

*The smart way to work
out, according to a
new theory of weight lifting,
is to spend less than
an hour a week in the gym.*

*DODIE KAZANJIAN
tries SuperSlow.*

It was the dead of winter. My regular exercise studio had folded, my chronic stiff neck was getting worse, and I was feeling tired, pettish, and generally crummy. Time for a drastic change. In New York, that usually means a new exercise program, but not necessarily one as drastic as SuperSlow, which I heard about from my colleague Charles. "This is much more like going to a shrink," he told me. "The price of admission is that it's blindingly painful." Hmm. Charles is over six feet tall, and through SuperSlow he's gained 30 pounds of "absolute muscle." That's hardly what I have in mind. But I happen to know that Mary Boone, who's about my height and my age, is also a SuperSlow devotee, and when I saw her last fall at one of Leo Castelli's many eighty-ninth-birthday parties, I was struck by how terrific she looked.

SuperSlow—the very word sounds un-American—contradicts almost every theory about exercise. Forget aerobics, whose benefits are unprovable and which may even be counterproductive (strained muscles, torn ligaments, et cetera). What SuperSlow offers are 20- to 30-minute sessions of intense exercises, performed at an excruciatingly slow speed and only twice a week. Working the muscles in this way does everything aerobics is supposed to do for the cardiovascular system but does it more efficiently and without the risks—that's the claim, anyway. Finding a certified SuperSlow trainer, though, can be a problem. There are only 200 in this country, and not a single SuperSlow facility in Manhattan. Charles put me on to his trainer, Jim Clarry, one of the rising stars in the SuperSlow movement—he has trained everyone from Mary Boone to Calvin Klein—and I started working with him last December, at the uptown, all-purpose David Barton Gym on Madison Avenue.

Jim is a tall, slim, soft-spoken young man whose quiet confidence is immediately reassuring. At our first meeting, we talk for 45 minutes, while the aerobics-mad clientele pump and sweat and pedal away on all sides. "I want you to get really skillful at a few exercises rather than moderately skillful at many," he says. "SuperSlow cuts to the truth. We're going to strip away everything that's not productive. It all comes down to fatiguing muscles efficiently."

The basic element in SuperSlow technique is the ten-five interval: ten seconds to lift the weight and five seconds to lower it. As Jim explains, this is hard work and no fun. By gradually increasing the weights, he will make my muscles work until they fail; failure, in fact, is the goal of each exercise.

"My objective is putting more muscle on people," Jim tells me. But

do I want that? I'm short and sort of frail, and I certainly don't fancy being short and bulky. "Bulk is usually due to a combination of muscle and body fat," he says. "If someone achieves a bulky look training this way, they're probably overeating. A pound of muscle is much smaller than a pound of fat." He tells me that I'm not overweight, and that I should keep right on eating the way I have been. The emphasis here is all on the muscles. If we do right by them, everything else—heart rate, energy level, strength, and even the right shape—will fall into place.

Question-and-answer period is over, and we go to the day's first exercise, the stiff-legged dead lift. Jim places two five-pound dumbbells on the floor, positions me precisely over them, has me bend at the waist, and tells me to lift the weights slowly, to the count of ten seconds, and then lower them in five. I do this eight times, keeping my knees stiff. It exercises the hamstrings, glutes, and back muscles, all the way up to the spinal erectors at the base of the neck. Nobody has ever worked on my spinal muscles before; I didn't even know I had them. Aside from a slight tingling in my lower back, I don't feel much of anything, because the weights are too light. Today's session is just to learn the motor skills. He teaches me three more exercises—leg press, chest press, and weight-assisted chin-up. The protocol is to repeat each exercise four to eight times; if you can do eight, the weight gets increased. I do eight of each without much difficulty. The pain is yet to come.

My learning curve continues through the first few sessions. I'm going three times a week, and Jim keeps adding exercises and increasing the weights. Five days after Christmas, we're up to eight exercises, which is the most we'll ever do at one time. I'm lifting a 35-pound dumbbell for the stiff-legged dead lift, and moving 46 pounds on the leg press. We go rapidly from one exercise to the next, and I notice that my heart rate stays elevated. "During SuperSlow your heart rate is elevated to what you would achieve on a treadmill or stationary bike, which is what's recommended in cardiovascular training," Jim tells me. Doing the chest press today, I have my first failure—seven repetitions is all I can manage. "Keep pushing, keep pushing," he says as I struggle, lying flat on my back, to lift the ten-pound weights in each hand. "This is the most important time. We need to fail." My heart is racing, my whole body is trembling. The pain is so severe, I feel dizzy. Jim finally takes the weights from my hands and says, "Good work." This is what I have to look forward to on all the exercises: to succeed by failing.

SuperSlow was developed in the early 1980s by Ken Hutchins, who considered aerobics to be a totally misguided approach to fitness. He put his faith in slow, concentrated, precisely measured stressing of the muscles. The slow part of SuperSlow makes the lifting difficult but also safe. "The most dangerous thing you can do while exercising is apply too much force to a joint," Jim tells me. "The goal is to fatigue the muscle, not to lift the weight." All around us, the treadmills and stationary bikes are going full tilt. Jim says he has nothing against treadmills; "it's just that people think they're burning off more calories than they really are." In other words, they're wasting their time. Jim says I can jog or play tennis or go to body-sculpting class if I want, but I should do it for fun, not for exercise.

Three weeks into the program, I'm coming to failure with more and more of the exercises. Washing my hair in the shower one morning, I notice something astonishing—biceps! Neat little biceps, not a bit like Arnold Schwarzenegger's. And my stiff neck is totally gone. One of the exercises we do has me lying prone on a narrow bench and slowly raising my head while Jim exerts a counterpressure with his hands. And unlike the other remedies I've tried, including Motrin, prednisone, and physical therapy, it works. Jim says I'm making great progress. He no longer has to remind me to breathe regularly during exercise; holding your breath is a definite no-no, and so are the grunts and clenched teeth that often precede it. (There's plenty of grunting and groaning in the David Barton *(continued on page 186)*)

THE 25-MINUTE MIRACLE

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Gym. There isn't any in a proper SuperSlow environment, which has white walls, no mirrors, no music, no telephones, no gum chewing, no bim-bos, a constant 61-degree temperature, and a metronome for the ten-five beat.) I've also learned to keep my movements smooth and constant, with no jump starts or pauses. "Don't save anything," Jim says each time I approach failure. "Empty that muscle out."

There's surprisingly little soreness between our sessions, which are getting shorter and shorter. We're down to 30 minutes because my skills have increased, along with the weights, and I'm coming to failure more quickly. Out on the street after a workout, my body feels like molasses. The legs are moving and the upper body is going with them. It's exhilarating to feel so good and energetic.

Lunch with Ann Piccirillo, my former exercise teacher. When I tell her what I'm doing, she's horrified. Lifting a 55-pound dumbbell (as I did this morning) without bending my knees is lunacy, she says. "You never, ever, lift something without bending your knees." I'd always heard that, too, but it doesn't seem to have done me any harm. Ann also says that using heavy weights is going to bulk me up. She offers to give me the name of a good therapist and a good acupunc-

turist, because she's sure I'm going to need them if I go any further with this.

The part about bulking up really worries me. The other night I asked Charles Gaines, whose book and film *Pumping Iron* set Arnold Schwarzenegger on the road to stardom, whether lifting heavy weights makes you bulky, and he said, "Yes, definitely." I raise the question again with Jim. I say I don't want to look like the muscle-bound bruiser in the SuperSlow manual's before-and-after photographs. Not to worry, he says. "The guy in that picture was eating 7,000 calories a day, and he's genetically gifted—something very few people are." He reminds me that muscle mass is smaller than fat mass.

Jim knows his subject through and through. "He's the most informed and rigorous trainer I've ever met," Mary Boone tells me. "If he ever started his own gym, I'd put money in it." Mary also says that she and I are both dealing with the same problems, age and gravity. "And we're not going to find a plastic surgeon who will make us six feet tall."

In March I'm failing at everything. My leg press is up to 240 pounds. I get nauseated every time I do it, and my ears are stopped up, as if I'm riding a fast elevator. All the exercises make me feel this way now, but often I can think beyond the pain and feel my way more deeply into the muscles. "Don't acknowledge the pain," Jim says. "When you acknowledge it, it hurts more." On a trip to Los Angeles, I see myself in the mirror at the Beverly Wilshire and my proportions look better, the hips and thighs slimmer, the shoulders a little wider.

On April 11, I can't do a single leg press. It's time to cut me back from three to two sessions a week, Jim says. I've gotten so good that I've overworked my muscles, and they need time to recover. "One of the drawbacks of aerobics is that people don't give their muscles time to recover, and that makes them weaker, not stronger," Jim says. With SuperSlow, the better you get, the less frequently you do it. Twice a week is the preferred schedule for SuperSlow. (The really good SS-ers do it once a week.) In place of my third session the next week, I take a long walk in Central Park with my husband, not for the exercise but for the fun of it. We climb the steps to Belvedere Castle and check out the early spring flowers in the Shakespeare Garden.

A whole new prospect is opening up for me. Ever since I was sixteen, I've had a compulsion to do some sort of exercise every day. But now I can get all the exercise I need in two 20-minute sessions a week (maybe one, eventually) and have that much more time for doing the things I like. My thighs are as slim as they're ever going to be, I haven't bulked up (it seems I'm not genetically gifted, thank God), and I show off my biceps at the drop of a hat. I actually feel stronger, healthier, and less tired. Is the blinding pain that goes with those two sessions a week worth it? I'd say it is. There are moments when I even feel six feet tall.

To learn more about SuperSlow, call (212) 517-1703. □