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SPORTS

Athletes, Models: Who's Tougher?

By ADITI KINKHABWALA



Benjamin Norman for The Wall Street Journal

Oscar Smith, right, has trained models as well as NFL star Tom Brady.

Oscar Smith is a member of the NYPD's elite search-and-rescue scuba team who doubles in his spare time as a fitness trainer to celebrities. For years now, he's pushed models through frog jumps and flutter kicks and lateral raises.

Then, three summers ago, New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady came

knocking at his small TriBeCa gym.

A few sessions in, Smith says, Brady—the two-time Super Bowl MVP—offered maybe the highest praise he's ever gotten. Brady looked at the native New Yorker and said, "I think you're going to make me puke."



Benjamin Norman for The Wall Street Journal

"Oh, we're definitely tougher than athletes," said Anna Jagodzinska, a face of Tommy Hilfiger and one of the world's most-requested models. "If Oscar put me through a workout next to a football player, definitely yes I could be tougher."

There's a fun idea for an experiment: Take a massive male athlete, paid to be in top condition and handle tractor-trailer-like impacts. Then take a lithe, rice cake-eating female model, paid to smile at a camera. Put them through the same workout and see who whines less.

Mr. Smith works with model Cici Ali.

"Oh, no, they all complain," Smith says, a chuckle coming out of his 8% body-fat body. "But yes, the models work just as hard as—if not harder than—the athletes."

Once an aspiring Olympic gymnast, Smith isn't prone to starry eyes. A taut 5 feet 8, 185 pounds, he's of deceiving age (he's 45) and indeterminate ethnicity (his father is black and Chinese, his mother French and Native American). The only name he utters in a two-hour conversation with any reverence is Mary Lou Retton.

His private boutique gym just moved to its fourth space in the TriBeCa neighborhood, and is used solely for personal-training sessions. His client roster includes swimsuit models Petra Nemcova and Selita Ebanks, actor Val Kilmer, magician David Blaine and a 75-year old rabbi who berates him for having no "rachmanis" (the Yiddish word for mercy or compassion).

In his day job, Smith was part of the crew that helped tow US Airways flight 1549 along the Hudson River to Battery Park City in January 2009, after pilot Chesley Sullenberger safely landed the plane in the water and ferryboat operators hauled off all 155 people on board. Eight months later, Smith was again part of Hudson River history, this time tragic, as he helped retrieve bodies after a small, low-flying plane collided with a helicopter carrying five Italian tourists over the waterway.

Smith started training clients in 1990. He opened his first gym in a quiet nondescript building in 2004, and his philosophy is part-Buddhist, part-gymnast. A gymnast's strength comes from his core, while a Buddhist believes one's soul is in his core. Smith's workout signature is massive core work and so, what's the difference between walking a runway in six-inch stilettos versus shedding a 250-pound defensive end?

"Really, not that much," says Smith.



Benjamin Norman for The Wall Street Journal

Mr. Smith takes model Dianna Brown through some resistance exercises.

In their offseason, football players often train on their own, in their hometowns or with personal trainers. They have to maintain their cardiovascular fitness and strength, and the best will hone parts of their bodies they believe need work—sort of like a model who wants the taut tummy to compete in the lingerie catalog world.

Brady, who is married to a supermodel, Gisele Bundchen, was living in New York during the summer of 2008. Smith said the quarterback came to him on the recommendation of a mutual friend, after—as Smith understood it—Brady was hounded at a public chain gym. They hit it off and worked out together all summer. Smith talks about Brady exactly as he does his other clients. Which is to say, he says Brady isn't any tougher than his

models.

"Athletes are maybe a bit more businesslike," Smith says. "The girls are more likely to say, 'Is that all you got?'"

It all comes back to the core, Smith said—the basis of human movement. A weak core means lousy posture and a slouchy stomach. A strong core strengthens a whole body and facilitates breathing. A strong core is also aesthetically pleasing.

For Brady, Smith says, core strength is vital in shedding defenders. He has to be strong enough to plant a foot and then twist his body. If a defensive end is running at him, once the much-bigger player gets a hold of Brady, the defender is still in motion. Brady can make the rotation, right or left, and the end will still keep going forward, while Brady's shrugged out of the hold. Similarly, if Brady crunches up, or tucks down over a ball, his core will keep him together while his legs keep going.

Models don't need to protect a football, but they do need symmetry in their bodies. Their muscles, Smith says, "need to flow." They're also constantly on their feet.

"Models are athletes too," says Maxine Schiff, a model and a client of Smith's. "We probably have more pressure on what our bodies need to do than a football player."

Smith wisely avoids taking sides in the who's-tougher question. In his first three months as a trainer, he went from one client to 60. He charged \$60 an hour at first; he now charges \$150. (A quick search of celebrity trainers in New York City reveals a minimum hourly rate of \$330.) Smith has been flown to Paris by modeling agencies to work for two weeks at a time with models, and in the last year he has helped design new gyms at two New York hotels. Not that he asked a fee for either.

"My accountant wasn't thrilled," he says dryly.

Building a big business wasn't ever the focus, Smith says. He's challenged by his work with the NYPD, he's just begun professional body surfing and he's happy with his training clientele. Of course, he'd love to take on more athletes, but he knows that may not happen. After all, what athlete wants to hear his trainer yell, "I have a swimsuit model who could kick your butt!"

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