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FITNESS

A Better Body in 64 Payments

By Steve Friedman

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HERE'S how an infomercial works: One day life is good, and I'm munching on a sugar-coated, low-fat blueberry Pop-Tart in front of my television at 1:30 a.m., weeping quietly at Tony and Maria's first meeting in "West Side Story" because I know that staggering pain and death await them and all of humanity.

Between that moment and dawn's early light, for 20 minutes I remember only dimly, I stare slack-jawed at a television advertisement for a Bowflex home-exercise machine.

A few days later, five small-coffin-size cardboard boxes are crammed into my one-bedroom apartment, cutting off some of my favorite television viewing angles, tripping me on my late night sorties to fetch Fig Newtons from the fridge, unsettling me so much that I'm forced to add a pint of reduced-fat frozen yogurt to my Pop-Tarts, to soothe my nerves.

I call my friend Jack to complain. I do this because I blame him for my predicament. Jack is a voice-over actor who works out at a health club every morning and eats oatmeal for lunch.

A few days earlier we had been sitting at a Greek diner in the middle of the afternoon, because for the last five years neither of us has had what Jack calls "a no-win contract with the Man" and others refer to as "steady jobs."

We had been chatting about Venezuelan-style populism, Britney Spears and male-pattern hair loss. I was snacking on a cheeseburger and milkshake.

"You're Shamu," Jack said. "Don't you think you'd be happier if you'd eat like a human being instead of a tree sloth and start working out every so often?"

"I think tree sloths are vegetarians," I said.

"Who cares what tree sloths are? You're a whale! You've got to do something!"

But what? My knees are arthritic, so I can't play basketball or jog anymore. The pool at my fitness club is always crowded. It's too cold for bicycling. Sit-ups? On my hardwood

floors? Why not just ask for serious spinal injury and months, if not years, of excruciating and expensive rehab.

And then I saw the Bowflex infomercial. "Pumped arms. Ripped abs. Legs of steel," it said. "Twelve pounds of muscle in six weeks," and "Results are easy, with just one simple workout, 20 minutes a day, three times a week." All for \$25 a month.

Bowflex spent \$16 million for paid programming on national cable channels in 2005, more than any other company spent on a piece of home exercise equipment, according to the Infomercial Monitoring Service.

I can understand why. Its message is clear and life affirming, potent and simple. I have heard similar exhortations from evangelists over the years and, more recently, from a girlfriend right before she dumped me. To wit: just because I'm an overweight, lazy, greedy, at times selfish, overeating, occasionally self-loathing and chronically underearning daydreamer, doesn't mean I'm beyond salvation.

Redemption is as easy as surrendering my will and a little cash to a higher power. Or springing for flowers and shaving more often and taking Katharine to a nice restaurant every once in a while. Or, in the case of the Bowflex, simply punching a few buttons on my telephone.

A week and a half later, after I have realized that assembling the Bowflex Xtreme 2 requires an advanced degree in biomechanics, after I have called the Bowflex folks to send someone over to put the thing together for me, and after I have learned that assembly costs an extra \$200 or so that the infomercials don't mention, I open the owner's manual and fitness guide, searching for the easy-to-follow map to a world where no one will call me Shamu.

Instead, on the first page, I find this: "Please take your time to read through the entire manual before attempting to use your Bowflex Xtreme 2 home gym. You should understand how to properly set up and perform each exercise before you do so using Power Rod resistance." Slight problem: The manual is 69 pages. There are 75 different exercises. I feel a mood coming on. I fetch a few Pop-Tarts.

This isn't fair. One Bowflex magazine ad promised me "rock-hard abs, a sculpted chest, and powerful arms" as a result of exercising "just 20 minutes a day, three days a week." It didn't say anything about hours spent memorizing "success tips." And it certainly didn't mention the "Bowflex Xtreme 2 Body Leanness Program," which I found on Page 55, where I learn that "for maximum fat loss," I ought to stick to a daily diet of 1,500 calories. If I could stick to a 1,500-calorie diet, would I be sharing my living quarters with a

machine that is nearly seven feet tall and looks like a mechanical octopus? I take out my fury on a pint of peanut butter cup ice cream, which I have stored for just such an emergency.

I wake the next morning filled with resolve and anticipation. I do three sets of bench presses, then seated shoulder presses, lat pull-downs and biceps curls. Afterward I am sweating a little, grunting and feeling extraordinarily fit.

"Behold the new me," I say to Jack, whom I have invited over to admire the Bowflex Xtreme 2. Jack inspects the resistance rod technology.

"I see you have it set on 'girl,' " he says.

The booklet offers seven training regimens, ranging from the 20-minute, three-day-a-week "better body workout" to the six-day-a-week, hourlong "body building" plan. I choose "advanced general conditioning," which means exercising 35 to 45 minutes, four days a week. On those days I also spend 30 minutes on the elliptical trainer at the gym. At the end of a week I have taken my belt in a notch. After two weeks I have lost five pounds. I don't wheeze quite as much on my trips for Fig Newtons. Also I now use bowflex as a participle.

"What are you up to tonight?" Jack asks one afternoon at the diner, where we are mulling over Villanova's prospects in the forthcoming college basketball season, the heavy toll globalization exacts on the poor and who is a better dancer, Christina Aguilera or Shakira.

"Not much," I say. "I'm just going to grab a salad, maybe watch a little TV, then do some bowflexin." I drop the g because I think it makes me sound more muscular.

In the middle of Week 3, when I look in the mirror, my arms are bigger and my chest and shoulders are more defined. I refer to my arms as guns now, as casually as possible and at the slightest opportunity.

"How have you been?" a magazine editor I used to date asks me when I run into her on the street one day.

"Not bad," I reply. "But the guns are kinda sore."

She frowns, pursing her lips.

"Probably because I've been doing so much bowflexin," I say.

She steps back.

I scream during my crossover high rear delt rows. (Don't ask.) I grow a goatee, which I

think is slimming. I start slipping the word engorged into conversation.

"Don't you think," Jack asks one day over our afternoon coffee, "that December's a little late in the year to be wearing nothing but a T-shirt?"

"The guns need to breathe," I say.

"What is wrong with you?"

"Nothing. I'm getting healthy. And speaking of health, do you have any idea how many calories are packed into a bowl of oatmeal? Maybe you ought to think about that."

"I miss the old you," Jack says. "Plus you're never going to last on that thing."

But I do. I last, and I thrive. I have worked out with free weights before, and on Cybex machines and Universal equipment. I find the Bowflex Xtreme 2 a perfectly satisfactory alternative, solid and challenging. (So do legions of Bowflex users I encountered online, who seem to find success with the Bowflex in direct proportion to how much they use it.)

Virtually every exercise I have ever done with weights, or on a machine in a gym, I can do on my Bowflex. And the power rod resistance turns out to be a rather ingenious way that the Bowflex brains have figured out to simulate weight by pulling against heavy plastic rods. So what if I have a mechanical octopus as a roommate? It's working.

True, the heavy-duty plastic mat that the Bowflex is supposed to sit upon is an "accessory" that is an additional \$99. True, the "satisfaction guarantee" refund offer would entail my disassembling the Bowflex Xtreme 2, packing it into its original boxes and paying for its shipment back to Bowflex. True, the manufacturer recalled more than one million devices in 2004 after reports of broken seats and collapsed benches on its Ultimate and Power Pro models. True, the Bowflex Xtreme 2 costs \$1,599.

True, when a woman I'm dating discovers that I have ordered a machine advertised on an infomercial, she says, "I don't know what your mother did to you and I don't want to know, but don't call me anymore." True, the infomercial universe is filled with companies selling belts that promise to melt away pounds while you're lounging on a couch, miracle diets that will make you slender while you're slumped at your desk and other goofy sounding, if not fraudulent, gizmos and gimcracks. Can something called a Bowflex that comes from that same universe possibly be legit?

"As long as you stress the musculature in a similar manner, it doesn't matter if you're using a Bowflex or free weights or a similar device," said Glenn A. Gaesser, a professor of exercise physiology at the University of Virginia.

"The bottom line is they all work if you use them," Dr. Gaesser said, "But there's a caveat with the machines that make promises. If you work out 20 minutes, three times a week, yes, there will be a new body. But don't think it will look like a body builder or Lance Armstrong."

Keith Cinea, the senior education coordinator for the National Strength and Conditioning Association, said a better physique was part of a package deal. "It's resistance training, aerobic conditioning and your diet," he said. "Especially if you're looking at the body transformation they mention in their sales pitch, with just the machine, no, it won't work."

It won't? I need to change my diet, maybe even increase time on the elliptical trainer? This disappoints me. This makes me sad. I feel a mood coming. But I do not grab for a pint of ice cream, or reach for a box of Pop-Tarts. Those sad, fatty days are over. Shamu doesn't live here anymore. There's no room, not in my apartment. For this I salute the Bowflex Xtreme 2. As I salute, I check the mirror. The guns? Totally engorged.

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