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## Reality Check

### Richard Seven

Cedric Bryant's home gym in Redmond is a garage awash in fluorescent light and lined with thin carpet. But it is well-stocked, with five old cardio machines that simulate everything from stair-climbing to kayaking. A tiny TV and a tape player, neither of which gets played much, are stashed off to the side. His stability balls and dumb bells, along with an array of balancing tools, are front and center.

Four or five times a week, he spends about 90 minutes in there, starting at 5:45 in the morning. Bryant insists he is a realist, not an early-morning exercise freak. If he doesn't do it first thing, his best intentions can get swept away in the flood of his daily duties.

In fact, as he grinds out some distance on a stepping machine he helped develop while at StairMaster, he peruses a chapter he's editing on designing exercise programs for people with chronic fatigue syndrome. He has not only the stamina to exercise on the machine for sometimes two hours at a spell but also the odd ability to read and jot while doing it.

Such multitasking comes with his mission as chief science officer for the nonprofit American Council on Exercise. He wants to get people moving — safely. His workout style fits him, too. Fundamentals over flash.

In other words, he walks his talk.

But more than that, Bryant has managed to weave his work, life and passion into one quilt that spreads into the lives of his wife, Ginger, four active boys, ages 12 to 19, hundreds of other kids he's coached over the years, and strangers nationwide searching for ways to begin and maintain active lives.

A Penn State-trained exercise physiologist, teacher, researcher and former head of research and development at StairMaster, he has written or co-written 21 books as well as



BENJAMIN BENSCHNEIDER / THE SEATTLE TIMES

At 5:45 a.m., Cedric Bryant, chief science officer for the American Council on Exercise, starts his day with an intense 90-minute workout in his home gym. Personally and professionally, Bryant is committed both to raising standards in the industry and to making exercise work in our daily lives.



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more than 200 articles and columns that have appeared in magazines and sports-medicine and exercise journals.

He manages the certification and publications department for the council, a consumer watchdog that also certifies personal trainers. He speaks almost daily to fitness publications or professional groups, dispensing advice that ranges from urging common sense to pinpointing proper form. He works with industry vendors who want to find the scientific steak behind the sizzle they sell. A former college center fielder, Bryant, at 46, wears his 175 pounds well enough to look like he could still chase down deep fly balls, but he is as unassuming as his gym décor.

"I saw Cedric not long ago half-asleep on a chair at Reagan National Airport," says Dr. Dan Tripps, director of the Center for the Study of Sport & Exercise at Seattle University. "When I said hello, he popped up to life and, although totally exhausted, he immediately began discussing his next plans" for the council. "He is passionate about exercise and committed to raising the industry standards."

Getting us to move is a big job. As a country, we have never been so fixated on fitness yet so unfit. The reasons are many:

Tight schedules and the bad nutrition choices that often result; how we design our workdays and even our cities; too much TV and Internet; unrealistic expectations fed by false promises; lack of instruction, patience and opportunity.

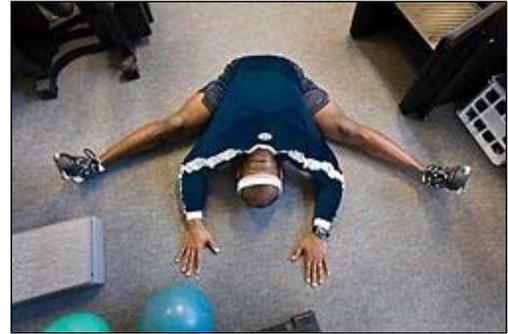
But perhaps the main barrier is this: Exercise, what we used to do for fun, is for many steeped in angst and guilt. Some of us spend more energy on shaming ourselves than on doing what we are capable of or need to do.

Bryant understands the disconnect. He knows how daily life can get in the way. When he moved from StairMaster to the exercise council 6 ½ years ago, the stress of changing jobs and routines knocked him off his exercise regimen, and he packed on pounds. If there is a point to blaming, he says the fitness industry certainly shares it.

"We either try to scare people into exercising or entice them with visions of a better, sexier body," he says. "We have made it too complicated. We have been so focused on numbers and not enough on does it produce a meaningful result — and that's different for each person. What each of us should ask is, 'Does exercise make me feel better?'"

**Gangly sixth-grade boys** scamper up and down the

Bryant, a former college center fielder, is, at age 46, still fit and committed to staying that way.



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Bryant's exercises are generally slow, controlled and focused. He says people should ask themselves these fundamental questions: "Does exercise make me feel more energetic?" "Am I in a better mood?" "Do I cope with things better when I exercise?"



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With a basketball court in the family backyard and a 30-yard-long lawn, Bryant's sons have gravitated toward organized sports. He says playing with them helps him meet his fitness goals, too.



basketball court, sending sneaker squeaks ringing in the cavernous Northshore Junior High School gym. These kids don't concern themselves with calorie burn. They just do it, chucking jump shots, passing to the open man, shuffling their feet. Up and down they go, never seeming to tire.

They stop only when Coach Bryant feels the need to correct something.

His instructions are firm, short and to the point. "Now why don't we want to do that?" he asks. He doesn't get personal or act like someone let him down. Whatever he does, both youth teams he coached had gaudy win-loss records last season. He is president of the Northshore Youth Basketball Association, even though his sons don't play in it anymore. This is the first summer in 10 years he hasn't coached baseball.

"It helps me stay balanced to see kids develop, not just in a sport but transitioning from little boys to young men," he says. "Athletics can do a wonderful job teaching about how to handle disappointment, success, conflict — as long as there is proper instruction and perspective."

The family always played active games together, be it tag or capture the flag. His 30-yard-long lawn has served as a football field for neighborhood kids of all ages. So it's no wonder his sons gravitated toward organized sports. He expects that they'll stay active their whole lives. Playing with them helps him meet his fitness goal, too, because he doesn't want to be wheezing as the kids run circles around him.

To play organized sports, though, his sons must maintain at least a 3.5 GPA (or 3.0 if they are "putting forth an honest effort"). In fact, he had the foresight to bring three men he respected together to speak with his oldest son, C.J., as the boy was about to enter his freshman year at the University of Washington. The idea was to let him know there were other mentors for him if he ever needed an alternative to his father.

Bryant's parents, Joe and Buelah, were not physically active or formally educated. As children, both worked in cotton fields. Joe picked with his father, a part-time Baptist preacher, in Georgia. Eventually, Joe moved the family to New Jersey, where he became a longshoreman and the young Cedric and his two siblings grew up. Education was the mantra from both of Bryant's parents, but he caught the sports bug with early athletic success, especially in baseball.

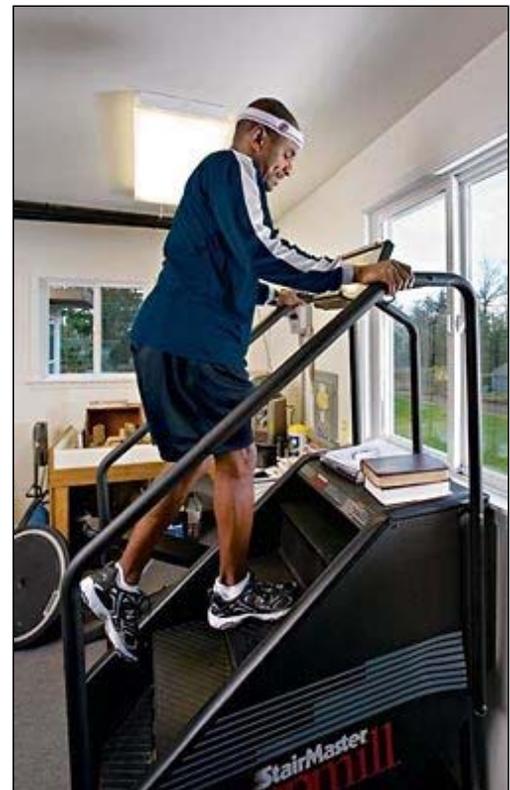
He was playing baseball at Rutgers University when he injured his anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) while breaking

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Bryant, who is president of the Northshore Youth Basketball Association, coaches sixth-grade boys basketball. While coaching, his instructions are firm and to the point. He doesn't get personal or act like someone let him down.



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A former head of research and development for StairMaster, Bryant uses a stepping machine he helped develop for the company. A multitasker, he has the ability to read and jot notes while stepping.

up a double play. Going through rehab on his knee fused the biology major's fascination with how the body works in real life. He began looking into physical therapy as a career and took physiology courses.

"I must have read the entire text book the first month," he says. "I couldn't put it down. Reading about applying systems and connecting that with purpose, how they relate to our lives, made me realize that we are all athletes. We're just on this wide continuum. For some, daily activity is their 'sport.' "

While studying sports science and physiology at Penn State, where he has since been named a fellow, he did stints in its Human Performance Laboratory and with the strength-and-conditioning staffs for the football, basketball and wrestling teams. He taught strength and conditioning for the Military Academy at West Point for a year and eventually moved to Arizona State University to teach exercise science.

He never really had a grand plan, he says. Doors just kept opening — like when an acquaintance from West Point days called from Kirkland-based StairMaster in the early 1990s and asked if he would join the company's research-and-development department. The chance to study and shape health products seemed too good to pass up.

He stayed at StairMaster as senior vice president for health-and-fitness products for a decade. When the company changed hands and drifted away from R&D, Bryant accepted a job as chief exercise physiologist and vice president of educational services with the San Diego-based exercise council.

He had moved to Seattle during one of our rainiest springs on record. When he agreed to take the council job, he insisted that he and his family keep living here.

**It's the combination** of background, employer and personality that enables Bryant to act as synergist. His work with the Center for CardioVascular Wellness at Swedish Medical Center is a prime example. One room is full of exercise equipment from 1-2-3 Fit, an upstart rival of the popular circuit-training program used by Curves for Women. Through Bryant and the exercise council, the company worked to have its system tested at Swedish under the direction of Tripps.

Physiologists ran test subjects through the circuit to get unfiltered "oxygen uptake" and caloric data. The company wants that, too, as well as the good public relations and sales



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After a business appointment, Bryant passes the elevator and takes the stairs instead.



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On an informal basis, Bryant serves as a physiological consultant to Technogym. Here with Technogym's Greg Gott, Bryant checks out the new Cardio Wave machine.



BENJAMIN BENSCHNEIDER / THE

it could get from potential positive results. The medical center keeps equipment that helps patients rehab or pursue preventative care. (The study ultimately found a high-intensity 1-2-3 Fit circuit-training workout is as or more effective than jogging or lifting weights for 30 minutes, making it a good option for the time-pressed.)

Another, more expansive, room in the medical center contains about three dozen different machines, again used by both patients and wellness subscribers. The machines are largely leftovers from testing — and there because of Bryant's contacts. During his decade working in research and development for StairMaster, he concerned himself with such things as loads, torques and how close promises could get to reality. As a result, he developed many contacts within the industry.

Inside a private room at Swedish, researchers from Tripps' Center for the Study of Sport & Exercise have been testing, under council supervision, the Technogym Cardio Wave. The product is different than most, if not all, other aerobic machines. Instead of working on the normal back-and-forth plane, it works on a side-to-side plane, as if the user is skating.

The company and researchers are trying to learn more about its gait mechanics, such as what stresses and muscle activation the movement causes. Technogym wants to identify the forces on the knee joint when a person uses its product and compare the data with other activities, then work with orthopedic and rehab medical specialists to evaluate the benefits of using it.

The company doesn't want to cause people to move in ways that create issues down the road, says Bryant. "The bottom line is they want to offer something the public will grab onto because it's unique, but they want to address health concerns, too. They deserve credit for that."

Bryant designs physiologic studies like this one; the council funds them to remove corporate influence and save lead investigators time and money by allowing them to hire graduate students to do much of the hands-on work. By being in charge, the council can avoid questions of bias and reveal secondary findings the company didn't seek.

Bryant sees false promises as one of the main barriers to fitness.

"There is so much information out there, and it's so accessible. The problem is that not all of it is good," he says. "We try to protect the public from the infomercials that sell the physiologically impossible. I fear that if you buy one of those schlocky devices and it's one of your first tastes of physical activity, you'll just give up and stay on the couch. Or worse, you get hurt."

A few years ago, the exercise council commissioned researchers at the University of Wisconsin, La Crosse, to investigate the validity of claims that Electrical Muscle Stimulation was enough to achieve a sculpted body. An eight-week study found no significant changes in weight, body-fat percentage or appearance.

The council mainly works with legitimate companies, of which there are several in this region.

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At Swedish Hospital, Bryant helps oversee testing of the Cardio Wave.



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Bryant catches up with his wife, Ginger, before heading out to play basketball with his sons. Exercise is an integral part of their family life.

Dorothy Sager, education and training manager for Technogym in Seattle, says Bryant is a valuable resource for manufacturers because he has the ability to interpret scientific data, make it clear to the lay person and conduct himself in an even-keel manner.

"Cedric operates from a place of integrity," she says, "and always works for the benefit of those who are fortunate enough to interact with him."

One night a few months ago, Bryant prepped a group of minority students for a council-sponsored personal-training exam. He told them how important they were to their specific populations, who are often overlooked.

He took time to find out why they were pursuing the qualifications. One trainee, a mother of two badly out-of-shape teenagers, said she felt this was the best way she could help them. To Bryant, this is where the rubber meets the road.

**The right way.** Not the easy way. The right way.

Once he climbs down from his stair machine, Bryant hits the floor of his home gym. He methodically pushes through a series of challenging moves that incorporate balance, engage the core and target various body parts. Each movement is slow, controlled and focused.

With one leg raised slightly, he does push-ups on small medicine balls. Then he in push-up position, each hand grasping a 25-pound weight, and alternates pulling the weight toward its corresponding shoulder.

He does sit-ups with one leg sticking up at a 45-degree angle and the foot of the other leg resting flat on the floor because an exercise-council study revealed the back is supported best that way. He puts an air pad beneath the small of his back to keep his spine in the right position, too.

All of it is about form and symmetry, and working supporting and corresponding muscles. Before showering, he heads into his home office to sift through his e-mail. It's pretty quiet this morning, he reports. Good thing, because an editor has sent him a list of revisions on a manuscript.

Trophies sit atop his precisely ordered bookshelves, which hold journals and a series of books from "Atkins for Life" to "The Ergonomics Edge" to "Framework." He recommends the latter, but many he reads and keeps only because he gets asked his opinion of them.

He and other health professionals have to take the long view and drill us not only on what moves to do, but on why we do them. Looks and shame are powerful motivators, but the wrong ones. Raw numbers can mislead, too. How much? How fast? How often? Wrong questions, Bryant says. You should ask, "Does exercise make me feel more energetic?" "Am I in a better mood?" "Do I cope with things better when I exercise?"

You should be satisfied with incremental steps and concern yourself with whether what you are doing is safe, efficient and effective, he says. Think function. He likens exercise to medication. Take the dose you need.

The barriers are many, but none is greater than perceived lack of time.

"That's No. 1, bar none," he says. "We're a time-pressured society. And activity is going to get

squeezed out. Notice I say 'perceived' lack of time because we always find time for the things we value."

*Richard Seven is a Seattle Times staff writer. Benjamin Benschneider is a Pacific Northwest magazine staff photographer.*

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