

Energy Express: Cross-training; the smarter, safer way to work out

by Marilyn Preston

Are you hooked on your favorite sport? Do you spend all your workout time either running, biking or swimming, believing that single-minded dedication is going to make you stronger and faster, better and better?

Sorry, dear reader. That's not how it works. It's time to learn about the benefits of cross-training, a fancy name for simply including a mix of sports in your exercise regime.

If you're a runner, for example, regular Pilates classes would do wonders for your core. Swimming is a good complement to biking, and vice-versa, and your performance in both can significantly improve if you add some yoga and/or targeted strength training to your weekly routine.

Cross-training isn't just for uber-exercisers or competitive triathletes. It's for all the rest of us who want to live healthier, happier lives with more fun and fewer injuries.

Here are four good reasons to switch from single-sport to multi-sport training, starting now, with spring and summer just around the corner, and so much stress and economic strain all around:

CROSS TRAINING HELPS PREVENT INJURIES. Repetitive stress is a major cause of injuries in all sports. Think about it. You use the same muscles doing the same sport, over and over, and your risk of injury (especially tendonitis!) goes way up. Cross-training lets your overused muscles rest, while pushing others into action. It's a good remedy for overused tendons and ligaments, too.

BEATS BACK BOREDOM. Doing one sport day after day can leave you bored, and boredom is one of the main reasons people quit working out. Doing two or three different activities keeps your mind fresh, and your body willing, so lifelong fitness is a more manageable goal.

NEW SKILLS BUILD CONFIDENCE. One way to keep your brain fit is to face new obstacles and work on new skills. Cross-training "which takes you out of your comfort zone and makes you a beginner again in a new sport" challenges your mind and body in ways that boost confidence and self-esteem.

(FIT PARENTING ALERT: That's why it's a good idea to expose your kids to a variety of sports, even if they star in one.)

LIFE DEMANDS FLEXIBILITY. If your only sport is running, what do you do when your knees give out? If the only exercise you enjoy is swimming, what happens when you travel and there's no pool around? It's always better to have a mix of sports up your sleeve, at the ready, for bad weather or unexpected free time or limited hotel facilities.

FROM THE EN/X EMAIL BAG: WHAT'S WRONG WITH DIET DRINKS?

Culling through the emails, I found this lovely challenge:

"Hi, Marilyn; I'm confused by your recent article equating regular and diet colas. How are diet colas "not considered healthy"?" â€” from BC@juno.com:

Dear BC: I know how hard this is to hear because so many of us think of diet colas as a benign beverage. You want a soft drink, but you don't want the calories, so you get a diet drink and don't think another thought.

Well, think this: Diet sodas do not qualify as a healthy drink. In fact, some experts now believe â€” based on credible research, none of it by the diet soda industry â€” that diet drinks raise your risk of obesity even more than regular full-sugar sodas.

What? Is that even possible? You bet your aspartame it is. Granted, the inherent toxicity of diet drinks is a much-debated subject. On the one side you have experts arguing that artificial sweeteners are perfectly safe and nothing to worry about. On the other side, where I tend to hang out, you have the doctors and scientists who believe that artificial sweeteners actually stimulate your appetite, increase your craving for more carbs, and stimulate fat storage and weight gain. We certainly know that as the consumption of diet drinks has gone up, so has the number of Americans who are obese.

My advice? Wean yourself off all soft drinks, diet and regular. Your kids, too. If you can't live without an occasional pop, avoid the artificially sweetened ones. There isn't a shred of evidence that diet drinks help you lose weight. Quite the contrary, they may be short-circuiting your body's natural appetite control system because fake sugars send confusing signals.

I know this won't be easy. Do it anyway. Please and thank you.

ENERGY EXPRESS-O! IS IT TIME TO CAN THE CANS?

"If there is something you want to do and cannot do it, you cannot do anything else." â€” Mignon McLaughlin

Marilynn Preston â€” fitness expert, personal trainer and speaker on healthy lifestyle issues â€” is the creator of Energy Express, the longest-running syndicated fitness column in the country. She welcomes reader questions, which can be sent to MyEnergyExpress@aol.com.

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