

Shape Up

As the cliché goes, don't judge a book by its cover.

It's a fitting phrase for the 426 Fitness studio, and for personal trainer Steve Skitek.

On the outside, 426 Metacom Avenue is a large brick building in Warren that used to be home to a cotton mill. On the inside, the 30,000 square-foot facility is spotless and modern, and houses every kind of fitness equipment imaginable.

On the outside, Steve Skitek, CPT, is perfectly toned and, frankly, intimidating. He looks the part of a personal trainer, the kind you might see training celebrities on television.

But spend a half hour with him, and you'll find that Skitek is warm and accommodating, and willing to cater his workouts to any age or skill set.

"I don't train people like body builders because we're not body builders. Our general population are not athletes," he said. "My job, as a trainer, is to make people feel comfortable."

On a recent Thursday morning, Skitek is busy making Bill Grandgeorge feel comfortable.

The 77-year-old Grandgeorge is a theater professor at Roger Williams University. He had a knee replacement not long ago, and his mobility was impaired. With a trip to Prague coming up, he worried he would not be able to get around and tour the city on foot.

Within two months, Skitek had him on track and ready to take on Europe.

"There's no question it paid off. I have more confidence in my body's ability to function," Grandgeorge said.



The trip is over, but Grandgeorge continues to return to 426 Fitness and has lost 16 pounds and counting.

"Now that the trip is over, I don't want to lose what I've gained," he said.

He also had kind, albeit witty, words about the fitness studio staff.

"They're all young and they all have muscles, but they're wonderful people," he said, laughing.

When a client comes in to see Skitek, especially if they're a senior, he tries to get to know them before working up a sweat. He asks questions about their medical histories and any medications they're taking. Often, clients won't realize that a certain medication could impact their heart rate or ability to do specific workouts.

"I have to dig a little deeper sometimes," Skitek said. "There's a very old 50 and a young 80."

If need be, he hooks clients up with Rhode Island Rehabilitation, which has an office in the gym.

Regardless of medical issues, he says there's a workout for everyone. He has many clients who suffer from chronic conditions such as diabetes, arthritis and fibromyalgia, and he knows that some days, he needs to take it easy.

"You have to gauge when their having a good day or a bad day," he said.

When it's a bad day, Skitek sticks to the low-impact exercises and PNF (proprioceptive muscular facilitation) stretching, which improves flexibility and makes muscles long and lean.

He's also an advocate for RNT (reactive neuromuscular training) as a means to improve balance.

"RNT training trains your brain not to fall down," he said.

An example of RNT training is lifting weights while kneeling on an exercise ball.

Skitek admits it sounds scientific, and intimidating to some, but getting in shape doesn't have to be an unpleasant experience. The biggest obstacle, he says, is mental.

"They have a fear; 'I think that if I move a certain way I'm going to break'. They think it's going to take a lot of time and it doesn't have to. They're misinformed of what working out is like," he explained. "You have so many options these days. You're able to get your heart rate up, work on your core and work on your flexibility in a half hour. As we age, our workouts need to be shorter and more intense."

There are many options at 426 Fitness, too. There's a stationary bike room for spin classes, traditional exercise equipment, free weights, water rowing, yoga and pilates. Classes also include cardio ballet, tai chi, parkour, kickboxing and a class that Skitek runs called TRX suspension.

"Most of the people who stick with this class are 50-plus. At the same level, I have 18-year-olds taking the class," Skitek said, demonstrating what TRX is by hooking a stretchable band to a solid post and using his body weight to do resistance training.

The key for Skitek is customizing workouts, going at the client's pace and helping them to better function on a daily basis. Not everyone is going to run a marathon, he said, but if a client wants to keep up their sailing or golf hobby into their senior years, they need to stay healthy.

"Working out is more about functional moving patterns. It's less of the free weights and more of the dynamic movements. The worst thing you can do is stop," he said.

And that's where Skitek comes in. He's ready to motivate clients and work with them to create a workout and a schedule that makes exercise enjoyable.

"My workouts with my clients are never the same. You want to keep the muscles guessing of what's coming next," he says, stopping to chat with one of the regulars. "When you exercise, you feel better."

For more information about 426 Fitness or to schedule a session with Steve Skitek, visit www.426Fitness.com or call 247-7440. ■