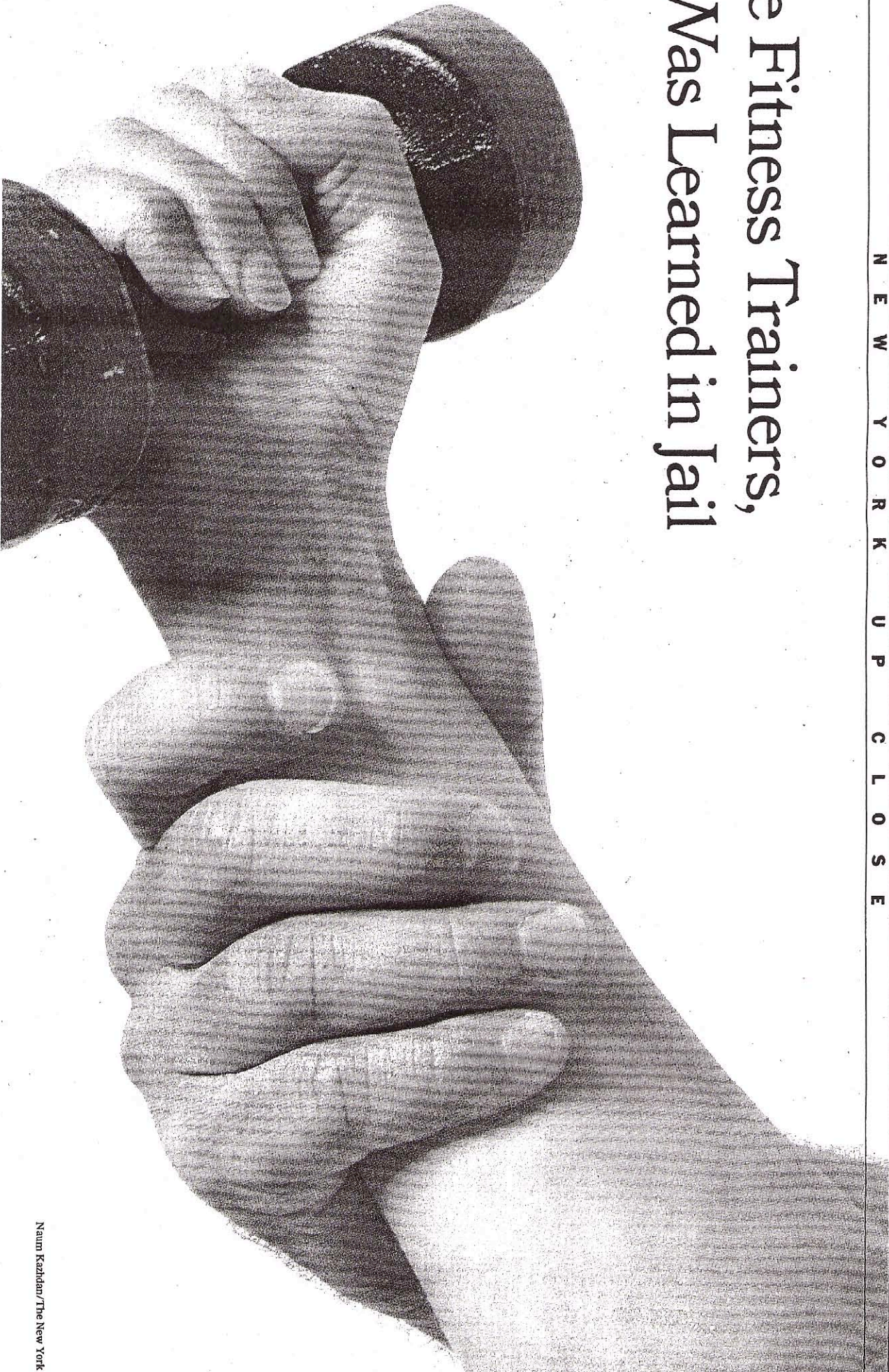


N E W Y O R K U P C L O S E

For Some Fitness Trainers, The Job Was Learned in Jail



Naum Kazhdan/The New York

HE was the best trainer that the 33-year-old medical researcher had ever found. A Queens street tough with a Sean Penn sort of look, he yelled like a drill sergeant, but knew when to pull back. He hadn't graduated from high school, but he held the top fitness qualifications. Club trainers typically keep less than half of what they bill, but at his club in Lower Manhattan he commanded \$125 an hour.

This woman, a resident of Hudson Heights in northern Manhattan, had just ended a year filled with break-ups, work problems and family crises, and he had helped her develop more stamina and strength than she thought possible. She likened her journey to that of Buck in "The Call of the Wild," the dog who, she said, "was starved, down in the snow and ready to die, when he adapted and became a wolf."

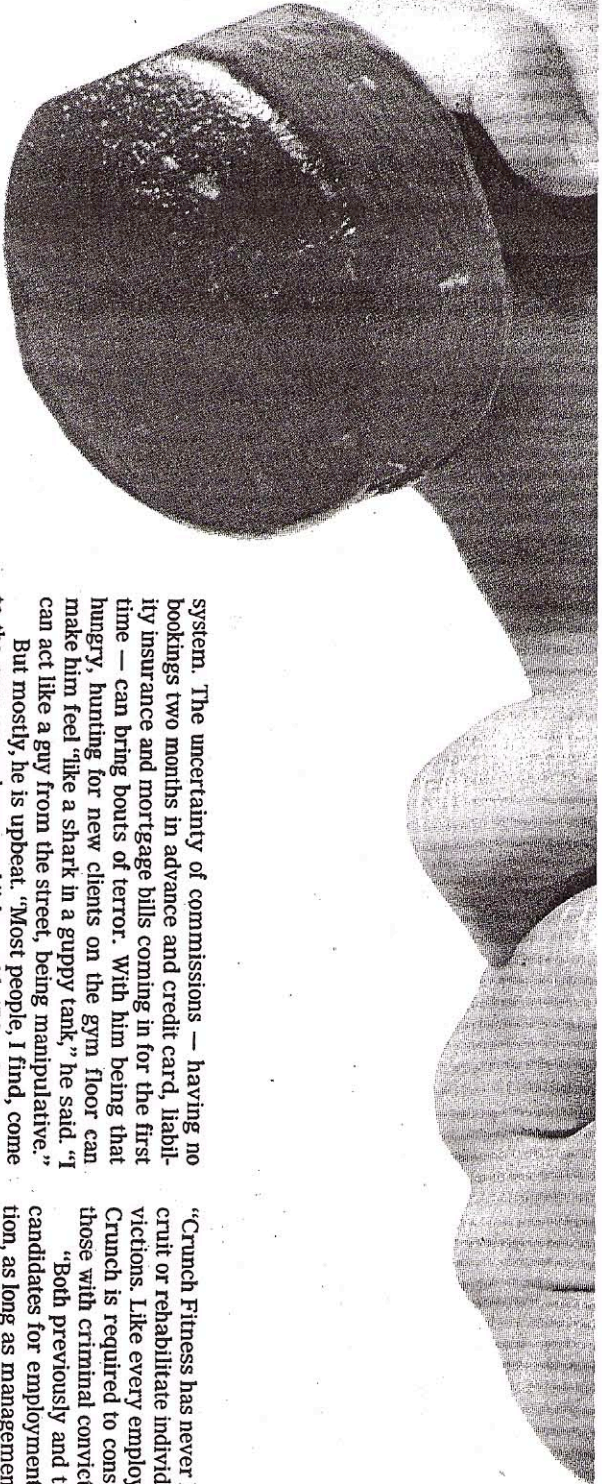
She often wondered how her trainer knew so much about survival and transformation.

Her answer came in a call one day from Rikers Island. It was her trainer, who had just been arrested on a parole violation, a D.W.I. charge outside a Long Island restaurant. He had previously served two sentences, for theft and aggravated assault, he said: all told, 13 of his 35 years. He would probably get three and a half years.

The subway may be where disparate New Yorkers come into the most physical contact, but for unlikely personal relationships, fitness training in the city holds the prize. Today, although their customers may not realize their pasts, ex-offenders are fitness trainers at sports clubs, city gyms and homes.

"I know seven guys like this personally," said Edmond Taylor, senior employment coordinator at the Fortune Society, a Manhattan agency that helps ex-prisoners. Club managers and former inmates echo this remark. And Angie Wickstrom, a spokeswoman for the National Federation of Personal Trainers, said her group has certified 300 former inmates as trainers in New York State since 1996. Some, maybe quite a few, presumably work in the city.

In a city where no one has enough time to work out, it makes sense that personal trainers include many who have had all the time in the world for exercise. Former inmates pumped iron in the weight yard for three or four



Naum Kazhdan/The New York Times

They got in shape in prison, for protection and for fun. Now, they use the skill to serve people from a very different world.

or more hours a day, to relieve stress and develop the strength to fend off attackers. Many studied physical fitness and, still behind bars, sat for reputable trainer licensing exams in anatomy, nutrition and physiology.

Not surprisingly, none interviewed would permit their real names to be used, fearing that disclosure would endanger their jobs and salaries that can run to \$60,000 a year.

For the same reason, they often hide their past from clients and colleagues, even though state law makes it illegal to discriminate against convicts and some of these ex-inmates say that the skills they learned in jail are precisely what makes them good trainers.

"Prison made me a better person," said the medical researcher's trainer. (He weathered the D.W.I. arrest and has returned to work.) "It's made me who I am, and given me a knack for figuring people out."

Still, these trainers must struggle daily with old habits and freedom's new challenges. The medical researcher's trainer says he is not fully at ease when he knows that a club member works in the criminal justice

system. The uncertainty of commissions — having no bookings two months in advance and credit card, liability insurance and mortgage bills coming in for the first time — can bring bouts of terror. With him being that hungry, hunting for new clients on the gym floor can make him feel "like a shark in a guppy tank," he said. "I can act like a guy from the street, being manipulative."

But mostly, he is upbeat. "Most people, I find, come to the gym very depressed," he said. "My clients are presidents of companies, walking in slumped over. I can turn their lives around because I've turned my life around."

Another trainer and former prisoner, who is the top earner at a Midtown health club, is brimming with candor attitude. At 4 a.m. one day earlier this year in his South Bronx home he was wide awake without an alarm — a holdover, he said, from the prisoners' hours he kept for eight years. A health enthusiast, he downed a strawberry-banana protein shake, jogged to the subway and, before 6 a.m., unlocked the club.

"Aggressive is what he is," one male client said. "He won't take any nonsense. He's happy, he's cheery, he's intent on form, he lays on hands."

Though the trainer has worked at this club for several years, no one knows his real story. But, he said, "I don't dwell on the past. That person is gone."

Do gym-goers care about not knowing a trainer's criminal past? If the trainer had been convicted only of a nonviolent drug offense — many fit that category — some clients interviewed said they would not mind. Yet many were disturbed at the possibility of unknowingly training with someone who had a violent past.

"It creeps me out," said Victoria Lessin, a filmmaker who lives in Brooklyn. "I'd want to know if a trainer has a conviction of violent crime. It would be hard to continue a relationship with someone on that intimate a level, making yourself very vulnerable. As long as you're in a public place, there's no real threat, but there would be a sense of psychological insecurity."

Even the medical researcher, who wasn't upset to learn that her trainer had done time, said she was relieved he had not committed certain offenses. "I wouldn't work with a rapist," she said, "and I'd have a problem with someone who'd committed crimes against children, or anything racially motivated."

How do fitness clubs treat the matter? One major New York club, Crunch Fitness, issued this statement:

"Crunch Fitness has never had a specific program to recruit or rehabilitate individuals with prior criminal convictions. Like every employer in the state of New York, Crunch is required to consider all applicants including those with criminal convictions.

"Both previously and today Crunch has considered candidates for employment that had a criminal conviction, as long as management was confident that the candidate and his/her background would not pose a risk to members or employees. As a result, some qualified candidates whose criminal backgrounds did not pose a risk to the safety and security of our members, employees or facilities, were hired by Crunch."

Crunch was bought by Bally Total Fitness in January 2002, and the statement goes on to say, the acquired company "implemented a more rigorous system of background checks, which was already standard at Bally Total Fitness and still considers a candidate's total background and qualifications before hiring."

SOME people in the business say ex-inmates often have the qualities needed to be trainers. "Think about it," said Antonio Simi, a personal training manager who has been at Crunch for seven years and now works at the center on Lafayette Street downtown. "This position is a hustler's job. You have to be able to go up to people and sell yourself, look the part, be fit, and be tough mentally and physically. To survive in the streets, you've got to be strong."

But a tough economy and regulatory changes are making job-hunting tougher for these potential trainers. "It's a heartbreaker when someone is hungry, motivated and wants to rebuild a life," said JoAnn Page, executive director of the Fortune Society. "How do you get someone to gamble on you? To trust you? Who'll give that person a chance?"

One answer is someone like the medical researcher. After getting the call from Rikers, she visited her trainer there (Bringing a gift, "The Call of the Wild"), and so did other clients. Along with a manager of the gym, they began a letter-writing campaign on the trainer's behalf that led to his release after just four months, his record wiped clean. Since then, the trainer has been promoted, and his relationships with clients have deepened.

"He came over to my house for the Super Bowl," one client said. "He was into heavy conversation with my brother, who's a cardiologist."