

Jack LaLanne: Fitness Pioneer and Innovator

America's First Glimpse of a Fitness Innovator

Rita Babcock of San Francisco, California knew exactly what her morning would hold. It was ironing day.

She set her ironing board up in the living room and plopped the laundry basket onto the sofa. She walked over and turned on the new Magnavox television to keep her company. She would watch her usual shows, finding comfort in the black-and-white worlds of fictional others.

While her iron was heating up, the television announcer told Rita her soap opera was delayed for the following special.

Exposure: The Fitness Evangelist

Springing onto the screen was a dark-haired, compact man in a jumpsuit. He spoke with the fervor of an evangelist but appealed to her not for her soul, but her health. His pioneering mantra was “Get off your seat and on your feet.” An original gospel new to middle America, exercise science was his Bible, promotion his chariot. The animated, muscular man

showed her exercises she could do with him and preached the benefits of natural nutrition.

It was September 28th, 1953, and, while she folded shirts, Rita witnessed the first Jack LaLanne Show, a 15-minute, self-financed promotional segment that would soon grow to

national acclaim and last for 34 years. A testament to Lalanne's fitness innovation and pioneering spirit.

Lalanne's Evolution

The Godfather of Fitness, Jack Lalanne, knew of the transformations he preached. He was born in San Francisco in 1914, the first year of World War I. His given name was Francois Henri Lalanne, born to French immigrant parents. It was his younger brother that gave him the nickname "Jack."

He was a typical adolescent and ate whatever tasted good. He suffered from irritability, nearsightedness, boils, and acne. He was weak and admitted later that during this period girls "beat him up."

When he was fifteen, his life changed forever.

The Origins of a Fitness Innovator

Jack happened to see a lecture by Paul Bragg upholding the value of nutrition and exercise. From that point, Jack studied voraciously, devouring books on anatomy, chiropractic, nutrition, and exercise. He exercised every day and lifted weights religiously at the Berkeley YMCA. He consumed only fresh foods, eliminating junk from his diet. As he would say many times over throughout his life, "if a man makes it, don't eat it." His body soon changed, as did his life. He made the football team at school and became popular, no longer fettered by physical afflictions.

His metamorphosis could not be self-contained, however. He resolved to share his discoveries with others, inspiring their own change from within.

Hardship and a Message

Jack's mission was made more meaningful with the passing of his father at age 58 from a heart attack, prompted by poor nutrition and a sedentary lifestyle.

Lalanne continued his quest through the great depression, which hit its lowest point in the winter of 1933. Following that, the U.S. economy saw vast growth for several years, giving birth to Lalanne's bold new ideas.

He thought that if people had a social place to exercise, they may be more inclined to do so. In 1936 he rented a space for \$45 dollars a month and started the first commercial fitness club and health food bar. The gleaming tile and wood floor supported several types of bars, benches, and machines, some of which Lalanne invented.

Creating the Future of Fitness

Lalanne constructed the first cable leg extension machine, a gym staple today.

Additionally, Lalanne created the first "selectorized" machines, using a stack of plates, with resistance selected by inserting a pin into the stack. This technology, of course, is a staple for today's fitness machine manufacturers.

Despite his ingenuity, Lalanne was seen as a charlatan by many. It was widely believed then that women shouldn't exercise (they would end up looking like men) and many physicians scoffed at weight training, saying it caused heart attacks and ruined sex drive.

Undeterred, Lalanne continued to open clubs and decades later licensed his clubs to Bally, the clubs are now hailed as Bally Total Fitness.

LaLanne's passion for self-promotion led to two of his longest-lasting endeavors, television, and marriage.

A Fitness Marketing Genius

Lalanne, during one of his many interviews was at ABC affiliate KGO in San Francisco, home of the Les Mallow Show. The talent booker's name was Elaine. She was 25. When Lalanne met her, she was at her desk, munching a doughnut and smoking a cigarette. Jack reminded her that she would be happier if she took care of herself, adding "If I didn't like you, I wouldn't have said anything." The two soon married, and Elaine made many appearances on Jack's show, demonstrating that women who worked out were feminine and attractive.

Thereafter, to attract children to his crusade, Lalanne added a new cast member to the show -- his dog, a White Shephard named "Happy." Happy would appear onscreen, and do tricks, with Jack giving ample affection. Another dog, Walter, would be added later. The name Walter was an acronym for "we all love to exercise regularly."

New Arenas to Market Fitness

Lalanne, the master promoter, tried a stint with professional wrestling in 1938. Most of the wrestlers were avid weightlifters and knew Lalanne personally. Jack was always choreographed to a draw match, as he was respected, and wrestlers did not want him to “lose.”

When Lalanne was 54, he met a 21- year- old Austrian immigrant named Arnold Schwarzeneger. The two agreed to an informal strength contest, with Lalanne taking the honors. Afterward, in a thick accent, Schwarzeneger admitted “That Jack Lalanne is an animal!”

Walking the Talk

Part of Lalanne’s marketing was to publicly demonstrate his fitness prowess, many times on his birthday. The message, of course, was to show how fitness prolongs health and vigor throughout the years.

At age 42, Lalanne set an example for the world to follow. On the set of “You Asked for It,” a popular television show with host Art Baker, Lalanne performed 1,033 push-ups in 23 minutes, a new world record.

At age 45, Lalanne set yet another standard by performing 1000 push-ups and 1000 chin-ups in one hour and 22 minutes. Maybe not coincidentally, The Jack Lalanne Show went national after that.

Connection with Another Pioneering Promoter?

It is interesting to note that many of Lalanne's innovative promotional feats involved swimming and being restrained by manacles. For instance, when he turned 70, Lalanne towed 70 boats with passengers a mile and a half while handcuffed. When Lalanne was born, another promotional genius was already popular for using similar techniques, Harry Houdini.

Houdini would allow himself to be bound by the local police department or independent challenger, dive off a public bridge into sometimes icy water, and emerge just when the onlookers feared for his life. Of course, Houdini's goal was to escape, Lalanne's to make the swim more difficult. The men are similar in stature – Lalanne was 5'6 and Houdini 5'4.

Both men were famous for their physiques and strength. In fact, Houdini died from an injury caused by a boxer wishing to test out his legendary abdominal muscles with a punch. Houdini agreed to the test but was punched as he rose from a sofa, unprepared for the blow. He died from fever and infection due to appendicitis in 1926, having refused to stop performing.

A Never-Ending Legacy

Lalanne lived to be 96 years old, finally succumbing to pneumonia. He performed his regular workout up to the day before his death.

One of Lalanne's favorite sayings was "I can't die, it would ruin my image."

Like many iconic people, Jack Lalanne could not foresee his influence on future generations of fitness enthusiasts. He was just living as he saw fit, so to speak. The best leaders have always done so by example. He didn't know that, after death, his legend would grow and be shared by those lucky enough to know his story.