

15 MINUTES

Getting ripped at Hammerhead Gym

BY EVAN WILLIAMS
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The busiest time at Hammerhead Gym on Fort Myers Beach is Monday morning, when the locals may be recovering from indulgent weekends.

"I think a lot of people feel guilty about what they ate and drank over the weekend," said owner Tiffany Katcko.

She appeared clear-eyed, deeply freckled by the sun and far too healthy to have ever eaten or drank too much on any day.

"They usually leave in a good mood," she said. "They take their frustrations out on the equipment."

By mid-morning, the crowd had receded and cardio equipment sat wiped clean and motionless. Big front windows looked out on a 7-Eleven parking lot and across Estero Boulevard, toward a sliver of sand and the Gulf of Mexico.

There was one last workout left to be had at the gym Monday morning. Sherri Crister, in her spandex tank-top and shorts, stayed to work on her abs. They were admittedly pretty ripped.

"This is a cool little gym," she said. "There are bigger gyms, but you have to go off the Beach."

"This is my social life. I have four kids."

Ms. Crister has lived a few blocks away from Hammerhead for the last

five years. She moved to the Beach from a small town in Kentucky, where "it was all about who you knew," she said. "It's not like that here... You can't tell the millionaires from the transients. Everybody's the same."

Her husband is the pastor at First Baptist Church on Fort Myers Beach. He and Ms. Crister used to travel around the country singing southern gospel music. She said they plan to stay in town, and she'll keep working out at Hammerhead, "until God says go again. And we're ready."

On the other hand, Ms. Katcko isn't planning on going anywhere soon. She has lived on the Beach for 23 years and owned the gym with her husband for 11 years. While using the mid-morning downtime to do a few repetitions of her own, with 10 pound dumbbells, she talked about how the years passed.

"(Fort Myers Beach) has changed a lot," she said. "There's been a lot of development. It used to be a lot of little cottages and quaint little places. It's definitely growing up. And the beach layout has changed with the storms over the years."

Ms. Katcko grew up in Shawano, Wis., a 45-minute drive from Green Bay. It's a tourist destination that swells to twice its size in the summer months.

"It was a little town, out in the country, with pretty, rolling hills," Ms. Katcko said.

One winter, when she was a teenager, her parents traded the frozen Wisconsin landscape for Fort Myers Beach.

"Six months turned in to eight months," she said.

They liked it so much they sold their house that year, and moved to the Beach permanently. Ms. Katcko eventually became a general manager at three hotels and a bar — Howard Johnson, Days Inn and the Ramada.

"I didn't have much time off," she said. "My dad was always a really hard worker. I guess that was the way I was brought up."

She met her husband at the hotel bar, though. They opened a gift shop together on the Beach, but he had plans to open a gym all along.

"I think he kind of had the name of the gym in his head when he was a little boy," Ms. Katcko said. "He had even drawn the Hammerhead logo when he was really young."

In the logo, a Hammerhead shark with a buff chest is rising out of the ocean, grimacing and pumping iron.

"I think we're very unique," Ms. Katcko said. "The gym is small and extra friendly. People come in to socialize and see familiar faces. We're definitely not one of those gyms with all the gruntin' and groanin' and body builder types. It's a laid-back gym."

Who you see at the gym depends on when you go. You'll find five or



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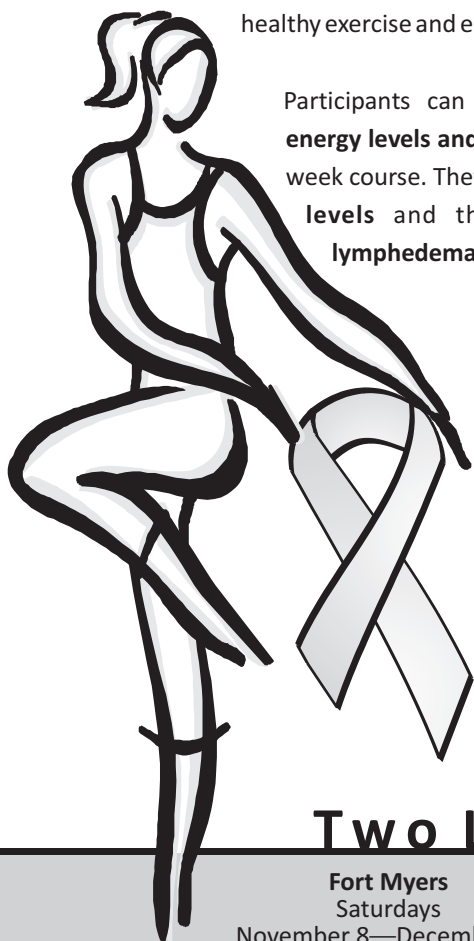
Tiffany Katcko

six early birds who arrive at 6:30 a.m. every day before work, and retirees who come later in the day; the snowbirds and Europeans make the place busier in the winter months. And you might see a famous face on occasion. Pictures on the wall show professional athletes who have visited, like Fred "Fuzzy" Thurston, from the Green Bay Packers.

All came, like Ms. Crister, to feel and look a little better. And possibly to achieve six-pack abs. ■

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