



THEFIRM
MINNEAPOLIS

As They See FIT: 5 things that will surprise you about Firm FIT **By Hillary Churchill**

Everyone guesses that Firm FIT is very, very hard. People assume that since it's a boot camp-style program and it's every day early in the morning, and that since they've seen the before and after pictures of participants who have gone through their transformation, that there will be a severe ass-kicking around every corner. They assume that there will be moments that they feel like crying, or quitting. They predict periods of excruciating pain, intense frustration, and possibly some mental distress.

Well, (This is Huge Surprise #1) it's much more complex than that.

Okay, so here is the thing about Firm FIT. Everyone knows it's hard, but no one really understands how hard it is, or even how it is hard. You go into it knowing that you're going to get your ass handed to you, and honestly, you're asking for it. But you don't know. Oh Lordy, you just don't know. On the other hand, no one realizes what a spiritual and emotional eye-opener they have to look forward to either. Participants start with trepidation, worry once they get started that they don't have what it takes, and then they succeed. The end result is more than just a compilation of statistics about pounds lost or inches trimmed. What results is a revelation about how participants can change their lives and their bodies permanently.

I interviewed seven people about their experiences with Firm FIT. They were of varying ages and fitness levels. They all had positive experiences. They all look and feel fabulous. They all floored me with their stories.

Let me break it down:

- Firm FIT is a 1-hour-a-day, 6-day-a-week, 8-week program.
- Days alternate between a 30-minute cardio workout and a 60-minute weight-lifting session
- Every cardio workout concludes with a 30-minute stretch (either yoga or Pilates).
- Participants are given guidelines and advice on diet and encouraged to eat at least six small meals a day. Journals detailing every mouthful of food are submitted to an instructor for critique daily.
- One day a week, participants may eat whatever they want, as much as they want.
- There are two thorough assessments taken throughout the program: one before the program begins for benchmark measurements, and another after the program is finished.

But those are the things you can read off a brochure. Those are the sound bites that a former FIT participant will tell you when they think you're just asking about Firm FIT to be nice. You've got to push a little bit to get at the juicy stuff. But I got it out of them, oh yes I did. FIT participants are bursting with information like this, but perhaps they feel like people who have never gone through Firm FIT won't understand their story because they relate to their own experience on a sort of emotional or spiritual level. Anyway, once you get a Firm FIT participant started, it's hard to get them to stop gushing.

But it isn't all puppy dogs and fairy tales. This is eight weeks of pure tough. I imagined that the hardest part for the participants would be lifting weights or waking up early. And I also imagined that the easy part for them would be eating healthy food and keeping a meal journal. I was wrong.



Huge Surprise #2 the eating component of Firm FIT is the hardest part

Without fail, the people I spoke to about Firm FIT were shocked at what a challenge it was to eat the FIT way. Participants are given guidelines about what to eat at the beginning of the session, and are asked to keep a detailed food journal throughout the program. The journals are critiqued by a Firm FIT instructor, and participants are given advice on changes they could make to improve their eating habits.

But from the sounds of things, it isn't the journals that participants struggled with, or staying away from sweets: it was eating enough food. That, I tell you, blew me away. This is a program meant to help people trim down, and lose weight, but participants are asked to eat more. By eating small, nutrition-packed meals throughout the day, and eating often (every two hours or so), participants noticed a calming stabilization of their blood sugar, and increased energy.

"There are three components needed to create change in the body," Says Kristen Braniff, one of the Firm FIT trainers. "Lifting weights breaks down the muscle fiber, so proper food is necessary to ensure the body feels comfortable using energy to repair the damaged fiber. The body needs rest, because that is when the greatest amount of repair takes place. If take one of these three components is taken out of the equation, you impair your body's ability to change."

Says former participant Charlie B: "Learning about eating is like learning how to drive a car. When you first learn, you're focused on everything. And you wonder when its' going to get better. Then you develop an automaticity. Toward the end it got better, but for the first couple of weeks it was very hard to do the calorie counts and count grams."

After Jen M told me that a huge plastic bin of pre-washed spinach from the grocery store was only ten calories for the whole thing, I chuckled at her use of hyperbole. Then I went to the store and bought one to see for myself-- and by golly if she wasn't dead on! I ate the whole thing with a nice piece of grilled chicken, and had a large helping of smug self-satisfaction on the side.

Nathan S remembers complaining about having to eat constantly. He said at the beginning of the session, he and his partner were barely able to choke down their last meal of the day. "We were like, 'just two more strawberries!'" and Megan M, who travels for her job, would get teased by the receptionist back at company headquarters. You see, when Megan M was with a client, she couldn't eat. So obviously, she had to take advantage of her moments between clients to have her meals, so every time she'd call in from her car, she'd speak to the receptionist through a mouth full of food. "She was always like, 'are you eating again?'"

"The food calculations were tough at first, but we got the hang of it and eventually found short cuts," says Charlie B of his and his partners experience with the nutrition component of Firm FIT. "We started buying frozen turkey patties and putting some low fat cheese on them and baking them. We started eating lots and lots of fresh spinach. We'd do the egg beaters and spinach, and maybe a little low fat cheese, and whole grain bread, and lots of shakes. TJ [McNiff] gave us this recipe: you put fruit, yogurt, oatmeal, protein powder, and a little fat in the form of peanut butter or olive oil, and you regulate the portions so you come out with a balanced result. And if I'm organized, that's what I bring to the firm in a blender with some ice and water."

A few weeks in, participants get used to eating so often, and their bodies yearn for the consistency. They report a nice light feeling, of never feeling bloated and full and never feeling hungry. They feel more alert throughout the day, because their blood-sugar isn't spiking and diving.

Chad B even reported an elevation in body temperature, which he attributes to fueling his body's furnace constantly with good, healthy food. "My body heat was really high. I would get really hot in my chest and arms, because my metabolism was kicked up from eating this really good food. Your body has this fire that needs to be kept steady, and it was like rocket fuel. It still happens sometimes when I eat really well. My body just metabolized everything so quickly and efficiently."

And Hel-L0000, Huge Surprise #2-A, courtesy of Nathan S. "We don't have to work out as hard when we eat better. If people only made the connection!"



Another misconception shared even by people who have just started Firm FIT is that the “Free day”, which is the one day a week when you can eat whatever you want, is a glorious treasure. But behold Huge Surprise #3. Eventually, participants don’t totally pig out on their Free Days

At first, participants count the minutes until their “Free Day” and dream about that trip to the restaurant. They email each other about their fantasy meals, and meet each other at Cheesecake Factory after work for a great big sit-down pig out. Some people cleverly plan their social lives around their free days, using the day they have a date or a party planned to be the free day so they don’t have to pass up the buttered popcorn at the movie theater or a bratwurst at the company BBQ.

But participants quickly learn that the saying “Nothing tastes as good as thin feels,” rings true. They find that their free day sets them back with sluggishness, bloat and bad skin. Some found that it wasn’t worth the trip to the fast food drive-thru, and indulged in one glass of wine, but skipped the pizza, chocolate-chip cookies and fancy coffee drinks.

I was curious about the differences in the experiences between people who were beginners, and people who had been working out for years. Because people of all exercise levels are mixed in the program, but (Huge Surprise #4) was that even seasoned exercisers get their asses totally kicked.

Let’s take Bradley W. for example. Dude thought that since he was a shit hot spin/aero/circuit-training instructor at the premier health club in Minneapolis (that’s the Firm, obviously) that all of the cardio would be a walk in the park. Well, he was wrong. “I thought it would be a step backward, initially. But there were areas I had never explored. I found that people don’t usually do intervals. When we did that I was really able to push myself. It was a treat. It’s a customized program. The trainers are really looking at this as an individual approach with group dynamics. We’re cheering them on for their own needs. I was working my butt off, and so was the person next to me.”

And Megan M didn’t understand what she was getting into either: “I thought it would be with people that had never exercised before in their lives. I was afraid of who else would be in the class, and I was worried that it wouldn’t challenge. I thought I was going to go in and see people from The Biggest Loser.”

“The secret to Firm FIT’s adaptability is that the Program uses the assessment process to configure the program around the clients health history information along with their individual goals.” Says Braniff. “Additionally, the cardio portion of the workout takes into account clients’ age, gender and resting heart-rate to ensure each client is working out at the appropriate exertion level. It is in this manner, clients of all fitness levels have their workouts customized for their specific needs.”

You know how you think that a big change will require a big time commitment? You remember how Linda Hamilton trained for three hours a day for a year to prepare for T2? Well, Huge Surprise #5 is “Brevity is the soul of FIT.”

The really refreshing thing about Firm Fit is how quickly participants are in and out every morning. Workouts are a very short but intense 60 minutes. After finding their target heart rates with a trainer during a pre-session assessment, participants learn to self monitor their heart rates during the cardio workouts. This does not only serve the purpose of keeping workouts vigorous during Firm FIT, but also trains participants to find the most efficient work out well beyond the eight-week session. Participants continue to use their heart rate monitors and target heart rates because they learn that this is the best way to get in a good body-changing workout.

Jen M said of the cardio workouts: “It’s different because I also learned about heart rate training. I had had a polar watch before, but I had no idea how to use it. It was such a waste of money before, because I didn’t understand my zones, and I didn’t work out to optimize my workout. I just would stay at about 55% before. And what we learned with Kristin [Braniff] was to try to do those spikes, and try to get your heart rate up for maximum intensity and then bring it back down.”

The same goes for the weight lifting days. The group of Firm FIT participants is split into four groups of three people each, so participants get more attention, and trainers maintain an intense pace. The groups learn to increase the weight slightly for each set, to squeeze every bit out of each rep.



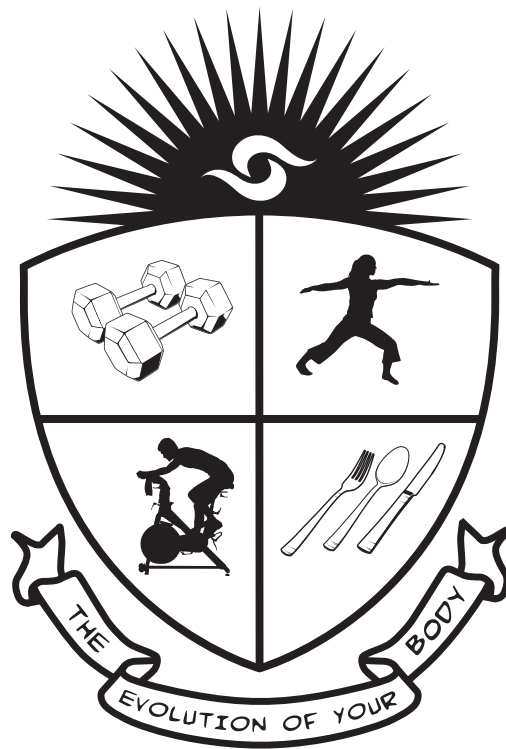
The succinctness of their workouts is important, considering that most participants reported disliking waking up early every morning, and a bit of a dip in motivation around week three or four. Keeping workouts short and sweet kept them more bearable when enthusiasm may have been waning. And it's nice to know, when the eight weeks are coming to a close, that post-program workouts can remain concise.

In conclusion, Firm FIT is the best way to get in, get healthy, get out, and sustain the practice for the rest of your life. A few of the folks I spoke to have been out of the program for over a year. They may not be as rock hard as they were the day they finished the program, but they have kept almost all of the weight off, and they "know what to do to drop 5 pounds fast," as one participant says.

The experience stays with you as more than just a box of tricks to firm up before swimsuit season, however. Participants learn that they have what it takes to accomplish something big, and come through a stronger, wiser, sexier person. They also learn that it's satisfying to help each other out and encourage each other, and that the support of their FIT-mates is an indispensable part of the program.

When I asked Jen M about the most important thing she learned about the program, she grew rather wistful, "I think this is going to sound cheesy, but what I took away from the program that if I think that if I actually put my mind to something, and if I am equipped with the knowledge, I can actually do anything. I was asked to come in six days a week, early in the morning (and I'm not a morning person); I was asked to completely overhaul my diet (and I enjoy eating); and I like exercise but I was asked to do it every single day. I was asked to do a whole bunch of things that I wasn't used to doing. But there was a group dynamic, and a group, it was fun."

And that's the nicest surprise of all.



For more information on THE FIRM F.I.T. and when the next session begins, contact Neil Miyamoto. Neil can be reached at 612.810.4052, or via e-mail at nmiyamoto@thefrimmpls.com.