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Rachel's naked ambition

Wreck Beach 'sans suit' no problem after months of fitness torture

By RACHEL SA

Vancouver's Wreck Beach is one of the world's most famous clothing-optional beaches. Knowing I would visit Wreck this week in between studies at UBC was floating in my mind the day I committed to P90X, a crazy-intensive workout program designed by American fitness guru Tony Horton.

For three months, I dragged my exhausted butt out of bed before sunrise to exercise.

Visions of leaping out of bed like a toned gazelle with zero resistance never materialized. In reality, I grumbled and groaned right until the last workout, when I completed P90X two weeks ago. I grumble and groan still in my little dorm room as I fit in yoga and push ups before classes.

So, in our world of instant gratification, when does staying fit get easy?

"It doesn't," says Tony Horton in a telephone interview from Santa Monica, Calif. "If it were easy, everyone would be fit and healthy and happy. It requires a certain amount of discipline, a certain amount of willpower. And, you have to find away to just turn off the negative noise."

I wonder if paying someone to pour a bucket of ice water over you to get you out of bed in the morning would do the trick? Whatever it takes, says Horton.

"What I tell people is, you're in a place where you're unhappy. You're overweight and you have poor energy and you're struggling in life. For you to achieve anything that's worthwhile, you have to find a reason why. And your reason why has to be so profound that it gets you off the couch and gets you moving five to six days a week."

In the three months it took to do a round of P90X, I developed something like Stockholm syndrome when it comes to Horton. I swear at his image on the screen as he makes a one-handed push-up look so easy (damn you, Tony). But then, when I slip into a pair of once too-tight jeans, I want to hug him. Does everyone develop this love-hate relationship?

"No, it's more of a love-love relationship," he jokes. "My ears are constantly ringing because there are tens of thousands of people here, in Canada, in Mexico, soldiers in Iraq, they're all throwing the F-bomb at me."

Thankfully, Horton puts a very human face to extreme fitness. A trainer since 1983, he admits that working out remains a struggle -- even for him. He gets himself into the gym by scheduling workout times with friends.

"I was someone who despised exercise. I was always the kid who was weak and frail and skinny, who got sand kicked in his face and got picked last for team sports," he says.

Sounds familiar.

Horton surprises. At 50, he doesn't love to exercise -- but loves to be healthy. He hates steamed vegetables as much as the rest of us but eats clean and indulges in one vice -- chocolate chip cookies.

"At one point I was pure vegan and I didn't have sweets at all," he says. "But I looked too skinny. I mean, my body fat was 3.5%, but I was miserable! I say, find out what your one vice is, cut out the rest of the junk, and your health and fitness won't be an issue in your life anymore."

What about motivation? While vanity can motivate some people forever, many hit a wall once they've achieved the body they thought would bring them happiness.

"For some people, the aesthetic aspect of looking a certain way is really important to them. I think it's a really dark, empty place for people who operate only under those conditions," says Horton. "The aesthetic aspect of

fitness is not the finish line."

Horton touts five reasons to exercise -- none of which include looking smoking in a Speedo or string bikini.

Exercising today guarantees you will be fitter and stronger than if you didn't. Ditto with healthier food choices. The quality of your life will improve in areas that have nothing to do with fitness and you'll be less vulnerable to illness and disease.

"If you want those five things, you should exercise every day," says Horton. "How are you going to look 30, 60, 90 days from now? I don't know. Who wants that crapshoot? I want to deal with what I can affect today. I'm addicted to feeling good."

And this writer will feel very good on Wreck Beach.