

Trash your old body on this hill

Fitness guru helps runners shed pounds

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Vic Keller (right) with runners Jeff Vince and Kaye Grant on Garbage Hill, not far from Polo Park. (BORIS MINKEVICH)

VIC Keller is quick to realize the irony in working on reclamation projects at Garbage Hill, a one-time refuse dump that is often littered with broken glass and abandoned shopping carts.

In Keller's case, he's working to fix the broken-down and out-of-shape bodies of his clients by pushing them to run up the 400-metre road that runs from the bottom of the hill, located a few blocks north of Polo Park Shopping Centre, to the top. Every Tuesday evening from early spring to late fall, the 47-year-old personal trainer oversees between 25 and 50 people, ranging in age from 14 to 75 years old, running up and down the hill at various speeds.

"I'm helping people reclaim their lives," said the svelte Keller, the face, mind and body behind Vic Fitness Inc., who tips the scales at 175 pounds.

Many of his clients are recovering from injuries, workplace and otherwise, while others are recovering from various

addictions, including drugs, alcohol and food.

There are two parts to the route; the first section is about 100 metres long and increases at an incline of six per cent; the second piece, about 300 metres in length, goes up at a grade of nine per cent.

Keller said he's a strong believer in hill training because it creates "biomechanical efficiencies."

"Running hills gets our hips, glutes and total body stronger and in better condition than running on flat ground," he said.

Not only that, but it makes activities performed on the Prairies -- such as playing tennis, running, playing with your kids or going for an evening stroll -- considerably easier. It's as close as Winnipeggers can get to high-altitude training, Keller said.

Clients just starting out might complete the up and down in two minutes and 40 seconds. Gradually, as they improve and get fitter, they knock seconds off each lap. Many of them are sub-two-minute runners now, he said. Rookies might get five or six laps in during a workout while veterans can churn out 12 or 13, said Keller.

Keller knows of what he preaches and he can empathize with his clients. Twenty-five years ago, he weighed 280 pounds, was horribly out of shape and lacked energy and spunk.

One of his clients would make most of the participants on *The Biggest Loser* weight-losing reality show look like rank amateurs. Two years ago, he signed up with Keller, weighing more than 400 pounds. That came from a sedentary lifestyle that included hours of video games, litres of soda pop and several bags of chips, no exercise and little sleep, day after day.

Today, the man's lost more than half his original body weight, is down to 187 pounds and roars up and down the dump like a machine.

"Reclaiming people's lives is about doing fitness activities that create long-lasting benefits. That is a true reclamation," Keller said.

Jeff Vince, a retired accountant, took up running 25 years ago to lose weight -- he's down 40 pounds to 134 pounds -- but he's kicked things into a new gear since he first ran up the dump 18 months ago. He has qualified for the Boston Marathon in each of the last two years and credits his countless ascents for knocking 25 minutes off his previous best time. He crossed the finish line in three hours and 51 minutes this year.

He said running the dump also helps him cope with different challenges life throws at him. "Running helps me get rid of the stress," he said.

Kaye Grant credits Keller and the dump for helping her reconnect with her two children, aged 20 and 21. The single mom had high blood pressure, wasn't sleeping, was tired all the time and had no get-up-and-go. She has since shed 25 pounds, added some muscle and gained a new appreciation for life.

"Now I feel wonderful. I have so much energy. I can't believe what I can do. The fitter I've become, the fitter my kids have become," she said.

Keller said he's proud of the fact his group trains at Garbage Hill whenever the road isn't covered with ice and snow and long after people training for the Manitoba Marathon have returned to their flat-land training.

"We're here in the late fall when it's so dark sometimes you can barely see the road," he said.

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