

Week Eight

The man behind my remarkable transformation

Joe Ferry

As we head into the home stretch of my journey to physical fitness, the progress report couldn't be better. I have lost significant fat and built muscle. I have more energy than ever.

And after watching the scale stay steady for the last few weeks, I dropped five pounds, down to 240.

One of last week's workouts provided a good learning opportunity. While I felt good, my body just wasn't into it. In the first few minutes, I struggled through exercises I had mastered. My back hurt, my legs burned and my stamina was virtually non-existent.

Without somebody there to guide me, I would have done one of two things: quit or pushed myself to complete a normal routine.

But, as Fernando Paredes, my personal trainer from Fusion Fitness Studio in Doylestown, explained, neither choice would have been a good one.

Quitting would be a setback. Pushing too hard would violate his edict: Stimulate, not annihilate. So he just backed off a little, lightening the intensity and giving me a little longer break between each set.

Pretty soon, my body responded and we finished strong. No time wasted and no injuries from overwork.

So who exactly is this guru in whom I have entrusted my fitness future?

Meet Brooklyn-born and Elizabeth, New Jersey-raised Fernando Paredes, the first born of Kira and Galo Paredes.

Fernando's passion for fitness is probably rooted in his genes. Growing up on the mean streets of North Jersey, he inherited his father's scrawny upper body and his mother's skinny legs. The



result was a kid who was nicknamed "Egg on Stilts," which when translated from Spanish means, literally, "String With Knot." He was a roly-poly kid with skinny arms and legs and an old man's pot belly.

You get the mental picture.

His brother, Galo Jr., was just the opposite, a natural athlete seemingly born with six-pack abs. Without so much as lifting a weight, he was all muscle.

"He hit the lottery," says Fernando without a hint of jealousy. "He had no control over it. It all depends on what you get."

By the time he was 12, Fernando was fascinated with the complexities of the human body. He would spend hours pouring over physiology books and anatomical charts, trying to learn as much as he could about fitness and nutrition, hoping they might provide the ultimate answer to transforming his unique physique.

After a back injury laid him up for a week at age 17, Fernando vowed to do something about his physical problems. For the next seven years, he dedicated himself to working out, to eating right, to learning all he could about the way the human body functions. He was obsessed with losing the fat.

"It was a lot of trial and error," he says. "One of the most important things I learned was that I needed to exercise less, but I needed to exercise more intensely."

By the time his family moved to Telford in 1987, his

transformation had begun. Seven years later, Fernando was down to 145 pounds. But at 5-feet, 9-inches tall, he still didn't have that six-pack he so craved.

"I went too far. I was too skinny," he admits.

Another bout with back problems provided the inspiration for his next move. Lying in a hospital bed after being forced to call 911 because of the excruciating pain, something that seemed to happen two or three times a year, Fernando had a revelation. Despite faithfully sticking to his workout routine, his back was still weak.

"If I did everything I was supposed to do, why am I lying here?" he remembers thinking.

By this time, Fernando was married with a wife and daughter to support. He was working in the insurance industry, a sedentary desk job he hated while dabbling as a personal trainer on the side. Starting from scratch, he searched for a deeper understanding of the way the human body functions.

His study of the way history, science, anthropology are woven together, along with advanced training certifications and learning from the best trainers in the field, led him to the concept of functional fitness, which encompasses traditional exercise, but only as one component of a more comprehensive system. When the concept worked, Fernando switched all his personal training clients to the same system.

"Everyone started to see better results," says Fernando. "I haven't looked back since. I've just been refining my approach since then."

Fernando often thought of making a career as a personal trainer but hesitated because he didn't fit the body-builder profile of the typical trainer of the time. But he had a deep passion for teaching people

the right way to achieve their fitness goals and seethed when he saw other trainers handing out bad information.

Finally, in what he calls "a leap of faith," Fernando quit his insurance job and became a fitness instructor at a local health club. With his revolutionary emphasis on functional fitness, he went from zero clients to a full-roster within 18 months and was promoted to head trainer.

That stunning success caught the eye of the owner of another fitness club in Doylestown, who offered Fernando a job as Personal Training Director. Seeing it as an opportunity to grow personally and professionally, he accepted. Within three months, involvement in the program tripled.

"People were very happy with the results," says Fernando.

But Fernando himself was not particularly pleased. His philosophy was still too radically different from what most in his field were doing. He figured he would never be totally happy unless he was in complete control of doing things his way and teaching exercise and nutrition the way it should, the functional way.

In another leap of faith, Fernando opened Fusion Fitness Studio four years ago in a small shopping center along Ferry Road in Doylestown. His slogan says it all: "The Science of Fitness."

It's been a crazy ride since, positive but a struggle to get people to see the inherent benefits of functional fitness. Too many people are focused on weight-lifting and training specific body parts sitting in machines, he says.

In the early days, people would take one look inside the studio and walk out. There are no bulky weight-lifting machines and only a handful of barbells. Mostly, it's cable machines, resistance

bands and exercise balls.

"People didn't get it at first," he says. "They couldn't accept something different, even though what I teach is the original exercise concept going back thousands of years, that of strength, balance and core strength. What most other trainers teach has only been around for 50 years."

Fortunately, a few brave souls saw the potential in Fernando's philosophy and gave it a try. They've kept him afloat while he tries to spread the functional fitness message across to people who

need it.

"I've been able to continue my dream because of phenomenal clients who believe in my approach and methods," he says. "Once they feel the kind of results functional exercise delivers they become totally hooked on it."

Fernando's clients run the gamut. With his emphasis on functional methods, he's helped automobile accident victims fully recover from back injuries, he's helped housewives lose 70 pounds, athletes significantly improve competitive performance, and body-builders break through

stubborn plateaus.

While he's not unique, trainers who espouse Fernando's philosophy are few and far between.

"Lots of trainers out there know functional exercises," he says. "But very few who understand the concept of functional exercise."

"I've had many clients come to me because of bad experiences they had with other trainers. Once they come to my studio, they usually stick around for a while," Fernando says with a smile. "That's exactly the reason I got into this business in the

first place."

As for Fernando's own fitness, he's "stressed-proofed" his back, making it less susceptible to injury, and gained close to 40 pounds, most of it muscle. Because of his unique metabolism, he has to be meticulous with his food choices, balancing muscle-building protein with just right amount of fat.

"I had to get over the fact that to build muscle on my odd body-type, I had re-gain some of the fat I had struggled so hard to shed.

"All in all, it was a decent trade," he says.