



The Miracle of **Physical FITness**

If not for three factors, it would be just another standard group exercise class at another full-service gym; another chance for the well intended to sweat into shape, and to shape into sweat. The difference is, unlike all those other classes, this one has a line outside the workout room, twenty minutes before the first callisthenic. The teacher is Michael Giacapuzzi. His secrets? "There is no reason why I should be here, no reason I should be alive, and I should be in jail."

By Jack McCaffery

Those are the three factors. So it is, with the effervescence of a fifty-year-old man given a second chance in life that Giacapuzzi draws his crowds. He has followers by the dozens that come to the Bally Total Fitness at the Oxford Valley Mall; they are legions determined to arrive early and leave better for the effort and the investment. They believe the trainer with the earring, the eternal tan and the black, military-style jumpsuits can provide the miracle of physical fitness. He believes so, too. Why? "Miracles can happen," he said. "I am living proof that they do."

The key word is "living", and for ten tense seconds on I-95 in Florida in 2002, that was never more in question. Giacapuzzi was at the wheel, swerving in more ways than one, speeding in excess of one hundred miles per hour, out of control, as usual at that point in his life. That the car would crash, thrusting him to the pavement, might have been inevitable. More unlikely was that once the hubcaps and his mind stopped spinning, Giacapuzzi would take control of his life for the first time in years.

Somehow in the commotion, an eight ball (that's an eighth of a gram of rock cocaine) disappeared, and though the notion was plausible at the time, it did not disappear into the driver's nostrils. "I have no idea what happened to it," said Giacapuzzi, who began his drug abuse at age twenty-seven. "But if it was found, I would have been in trouble— big, big trouble."

As he recalls now, his automobile had completed two 360-degree turns before colliding head on with the median strip. He was driving under the influence and also having an asthma attack.

Huffing the necessary medication added even more of a buzz to his brain. He would spend two days in jail and a lifetime of regretting his years as a drug addict.

"The morning of Dec. 7, 1999 was the worst day of my life," said Giacapuzzi, who was raised in Pennsylvania's Lehigh Valley. "As I was lying in bed, I heard my mother yelling for me. I got up and went into the dining room and saw my father, his hand tapping on the table and the left side of his face drooping. I knew then my father was suffering a major stroke. Days later, told there was no hope, the family agreed to have the nurses remove him from life support. It was rainy that morning, but a ray of sunshine came through that window and shined on my father. I had lost my father, my best friend. A lot of me died that day. But even with the loss of my father, my drug addiction got worse."

So dependant on drugs Giacapuzzi was too incoherent to help when his mother passed. That was then. Now? "I could aptly be described as a full-blooded Italian, a former renegade and a confessed late bloomer," he said, "Who has turned his life around." Giacapuzzi has not consumed an illegal drug since the crash.

Within the month of the accident, he became a trainer at the Bally gym in Bucks County. In that, he knew he would succeed, for he once was the kid so out of shape that his Little League coaches used to warn him to hit a home run, for he would never be able to successfully run the bases. Yet the kid who once was teased daily by all his teammates became so physically fit as a young adult that he would tour nationally for ten years with the male exotic dance group, "Body Heat". "It was if I were saying to society," Giacapuzzi said, "OK, here I am." Society, though, answered back, tempting and for a while, beating him with the drug and party lifestyle.



Inspired by Joel Osteen's book, "Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential" and, by the support and guidance of Dr. Anna Marie Valeriote, a chiropractor from Warminster, Giacapuzzi began professional fitness training. Though his emphasis is on a back-to-basics approach popular with the forty-five and over set, his gym-side manner is appreciated, too, by a younger generation.

"In my experience, Michael's unique ability to teach and encourage, as well as to accommodate specific concerns and work around my schedule make training convenient for the modern busy woman," said Monica Devlin, a Philadelphia Eagles cheerleader. "Training with Mike has helped me adopt the proper form and consistency needed to tone and shape my body."

As his business increased, so did his plans and opportunities. The Yardley resident has begun a project, "Body by Michael G", that will incorporate a line of designer workout clothing, an exercise DVD, his own health spa and a charitable foundation. Mostly, though, he wants to tell his story, to help others not only in the gym but also as an inspirational speaker. "There is a reason why I am here," Giacapuzzi said. "And I believe that the purpose and plan for me in life today is to be able to reach out to other people who, in whatever fashion, might have some kind of a problem or negativity or feeling that they can't change. I am living proof of a miracle and that people can change."

Yes, Michael Giacapuzzi is proof of that, and so are those lines outside the exercise room.

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