

# Mid-career stretches

Professionals who leave the rat race for jobs in fitness find it can be risky but rewarding.

By JEANNINE STEIN  
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**T**HE defining moment for Narween Otto, the instant she realized she was ready to trade her frenetic life as a film producer for a new life as a yoga instructor, came during a yoga class.

Already a part-time instructor, she was at that moment adjusting students into proper alignment. "I was connecting with people," she recalls. "I was being giving and kind and sharing and good to people. Someone asked me how it felt, and I welled up with tears. I liked who I was."

That type of epiphany is shared by many people who opt out of their current careers — often of the long hours, mega-stressed variety — and switch to professions in the health and fitness arena, such as yoga teacher, Pilates instructor, dietitian or personal trainer. For them, this is not just jumping from "Job A" to "Job B" simply because of burnout or boredom. They form a deep connection to these careers brought about by a firsthand, life-changing experience: the transformative power of Pilates, the serenity and spirituality of yoga, the renewed vitality and well-being prompted by a healthy diet.

Sheila King, program director of UCLA Extension's certification program [See Career, Page F5]

**NEW POSITION:** Bonnie Cahoon traded life as a television producer to become a Pilates instructor. Cahoon says that taking a steep pay cut and downsizing her lifestyle were worth the switch. "Feeling sick before I went to work — all the money in the world isn't worth that."



# Professionals follow their passions to fitness careers

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In fitness instruction, says students often enroll in the program as part of a mid-career switch. "There's the dissatisfaction with what they're currently doing and the simultaneous draw of getting deep satisfaction out of helping people feel better about themselves," she says. "They've experienced it themselves — typically most of the people in the curriculum are fit, and they come from the personal experience of transformation, and they want to pursue their passion."

The health club and fitness industry raked in \$13.1 billion in 2002, according to the International Health, Racquet & Sportsclub Assn., even as the population continues to get fatter. It's a scenario that's opened up job possibilities, many tailored for entrepreneurial-minded men and women seeking their niche in a field.

Finding that niche can be a daunting task. After all, making a leap into these occupations isn't without its risks, pitfalls and sacrifices. Changing careers is often accompanied by a dramatically lowered income, radical change of lifestyle and a tough time finding jobs.

Some yoga teachers who have recently graduated from teacher-training programs are finding a glut of instructors in the L.A. area. Several gyms and yoga studios report getting five or more calls a day from instructors looking for work, and top gyms have their pick of the best.

Other people discover that turning a hobby into a job destroys the zeal they once felt.

"I wouldn't give up your day job," advises Mara Carrico, a San Diego-based yoga instructor and continuing education specialist for the American Council on Exercise. "Unless you're independently wealthy or have someone supporting you, start teaching on weekends or in someone's home or rent a little hall." She also suggests that teachers consider heading to areas of the country not inundated with yoga studios. "Be very logical and see how it moves from there."

## Sacrifices and change

SOME say that whatever trade-offs they've had to make have been worth it. Otto, 29, realized that after seven years of struggling to gain producer credits and establish a reputation in the industry she still felt unsatisfied. "I had a whole crisis of faith. I wasn't quite sure if I was ever going to make a fantastic movie. The flip side is working for a major studio where you're surrounded by people who want to have sex with bimbos and drive Ferraris. I thought, I'm a smart person — is this really what I'm supposed to do? I wanted to make a contribution to the world and connect with people. Make people feel better."

Otto, a native Australian, always considered herself "noncommittal" about yoga, taking classes here and there and not wanting to delve into the more spiritual aspects. That changed with a class at City Yoga in Los Angeles about a year ago: "The teacher was talking about how if you're not trying hard enough here, it translates into who you are in the world. Something about that engaged me."

While still producing, she decided to take a teacher-training course as a way to deepen her own practice. But in the back of her mind, Otto was doubting her future in films. She eventually decided to put producing on hold, then ultimately let go of it all — her job, her nice house, even her husband, a director with whom she worked on projects. The transition wasn't easy. She now teaches at Still yoga studio in Silverlake and at Cal State L.A. But her one-bedroom Los Feliz co-op suits her more than the spacious Westside house. "I'm OK I'm a yoga teacher," she says. "I don't feel fraudulent."

Like Otto, 37-year-old Bonnie Cahoon wasn't feeling much gratification being a

## Research fitness field before handing in a letter of resignation

Thinking about trying to make a go of it as a Pilates instructor or personal trainer? Before you jump ship from your current job, consider this advice:

■ Thoroughly research the field in which you're interested. Get information from trade organizations, and talk to people working in the field to see what certifications are required, what the job market is like, salary ranges etc.

If your dream job does require a certification or degree, go for the one that's most respected. It will give you an extra edge over others in the field.

■ Consider moving. If you can't find much work in a major city like Los Angeles, which is lousy with health clubs and yoga studios, go where there's more opportunity and less competition.

■ It's great to be your own boss, but not everyone is a born entrepreneur. "Your clients will cancel on you, and you need to keep your volume up," says Sheila King, program director of UCLA Extension's certification program in fitness instruction. "You have to be a good businessperson." She recommends taking courses to learn the ropes of running your own business.

■ Explore all options. Yoga teachers aren't limited to private studios or health clubs; many work in schools or senior citizen centers, or lead yoga retreats.

Registered dietitians can work in hospitals, clinics, substance abuse programs, schools, hotels, food production, in the media, or as food stylists or chefs, says Gail Frank, a nutrition professor at Cal State Long Beach and a spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Assn. "I'm a health scientist," she says, "and this is a sophisticated intellectual challenge that gives you a profession."

■ Establish a niche. King suggests that people "brainstorm ways to meet society's needs. There is certainly business out there, but it has to be well thought out."

— JEANNINE STEIN

television producer creating on-air promos for Disney and the WB. It afforded her trips to Europe whenever she felt like it, meals at the best restaurants, even time and money to pursue acting. But all that came with a downside: "I felt sick to have to go to work. People think it's like brain surgery, and the importance they put on it is insane. But I didn't feel I was helping anybody; I felt like, oh boy, I'm trying to get people to watch television."

A friend she met in acting class was also a Pilates instructor, and Cahoon, who'd been through the gym and personal-trainer route, decided to give it a try. Her revelation was simple but profound: "It feels so good. This is never boring, and there's that mind-body connection. I never had that before."

Classes three times a week just weren't enough, and she decided to take a teacher-training program at Absolution in West Hollywood, from which she'll graduate in two months. A year ago Cahoon decided she'd finally had enough of the TV world and quit her job. She downsized, buying a smaller house, nixing the trips abroad and corking the shopping sprees. "It was worth it. Feeling sick before I went to work — all the money in the world isn't worth that."

With five clients and more time to pursue acting, she says she's more passionate about Pilates now than when she started. "The look clients have on their face at the end when they're doing some stretching, that's the payoff. I'm making a difference — they're more flexible, their back doesn't hurt. It's on the spot rewards, and that really feeds me."

Eventually Cahoon would like to open her own studio, but for now she's not worried about finding work: "I've already been offered classes at a gym, so I'm sure I'll get something. Maybe I'm blindly confident, but

I'm not worried."

Sascha Ferguson, who opened Absolution three years ago, says stories like Cahoon's are a familiar refrain. "People equate their jobs with not having fun, and what they do outside of their jobs as fun. This starts out as a hobby, and it never occurs to people to do it as a living until they have such a hard time going back to their jobs."

David Hollenback Jr. wants to find his niche as a registered dietitian directing a community-based program such as Women, Infants and Children or Indian Health Service. "I want to be able to create a change, be a part of it," says the 28-year-old who's currently in a master's program.

During high school, Hollenback went from a gangly 6-foot, 120-pound freshman to a 215-pound muscular football player, solely by following the exercise and nutrition advice he found in books and journals. "I was fascinated by the body and how it worked," he says, and he decided that some aspect of sports or nutrition would be his career path.

Joining the Marines after high school delayed his plans but didn't dim his passion. He continued to read about health and nutrition, counseled fellow soldiers and even started a nutrition and exercise class while stationed at the El Toro Marine Base. After his service, he landed a job in the aerospace industry but decided it was time to pursue his calling. He quit his job three years ago to attend school full time at Cal State Long Beach. Counseling low-income men and women who were battling obesity, Hollenback often relates stories of his past: "One person said, 'Hey, you know what you're talking about,' and people can relate to that."

Changing careers has turned Hollenback and his wife into "the coupon king and queen," he jokes. "My wife had never eaten generic foods, and now she does. We had a lot of wants and needs that went on the back burner. But it's all going to pay off in the end."

## Not always a perfect fit

NOT everyone who opts for a career turnaround decides to stick it out forever. Stewart Richlin was a self-described "big, fat lawyer" whose stress level was maxed out. He started practicing yoga, lost 40 pounds, decided to teach, then finally opened his own studio called Yoga of Melrose. But after a decade, says the 42-year-old Richlin, yoga began to morph into something he didn't like: "The intention of the students changed from wanting to be enlightened and be of service to wanting to have a better stomach. The word 'yoga' has been diluted and co-opted."

Although Richlin says he was making a decent living, he also had his 11-year-old son's college tuition fund to think about, and five months ago he closed his studio and opened a law practice.

"I wanted to fulfill my own personal goals as far as creating financial stability and freedom. I did yoga primarily as a service, and wasn't so concerned about having a big savings account. But I decided I was going to take some of the energy and intelligence that I'd been cultivating and do something with in terms of business," he said.

His approach to work now is "totally fun." "I'm wearing a T-shirt with my suit, and I'm excited about getting back into doing deals. When I was a yoga teacher people could relate to me because I had been an attorney. Now that I'm in business people feel a greater connection. They say, 'You're not just some bloodsucking leech,' because I have something else going on with my life. I'm a much better lawyer now because I know something about human nature."

He hasn't counted out teaching yoga again: "Maybe I'll write another chapter of my life and go back to it in some way. But I do it for the joy of doing it."