmic water exercise is comparable to similar land-based programs. In other words, aqua fitness, like any other aerobic activity, is an effective component in the fight to lose weight.

A Great Place for the Young and Old

Because water offers an element of privacy and its workout can be tough while still easy on the joints, the 55 plus market make up the majority of its followers. With the rising number of baby boomers looking for a softer workout, aqua fitness has even more promise for the future. Still, program directors should proceed with caution before marketing their aqua fitness classes solely to the senior population. Because of the dynamics of working out in the water, those looking for a tough workout can share the same class as someone who is taking a gentler approach to fitness.

Every move in the water can be performed at any one of three varying intensities, making it easy for a qualified instructor to accommodate many different fitness levels in one class. Market your aqua fitness program as an alternative to land fitness, not as a workout for the older exerciser.

Indeed, studies have shown that travelling though the water, while wearing shoes, equals the fitness gains made during land exercise. Large leg movements, travelling and moving the arms in the water will increase the training effects of aquatic exercise.

With the right kind of marketing, aqua fitness can become your fastest growing program. The experts feel that water exercise has yet to reach its peak. Now is the time to dive in and let your community catch the wave of benefits found in the water.

Jill Barker is a freelance writer, specializing in fitness and health issues and her articles can be seen regularly in the Montreal Gazette and Today's Parent. She has been a fitness instructor in Beaconsfield, Que. for 12 years.