

THE FITNESS PYRAMID:

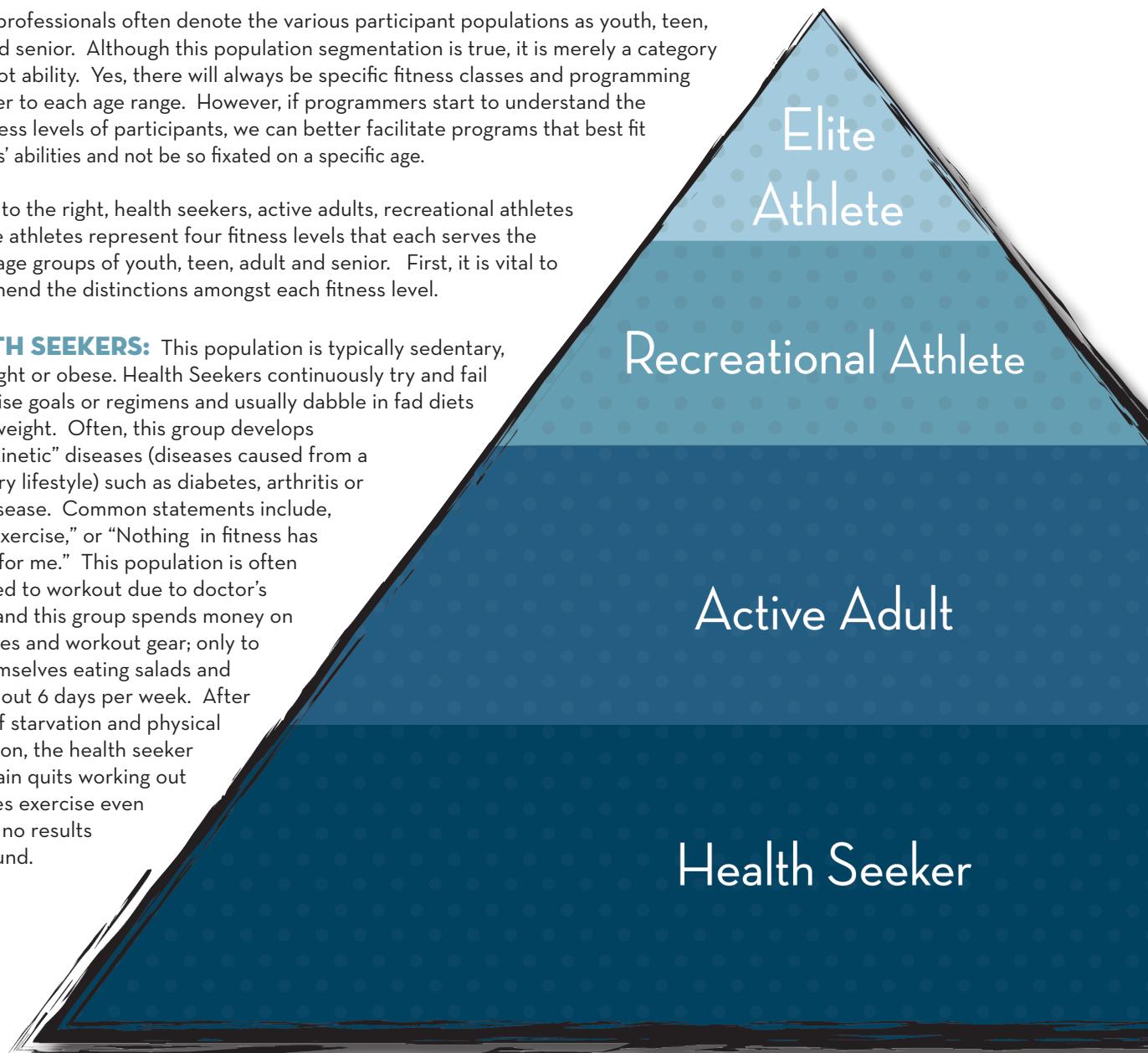
Understanding the 4 Levels of Fitness Participants

By Elizabeth Kovar, M.A.

Fitness professionals often denote the various participant populations as youth, teen, adult and senior. Although this population segmentation is true, it is merely a category of age not ability. Yes, there will always be specific fitness classes and programming that cater to each age range. However, if programmers start to understand the four fitness levels of participants, we can better facilitate programs that best fit members' abilities and not be so fixated on a specific age.

As seen to the right, health seekers, active adults, recreational athletes and elite athletes represent four fitness levels that each serves the various age groups of youth, teen, adult and senior. First, it is vital to comprehend the distinctions amongst each fitness level.

HEALTH SEEKERS: This population is typically sedentary, overweight or obese. Health Seekers continuously try and fail at exercise goals or regimens and usually dabble in fad diets to lose weight. Often, this group develops "Hypo-Kinetic" diseases (diseases caused from a sedentary lifestyle) such as diabetes, arthritis or heart disease. Common statements include, "I hate exercise," or "Nothing in fitness has worked for me." This population is often motivated to workout due to doctor's orders, and this group spends money on new shoes and workout gear; only to find themselves eating salads and working out 6 days per week. After weeks of starvation and physical exhaustion, the health seeker once again quits working out and hates exercise even more as no results were found.



ACTIVE ADULT: This population is not sedentary but exactly committed to a full-on workout regimen. Active adults may substitute physical activity for exercise, but is not necessarily true for all individuals. For example, these people enjoy walking the dog, gardening, raking leaves in the yard or have an active job which substitutes for the gym (e.g. farming). These people are sometimes new to an exercise regimen or returning to exercise after a length of time of being sedentary. Active individuals gravitate toward the soothing forms of exercise. You may see in the gym a couple times per week walking on a treadmill, attending a yoga class or water aerobics.

RECREATIONAL ATHLETES: These individuals love exercise and were usually active as a youth and teen. Movement is a part of life and they continuously stay active in their adult years through events such as 5k's, marathons, century rides and triathlons. They enjoy challenges and are usually committed to training and beating their personal best records. Recreational athletes have interests of all kinds (e.g. rock climbing, kayaking, and hiking) and usually progress up the chain of challenge. For example, they may start with a 5k and progress to the 10k, half-marathon, marathon, and if they are bored, they will switch to a new fitness hobby or progress to become an elite athlete.

ELITE ATHLETE: Rare, but they are out there. They are the cream-of-the-crop and in top-notch shape. There are a couple forms of elite athletes. First, are the athletes who compete in events such as running, cycling or triathlon events. For some, it is their career to compete for prize money. The second type are the adventure enthusiasts; they train for the extreme out-of-the-box events such as Iron-Man, mountaineering Mount Rainier or cycling across America. These people continuously seek challenging stimulus and fresh ideas. Movement and fitness is their life blood.

UNDERSTANDING HOW TO SCHEDULE FOR THE VARIOUS PROGRAMS

What is intriguing is that a person's age depicts a chronological life age, and not their biological age or capability. For example, there are people in their 70's that are highly active skiing or hiking. Similarly, there are overweight, pre-diabetic teenagers who struggle to walk up stairs.

As baby-boomers age, fitness instructors continuously seek the challenge to teach to all fitness levels and ages. Currently, it is not uncommon to find participants' age range from 18 to 75 in each class.

Youth and senior programs typically have separate classes that cater to that specific age range, but what we really need is a mix of programs to attract the interest of each fitness level. In essence, when analyzing the four fitness levels for youth, it is relative to program to each level such as: Youth Speed & Agility (athletes), Yoga kids (active/creative kids) and Zumbatomic (sedentary/trend setters). For seniors, chair or aquatic classes cater to those who struggle with joint/mobility pain but you can incorporate a Stability Ball class to cater to the active, older adult.

With the understanding of the various fitness levels, ask yourself, what programs can your facility offer to cater to all the levels? Simple ideas include Bootcamp, Zumba, Pilates, Triathlon training, Yoga and TRX. These common-sense programs distinctly cater to all fitness programs in the fact that any fitness level can progress or regress exercises in these programs to fit their ability. In addition, various fitness levels are attracted to certain styles of classes due to the stereotype of each class. For example, athletes may be more attracted to bootcamp for the challenge or yoga to incorporate stretching into their routines; whereas, the health seeker and active adult may be more attracted to Zumba for the fun music and low-impact cardio.

Therefore, programmers need to balance fitness schedules with offering classes that cater to a mix of fitness levels. One controversy is labeling classes "beginner, intermediate and advanced." This terminology is outdated and confusing as these words represent more of a person's ability and the participants perceives this as the length of time an individual has been exercising.

People who have exercised for 20 years are not necessarily advanced nor is someone recovering from a hip replacement that needs a gentler fitness class not a beginner to exercise. Beginners are only beginners to exercise for so long before they progress to a more challenging need. "Gentle, basic, intense or Level 3" are more appropriate nomenclatures to label classes. Another example, "Bootcamp Basics" and "High Intensity Bootcamp" distinguish the level of the workout, not the level of the individual. Understanding the fitness levels is one of the many strategies utilized in programming successful and appropriate classes for participants. **OSF**
Happy Scheduling!

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