

When You Are Serious with Mike Nichols, MD

Trainers, Surgeons And Life Or Death: Your Choice

One of the conceits of a well trained, heck of even a poorly trained, surgeon is the belief that his 'hands' are better than anyone else's. The phrase comes out something like this "In my hands patients with disease 'X' always get better." Large surgical groups are even wont to say "In our hands..."

This is the fodder of people's ridicule of surgeons, the tone of a surgeon's inner monologue, annoying as can be but something that conveys a very important truth. A great surgeon can literally be the difference between life and death. In the hands of a lesser surgeon things do not turn out as well. Surgery is 'operator dependent.' I don't like this, you probably don't like it, but there it is...surgery, in fact the whole of the practice of medicine is 'operator dependent.' We can either ignore this fact, too uncomfortable, or do something about it.

Well here is the shocker...the same is true of personal trainers. Whether your personal trainer is yourself or someone else you are placing your health in someone's 'hands' and I advise you to get the best that your money can buy. Any trainer can help you get bigger biceps, 'tighter abs', can watch you run up and down hills and, perhaps, even motivate you. This is not enough. A good trainer can be the difference between life and death; just like a great surgeon. Given that proper exercise can reverse coronary artery disease, increase bone density and raise testosterone and growth hormone and that these variables can be the difference between life and death and that exercise poorly done can just as easily make each of these variables worse; given these things choose wisely. An average trainer may know how to make you a good power lifter but give you medial epicondylitis, or Achilles tendonitis, or over train your heart and suppress your heart rate variability. Life and death.

The hallmark of a great trainer is that s/he understands not merely what to do but why and can explain it. A well trained body is easily a Ph.D. in knowledge. Don't be fooled by definition, size, proportion, vascularity, peak heart rate; know that the end result is better physiological parameters that are not mere numbers but the very substance of health and performance.

Execution, precision, repeatability; everything quantified, analyzed and looked at from multiple perspectives. As I've taught elsewhere; local, regional, systemic changes are occurring so make sure they are the right ones. Heart Rate Based Training is a part of great training but even then not the whole story. There is a physiology, an aesthetics to peak performance, to becoming an athlete, which should be your goal, and the result is a thing of beauty. Even if you are old, worn out, full of aches and pains, there is a 'beautiful' solution to movement and training for each of us. And if you are young, you are at great peril, because any training will look better, have a fairly quick payoff but may be doing lasting harm; youth covers a multitude of sins of omission and commission.

Train smart; or at least make sure your trainer is. What is the plan, how does he expect to get there, what are the risks, the alternatives, how does he want you to train if injured or not? If the vocabulary is 'resistance training' and 'aerobics training' and poundage trumps gait and posture and form you've got the wrong guy. Good isn't cheap and great is expensive; what is your life, health and sense of well-being worth?

The temptation, the ever present temptation, is to think that anything that might occur in a gym cannot be too complicated or require very much intelligence. Wrong. I'm here to tell you that nothing in med school, surgical residency, and practice life after those hurdles is any more complex than the subtleties of great physiology and training. Choose wisely.

Dr. Mike Nichols is one of the pioneers in the development of protocols for prescriptive exercise & a particularly prolific writer on the topic. You can view more of his articles at: whenyouareserious.com