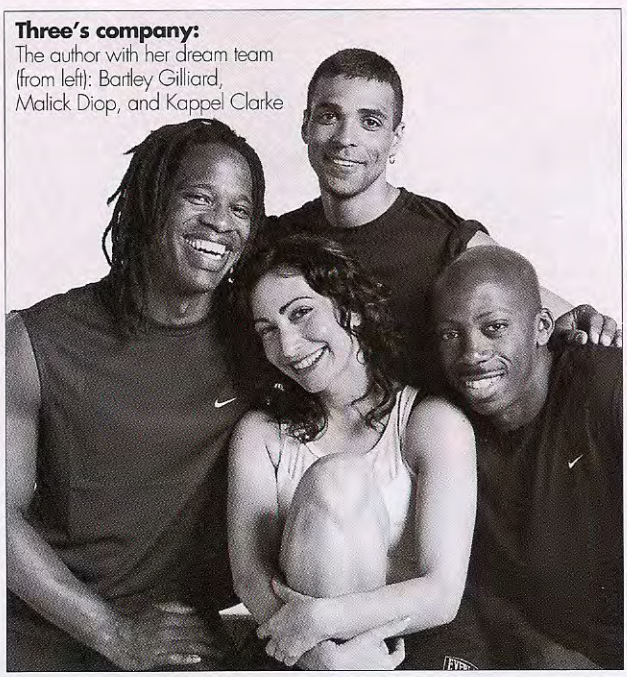
MY 3 TRAINERS

WITH THE HELP OF THREE ABLE-BODIED INSTRUCTORS, ONE WOMAN MAKES THE LEAP FROM WIMP TO WORKOUT QUEEN. BY CARA KAGAN

I never meant to be a trainer tramp; it just turned out that way. But if I had to pick someone to blame for my personal exercise addiction (for the last year I've been working out with three different trainers every week), it would have to be my seventh-grade Phys Ed teacher, Ms. L. Not exactly the nurturing type, she would bark out epithets to any less-than-stellar athlete. As I was extremely uncoordinated and only four-foot-eleven, I was not only the last person picked for every team, but frequently the object of her derisive remarks. Things came to a head during track and field when she sent me to the principal's office because I refused to jump over the hurdles. They were just too damn high.

My fear of all things physical extended into my leisure time as well. As an adolescent, I took ballet and ice skating lessons. But while my friends were going on school ski trips, mountain biking, and taking tennis lessons, I read. After college, I did get sucked into the whole '80s aerobics craze, but I couldn't get up the guts to try anything more daring than a high/low funk class.



Three's company: The author with her dream team (from left): Bartley Gilliard, Malick Diop, and Kappel Clarke

FLIRTING WITH FITNESS

I first got bitten by the personal-training bug three years ago when I was writing a fitness article. I called up New York City's Equinox Fitness Clubs and asked to be matched with a trainer. Enter Chris, an ex-Marine, who boot-camped thirteen pounds off my body in about two months. But believe it or not, a few months later I learned that fitting into size two jeans wasn't anywhere near the best part of working out. One night when we were training at the leg-press machine, a big musclehead guy asked if he could "work in" with us. When he was done with his set, he turned to Chris and asked, "Should I take that weight down for her?" Without hesitation, Chris replied, "No. She can do way more than that. We'll be going up." And there it was: I had actually out-lifted a guy. Talk about a rush. I finished that magazine article, but my love affair with personal training had just begun. I had tasted power, and I wanted more.

SETTLING DOWN

Heartbreak followed soon after, though; Chris left Equinox to pursue a career in music. Over the next six months, I went through a succession of short-term trainer "liaisons" until Malick Diop came into the picture. That's when I started to fully grasp how defeatist and defeated my unathletic childhood had left me. Since Malick works on all aspects of fitness: strength, endurance, flexibility, balance, agility, and speed, he would (and still does) have me do some pretty wacky things. A typical hour-long session might include jogging backward on a treadmill, jumping up onto a waist-high bench, or taking the stairs on the StepMill two at a time without holding on, which frankly all scared the hell out of me.

"I don't think I can do this," I'd say before even making a move. "Do it first and think about it afterward," he would counter. But somehow, some way, I would succeed in performing the exercise. After several months of these exchanges, and seeing the weights gradually creep up and my stamina increase, I became convinced that if I set my mind to it, I could take on virtually any physical challenge Malick could present. For the first time in my life, I began to feel athletically capable. I even gained enough confidence to try other sports like golf and tennis. Sure, my body got tighter, but that's not what kept (and still keeps) me completely faithful to our twice-weekly appointments. It was because in the gym I felt like I had no limits, except for the ones I set for myself. >

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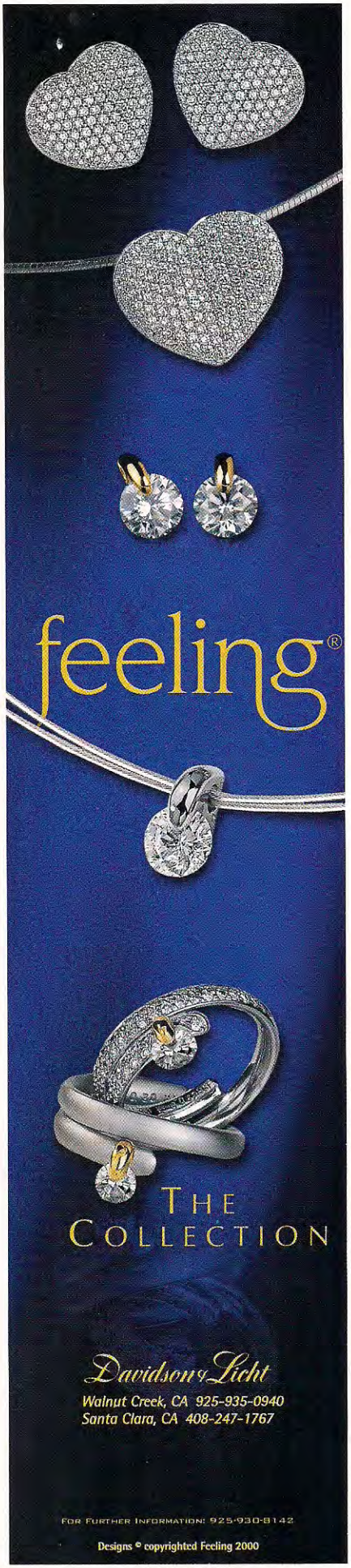


TWO-TIMING

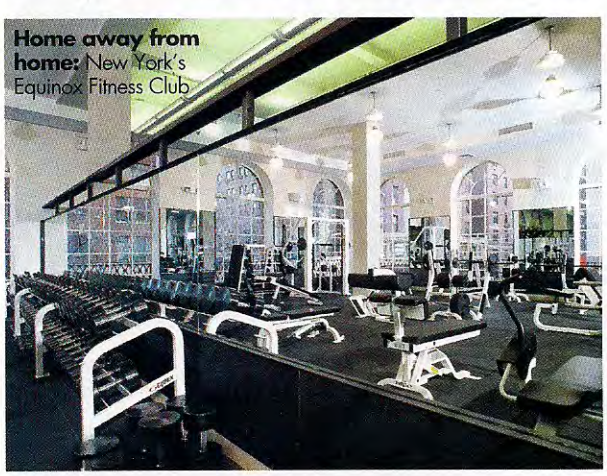
With such an empowering training relationship, you might wonder what led me to "cheat" on Malick with another trainer, much less two. I had been watching Kappel Clarke from afar for about a year and marveled at the intensity of his workouts. This guy was *serious*. I couldn't believe the things he would make his clients do, much less what he did to himself when he was working out. I couldn't resist the challenge. So when Malick was going away on vacation, I broached the subject: Was I up to training with Kappel? "Of course," he replied with his usual conviction. I, on the other hand, wasn't so sure. And it turns out that even I had grossly underestimated just how *serious* training with Kappel is. During our sessions, I never even think about whether or not I can do an exercise—I'm more concerned about whether or not I'll *survive* it. And there are no excuses. That time of the month? Forget about it. Hungover? "Glad you had fun last night. It means you're ready to work now," he'll say. He pushes me to the outer limits of fitness with extreme exercises that make my muscles scream, my heart pound, and my lungs burn. It's fabulous. Not only do I get an amazing endorphin rush, but all thoughts other than getting through that part of the routine flee from my head. Stress? What stress? Admittedly, I sometimes dread these workouts, but afterward, I feel unconquerable. When Malick returned, I was overjoyed to see him—but how could I give up Kappel? I decided to continue my Monday and Thursday dates with Malick and see Kappel on Wednesdays. Malick took this news graciously. He is, apparently, not the jealous type.

> ONE NIGHT I ACTUALLY OUTLIFTED A GUY. TALK ABOUT A RUSH. MY LOVE AFFAIR WITH PERSONAL TRAINING HAD BEGUN.

THE THIRD'S THE CHARM

If Malick is my patient-yet-demanding "husband," and Kappel is my supportive yet take-no-prisoners "boyfriend," my third trainer, Bartley Gilliard, is definitely the "buddy" in this mix. With all of this aggressive exercise, I began to feel like I needed a little yin along with the yang. So I started Friday-morning one-on-one Pilates mat sessions with Bartley. This hour is like my reward for working out so hard all week long. Pilates is challenging, but you do get to perform most of the movements lying down, and Bartley is an extremely comforting person. The focus is on breathing, posture, alignment, and unkinking the knots I've managed to tie myself into during the week. Since we've started working together, I've eliminated all of my lower back pain and most of my stress-induced neck and shoulder tension. I'm also standing up straight for the first time in my life, which makes my mother happy.

Needless to say, all of this training (and the several hours a week I put in on my own) eats up a substantial chunk of my time. But my husband and friends are getting used to meeting me for dinner after 8:00 P.M., and they've also realized how much nicer I >



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am when I'm working out. And yes, this is an expensive habit. Training sessions run from $55 to $70 (depending on how many you buy at a time), and a yearly membership at Equinox is $1,600. Then there's the exercise gear, Walkman, permanent locker (it beats dragging your gym bag around), and various other fitness "necessities." The annual grand total is around $16,000, a dizzyingly high sum. But to me, it's all worth it. My husband doesn't have to give me the "light" bags of groceries to carry anymore, and recently, a friend told me that she would choose me to go on *Survivor* with her—not half bad for one of the biggest wimps at Benjamin Franklin Junior High School. In fact, I hope Ms. L. is reading this article because I want a rematch against those hurdles. □

PERSONAL BEST

IF YOU CAN'T GET AN APPOINTMENT WITH ONE OF THESE GUYS, YOU CAN AT LEAST BENEFIT FROM SOME OF THEIR EXPERT ADVICE

FROM MALICK DIOP:

STICK WITH IT: "Getting fit doesn't happen because of one specific workout. It happens over time through consistent training."

LIVE IT: "Don't just think about workout principles like good posture and breathing in the gym. Take them with you wherever you go. They help to improve the overall quality of your life."

FACE YOUR FEARS: "Be sure to incorporate exercises into your routine that you don't like or are afraid you can't do. Usually when you feel that way about something, it's a sign that you're less proficient in that area. It will make you stronger not only inside the gym but outside as well."

BE A PERFECTIONIST: "Five good reps are better than ten so-so ones. Use a controlled full range of motion, while maintaining good posture. This also applies to cardiovascular machines, like the StairMaster. Performing at the highest level of intensity isn't beneficial if you're hunched over the machine, gripping the guardrails."

FROM KAPPEL CLARKE:

BE POSITIVE: "When you're faced with a challenging set or activity, refrain from self-defeating thoughts; they'll only sabotage your performance. Stick to positive visualization of successful executions."

BREATHE: "In strength training, inhale deeply in the preparatory phase of the exercise and fully exhale as you perform the exertion. In cardiovascular work, try to keep breathing in cycles that are complementary to the rhythm of your motion."

ACCEPT A CHALLENGE: "Real progress is made when you have to labor to complete a set or a cardiovascular interval. If an activity feels easy, it's not going to help you continue to make gains. Look at it this way: The difference in the amount of discomfort you will feel giving 80 percent versus 100 percent is minimal. So why not reap the full physical and mental benefits of giving it your all?"

ISOLATE: "Remind yourself to relax the muscles that are not directly involved in the exercise you are performing. For example, don't tense up your neck when you're doing shoulder work."

FROM BARTLEY GILLIARD:

STAY FOCUSED: "Really be there while you're working out. You won't get the benefits of exercise if you just plod through it without concentrating on it."

ENJOY YOURSELF: "Do something you like. If you're miserable the entire time you're working out, why would you keep it up?"

MIX IT UP: "Your body adapts to any kind of stress in as little as three weeks; you have to continually surprise it with new activities if you want to keep seeing improvements."

LOOK AT THE LONG TERM: "Focus on the true benefits of working out: You'll be healthier and feel better. Obsessing over losing five pounds most likely won't be enough to make you stick to your routine. And besides, once you achieve that short-term goal, you'll need motivation to keep coming back."