

## Studio spreads pain-free moves Boomer clients say they are believers in the Sugi way

By Marton Dunai  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Camille Clark had it coming.

The 46-year-old started straining her body as a child on the gymnastics floor and the balance beam. She continued in a Texas high school in the 1970s as a prominent member of a small town's big-time drill team. She went on to dance, do a bit of ballet, a bit of aerobics and lots of outdoor activities.

A broken ankle, uncountable twisted knees and two car accidents later, her body was a beat-up patchwork. That was five years ago.

"I was a typical victim of parasitic effort," she said, using an expression that refers to effort that is overdone and hurts the body instead of strengthening it. The diagnosis: "boomeritis."

Boomeritis is a term coined by Nicholas DiNubile, an orthopedic consultant for the Philadelphia 76ers basketball team and the Pennsylvania Ballet, to describe the growing number of sports injuries among the baby boom generation. In the 1990s, the syndrome landed nearly half a million American boomers in the hospital with a variety of injuries, prompting the American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons to launch a campaign against it last year.

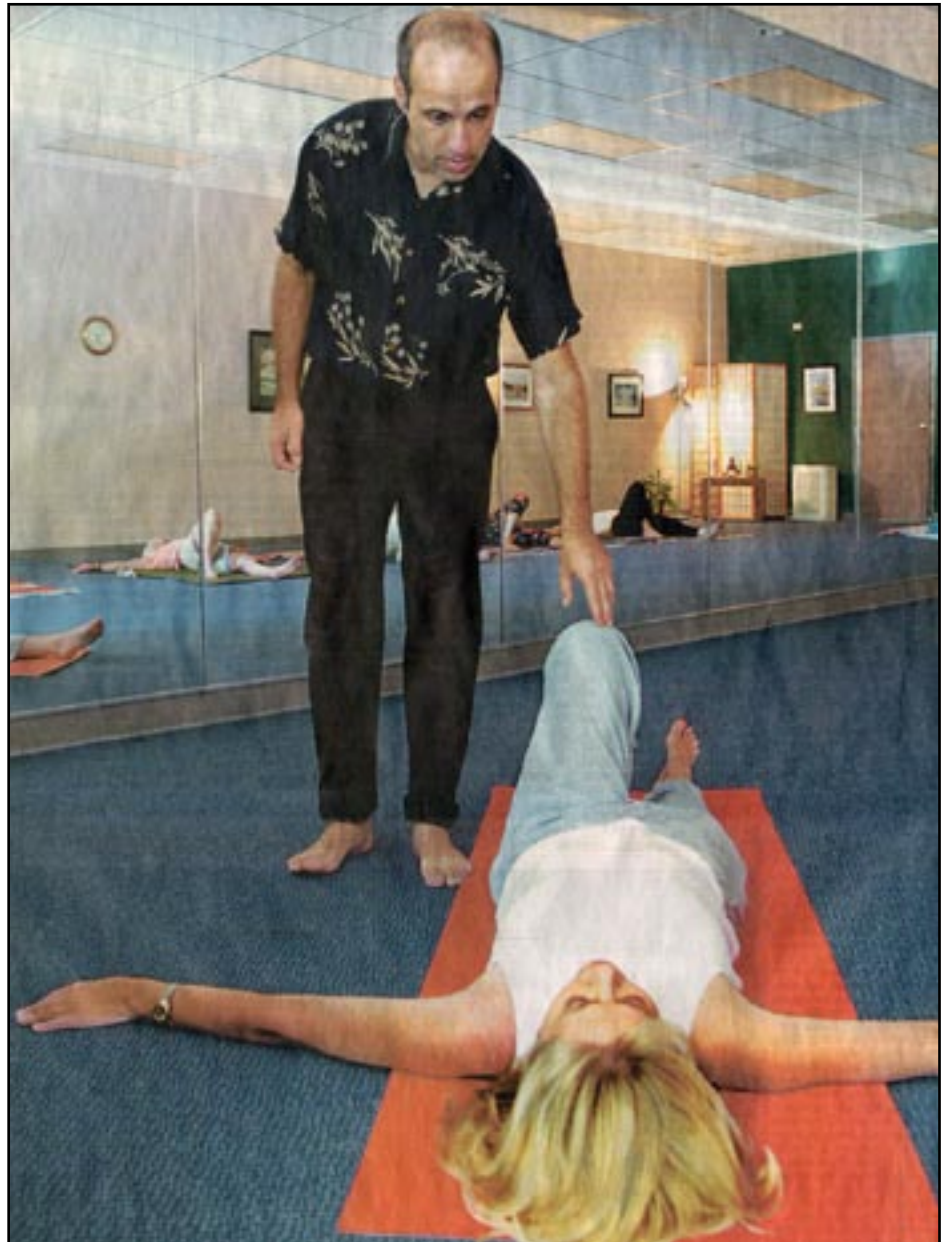
Scores of fitness studios, yoga places and other businesses have targeted aging boomers, some in traditional ways, and others with more alternative methods. The place Clark went, Pleasant Hill yoga studio Sugi Health and Fitness, offered an especially unusual solution: to stay fit, work less. Incredulous, she tried it. Her condition improved fast.

"Less Effort = More Benefit," Sugi's motto reads on the mirror-covered wall in the bare-bones studio. The idea is to prevent injuries through limited strain on the body while using alternative techniques to promote fitness.

"I can't even watch gymnastics now. The strain they are under is incredible," Clark said.

Although it is hard to accept the "gain without pain" approach of the studio, the philosophy seems to have appealed to boomers, who have come faithfully.

"I have come here for a year, and my condition has improved dramatically," said Mary Ann Kremenliev, a 58-year-old mathematics teacher at Foothill Middle School. She had a fragmented disc, which caused her unbearable pain. The pain is gone now, and Kremenliev is a believer in the Sugi way.



KATHIE THOMPSON of Walnut Creek is guided by instructor Ofer Erez on Wednesday during a class at Sugi Health and Fitness in Pleasant Hill.

Co-owners and instructors Ofer and Amy Erez used to have a hard time convincing people about the merits of their philosophy. But as they refocused on boomers and reformulated their message, it seems to have caught on. Recent efforts at networking and spreading the idea by word of mouth have paid off: Attendance has increased by a third in the past

month alone, and the couple now teach 18 classes a week, attracting a clientele of about 150. Charging \$12 per student per hour, the studio also has begun to take off as a business.

"We started to specialize in boomers because that's who came through the door," Amy Erez said. "They told their friends, their doctors spread the word, and we ultimately focused on them."

# CONTRA COSTA TIMES

The Erezes got some formal business training when they opened their studio, the first permanent location they have had. They learned business basics, such as identifying their market, at the Small Business Development Center in Concord. The result was not surprising.

"Our target market is boomers," Amy Erez said. Specifically: 70 percent women, mostly from 40 to 65.

With the Bay Area chock full of massage therapists and yoga studios, the Erezes have had to make an effort to differentiate themselves.

"Other places also do gentle yoga and senior exercises, but their approach is still that of working hard. We tell our students to do the exact opposite," Ofer said.

Ofer, who grew up in Israel, is trained in just about every kind of yoga, massage and the Japanese hands-on therapy of shiatsu. Amy also is an experienced massage therapist and yoga instructor and holds a bachelor's degree in Oriental studies and psychol-

ogy. Between the two of them, they share a tremendous amount of knowledge of new-age healing and exercise.

"The goal, like always, is to get healthy and stay healthy," he said. "But, how do you get there? The intuitive answer is to push your limit. But it's when you push yourself that boomeritis sets in. Injuries happen, then happen again, then they become chronic, and in the process, you prevent the very thing you wanted to achieve: health."

The couple devised a variety of classes in yoga, with a common underlying element. No disciples of theirs ever do anything beyond their comfort zone, which helps past injuries heal more quickly and leads to better performance. Although that sounds counterintuitive, the Erezes insist it works.

"It is shortcut-taking, yes. It can take a lot less time to achieve the same results (as in regular training or therapy). The general attitude of society is, 'I have to work at it, otherwise I don't deserve it.' But if you had to work half the time for the same salary you

earn now, you would do that, too," Ofer said.

He admitted that "sometimes you can't avoid making an effort," even if that is only the mental effort of making the movements smoother on the yoga floor.

"You have to learn how to do the same things with less effort," he said. "But that's it."

The difficult part is believing the body can develop without breaking a sweat. Kurt Fuller was not going to fall for it at first, but at 53, he needed the transformation badly when he reached out to Sugi a year ago.

"I had always been fit and athletic, but decades as a car mechanic did me in. I had carpal tunnel syndrome, repetitive stress injury, back injury, you name it."

He began taking one class a week, and got hooked soon. Now, he goes up to twice a week, and most of his problems are gone. He rides his bike his usual 50 to 100 miles, except he does it much easier than before. Even his stress level has gone "way down."

And the best part is, he says, "I didn't really work on it at all."

---

*Marton Dunai covers small businesses. Reach him at 925-952-2671 or mdunai@cctimes.com.*

---

## Classes taught at Sugi Health and Fitness

- Beginners yoga
- Yoga
- Tai Chi Gong: Coordination of breathing patterns with postures and movements of the body
- Feldenkrais: The practice of self-observance during movement
- Yoga hikes: Hiking with the Sugi methodology, starting in September

## LOCATION

Sugi Health and Fitness  
1924 B Oak Park Blvd.  
Pleasant Hill, CA 94523  
925-588-2727  
www.sugihealth.com

Drop-in rate: \$14; \$10 for those 60 or older



Camille Clark of Berkeley, foreground, and owner Amy Erez, behind Clark, participate in a class led by fellow instructor/owner Ofer Erez at the Pleasant Hill studio. Clark, 46, says the exercises eased her pain, some of which came from "boomeritis."