

Million Dollar Ladies

By Gretchen Grundstrom

Mattapoissett- Every Tuesday and Thursday night about 15 women put work, family, and errands on hold and drive their SUVs and minivans to The Knights of Columbus parking lot by 6 p.m. The reasons they come here vary as much as their Nike, Adidas, and New Balance footwear. Some are here to lose weight; others to combat stress. Regardless of their personal fights, their goal is the same: to get fit.

As the women gather in the main hall, the poor lighting fails to dim their spirits as their smiles and friendly greetings distract attention from the stereo blaring Gloria Estefan's "Break Out." The kibosh is put on the socializing as the women are summoned to "Line up!" in preparation of enduring an hour of cardio kickboxing training.

Instructor Derek DeCosta, 34, of Mattapoissett starts the class with a 15-minute cardio warm up that combines punches and kicks with jumping jacks and side-to-side shuffles. Following a 30 second Gatorade break, the pugilistic nature of the class takes hold with paired up students taking fistic shots at hand held punching bags. Students aggressively follow the drill: "Hook! Right side jab! Upper cut!" Sweat pours off the students' red faces as hip-hop versions of "You Shook Me All Night Long" and "You Were Always on My Mind" scream from the stereo.

Maureen Gillen-Brown, of Marion, has been training for about 3 years. She points out the dichotomy of women taking on an assault-type sport like boxing to get into shape. "Females,

where we're not used to (combining) athletics and boxing, we're feeling more powerful which translates into more confidence." She contends that stepping out of "comfort zones" allows non-athletic females that have never boxed to "look at yourself in a whole different light."

Gillen-Brown, a registered dietician and mother of three says "The workout...it's not humdrum. The routine is always different." She says her favorite punches are the hook and upper cut and says "I feel my strength coming from those moves more than any other. These two moves give me an inner strength. Every time I do it I do it bigger and stronger. I challenge myself."

Linda Smith, 49, who has been taking the classes for about 8 months says "Boxing is a man's sport. Most women don't have upper body strength like a man." Smith, of Rochester, weighs 98 pounds and is 5 feet tall. She says she likes the hook shot and punching the bag is a "stress reliever. It makes us feel powerful."

Though there are a few men that attend the classes, women in their 20s to 50s overwhelmingly hold the majority.

The students are again called into line formation, this time for the 10-count which showcases many of the choreographed maneuvers used throughout class. Front, hook, and upper cut strikes are lashed out at the air in duplicate followed by a knee strike, a front kick, a side kick, and a step back.

Merry Heath, 45, of Marion, is a class freshman having just completed her fourth week of classes. Heath says that kickboxing "incorporates the entire body. It's an empowering feeling. It's good for your head as well as your body."

Heath, the owner of a cleaning business, admits that

at first she was “a little bit nervous, but [the class] was wonderful. The classmates made me feel welcome. The general comradery of everyone in class makes you want to go. Everyone is in it together.”

Though she works out 6 days a week on her own, Heath started the classes because she was “looking forward to working out in a class setting. I thought it would be more intense than what I put myself through and I loved it immediately. The whole class is challenging. It’s fun and it’s a great workout.”

Alison Silva, 24, of Mattapoisett began attending classes in May to “lose weight and get in shape.” Silva, who works in sales, said her job is stressful and kickboxing “gets out all my aggression and frustration.” Silva chose these classes because of “the atmosphere. It’s amazing how much it works. When we partner up with the bag we all motivate each other. We motivate each other to go to class.”

The students are again called into formation. This time into a human ring. Classmates use side-to-side shuffles to rotate in a counter clockwise direction while executing lateral punches at the air. The students clap and cheer on a sole individual plucked from the circle into the center of the ring to corner a punching bag for 20 seconds.

Merry Heath says “All the punches are effective. A lot of times women have problems toning their arms. All the punches do that as well as give you cardiovascular at the same time.”

Though kickboxing is effective at increasing physical strength and energy, students enthusiastically agree that they have become mentally stronger as a result of the sport. “It’s definitely a great way to lose weight, tone up and feel great about yourself,” said Silva.

Linda Smith said to herself one year ago “I had to do something. I was walking on the treadmill 30 minutes almost every day for 7 years. Nothing was different. No results and I wondered why. Now I know. There was no variation. I had joined a gym...it lasted a month. I didn’t like it. I just didn’t like the atmosphere.”

For Smith the training “got me into running and being an asthmatic I couldn’t run before.” Smith is now training to run a ½ marathon (13 miles) in Brockton this March. She has also managed to kick her asthma medication.

Maureen Gillen-Brown attests that kickboxing “absolutely stabilizes” the body and improves “the immune system. You feel emotionally healthier, emotionally improved, and self-confidence.” “You can’t change DNA. We can’t stop the clock. We can’t have smaller hips or waists, but we can re-sculpt muscles and we can be as physically fit as we can be. Through kickboxing you can take charge of your physical fitness.”

For instance, she says “I saw Linda (Smith) doing military push-ups and I decided that I wanted to do them. We support and motivate each other. There’s an acceptance and easygoing competition. People feel very comfortable. It’s not a girly class. Everyone has different body types and different body shapes.”

As class comes to a close, the students are called once more into line formation for stretching exercises. A round of applause fills the room as the instructor screams out “Good Work Everyone!” The SUVs and minivans begin to leave the parking lot, some classmates destined for a cocktail social, some headed for home. All are getting fit.

