

Miami-Area High School Students Get Virtual Workout as PE Goes Online.

By Steve Harrison
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It is a self-contained punch line, much like "jumbo shrimp" or "business ethics." Online physical education.

Yet 180 Broward and Miami-Dade County high school students say they're working on their stamina, strength and flexibility through an Internet class proctored by the state. In addition to taking a dozen written quizzes on fitness and nutrition, they submit logs that chronicle their running, stretching and weight lifting.

'When I first heard about this, I said, `Wait, this isn't right. You can't do this - PE online,' " said Tim Maxwell, a longtime physical education instructor at Pompano Beach's Blanche Ely High School who now teaches Broward's online PE class. "But it works.

The kids are honest, and they're doing what they're supposed to do." Maxwell reviews his students' work via fax or his Yahoo! e-mail account. He never sees them.

Could they be jogging in blue jeans and boots? Absolutely. Taking a nutrition quiz while eating a Twinkie? Sure.

The half-credit "Personal Fitness" class is offered by Florida Virtual School, a state-funded online high school based in Orlando.

Most of its courses are academic, such as Latin III, Calculus AB and AP American History.

But Florida Virtual School officials predict more than 1,000 high school students will take the personal fitness class in the 2002-03 school year.

High school students throughout Florida can enroll for free in the virtual school, but the classes fill up quickly. So Broward has expanded the state's online menu, using the Florida Virtual School's curriculum and hiring some of its own teachers - including Maxwell.

Maxwell teaches 20 students in personal fitness through the Broward Virtual School. Another 80 students in Broward and another 80 students in Miami-Dade take the course directly from the Florida Virtual School, said Bruce Friend, chief academic officer for the Florida Virtual School.

Miami-Dade has about 600 students total taking online classes through the state but hasn't started its own virtual high school, as Broward has.

Broward's 750 high school students who take online classes are given slots based on priority, such as seniors who need credits to graduate or students whose schools can't provide a specific course.

Many of the online PE students are the super-motivated who don't want to "waste" a semester at school that could be used for an honors or Advanced Placement class that could earn them college credit or boost their grade-point average, Maxwell said.

Alexandra Blye, 17, is graduating early from J.P. Taravella High School in Coral Springs and will attend Florida Atlantic University this spring.

She plays varsity soccer but still needed the half-credit physical education class to graduate. Pleasantly surprised by how well the long-distance class worked, Blye said there still were a few times when an in-the-flesh teacher would have helped.

"There were some things where I wasn't sure what to do - like how to check my pulse - but I e-mailed [Maxwell], and he got back to me right away." Maxwell is accessible by e-mail, pager, telephone and fax - and promises to return phone calls from his students within 24 hours.

Blye's assignments were due Monday, so she usually did her online quizzes Sunday mornings in the comfort of her Tamarac home. She lifted weights at the FAU gym in Boca Raton.

On the academic side, students learn how to care for their bodies, covering such topics as nutrition. They also do three physical assessments throughout the course - flexibility, cardiovascular, and muscular strength (every week) and endurance.

For instance, each student must run one mile three times during the 15-week course. They log their times, get a parent's signature, and fax the form to Maxwell.

Could a student easily fudge the athletic assignments - or not do them at all?

"Yeah, easily," Blye said.

Maxwell believes his students are sweating when they are supposed to. He notes that some of the exercises involve checking their heart rate after running, so it's easy to tell if a student has made up a heart rate that doesn't match a nine-minute mile.

"I can tell if they haven't done it," Maxwell said.

David Feigley, a Rutgers University professor and founder of the Youth Sports Research Council, said the idea of online PE is generally a good one. He applauds the course's efforts to give students a blueprint for healthy living and said the idea of "whipping kids into shape in one class" is outdated.

Feigley did have some concerns, however. He said students could benefit from having a coach critique their running styles or how they lift weights.

"You could have a student running in high heels. And what if someone is lifting weights with their back arched, holding their breath, and with their wrists in the wrong place?" MaryAnne Butler-Pearson, the distance learning coordinator for the Broward School District, noted that most of the class has an academic component. So if you don't study, you don't pass.

And she agreed with Feigley, noting that a student won't become physically fit in 15 weeks. The best hope: A child will get a taste of the exercises, then continue them after the class is over.

"Personal fitness is a lot of academic work," Butler-Pearson said.

"Three months won't make a child physically fit. This is designed to teach lifelong skills."

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