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SEXERCISE

IT'S NO SECRET THAT FEELING FAT ISN'T SEXY. BUT WHO KNEW THAT THE CHEMICALS RELEASED DURING AN INTENSE WORKOUT COULD PUMP UP YOUR LIBIDO AS WELL AS YOUR MUSCLES—AND A HUNKY TRAINER DOESN'T HURT EITHER. BY JUDITH WARNER

Upper Northwest Washington, DC, the semisuburban residential area where I live and work, is, I think it's fair to say, one of the least sexy places in the world.

It is a magnet for former class presidents and National Merit scholars. A place where smart women don't wear makeup and where even the choicest specimens of neighborhood manhood—the thirty- and fortysomething divorced fathers who on Sundays frequent the nearby “sexy dads” park—look like they've just stepped out of a Model UN strategy meeting circa 1983.

I moved here three years ago from Paris, a city with a very different vibe, to put it mildly. But, sad to say, it didn't take long for sweatpants to become the cornerstone of my wardrobe and for wearing makeup to become a rare and much-commented-upon event. (“The transformation,” said a neighbor, “is striking.”) I came to feel dead in my skin.

Which is why earlier this year, when some women of my acquaintance started giggling and sighing and gossiping and fantasizing about a guy, I pricked up my ears and listened in. He was Laurent, a personal trainer at the Sports Club/LA in downtown DC. He was French, by way of Morocco, soulfully Jewish in a robust, Mediterranean, ancestors-never-saw-the-inside-of-a-shtetl way, and he was—unlike so many husbands in this workaholic town—emotionally and physically available. “His dancing. The music. The way he moved in close,” my friend Patty breathed a few days after entering the Laurent force field. “You could let your mind run wild, think he was interested in you. In that hour, in that room, you were

the center of the universe. You had a great body. You were sexy.”

This I had to see. So I wormed my way into joining two friends for a semi-private training session with Laurent.

At first, I was sorry to find, his magic didn't move me. He was good-looking, no doubt, and built. But younger men, unfortunately, tend to inspire within me not so much lust as



an almost irrepressible urge to give career advice. His Frenchie act was a bit silly—I knew, as a former expat, that his seven years on the ground here were enough to teach him the difference between “boobs” and “pecs.” And to be perfectly honest, his attractiveness just couldn't compete with my own self-obsession. During warm-ups I stared at my body in the mirror. I usually work out in huge T-shirts, but to get into the swing of things, I'd donned a Lycra tank top. And as a result, while all I normally see is a set of fairly skinny arms and legs, I was now confronted with a

roll of postmaternal fat (loose skin?) squeezing out between my tank top and shorts and sticking out (why? From whence?) above my armpits.

As usual, I felt pretty hopeless. But quickly things started to change. The workout was superintense, so intense that it left no time or mental space for dark rumination. I got into the music—Euro-trash golden oldies from the mid-'90s—“Club Med music,” Laurent called it. Whatever. His enthusiasm was catching. His energy filled the room. His light touches to my shoulders and trapezoids gave extra encouragement.

When Laurent leaned over to display a butt-firming move we were supposed to imitate, revealing through his loose-fitting swim trunks (more Club Med) a perfectly formed glute, I suddenly knew what the other women had been going on about. It was like a lightning bolt. (Was I raving? Yes—after two sets of lunges around the room, I was probably hallucinating.)

That glute—a butt proclaiming mind-over-body potency, the triumph of the will. I had to have it. And now it seemed that I could. “I can see that you could get really cut,” Laurent told me when I asked about one-on-one personal training. I stood up straighter, prouder. I felt somehow younger and full of potential.

Laurent and I started training together twice a week. The workouts got harder and harder—I could barely drive my car afterward—and I was thrilled. Exercising at the gym hadn't been doing much of anything for me in recent years. I was always multitasking, reading on the exercise bike, getting in some face time with a friend while running desultorily on the treadmill. Now I was focused,

giving it my all. (Laurent, who clearly had a better sense of female psychology than physiology, kept telling me—the kid who always failed gym class—that I had an “athletic build.”)

Pumped with energy, I complemented training with Laurent by joining my husband for two workout sessions a week with his new trainer, Frank. Living from workout to workout, I was deliriously happy. And to my great surprise, I even felt *hot*.

I started spending inordinate amounts of time stroking my new muscles. “You’re transformed,” a friend told me. “Yes, your legs are bulking up,” another sniffed jealously. My flesh was literally crawling with vitality. I was also finding my husband immensely attractive as he sweated and boxed in the backyard with Frank. The sight of his fast-moving shoulders and biceps (was he punching out Osama bin Laden? The old man with the coupons at CVS?) thrilled me with what could only have been an evolutionary, she-woman sizzle. We undressed at night, unveiling muscles with the avidity of Mel Gibson and Rene Russo comparing bullet wounds in *Lethal Weapon 3*. “That’s some nice oblique action you’ve got going there,” I heard myself say. He actually blushed.

I was deep in the throes of muscle lust—an exercise-primed, total-body state of excitation that, according to Cindy M. Meston, an associate professor of clinical psychology at the University of Texas at Austin, is one of the lesser known (and most pleasurable) physical side effects of heavy exercise. The way it works, Meston says, is this: Vigorous movement activates the sympathetic nervous system, the part associated with fight-or-flight responses, and there’s something about this adrenaline-soaked state that gets our bodies souped up for sex. Meston and a team of researchers proved this in a 1994 experiment, when they used sensitive vaginal probes called photoplethysmographs (which measure blood flow) to compare the arousal levels of 35 women who watched an erotic film, both with and without having first ridden a stationary bike for 20 minutes. They found that after

exercise, the women were more quickly and highly aroused. (The subjects followed the same drill with a boring nature film to demonstrate that women won’t respond sexually to just anything, post-bike or -jog or -swim.) “Exercise in the presence of an erotic stimulus somehow prepares the body for sexual arousal,” Meston concluded.

In other words, exercise plus trainer (“erotic stimulus”) equals...heat. No wonder Laurent was slaying the ladies downtown. No wonder a single friend of mine felt “dumped” when her trainer abruptly dropped her from his schedule. No wonder a Mommy friend had a “crush” on her workout coach, “the biggest crush I’ve had since college.” No wonder that mooning after your trainer has become so common that the American Council on

**I WAS DEEP
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Exercise (ACE), which certifies U.S. trainers, recently devoted a whole page of its newsletter to the problem of how to handle “inappropriate or unwanted attention” from clients.

Working out intensely—as you do with a trainer—is basically some kind of major psycho-emotional event. And it’s a chemical one too. According to Helen Fisher, a Rutgers University anthropologist and the author of the new book *Why We Love*, exercise actually gets your brain revved up for romance by “driving up the action” of dopamine—the neurotransmitter that gives you a feeling of satisfaction and pleasure—and increasing levels of testosterone, the hormone that

enhances libido. (In fact, Fisher told me, it may just be dopamine, and not the infamous pain-blocking peptides called endorphins, that creates the postexercise elation we commonly call “runner’s high.”)

Meston laughed when I asked her if her research on arousal could be applied to understanding why so many women get hooked on their trainers. “We call it ‘excitation transfer,’” she said. Or in common English: the roller coaster effect.

Apparently, Meston has found that after roller coaster rides, men and women shown photographs of people of the opposite sex will rate them as more attractive than if they had been shown the same pictures beforehand. The ride, like exercise, gets their nervous system into a high-arousal state—and afterward, they transfer all the excitement onto the most “salient stimulus” that presents itself—i.e., in the gym, the hunky guy with the free weights. “It’s like shooting the messenger,” Meston said—only with good vibrations. She hastened to add, though, that you don’t need an attractive trainer (or any trainer at all) to feel the vibrations. You just need a good workout. And a “salient stimulus.” A husband will do.

Which brings us back to me. And my husband. And Laurent, who, after joining me in two weeks of contemplating my pecs, my butt, and my abs, turned into a great pal. He told me about his early career as an accountant, his healthy-snack vending machine company, and his baby cousin’s bris. (“*What is wrong with you?*” Patty shrieked.) He told me about his idea for a book. And he asked me for...career advice.

And so, in our last session, I felt safe asking him what it felt like to be on the receiving end of so much hot-and-heavy chemistry. (The ACE says questions like this are come-on lines, but with ELLE, I had professional cover.)

“It’s a challenge,” he answered. “You have to draw the line. There’s a lot of touching going on, a lot of contact. And that contact just triggers...stuff.”

And then he blushed.

I went home and begged my husband to box with me in the garden. □