

# Muscle meets grace at Camp Savage

## Trainer in competitive fitness events to highlight circuit on MTV show

By Sandy Coleman, Globe Staff | February 17, 2005

In the world of fitness competitions, nothing can be left to chance -- not even walking.

Walking is an art form, Cathy Savage told a collection of buff women lined up at Core Fitness in Walpole, where she recently held a camp for fitness fanatics preparing for regional and national events.

"You don't just walk like a truck driver. It's a balance beam walk . . . You are a diva. Be confident," she said.

With that encouragement, 80 women wearing the 6-inch-high clear plastic-and-glass shoes required in competition strutted toward Savage. They stopped, posed, turned, and walked back to their places.

The scene was captured on video by an MTV crew that is following Savage and one of her newest clients, a Harvard neuroscience doctoral student, Rebecca Swimmer, who is preparing for her first major fitness competition.

Savage and Swimmer will be the focus of a documentary-style show called "True Life: I Want the Perfect Body II," slated to air in June on the cable TV channel.

Savage, who has a national reputation for consistently grooming winners on the fitness circuit, is hoping MTV will give a broader audience a glimpse into the world of fitness competitions, which are like beauty pageants with muscles. If you look good in a bikini and can do a one-arm, one-leg push-up, go into a handstand, and drop into a split, you've got potential.

"It's going to show an untapped market of mainstream people what we do," said Savage. "You try to tell people what you do and they look at you like you have five heads. They don't understand the sport."

Savage, who operates Savage Choreography at Core Fitness, teaches her clients the ins and outs of competitive fitness events, which test strength, flexibility, and athletic dance ability.

She helps them build their bodies, teaches them to eat properly, and offers advice on everything from the best music for routines to the best places to order custom-made swimsuits -- costing from \$100 to \$450 -- designed to show off chiseled physiques.

Last weekend, women of all ages and backgrounds traveled from all over -- New Hampshire, Iowa, Canada, Georgia, California -- to take part in Camp Savage. Katrina Stachowiak, who also competes in marathons and triathlons, came from Michigan. Melissa Randall, an investment firm portfolio assistant who once weighed 200 pounds, came from New York to find out how to take her exercise regimen to the next level -- now that she is 124 pounds.

Some of the participants already are celebrities in the fitness world. Toneka Pires of Avon recently won the Fitness New York competition and the Ms. Bikini New York title, and has five other titles under her belt.

Pires, who has a muscular ballerina's body, trains with Savage several times a week. The 5-foot-5-inch Nextel corporate data executive once weighed 135 pounds, but after years of training with Savage, she's at 115. Pires, who also helps Savage prepare other contestants, and Swimmer are among several of her clients in training for the Fitness America South Beach Pageant in April.

When Swimmer, 24, came to Savage Choreography, the 5-foot 8-inch, 142-pound former soccer player was looking for a new physical challenge. She had no idea it would lead to MTV.

MTV wanted to profile someone who wants the perfect body and is willing to go beyond the norm to get it, but without resorting to surgery or drugs. Savage recommended Swimmer. Taping began in December and will wrap up in April with the competition at Miami's South Beach.

"True Life" producer Patrick Lope said that when he began looking for his fitness guru, all roads seemed to lead to Savage. "We talked to 100 competitors. Everybody spoke so highly of Cathy," he said. "She has a way about her around the girls. You can tell how much they respect her."

Savage, whose married name is Savage-Eysie, lives in Norwood and has two children, ages 1 and 2½. She was a dancer, cheerleader, and gymnast during high school and college, and received a degree in marketing and communications from Boston College. But her love of competition drew her back to athletics. She began participating in fitness competitions in 1989, when the sport was emerging as a popular outlet for female body-builders who preferred a more feminine look.

Even competing without a coach, Savage placed in the top 10 of all 10 shows she entered. Her choreographed routines were so popular that other competitors began asking for her help. She stopped competing and began coaching in 1993 while teaching aerobics part-time.

In 1998, she began training competitors full-time. She started with about 10 clients. Now she has more than 100 nationwide, including Alicia Denson, a Ms. Bikini Universe champion who is on the cover of the March 2005 issue of Oxygen magazine.

Despite the long list of winners she has helped, Savage, 41, makes a point of telling women that the sport is a hobby and that it is not just about winning trophies, trips, and money. Making friends along the way is just as important. "The journey is just as good as the destination," she said.

Not all of her clients have athletic backgrounds, she said. "A lot of girls who work out want a goal. This takes them beyond the mainstream," said Savage. "This is for girls who want to show off their hard work."

Savage gives them all equal encouragement.

"One thing Cathy gives all these girls is a sense of empowerment," said Swimmer. "You walk a little taller in all aspects of your life."

Sandy Coleman can be reached at sbcoleman@globe.com

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