

Wednesday, September 20, 2006

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

A body for business

His outlook strong as his muscles, a man lands a fitness show.

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SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER

John Spencer Ellis is having a wardrobe malfunction, and the timing is terrible.



STAY TUNED: John Spencer Ellis is aiming for a major network to pick up his show. SANG H. PARK, FOR THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Ellis is a south Orange County fitness guru who has spent 15 years methodically building a series of health businesses that generates \$4 million a year. Now, just moments before the curtain rises on his shot at stardom, Ellis has no pants.

He planned to wear shorts for the first episode of his new television show, "The OC Body" but decided at the last hour that bare legs wouldn't fit with the set. Ellis has a contract with a clothing company that requires him to wear only its brand for public appearances, so just any pair won't do.

Finally, his wife, Christina Lucy, dashes in with two pairs of black sweats she has just bought. Ellis puts one on, then grabs a black marker to cover the manufacturer's logo.

"You've got to fake it till you make it," Ellis, 37, says with a grin. Now, the cameras can roll.

Today, Ellis might be most familiar to the public as "that boot camp guy." Adventure Boot Camp, the women's outdoor fitness program that Ellis founded six years ago, is in 100 cities. He rises before dawn each day to cajole his 5:30 a.m. class in Rancho Santa Margarita to run faster and do more pushups as members work out on an elementary school playground.

Ellis has released two exercise videos and leads the National Exercise and Sports Trainers Association, a 45,000-member trade group of personal trainers, yoga and Pilates instructors, and other fitness professionals.

He talks passionately about the importance of eating organic foods and sticking with an exercise regime one loves. His ultimate goal is lofty.

"I want to make a major contribution to reversing the current trend of obesity and sickness in our society," Ellis says. "If things don't change, for the first time ever, our kids are going to die younger than we are."

Tanned and toned, Ellis is a man with a life plan – and the upbeat language to match. Problems are "challenges." Exercising and eating well aren't just about aesthetics, but "living a better life and hopefully extending your life."

"People say: 'It's just fate. It's life.' I have a hard time buying into that. God doesn't want you to be lazy," Ellis says. "It's not about living your life. It's designing the life you want."

For Ellis, designing a life in the gym came naturally. His father was an amateur bodybuilder.

Ellis grew up in Garden Grove. His only sibling, a fraternal twin, Michael, is a firefighter in Glendale.

Ellis' mother, Luna, said that when she learned she was pregnant with twins, her husband suggested a deal: If the babies were girls, she could name them. He would name any boys.

"He said, 'I don't want any icky-poo names for boys,' " she recalls. "That's how we ended up with 'John' and 'Michael.' "

Ellis was not a gifted athlete. But when he was 12, his father gave him a health-club membership, and he began lifting weights. At 15, he took up road-bike racing.

After graduating from Garden Grove High School in 1987, Ellis attended Golden West College and then became a certified X-ray technician, working in a chiropractic clinic. Restless, he moved to Dove Canyon at 23 to start a personal-training business.

"I remember it to the day – June 1, 1992," Ellis says. "My mother was so distraught I was leaving home that she took the day off and cooked beef stroganoff so I would have dinner to eat that night. For a long time, she wanted me to find a good company to work for and get a solid job."

Ellis laughs now about how tight money once was. "I would put my car in neutral to coast down hills and save gas," he says. In 1992, he earned just \$27,000.

But Ellis said that he got as much out of the sessions as his clients did.

"In general, the people who could afford my services were successful, so I would ask them how they got that way," he said. "It was like having multiple built-in mentors."

Today, Ellis estimates that every week an average of 1 million people use a fitness program that he created. His name is attached to a line of outdoor fitness equipment and an institute for life coaching. He wrote a book.

A Rancho Santa Margarita restaurant is even adding a John Spencer Ellis sandwich to its menu – a wrap with chicken, spinach and berries. Ellis pitched the idea to Tutto Fresco Trattoria's owner after bumping into him at the gym.

"He will search for every angle he can think of, without being obnoxious, to promote his business," Luna Ellis says. "If you are a shrinking violet, I guess you wouldn't get anywhere."

When asked where he gets the moxie to ask that a menu item be named in his honor, Ellis shrugs it off.

"I've been rejected so many times, I don't care anymore," he says. "It used to hurt my feelings. Now, it doesn't."

The birth of Ellis' latest venture – a fitness show called "The OC Body" – also came from a fortuitous meeting. This spring, he spoke on a panel moderated by the president of the Healthy Living Channel, who told the audience she hoped Ellis might someday host a show on her channel.

He contacted her later and came away with an agreement to produce and host a half-hour fitness show for the 15 million households reached by the station. And in Ellis' design-your-life style, he is already talking about his next goal – for a major network to pick up the show within three years.

On this day, he is taping an interview with Mission Viejo fitness expert Chalene Johnson for the show's Sept. 28 premiere.

"I respect John's approach to fitness, which is finding what works for each individual. You'll never hear him say something negative," Johnson says as the crew puts final touches such as a bowl of lucky bamboo on the set. "I've had many clients who rave about his classes and boot camps."

Ten years ago, Ellis was not a natural on camera. His mom says she "cringed a little" the first time she saw him interviewed because she could tell by the way he kept swallowing that he was nervous.

Director Graham Koffler, who has worked with Ellis for 10 years on commercials and exercise videos, says Ellis has developed a charisma and comfort that shines through on camera.

"He's always most comfortable when he's teaching and helping people," Koffler says. The half-hour show includes a healthful-cooking segment and an exercise of the day.

As the cameras roll, Ellis applauds Johnson on the success of her workout video series, "Turbo Jam," and prods her to share her message for America. Johnson implores mothers to get their families to eat better and be active together, while keeping it fun.

"Moms, you are so important in determining the health and fitness of your whole family," Johnson says.

Koffler raises his arm to signal to Ellis that the segment will end in 30 seconds. Ellis deftly steers the chatter to a close, then faces the camera.

"We'll see you here next time on 'The OC Body,' " Ellis concludes with a smile. "Thanks a lot."

CONTACT US: "The OC Body" will premiere at 4:30 p.m. Sept. 28 on the Healthy Living Channel. In Orange County, it will be on the Dish Network's Channel 223.



body for business

HIGH MARKS: Fitness pro Chalene Johnson has praised John Spencer Ellis, saying he speaks positively and looks for individual solutions to a person's fitness challenges.

SANG H. PARK, FOR THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

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