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Axel Koester for The New York Times

Diamond Dallas Page used to be a professional wrestler. Now he teaches Yoga for Regular Guys at Equinox in Santa Monica, Calif., and has put out several DVDs.

By ABBY ELLIN  
Published: April 12, 2007

TO fans hooked on professional wrestling — and to himself — Diamond Dallas Page isn't just a three-time world champion whose signature move is a ghastly maneuver called the diamond cutter. He's a phenom.

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Three Time World Champion  
**DIAMOND DALLAS PAGE**

Courtesy Equinox Fitness Clubs

Diamond Dallas Page when he was a professional wrestler.

He loves to talk about how he became a professional wrestler at an ancient 35, and still beat up on much younger opponents. After sustaining an untold number of injuries, he says, an unconventional yoga and calisthenics program that he devised helped him recover.

Now that his wrestling days are behind him, he teaches his workout, Yoga for Regular Guys, at Equinox's outpost in Santa Monica, Calif.

"So many people knew all the crazy falls and bumps I had taken and saw how strong I still was in my late 40s after all I had been through," said Mr. Page, now 51, who has released three fitness DVDs and a how-to book since his retirement. "They want to be like me."

Never mind that he has no certification in yoga or exercise. "I'm certified in life," Mr. Page said with his over-the-top exuberance. "My experience speaks for itself."

Equinox agrees. Carol Espel, its national director of group fitness, said that Mr. Page's lack of credentials is not an issue. Managers who have seen his work were "convinced that the program is very credible" and "along the standards of what we feel is safe, appropriate and effective," she said.

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John Marshall Mantel for The New York Times  
Wade Davis, a former N.F.L. player, is a trainer in New York.

More and more clubs are hiring former professional athletes turned exercise instructors, hoping to attract clients who want to train with someone who once played in the big leagues, even if he's hardly a household name.

"People want to know they can train with the best," said Peter McCall, the education director for the Sports Club/LA, which has about a dozen former professional athletes on staff. "That's the appeal of working with a pro athlete. If you want to take a boxing class, why not take a boxing class from a former pro boxer?"

Spurred by the demand for their quasi-celebrity, some ex-players from the National Football League in particular have joined the fitness industry as personal trainers, group fitness instructors and gym owners. It is, they say, a natural transition because they are comfortable in gyms. "Training in the off-season wasn't even a major part of athletics until the recent couple of decades," said Steve Rosga, a manager at Life Time Fitness in St. Louis Park, Minn., who played in the N.F.L. "Now it's bigger, stronger, faster." So N.F.L. players, he said, have to work much harder to maintain their bodies.

No matter that most never had the talent of [Peyton Manning](#), or that they have little background in exercise science or just mediocre personal training certification.

"The perception in the public is that if you were a great athlete that makes you a good teacher, and that's not necessarily true," said Marc Rabinoff, professor of human performance and sport at Metropolitan State College of Denver. "Just because you won a gold medal in wrestling, doesn't make you a personal trainer. It just makes you a gold medalist."

Still, an instructor's academic knowledge is less important to some exercisers than the fact that he once strutted across a field to thunderous applause.

Bill Conti, a 53-year-old lawyer in Chevy Chase, Md., has been taking "Karim's Body Fat Burning Training Camp" at the Sports Club/LA in Washington. The teacher is Karim Jabbar, a former N.F.L. running back. Mr. Conti, a sports fan, knew Mr. Jabbar's bio and happily paid \$780 extra to be part of his eight-person class for two months.

The perks are priceless. "I tell people that I'm trained by this former running back and they're very impressed," he said.

His rationale? "Part of it was that this guy does have things in his background that are probably more than the average kid who got certified as a personal trainer," Mr. Conti said. "He promotes the knowledge that he obtained while he was a pro athlete."

Lucky for his clientele, Mr. Jabbar also was certified by the National Academy of Sports Medicine, and has taken 70 hours of continuing education.

But he's not the norm, and some fitness experts worry about pro athletes not having proper training to work with deconditioned Joes.

"A lot of people may want to do what that ex pro athlete may have done to become where he was as a pro, and that may not necessarily be the best protocol for that individual," said Scott Lucett, the director of education at the National Academy of Sports Medicine.

For example, exercise dosing — that is, tailoring the intensity and quantity of exercise to meet exercisers' objectives, given their health — is recommended by the American Council on Exercise. But many trainers, especially former pro athletes who are used to training at a higher level, may not understand that.

"I don't think most trainers know enough to be doing what they're doing," said Jan

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Griscom, a trainer at Chelsea Piers, in Manhattan, who for 12 years taught trainers for the National Academy of Sports Medicine. “The public loves an athlete. So, gyms hire them. I hear things on the floor that disturb me — ‘Oh, you think I don’t hurt every day when I get up? It’s part of the deal.’ ” But pain is not required to get fit, she said.

In his 38 years in the industry, Dr. Rabinoff has been an expert witness in dozens of sports-related lawsuits. Roughly 45 have involved clients who were harmed by unconscientious trainers. Professional athletes “have no formal training on how the body moves through space,” he said. “Their coaches didn’t teach them how to do this. They said, ‘You do 15 reps and this amount of poundage’ and they just did it.”

Many trainers say they have supplemented their in-the-field knowledge and adjust client workouts accordingly. But even trainers who have been certified by top agencies can rely too wholeheartedly on their personal experience and overstep boundaries.

“When someone comes to me with a knee, ankle, shoulder, hamstring, quads, joint or finger injury, I have firsthand practical experience of having those injuries myself,” said Bobby Neely, 33, a former tight end for the Chicago Bears who is now an American Council on Exercise-certified trainer at Equinox in Santa Monica.

Training others can make pro athletes feel that they still have a pulpit. “Most sports people who are professional love to be on stage,” said Tim Keightley, the vice president for fitness and personal training at the New York Sports Clubs and a former pro golfer. “Teaching a class gives you an audience.”

Not that downgrading to a 25-person studio after an audience of thousands isn’t somewhat of a disappointment. “Nothing compares to 50,000 or 60,000 beams of energy being beamed down on you,” said Mr. Neely, who created a conditioning class called Tight End Zone.

The steep pay cut is also hard to get used to. Mr. Neely, who said he was earning almost seven figures a year at the end of his career, has had to take other jobs to supplement his income.

So did Wade Davis, who used to be a defensive back for the [Washington Redskins](#), and then became a personal trainer at New York Sports Club in Manhattan. “Initially I worked for a tech company in Colorado for four or five months, but I didn’t enjoy sitting behind a desk,” said Mr. Davis, 29. “It’s tough to find a decent job when you’ve been out of college for five years and have no work experience.”

There is also a mourning period after leaving the big leagues. “I did freak out,” said Kerry Taylor, 30, who briefly was a tight end for the [New England Patriots](#).

He turned to playing arena football, and at the suggestion of his college coach, he became certified as a personal trainer. Now, he’s the fitness director for Bally Total Fitness in East Providence, R.I., which entails managing trainers. “In a sense, I’m their coach,” he said. “My new team is Bally’s.”

Mr. Neely admits he misses the spotlight, but thinks his current job is ultimately more rewarding. “As a football player you affect people’s lives, definitely, but you may never come in contact with them,” he said. “As a personal trainer it’s immediate. You go through the struggles with them.”

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