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## Exercising his body, conditioning his mind

**At 77, he's had three heart attacks and suffers from Alzheimer's disease. But a new exercise regimen has improved his quality of life.**

By DAWN REISS  
Published August 22, 2005

CRYSTAL RIVER - John Tunstall's stormy blue eyes gleam with pensive persistence.

"I don't want to know what's down there," Tunstall says.

His 77-year-old body teeters precariously back and forth as sweat drips from his forehead down to his snow white mustache. His right arm and left leg stretch out, hovering over the ground like Superman flying with a gigantic ball attached to his stomach.

"I feel like I'm going to fall down," Tunstall says.

But before Tunstall can panic, personal trainer Roger Ryffle reassures him he won't fall.

There's a lot Tunstall can't do. Three heart attacks, high blood pressure, high cholesterol and Alzheimer's disease squelched a once active life.

But exercise, coupled with a vegetarian diet and "body talk," an alternative medicine biofeedback energy treatment done by Ryffle's wife, has helped Tunstall.

He had his first heart attack at 45, after getting out of the oil business. Four years ago he had another, followed by his third on New Year's Eve 2003.

"The doctors just said more pills, more pills," said Lea, his wife. "And he just seemed to get worse."

That was nearly two years ago, when death seemed more imminent.

"If you lose your health," Tunstall said, "you might as well get in the box."

Two months ago, he could lift only 1-pound weights. Now he's up to 5-pound weights. His blood pressure and cholesterol are down, and his doctors say he is in better shape than ever. His wife said the bouts of depression common to people with Alzheimer's are gone.

"I feel better," Tunstall said before digressing into his boarding school stories of squash, handball and rugby.

At times he slips in and out of the present and past. A specific workout routine has helped, but still he sometimes forgets between his two sets of 15 repetitions.

"It's about giving back dignity and a sense of accomplishment," Ryffle said. "If you can give anybody with an illness or special needs a sense of pride or something back for even an hour, it's worth it."

This is Ryffle's first Alzheimer's client. He researched before starting the training.

Because of Tunstall's heart history, he can't do a cardiovascular workout. Instead, Ryffle uses a stability ball with Tunstall to increase his balance, coordination and strength. Twice a week they meet at the Sporting Club in Crystal River for an hourlong session. Some days are better than others. The disease makes it more difficult for Tunstall to learn new routines.

"Some days he is unbelievable," said Ryffle, who co-owns A Lotta R And R, which is based in the Sporting Club, with his wife, Sherry. "He gets the exercise perfectly, but if you change one thing, he can't get it. It's too much."

Instead, Ryffle has adjusted the workout regimen depending on his mind-set.

"He'll faze in and faze out," Ryffle said. "Sometimes he'll just stop in the middle of something

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and say, "How high is that wall?" or "Do you know ... ?" I'll answer and say, "Okay, we've got one more set."

Mostly they talk about Tunstall's youth at England's Oundle School. Born in the United Kingdom, Tunstall lived in colonized India with his parents until age 8. He then attended the boarding school until age 18.

When World War II broke out, he picked potatoes from farmers' fields 80 miles north of London. He played his beloved squash, along with other sports.

"There were competitions every year, and I got my fair share," Tunstall said. "I must confess, I don't like losing."

He was accepted at the University of Cambridge but went to England's University of Birmingham when he was told that the returning soldiers had priority and that he'd have to wait a year. A career in the oil business took him around the world to Trinidad, Venezuela, Libya, Egypt, Columbia, Borneo and Oman. He moved to Houston and worked as a stock broker until 1992.

"He quit because, he said, "My memory is not there anymore; I'm scared of making mistakes,"" his wife said. "When I went to the doctor, he just said, "I have the same problem; I can't ever remember where my wallet is, and I have a red wallet now."

Things progressively got worse. And Tunstall's wife realized something needed to be done when they moved to Inglis in 1996.

But Tunstall has made a marked improvement with his recent workout routine. According to the Mayo Clinic's Web site, he's not alone: As many as 70 percent of people who have Alzheimer's disease have symptoms of depression. They gradually lose the ability to participate in activities they once enjoyed and may eventually withdraw from all activities. Research shows that exercise lessens that tendency.

In a sample of people with Alzheimer's, a moderate exercise program totaling at least 60 minutes a week for three months reduced rates of depression. Exercising helps prevent people with Alzheimer's from falling, improves their sleep, diminishes wandering and improves the overall quality of life.

It's something everyone around Tunstall has seen.

"I can't say enough," Lea Tunstall said. "It's just helped so much."

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