

stronger together



How group fitness classes
fuel body, mind, and community

BY DEBRA STEVKO MILLER



Photo courtesy of Life Time



Photo courtesy of Getty Images



■ According to the National Institutes of Health, exercise and physical activity are some of the best things older adults can do to stay healthy.

“Are we breathing?” shouts the instructor over the upbeat music.

It’s just a helpful reminder from an attentive class leader ensuring everyone’s muscles are getting enough oxygen while performing the correct technique.

“Hands off the knees,” directs another instructor during a waist-bending hamstring stretch.

Like personal trainers, group exercise instructors observe both beginner and experienced gym-goers for proper form to help minimize injury risks and strain on joints and ligaments for maximum workout results.

If a knee isn’t bent, if feet are spread too wide, if a backside isn’t flattened, you might be called out to adjust your position. But no one minds.

Although not an individualized workout, an exercise class is like having a personal trainer but alongside dozens of friends who are aiming for the same health benefits. Gains such as improved mood, weight management, reduced stress, better sleep, enhanced concentration, and improved alertness are recognized advantages of regular exercise.

“The group setting fosters relationship building and socialization, which is also important for well-being and mental and emotional health,” notes James J. Vandenburg, DO, medical director for the Hunterdon Health and Wellness Centers (HHWC). “It also allows people to become more engaged at home and in their community, as they feel and move better. And even though younger people may be



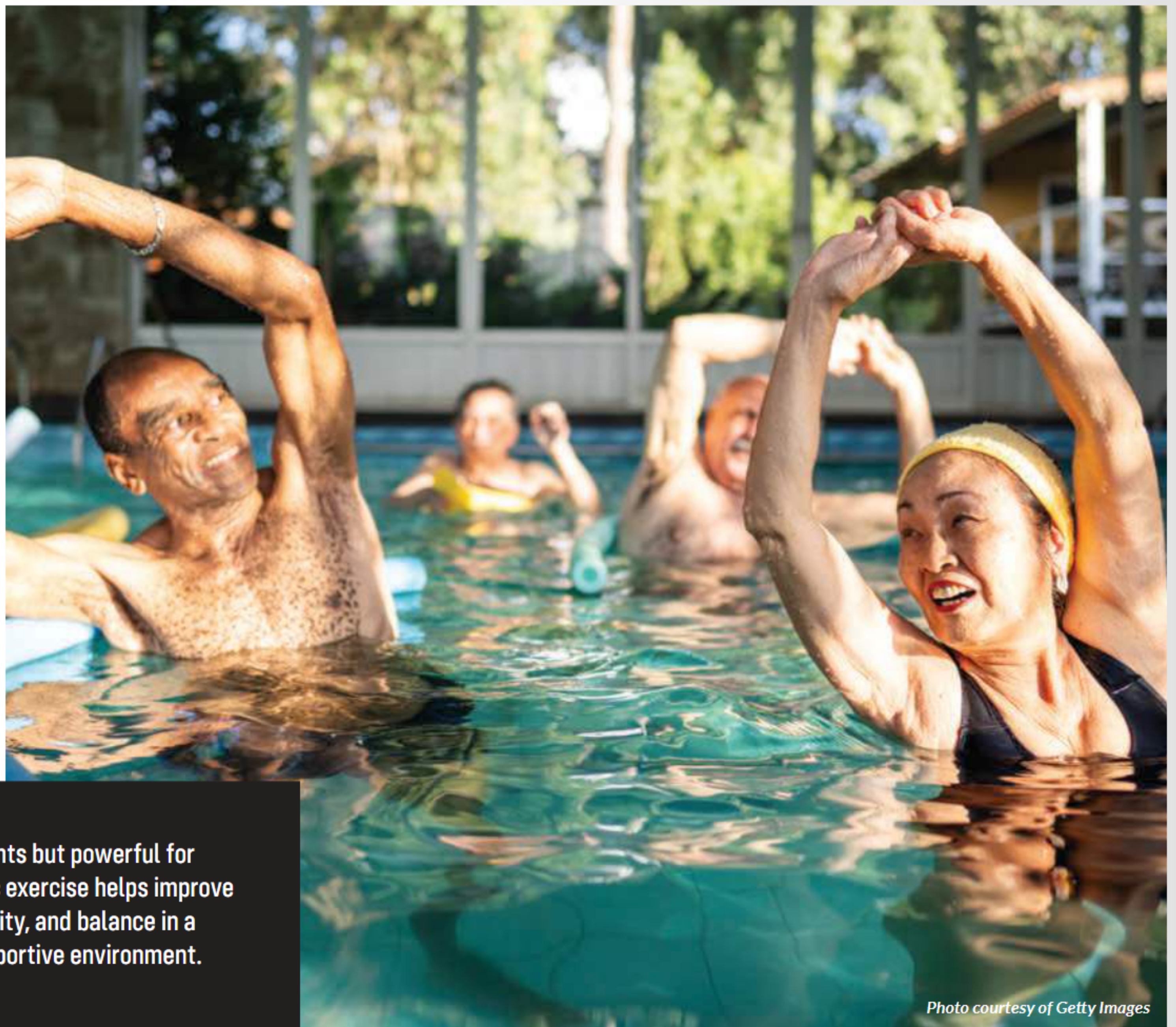
Photo courtesy of HHWC



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■ Dance your way to better health: Zumba combines cardio, coordination, and fun for a full-body workout.



■ Gentle on the joints but powerful for health — aquatic exercise helps improve strength, flexibility, and balance in a low-impact, supportive environment.

Photo courtesy of Getty Images



Photo courtesy of HHWC

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pressed for time, they really need to schedule time for exercise, or they will be forced to make time for an illness, resulting from a lack of wellness."

With facilities in Clinton and Whitehouse Station, the two medically based HHWC's offer 100 weekly classes combined giving members a plethora of choices.

"When you are in a group fitness class, you take it from beginning to end. There's a bit more accountability," says Jen Magro, HHWC group fitness instructor and personal trainer. "It's a very social atmosphere and I think that enhances and encourages people to keep coming back."

Justin Juliano, assistant director and group fitness supervisor at HHWC, agrees, "Having a community of people to exercise and work out with goes a long way. Having a team around you doing the same set of exercises, the same routine, who are after the same fitness goals creates a familiarity between the members."

Another advantage, members can check their blood pressure and participate in health screenings and wellness programs offered at the HHWC centers.

"It's designed to be a safe, supportive, guided environment," says HHWC director Mary Benyola. "Our instructors must be attentive, compassionate, and aligned with the broader mission of Hunterdon Health whether they're teaching a high-energy power cycle class or leading a restorative session in our Mental Wellness Program."

Gauging by the amount of participants who attend group classes, several factors bring individuals off the main training floor and into a fitness studio: the instructor, the music, the level of fitness, and a welcoming atmosphere.

"I love the music and the sense of fellowship," says Pamela C. "Group classes allow me to stay consistent in my wellness journey. And different scales of fitness of those in class keeps everyone motivated."

Instructor Rita Haake's Sit & Get Fit class at Princeton Fitness & Wellness (PFW), an affiliate of Penn Medicine Princeton Medical Center, class interaction is highly encouraged.

"To keep my peeps motivated and coming back for more each week, I am constantly changing the moves and the music," she explains. "Seeing their smiles and hearing them sing along gives me great joy. My moves are connected to the music and through the music."

As a certified instructor for 20 years of different fitness disciplines, Haake leads six diverse classes at PFW. She has also originated middle-of-road intensity classes such as Boogie Tone, Fit 101, and Balance & Movement.

"Though fitness as a career came later in my life at age 43, I have always been a fitness fanatic and group fitness was my 'drug' of choice," she says. "There was always a sense of community and camaraderie in class, not to mention the sense of accomplishment and that little 'high' afterward. As an instructor, I get to personally bring all of that to my classes."

Ballroom and line dancing, power yoga, rhythm ride, tai chi, boot camp, Balletone, and Just Step are some of the wide variety of classes that PFW instructors offer their members.

"There is something for everyone," says Cathy Tramontana, PFW group exercise manager. "Members of all ages can participate. Group fitness classes change people's lives. It makes them feel part of something special and meaningful. They have fun, make new friends and get fit at the same time. What could be better?"

"The music and instructor provide great motivation and make the classes really fun," says one gym-goer who goes by B.K. and attends Haake's class. "I find that I get a better workout in group classes, which help to push me harder than when working on my own. The classes not only put me in a great mood during class but lingers with me when I leave the gym. Sometimes I work independently at the gym doing the machines but although effective, that can get boring."

■ **James J. Vandenburg, DO, medical director for the Hunterdon Health and Wellness Centers.**

Photo courtesy of HHWC



Photo courtesy of PFW

■ **Instructor Rita Haake holds an exercise class at Princeton Fitness & Wellness, an affiliate of Penn Medicine Princeton Medical Center.**

Lifelong Group Workouts

A collection of fitness, social, and educational programs specifically for baby boomers and beyond is the focus of a specialized AroraSM program at Life Time facilities, which centers on improving flexibility, balance, nutrition, interaction, and strength.

As captain of AroraSM at Life Time in Princeton, certified instructor Chouchane Aprikian leads classes in dance, strength, aqua, barre, Hydro Training, and Zumba. In her cardio-focused dance class, Aprikian introduces newbies to a dance sequence with a brief run-through before embarking on a 3- to 4-minute routine coordinated to music from earlier decades. Then, after several weeks of everyone practicing the routine together, a class member might be invited up front to assist in leading the group through the dance.

"The amount of time and effort spent on compiling the routines and soundtracks shows how dedicated to their craft the (instructors) are," says Lydia E., age 68. "I have met so many wonderful people at class that I now call friends."

"I joined a gym for the first time in my life after I retired," says Suzanne D'Amico-Sharp, age 68, who participates in AroraSM dance. "I came for the workouts, but I stay because of the friends I've made in the classes. We exercise our social muscles as well as our actual muscles."

According to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), exercise and physical activity are some of the best things older adults can do to stay healthy. Even moderate exercise can improve the health of those who are frail or who have age-related diseases. Without physical activity, older people tend to grow weaker in four areas important for staying healthy and independent: strength, balance, flexibility, and endurance. Exercising regularly can also have a positive impact on the immune system, blood pressure, cardiovascular system and it can decrease the risk of heart disease and help with depression or anxiety.

"Exercise is the fountain of youth, it's never too late to start and best to keep (hydrating)," suggests Dr. Vandenburg. "(Older adults) should select something that interests them and may be of lower impact. Chair yoga is a popular program; there is also a balance program and aquatic programs that may be easier to start with."

Free or affordable exercise classes can be found at recreation and senior wellness centers in many communities. No-cost gym memberships at select fitness centers for retirees may also be available through some Medicare Advantage or Medicare supplement plans. ♦

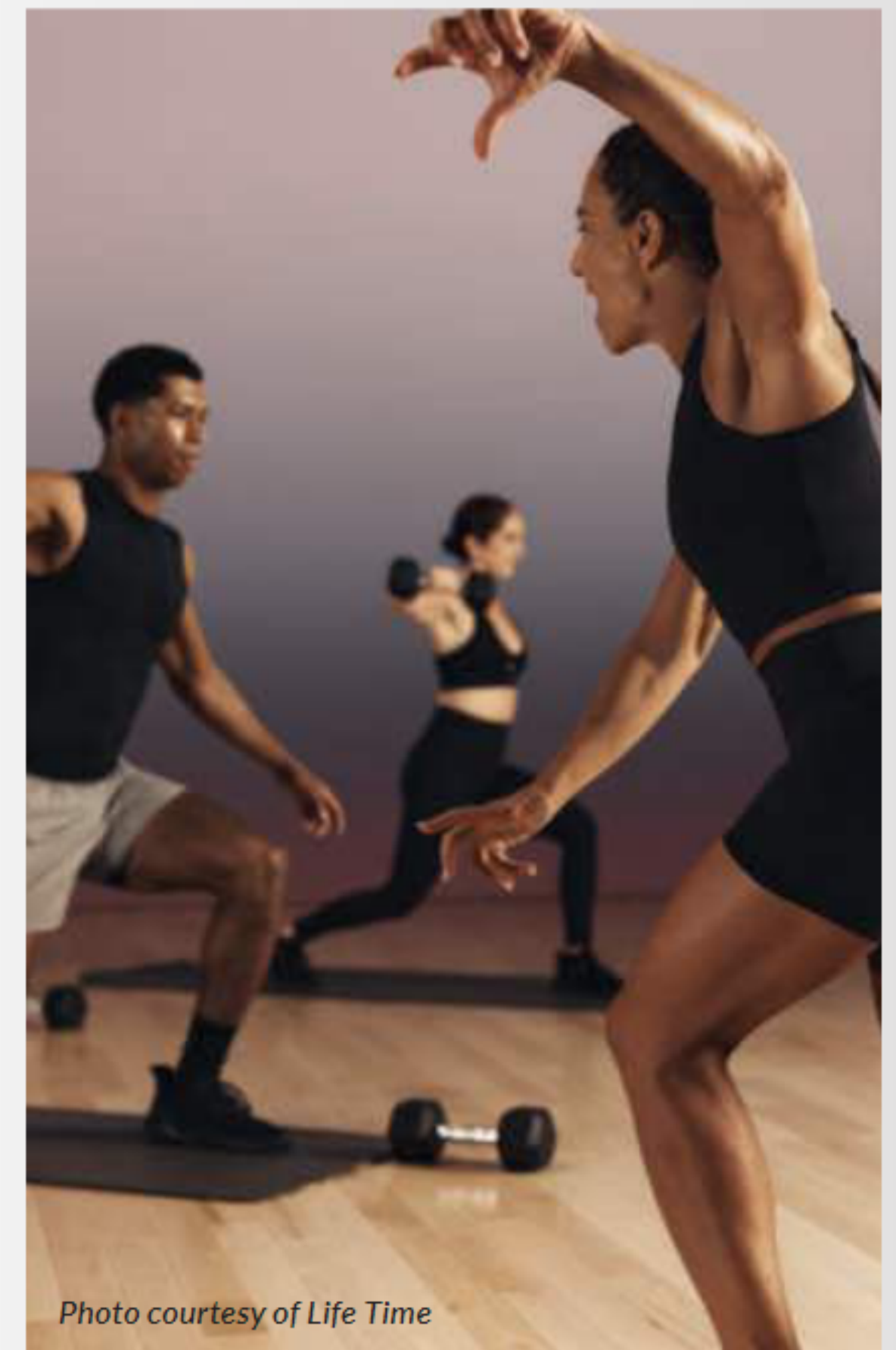


Photo courtesy of Life Time

■ **Building more than muscle — strength training boosts bone density, improves balance, and empowers you to stay active and independent at any age.**