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FITNESS A Celebrity Sweats: It's Richard!



IT'S MY WHOLE LIFE' Richard Simmons, leading a class at his fitness studio, says he teaches because 'I can't forget these people — where would they go?' More Photos >

By TRICIA ROMANO Published: December 23, 2009

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Slide Show Fitness Gurus, Then and Now

YOU hear Richard Simmons before you see him. On a recent Saturday morning, his tittering acolytes waited in the small green and pink pastel-colored lobby of Slimmons, his fitness studio here. His familiar Southern-tinged voice floated through the doors of the studio where he was holding Project Me, a talk therapy class about exercise.

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Suddenly, the doors flung open. "Hello, everybody!" Mr. Simmons called out, as a high-energy remix of "Poker Face" by Lady Gaga throbbed through the sound system.

Ninety-one students ran to take their places in the long, narrow gym, among them the swimmer Rowdy Gaines, a three-time Olympic gold medalist who was visiting from Florida with his wife.

Mr. Simmons is everything you expect him to be. At a recent class, he stood at the front of the room wearing teeny red shorts and a matching "Sweatin' to the Oldies" tank top encrusted with crystals. His lean, shapely legs were covered by nude tights, over which he wore pristine white socks and sneakers. And there was the ever-present halo of curly, graying brown hair, a miracle of hair plugs.

At 61, Mr. Simmons is as American as apple pie and the Big Mac — two things he would no doubt warn you away from eating. He has outlasted many of his peers, including Jane Fonda, whose career as a fitness guru started around the same time as his (the same company released their first videotapes in the early '80s). While she has moved on from leg lifts to political activism and the occasional acting role, he is about to release two new videos, "Sweating to the Oldies 5" and "Toning to the Oldies" — his 58th and 59th.

Other contemporaries like Susan Powter, the buzz-cut dynamo behind "Stop the Insanity," and Denise Austin, the peppy telegenic trainer, are still active through books and DVDs. But Mr. Simmons is the only one regularly offering classes to the public in his own studio.

It's not that he needs the money. He commands up to \$20,000 to speak and has sold millions of DVDs, according to his manager, Michael Catalano. But Mr. Simmons, who says he is deeply religious, has an almost spiritual connection with his followers.

"I don't have to teach anymore, I don't have to work anymore, God has been really good to me," Mr. Simmons said. "But I can't forget these people — where would they go? Where would these men and women who don't feel accepted in other places, where would they find a place to work out where they could laugh and feel good about themselves?"

Yes, he is a people person.

When he is in town — and last year he traveled 200 days — he teaches up to three times a week at Slimmons. "It's a very unusual place — it has a spirit all its own," Mr. Simmons said of the studio. "I've been on a month-to-month lease for 35 years."

His classes are an open secret in Los Angeles. You can call the studio to see if he will be there (or sign up for the Slimmons e-mail newsletter), show up 20 minutes early to ensure entry and pay \$12. The sessions attract a mix of first-time looky-loos, young Simmons converts and a die-hard clientele of middle-aged women. One student, William Belli, a 25-year-old actor, described the class as "women who would go to Curves, and hipsters."

Mr. Belli had come for a friend's birthday party a few months ago, and kept coming back. "I have a muscle now," he said and lifted his shirt.

He had brought his friend, Ingrid Sheaffer, 25, a reporter for US Weekly. "The real Richard Simmons is teaching a class?" Ms. Sheaffer asked. "I'm like, 'I don't even know how we lived in L.A. for so long and didn't know that this was something you could do.'"

The class is part workout, part stand-up show. Mr. Simmons cracked jokes in between instructions: "Look! There's a cookie down there!" he said, taunting one student. To another: "Why are you going so fast? Do you have lunch at the Ivy?"

Sometimes, for no apparent reason, Mr. Simmons would start screaming. "Aaaah! Aaaaaaaah!" Everyone giggled.

Midway through the class, a Hollywood tour bus pulled up to the front of the studio. Mr. Simmons ran out to wave hello.

"This is my theater," he said afterward. "This is where I can sing and act out a play and do sit-ups at the same time."

When he wasn't demonstrating the moves, he was frantically throwing well-worn vinyl records on a Technics turntable.

He led sing-alongs to the summer camp ditty "Kookaburra" and to "The Sound of Music." His class joined hands and kicked in a chorus line. Everyone was smiling, even when they were grunting to keep up.

After 45 minutes of aerobics and a round of sit-ups, push-ups and weights — which Mr. Simmons oversaw like a drill sergeant — he gave a brief motivational speech on the subject of inner peace.

"Peace is a state of being, where you are happy with who you are," he said. "I wish you success — some of you are young or changing careers. More than that I wish you peace."

He closed with: "Have a wonderful day! Thank you!"

This is the Richard Simmons people came to see.

After class, Mr. Simmons ruminated on his appeal. "I show them many facets of my diamond," he said. "I show them the funny part, the silly part, the laughing part, the crazy part and then the really deep, deep part where I'm talking from my heart to these people. Because I've been through everything they've been through."

His story — a well-worn trope about being a fat kid from New Orleans who shed a large amount of weight and kept it off through exercise — is universally appealing.

"Everybody needs somebody that they can connect with," Ms. Austin said in a telephone interview. "And I think that's what Richard makes people feel, especially people who are very overweight. It's all about being genuine."

Mr. Simmons spends his days writing and calling the thousands of people who reach out to him for advice and inspiration. Sometimes, he will sing to them.

"It's my whole life," he said, welling up. "I can't go to bed at night knowing that I don't answer something. It upsets me."

Mr. Simmons says he will keep teaching until no one shows up. It is, he says, his life's purpose.

Even Ms. Powter, who thinks his shtick has long since worn thin ("He needs to put some trousers on and stop it," she said), offered begrudging admiration. "To be able to continue going and go with the trends — it's amazing," she said. She called Mr. Simmons "the Liberace of wellness."

Mr. Gaines, the swimmer, said he found his encounter satisfying. "It's the epitome of what I expected," he said after the class. "He's Richard Altman. He's the exact same persona you see on TV."

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