

What can we learn from our Neighbors?

A Comparison of the U.S. Fitness Industry and European Fitness Industry

By Kris White

From 1993 until 2004 I worked as a Presenter and Educator in the European aerobic and fitness industry. And yes I can proudly say that I had a very successful CAREER there – not just a JOB! I started out as an instructor in a small studio in northern Germany. From there I obtained financial and equipment sponsorship from Reebok Germany and went on to work the Presenter circuit teaching at various aerobic and fitness events in Europe and Asia. At these events, I taught to hundreds of group exercise instructors interested in improving their teaching skills and furthering their careers.

What I took away from my experience overseas was the realization that fitness professionals in the US do not have the same career opportunities as in other western countries. During my time overseas, some great concepts were introduced in the U.S. health and fitness market that were then adopted by the Europeans and transformed by fitness professionals into a way of life for the masses. Why has this acceptance of the “healthier lifestyle” been so limited in the United States? And how can we, as dedicated fitness professionals, create more work and career opportunities for ourselves, while at the same time get more and more Americans excited about fitness training?

A comparison of the fitness industry on both continents is a good place to start that analysis. First and foremost, we must make an overall lifestyle comparison. Americans walk less, work more, and stress even harder than our European counterparts. This results in the American mentality of finding that “quick fix” for everything – from staying young to losing weight, it has to happen with minimal effort and in record time. Europeans approach weight loss or achievement of a healthier lifestyle as a series of small baby steps that when completed will bring about the desired result and will have taken them on a great adventure. They enjoy the journey like the tortoise did in the famous fable, “The Tortoise and The Hare”.

We, as fitness professionals, need to assure that the journey of our clients is positive, motivating and has purpose. We should exude that ‘every little bit counts’ attitude to help encourage our nation to get out and exercise. Walking in their neighborhoods or playing with their kids in the yard brings about positive physical change. Once the ball is rolling and 60-70% of our nation’s population is up and moving, gym membership will increase simply because people will want more. They will seek more challenge and excitement in their exercise programs. This in turn leads to the need for more and more highly qualified and skilled fitness instructors!

Looking at United States based fitness studios and comparing it to ones in Europe will also help us figure out why our membership may be lacking. We also need to ask how we can make our jobs as aerobic trainers more career-oriented and professionally accepted in the work world. The American fitness movement was like the “shot heard round the world” in the late 80s. The U.S. fitness boom had started and everyone followed suit, opening up studios from Germany to Russia. The idea was amazing; bring in members to train and exercise together in a fun social atmosphere.

In Europe, studio owners were quick to recognize the financial benefits of a well-run aerobics program and the trainers were paid accordingly. Top notch, well qualified, and talented aerobic trainers drew in the stay-at-home moms or self-employed individuals to the morning classes; and in the fitness fanatics in the evening and weekend classes. When the aerobics courses are full, the studio owner increased the membership by installing cardio machines. The increased numbers of membership helped the owners pay a higher hourly wages to the studio trainers.

On average, in a small city in Germany, aerobic trainers start out making 25 to 30 euros per class which is the equivalent of \$35 to \$40 an hour. For that amount of money, many of our most talented US instructors could work full time in the fitness industry. The ability to make enough per hour to concentrate on the job full-time would enable us to create a successful and sought-after career. Most U.S. studio owners fail to recognize the

importance of having a great group fitness program; and they tend to concentrate more on the personal training business. But having a strong qualified and talented team in both arenas is key. In order to attract the top notch group fitness trainers, the salaries of a personal trainer and group fitness instructor must be comparable. Both share the responsibility of providing a safe effective training program for their clients and therefore both should be compensated equally.

An evaluation of the certification process for group exercise instructors in Europe helps to explain why fitness instruction there is seen as a professional career. Individuals wanting to pursue a career in the fitness arena in Europe are required to invest a great deal of time and money into their training. There is a rigorous certification process that lasts anywhere from 8 weeks to 6 months depending on the organization offering the certification. Then the candidate needs to take workshops with educators like myself as well as courses from medically trained doctors and therapists. Once the courses are completed the candidate takes written and oral test, and before they are able to begin group exercise instruction. After a period of 3-6 months, the candidate must submit a video of a class or session they taught for further evaluation and ‘final sign off’.

This commitment of time and money helps to ensure the quality of instructors that will enter the training/teaching profession in Europe. The trainers who pursue certification want to make fitness instruction their career; they want to be in the fitness industry and are well suited to lead classes and train individuals. The concept of “getting paid while working out” does not exist in Europe. The stakes are too high. There are a limited number of jobs in this career, they pay well and your success is dependent to your dedication to the studio and its clients. Continuing ones education and developing programs according to the latest trends, scientific findings, and studio/client demands is a FULL time job and is compensated as such in Europe.

If we in the United States want to have group exercise instruction be seen as an official career, we will have to continually attend workshop and education seminars - it is what will set us apart from those who are in it for the money! We hold a tremendous amount

of responsibility when we guide people through our exercise programs. But if ones hourly wage was reflective of ones efforts, wouldn't it be easy to commit to the responsibilities?

I loved leading the certification workshops Europe and Asia. I probably certified close to 1,000 instructors over my 11 years there and received so much in return – a renewed sense of purpose, dedication and limitless motivation. If we want more then we must demand it and more importantly be willing to commit to it! We must “re-educate” the studio owners, managers and clients to the importance of having a highly talented and well trained staff. It won't happen overnight but every small step we can make towards achievement of this goal will be one step in the right direction. Re-dedicating your efforts to the improvement of your services for your clients will bring about a rewarding journey that I think many of the trainers in America have forgotten to enjoy!