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Functional isn't just for kitchen counters anymore

Functional movement training allows athletes and couch potatoes alike to get a great workout in 30 minutes

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Walk into the Get Fit! studio in Delray Beach almost any day of the week and you're likely to see men and women of all ages and fitness levels performing a variety of different exercises under the watchful eye of an instructor/personal trainer. Noticeably absent from the spacious studio on South Federal Highway are exercise machines of any kind – no Nautilus machines, no treadmills, no stairmasters anywhere in sight. Instead, Get Fit! specializes in functional movement training, an increasingly popular form of fitness training which emphasizes an integrated approach to strength training focusing on exercising multiple muscles and joints simultaneously instead of working them in isolation as with conventional strength training.

The benefits, say Sheree Thomas, 51, a certified fitness instructor and co-owner of Get Fit!, include increased balance, flexibility and strength. "It's an overall program that covers everything," said Thomas. "The average person who goes into the gym might use the treadmill for 30 minutes, but that might be all they do, but here in 30 minutes you're doing movements that improve balance, flexibility and build strength while focusing on the core. And, you also get in cardio because



In the Functional Moves class at Get Fit! in Delray Beach, students use dumbbells, stability balls, ropes, balance equipment and their own body weight to perform exercises that mimic everyday movement.

you can move faster throughout the class because you're not hampered by machines.'

During the average 30-minute Functional Moves class, students alternate 'stations' performing various exercises using dumbbells, elastic bands, stability balls, medicine balls, ropes, balance equipment and their own body weight. The Functional Moves class at Get Fit! can accommodate up to 15 people, but Thomas says she won't turn No. 16 away. "I can always double up on the stations to make room for one or two more," she said.

But what really sets functional movement training apart, according to Thomas, is its emphasis on "everyday movements."

"Even non-athletes, we all have to perform certain movements in our daily life. Let's say you have a moth-

er who picks up little children throughout the day. Functional movement's emphasis on core training through natural movements really allows her to strengthen her muscles so she doesn't have to strain her back," said Thomas. "The back ends up doing all the work if the other muscles aren't trained."

Although it has become increasingly popular in recent years, Thomas says that functional movement training is nothing new. "Nautilus machines were only invented in the 1960s. Before that, if you went into a YMCA all they used were balls, bands and ropes – that's what athletes trained with."

As a personal trainer, Thomas says she began using functional movement training exclusively with her clients four years ago after she saw the benefits it had for people that

were undergoing rehabilitative therapy. "I've worked with clients in rehab and some of them just want to work on getting in and out of a car – with functional movement training you can really design an exercise that will mimic that specific movement and build up those muscles."

"I really noticed that strength, balance, flexibility and cardio conditioning improved with all my clients after a few weeks of functional movement training," she added.

Functional movement training can also be highly effective training for athletes because it can mimic the movement used in a specific sport, says Thomas. A tennis player, for example, can work on his serve or his backhand by doing a functional movement exercise that mimics the swinging movement, including chest, shoulder and forearm muscles and

torso rotation.

And, it allows athletes in peak condition to work out along side first-time exercisers. "I can have someone who is a top athlete work out next to someone that never works out, just by tweaking the movement both can work to their maximum capacity."

In fact, Thomas says that many older exercisers are drawn to the functional moves method because of its simplicity and, yes, "functionality." "It's gentle on the joints and it's not intimidating because the exercises can be modified so that any one can do them. Many people find machines intimidating if they haven't used them before and different gyms have different machines. I train a lot of seasonal clients and once they learn how to do exercises with the stability balls or the bands, they can do it any where."