

Operation Morning Burn

What could get perfectly sane adults up at dawn to work out on the beach? Results.



Photos by Noah Grey

Last October Stacy Jones was sitting alone in a motel room on a business trip and she began to reevaluate her life. Unfortunately, she didn't like what she saw. She was 40 pounds overweight, lethargic, tired and stressed. She decided to make an early New Year's resolution.

"I just decided it was time," she said. "It just clicked."

Jones began taking classes at a Pilates studio, then joined a fitness center, where she worked with a personal trainer. After six months, she decided she was ready for something new and challenging.

"I received the Hermosa Beach newsletter and saw the listing for the boot camp on the beach," she said. "It sounded perfect."

The four-week class, called SuperSTAR Fitness Boot Camp, meets on the beach every Monday, Wednesday and Friday at 6 in the morning. It's the brainchild of Alec Hunter, a graduate of the elite U.S. Army Physical Fitness School, who spent nine years in combat ready units, including the

82nd Airborne Division and the 101st Airborne Air Assault Division – the Screaming Eagles.

The serious – and seriously buff – Hunter believes in training hard. He should. In tours of duty on the Demilitarized Zone in Korea and in war-torn Bosnia, he was responsible for designing and implementing fitness programs for hundreds of soldiers. Maintaining the highest level of physical and mental fitness is part of the job description for combat ready troops. And Hunter had to make sure every soldier in his unit passed rigorous fitness assessments every six months.

Jones felt she was in pretty good condition the day she met Hunter on the beach for her first boot camp class. Then came the assessment.

"I did my sit-ups and I was proud of myself. I did my push-ups and I was proud of myself," she said. "But the run was the most humiliating thing of my life. The last time I ran was middle school. I would do anything not to run."

The run spanned the distance of two lifeguard towers, hardly a difficult sprint.

"Halfway between the two towers I realized I'm not going to make it. I'm going to have to walk. I could barely breathe, I was red in the face, huffing and puffing," she said.

But Jones wouldn't be excused from the running portion of the exercise. Aerobic capacity, Hunter explained, is a vital part of physical fitness. Over the next four weeks Jones would learn to run – and then she would learn to enjoy running.

"Alec was very positive," she said. "Nothing negative ever comes out of his mouth. I thought he would do a lot of yelling. But there's no yelling. Just positive reinforcement."

By the end of summer Jones was confident enough in her physical fitness to sign up for a triathlon.

"Everyone else knew what they were doing," she said. "They had coordinated suits and power gels. I showed up in a tank top and shorts. And I brought a mountain bike



Former Army master fitness trainer Alec Hunter finds out what motivates his students. Then he puts them through an incredibly challenging workout.

even though I was entered in the racing bike division.”

Despite the glitches, Jones finished the competition.

“I finished in the middle of my division, which was great. I just didn’t want to come in last.”

Since then, Jones has signed up every month for the boot camp class – and she’s not alone. The class is so popular, Hunter offers another session in the evenings and is launching two more classes on the beach in January. Every class is taught by experienced military veterans.

That’s a key factor in the success of the program, says Hunter.

“I had a good friend, Scott, who I met in basic training,” Hunter explained during a recent interview. “He died in Iraq. His motto was, ‘Never quit.’ That’s the mentality in the military. In basic training was the first time I learned that you never quit. That’s the motto for my program now.”

It’s a way of life Hunter embraced in the Army – despite hardships.

in tears. But I just kept pushing myself.”

That determination propelled Hunter throughout his career in the Army, got him through weeks of difficult training with special forces at Camp McCall and eventually helped him attain the designation of Master Fitness Trainer.

Hunter recognizes that not all his students come with that kind of drive. But he works hard to help them find the motivation that will keep them on the program. His advice is simple, but pointed.

“It all boils down to your commitment – what do you want to achieve. If you drop out of this program, you’re going to have an excuse for dropping out of every other program.”

Hunter tries to find out what motivates each student, to help them set reasonable goals. Then he puts them through an incredibly challenging workout.

On one cold morning on the beach north of the Hermosa Beach pier, Hunter divided his students into teams and forced them to complete a relay race while drag-

“I developed a shin fracture during basic training, but I was afraid of not passing boot camp so I didn’t say anything. Every morning I would wake up

ging a tire on the end of a long rope. As the inside of the tire filled up with sand, it became increasingly difficult to maintain a fast pace.

Surprisingly, the group was all smiles.

“You look cold,” one participant said. “We’re all warm.”

The camaraderie and energy may get them up in the morning, Hunter said, but it’s the results that keep them coming back month after month.

“I can almost guarantee results in four weeks,” he said. “Working out on the beach feels good. And when you feel good, that’s when you start achieving results. By the end of four weeks people are really excited about physical fitness. You can see it in their eyes.”

Find out more about
Boot Camp on the Beach

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