

HEALTHY LIVING



IN IT TOGETHER



Friends don't let friends sit around. Nancy Pierson and Oliver O'Bryan rely on each other to row together, while Pamela LeBlanc and Brian Vance pair up for swimming.

PHOTO BY DEBORAH CANNON / COX NEWS SERVICE

Exercise buddies encourage, motivate

BY PAMELA LeBLANC
Cox News Service

As compulsive as I am about exercising (and there's a reason my husband calls our house Swim Freak Central), sometimes sleeping an extra hour or using my noon break to actually eat lunch sounds so appealing. Most days, I have a swim team practice to attend. I've paid for it, and I know how happy it'll make me once I'm there, churning through the water and trying to do whatever my coach dreams up. So I get up and go. But the team takes Tuesdays off, and it would be oh-so-easy to blow off my workout that day.

Thanks to Brian Vance, my official exercise buddy, that rarely happens.

Last spring, Vance, a 56-year-old financial consultant, began training for the La Jolla Rough Water Swim, a 3-mile ocean race in California. He wanted to get in a long, unbroken training swim at least once a week, on top of the three to five practices he catches with his team. Vance and I used to train together and are about the same speed.

Because I get twitchy if I don't swim or water ski almost every day, I decided to tag

along to keep him company.

Now we've got a standing date every Tuesday. No way I'm going to slack off if I know he's counting on me to show up. It's permanently scheduled on my calendar. We only miss if one of us is out of town or sick.

For the first time this year, we swam through the winter. Without my exercise buddy, I wouldn't have done it. But I knew Vance was counting on me. And if he could jump in that 68-degree water in the middle of February, so could I.

"It makes all the difference," Vance says of having an exercise partner. "If I didn't have that, it wouldn't get done."

Our relationship illustrates something I've always known — that you're much more likely to stick to an exercise program if you've got someone to exercise with. The social aspect is what makes grinding out miles on the trail or doing aerobics enjoyable. It's more than 60 minutes of cranking out intervals — it's a chance to catch up with people with whom you might not otherwise hang out. Having a buddy to share the fun (and, sometimes, the misery) keeps motivation high. And there's even a Web site to help you find the right exercise buddy.

Take rowing buddies Nancy Pierson, 50, and Oliver O'Bryan, 60. They met while rowing an eight-person boat together, but the pair has teamed up to row a two-person boat for the past three months. Three to five times a week, they meet for a muscle-mashing, 90-minute tour of Town Lake in Austin, Texas.

"It's like rowing a high-performance vehicle. The result of a bad stroke is disastrous; the result of a good stroke is bliss," Pierson says.

Even more so than in swimming, partners are critical in rowing. If one doesn't show up, the boat can't go out. Knowing that Pierson is depending on him motivates O'Bryan, who says he has a "sort of innate inertia." Once he's at the dock, that inertia quickly turns to enthusiasm.

"It's very easy for me to follow Nancy," says O'Bryan, a business manager for a doctor. "We have a natural rhythm together."

On the water, O'Bryan determines the boat's direction; Pierson sets the pace.

HOW TO FIND AN EXERCISE BUDDY

ExerciseFriends.com is a free online service that matches people looking for workout buddies.

Members can search the site by gender, age, ZIP code and activity.

Their top interests? Walking, hiking, running, tennis, weight training and cardio workouts.

(The site is not a dating service.) ■

"It makes all the difference," Brian Vance says of swimming with exercise buddy Pamela LeBlanc.



Together, they strengthen their bodies along with their friendship.

"I just like rowing with Oliver because I like Oliver," says Pierson, who teaches bowen, a form of therapeutic body work.

O'Bryan likens it to a sort of marriage. "But without all that other stuff," Pierson quickly adds.

For some women, pregnancy provides a convenient excuse to quit exercising. Not so for Tzatzil LeMair, 35, owner of the Tough Cookies Don't Crumble training program, and Ivonne Mercado, 38, who manages translations for Harcourt Inc. publishers.

"We've been friends for over eight years and made a pact that if we got pregnant again, we wouldn't let each other get too fat and out of shape (as we both did before)," LeMair says. Now that both are pregnant — LeMair with her fourth and Mercado with her third — they meet every Friday for a combination run/walk.

"If you don't have somebody, you won't do it," Mercado says.

"If there's no accountability, other things get in the way," LeMair says. "It's too hot, I'll do it later — it just doesn't get done."

"If you don't have a training partner waiting for you, you have this inner dialogue, and you know who's going to win."

The key is not thinking of it as work, or something you have to do.

"That's how Cookies started," LeMair says. "The basic (premise) is that exercise needs to have a social aspect. It takes away from your free time, so it has to be fun."

The Friday meetings provide time for Mercado and LeMair to catch up on how their pregnancies are progressing. They hope to keep meeting until their babies are due in the fall.

After that, they'll help each other get back in shape.

Vance and I socialize at our weekly swims, too. It's a chance to hear what's going on in his life and to share what's on my mind. The workout almost becomes a happy side benefit.

It has worked so well that I've collected a couple of friends to keep me running through the summer, too.

If you're trying to keep in shape on your own, you're setting an obstacle in your path.

Sure, you can get around it. But wouldn't it be easier not to have to try? ■



Exercise buddies Oliver O'Bryan and Nancy Pierson have a real friendship. Pierson likens it to a marriage "but without all that other stuff."