

On Your Mark, Get S.E.T., Go

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By Janice Llanes Fabry



Co-owners Maryellen and Don Johnston with trainer Robert Messina Fitness facilities seem to be muscling their way into every nook of our Sound Shore communities and more often than not, they're clones of one another. S.E.T. Fitness in Mamaroneck, which opened this week, really is different. It's a scientific-based program that relies upon high-intensity, low-impact, slow and controlled movements, all in one half-hour a week.

Too good to be true? That's what co-owners Don and Maryellen Johnston thought initially.

"I got a phone call three years ago from my son who told me he'd started working out with his best friend, a high intensity strength trainer," recalled Don. "My son thought the workouts would be perfect for me. He mentioned they require half-hour, heavy weight, slower movements, and bringing muscles to exhaustion. I thought what am I getting myself into?"

Previously, Don's typical exercise regimen included an elliptical machine for cardio and lifting weights four days a week without seeing results. The new protocol required seconds of highly intense weight to be increased weekly. After seven sessions, Don noticed subtle but significant differences. He mentioned that walking through the airport, luggage felt lighter. His skis "felt like feathers" when he took them off his car roof rack.

That's when Don began talking to this crackerjack trainer about sharing the program with others. A personal trainer and martial arts instructor in New York City, Robert Messina's introduction to this method was eye-opening as well.

"I decreased my exercise volume significantly and saw even better results. I learned the value of effective training and recovery. I was fascinated. It's about doing more with less," explained Messina. "It's based on High Intensity Training (HIT), which was originally popularized in the 70s."

Before long, he and the Johnstons made the decision to open a facility that focused on this methodology. Maryellen and Don secured a central location at 125 Spencer Place in Mamaroneck, a block away from the train station and across the street from an ample parking lot. They renovated the space — high ceilings, clean lines, plenty of high windows for light and privacy. With Robert's input, they invested in top-of-the-line biomechanically designed Nautilus and MedX machines, more typically utilized in sports and medical rehabilitation.

"This program was not offered anywhere in Westchester and I wanted to do something with my life that helps other people," said Don, who has worked in financial services for a better part of his life. "I figured baby boomers, like myself, could benefit and see health and fitness improvements."

S.E.T. Fitness for "Slow Eccentric Training" is an evolved style of HIT with improved efficiency, safety, and comfort. Pronounced "eesentric," eccentric training refers to maximizing the body's ability to perform at a high intensity by incorporating the use of negatives, essentially lowering the weights slowly and while the muscle is in a state of contraction. The method requires one-on-one training sessions with a highly knowledgeable trainer.

"By lifting weights slowly, you can effectively develop strength and lean muscle, without putting excessive force on your joints and connective tissue. Our low impact style of strength training will get you results while minimizing your chance of injury," explained Robert. "This method marries intensity with safety."

Although Don is a bit reluctant to talk up the 30-minute once a week angle for fear of sounding gimmicky, the truth is that's all a full-body workout takes. According to Messina, the week between workouts gives the muscles and energy systems that support them the opportunity to adapt to the challenging HIT workout by synthesizing more muscle. Moreover, it's so efficient that the cardiovascular system continues to work as the body recovers.

Since a soft opening in the fall for friends and family, S.E.T. Fitness has proven to have endurance. “Right off the bat, we had an interested group,” said Maryellen, whose clientele so far runs the gamut from 15 to 84 years old. “The demand was such that we’ve hired an additional certified trainer. Chris Marraffino is a great guy we were very happy to bring on.”

Although additional cardio is not necessary, S.E.T. Fitness does not discourage additional exercise. On the contrary, because it improves strength, flexibility, endurance, range of motion, metabolism, and bone density, the idea is to help individuals continue to lead active lives.

“We naturally lose our muscle mass as we age, which makes us weaker, more fragile and it even makes us accumulate excess body fat. This workout preserves and even develops our muscle mass, which slows the process of age-related muscle loss and allows us to continue enjoying all of the sports and recreational activities we love, like golf, tennis, yoga, hiking, and swimming,” explained Maryellen, who has led an active life with her husband of 33 years.

“Skiing is my passion and I want to be able to ski into my 80s,” Don added. “If something can allow me to stay strong enough, and this does, that’s motivation enough for me.”

Open six days a week, S.E.T. training sessions are by appointment only from early morning to 7:30 p.m. Sessions cost \$60 on average, no registration or membership fee. Packages of 12 or 24 are available. For more information, visit setfitnessny.com or call 341-1101.