



Research Paper

## Making Fitness FUN!

Dr. Jon J. House

(Allied Health Professions Liberty University)

**ABSTRACT:** *Motivating and improving student behavior seem to be two of the biggest challenges in the teaching world today. If we can make an activity fun, then motivation and student focus become more natural, and both teacher and student benefit. This paper is a list of suggestions, based on the author's 40-plus years of experience, for improving practices for motivating students toward fitness. It begins and ends on an academic foundation of health fitness testing and uses focused labs and mini-lectures to cover relevant topics. It uses competitive and non-competitive innovative games, indoor and outdoor settings, surprises, positive feedback, enthusiasm, instructor role modeling, time-saving efficiency, and socialization to motivate. The author believes it is possible to make fitness both fun and beneficial for our students.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Fitness, Fun, Motivation, Health*

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Motivating and improving student behavior seem to be two of the biggest challenges in the teaching world today. Attention spans are extremely short, and it is very hard to compete with the instant gratification of social media, video games, and other forms of entertainment. Like so many other veteran teachers, I will be retiring soon and need to pass on my “pearls of wisdom” before I say goodbye to the education world.

If we can make an activity fun, then motivation and student focus become more natural, and both teacher and student benefit. Every semester I get students making statements like: “*This was the most fun I’ve had in an activity class!*”; “*I’ve been here 4 years, and this is my favorite class!*”; “*Why didn’t my high school gym classes feel like this?*”; “*Can I take this class again?*”; “*I don’t want the class to stop.*”

Full disclosure, I teach on the collegiate level mostly within majors, Health and PE Teachers and Exercise Science, that are agreeable to physical activity. However, most of these majors have never really enjoyed fitness. They understand the health benefits of fitness, but most do not enjoy getting in shape and staying in shape. It has always been a chore, a necessary evil, or a due that must be paid to be in shape. I do have other majors who take my class to “get in shape” or for a needed elective credit who are not the typical majors.

When I inherited this fitness class during my first year at the collegiate level, I determined to make it more enjoyable than the typical fitness class. After 20-plus years of fine-tuning, most students find the class, dare I say FUN. To make fitness FUN I modify activities to help increase success. I use competitive and non-competitive games, innovative games, surprises, socialization, and lots of positive teacher feedback while using students’ names. I role model and participate when appropriate. Also, enthusiasm and efficiency help grease the wheels of motivation, and I believe good motivation always helps with behavior.

Do not let this “Making Fitness Fun” title mislead you, this is not another “busy, happy, good” activity class that already dominates the American PE landscape (Siedentop 2008). The goal of the class is to develop a personal fitness plan that is balanced, self-motivated, individualized, and results-oriented but still FUN. The goal is health-related fitness, not sport skill development. The five health-related fitness components: cardiovascular fitness, muscular strength, muscular endurance, flexibility, and body composition are emphasized (Fahey et. al 2001). Thus, the goals focus on health-impacting behavior and not sport skill development. The overview of the class involves pre-testing, setting individual goals, participating in activities, and post-testing. We begin with a strong academic foundation, but we will soon get to the FUN.

## **II. Academic Foundation**

Pretesting is important to establish a student's current fitness level and helps them to choose personal fitness goals.

Pre-tests include:

- Skin fold or bioimpedance measurements to assess body fat percentage
- Two-legged sit and reach for flexibility
- Sit-ups for muscular endurance
- Flex-arm hang (female) or pull-ups (male) for muscular strength
- Cooper 1.5 mile run for cardiovascular endurance

Following the pre-test, individual goals are set and then activities begin. Most activities emphasize cardiovascular fitness but include all health components. At the end of the semester, a post-test is given completing the above tests again with one additional test required, a 30-minute continuous run challenge.

Cognitive goals are addressed with 12 lab assignments and 2 exams. Relevant topics, which are called mini-lectures, are spread out over the semester and serve to focus discussions and help complete labs.

Topics include:

- A reflective aging activity (visually growing old)
- Developing a personal health/fitness program
- Considering individual genetic differences (family tree/ health)
- Stress management
- Nutrition
- Posture test
- Lower back strength test
- Self-image/body image questionnaire
- Principles of exercise (Fahey et. al 2001)
- Longevity/lifespan age prediction survey based on personal behaviors (*Health* n.d.)

Some of the labs have a practicum component requiring or implementing a fitness measurement skill such as using the maximum heart rate method to determine and measure cardiovascular intensity. Another lab creates and tracks a personal workout regimen over time (Fahey et. al 2001). These labs are spread out over the entire semester. Following the pre-testing, most of the semester is spent in group and individual activities. This is where the FUN aspects of the class start to take shape.

## **III. Where FUN Starts**

### ***Modify for FUN***

I modify many aspects of the activities to ensure success. For example, competition motivates most people until or unless they reach a point of little or no success. Then human nature takes over and they get frustrated and quit. I use what I call friendly competition to improve individual and group success. First, steps are taken to balance teams and minimize dominance by athletically stronger students to level the playing field. For example, team balance is improved by the teacher choosing team members. Skill, size, gender, and personal motivation are all considered.

Next, when we have a class size of 16 or more, we make 4 smaller teams rather than 2 larger teams. This allows for 3 short games instead of 1 long game because students have twice the opportunity to be involved with half the team size. Students play 3 games with 3 different opponents or matchups and 3 opportunities to compete and win. In 1 long game, students may give up once they have decided there is no point in working hard because they have already lost. Having 3 short games reduces this risk and thus increases motivation.

Additionally, team members rotate positions after every score or set amount of time. This means no one stays in goal, remains the center, or is on offense for long. Every student will change often which ensures frequent fresh starts and thus increases the likelihood of success and FUN. Also, innovative, or modified games comprise most of the group activity which also provides more opportunity for success and helps control dominance by a highly skilled individual.

### ***Innovative Competitive Sports and Activities for FUN***

I use initiative or highly modified games to reduce dominance by higher-skilled students. For example, if we play typical core sports like basketball the skill level difference between a Division 1 basketball player and the rest of the class would be tremendous. A wide range of abilities would lead to discouragement on the lower-skilled side and a lack of motivation. We modify games to reduce dominance such as changing ultimate frisbee rules to play indoors and allowing the frisbee to be bounced off the wall or floor with no turnover penalty for touching the ground or dropped catches. This also has the benefit of being more continuous and thus a higher level of cardiovascular fitness, especially for the beginner skill level player. When playing a modified ultimate

freebie, the catching and throwing skills of the division one football wide receiver do not readily transfer. Thus, reducing these D1 football players to a more average skill level. Other games that are modified include street hockey, speedball, lacrosse, scoops, team handball, tchoukball, swat ball, flag football, and broom hockey.

### ***Non-Competitive Activity for FUN***

Even though we use competition to motivate, I teach that most fitness is about individuals getting to know themselves and finding out what they are capable of. It is not about comparing yourself to others or a testing standard, even though we do use them. It is about challenging yourself to improve and be the best version of yourself you can be. At some point, as you age, it is about maintaining your fitness and health, not about improving. So other activities like weightlifting, cardio challenge, fitness scavenger hunt, climbing wall, indoor cycling, yoga, hiking, and disc golf are more individualized (or paired) and the student can challenge themselves to a higher fitness level or just get a good workout while having FUN. I also invite experts in to lead indoor cycling, yoga, and the climbing wall to motivate the students with a fresh face. Of course, the experts have more knowledge than me and specific certifications to cover safety/liability issues.

### ***Surprise and Enthusiasm for FUN***

I try to build excitement and avoid repetition that often leads to staleness, so my classes are an event you do not want to miss. We rarely repeat an activity or announce what the next activity will be. “*What are we doing next class?*” is the question I want to hear! This helps to create an atmosphere of surprise, excitement, and anticipation. This starts with the instructor being and staying enthusiastic. Yes, even when I do not feel like it or it’s not natural. Students feed off the teacher’s energy and you must be positive and up for the class. The FUN continues by varying the warm-ups, constantly changing class locations, and of course, varying the activities themselves. We may be inside or outside and have competitive, individual, or paired activities. We may start class with a lab or finish class with a lab. Warm-ups may be paired, grouped, or jogging in lines or around the perimeter. Equipment may be used for warmups or not. Warmups may be led by students or the instructor. We may discuss a topic at the beginning of class or at the end or not at all. This keeps the students guessing and wondering what will come next. Students always want to know, but not knowing builds anticipation. Since there is little routine, surprise and enthusiasm require a lot of positive communication and feedback.

### ***Positive Specific Feedback for FUN***

In my first school, I had the privilege of coaching and teaching K-12 for 13 years. As I learned from experience and failure, I grew to recognize the value of feedback. During one basketball practice, I happened to give more positive and specific feedback than normal to one of my leaders on the team and he responded with more effort. I tried it again and was surprised with more positive results. I also found that if I used the athlete’s name with a positive specific comment, he was even more motivated. It quickly became most of my communication during practice sessions and in PE classes and changed my view of motivation for students, especially in the fitness portion of the lessons/practice.

In my early years of coaching a boy’s high school basketball team, we would typically finish practices with lots of fitness, specifically full-court suicides. It was viewed as a necessary evil to be ready physically for a full 4 quarters of basketball. Most of the feedback during this activity was negative and directed at the slower, non-hustling players, at least from the coach’s perspective. It was anything but FUN, but seemingly necessary to get the athletes in shape. When I made the transition to mostly positive specific feedback, I noticed the players working harder, spurred on by feedback during the warm-ups and all parts of the practice session. I realized I did not need to have additional fitness at the end of the sessions to push the anaerobic threshold of my players. The athletes were in better shape than ever and enjoyed the practice session. They did not dread fitness, so we stopped doing suicides. Everyone was having more FUN, including the coach, and surprise, surprise, those were my most successful winning years.

I experienced the same results in my physical education classes. Of course, learning and using the students’ names are more challenging but vital for the process to be successful. The next step is to begin the process of encouraging the students to give each other positive specific feedback. This helps build team and class unity as well as increases socialization. In addition, I verbally encourage the students to help someone else score or be successful which helps build empathy. Thus, positive specific feedback with the use of names motivates and helps make activities FUN. Most elementary school and secondary students know each other and their names, but on the collegiate level getting to know each other and learning individual names is necessary for building community and socialization.

### ***Community and Socialize for FUN***

Socialization begins with the first lab requiring students to meet 5 classmates and ask them 3 relevant questions. To further improve socialization and team balance, after 4 captains are chosen by the professor, alternating female, and male, each captain picks the opposite gender co-captain. In this process, the captain

states their name out loud for all to hear and then picks a co-captain and states their name if they know it. If not, the picked co-captain states their name out loud. The remainder of the students are named, again stated out loud, and assigned to a team by the professor. This process helps with learning names, eliminates last or even later-picked embarrassment, helps balance the teams, and rotates leadership. All students are captains or co-captains at some point, student names are repeated during the process, and student names are repeated often during the professor's verbal feedback. Some activities and labs require pairing or small groups. During these labs or workouts, the students accomplish a task together and thus build a sense of community and accomplishment. Even the warm-up activity can build community by using pairs or small group activities. Keeping the class moving with little downtime helps keep the students motivated and having FUN.

### ***Be efficient for FUN***

Downtime or wait time slows the momentum of the class and kills the excitement and natural enthusiasm so being efficient with the schedule is very important.

Here is a typical class schedule of an indoor fitness class.

Beginning of Class (about 5 minutes):

- Assemble in the bleachers
- Give out colored jerseys and we repeat or learn names
- Students check and record their resting heart rate on their evaluation card
- Attendance is taken electronically
- Labs, if due, are collected electronically
- Prayer requests and prayer (LU is a private Christian University)

Warm-Up (5 minutes)

- A dynamic activity, typically led by the professor
- Starts with light jogging
- Progressively moves to more challenging movements
- Finished with the group in a semi-circle doing some type of muscular strength while the professor assigns late students to a team.

Game rules

Then the game rules and safety measures are quickly covered. Our goal is to keep the body moving for fitness' sake, so demos are minimal or nonexistent, and no time is given to skill practice. Captains choose co-captains and are assigned a starting end to defend. Normally the number of students per class (24-28) allows for 4 teams of 6 to 7 and each team competes on side-by-side courts to help with supervision. Each game lasts for approximately 12-15 minutes. The second game follows with a new opponent and then the 3<sup>rd</sup> game with yet another new opponent. Somewhere during the activity, the students are stopped and asked to check their activity heart rate.

Cooldown:

With about 8 minutes to go in the class, play stops and the group drops their colored jersey and other equipment where they found it and starts a light jog or walk in a circle for a cooldown and stops for stationary stretching and more cooldown. During this cooldown, students check their recovery heart rate, and a mini-lecture is given on a relevant health topic that coincides with the upcoming lab or the lab just completed. Mini lecture notes are also provided online. As stated before, sometimes the mini-lectures or discussions are held at the beginning of class if appropriate for the day's activity or lab. We have used heart rate monitors which can help speed and improve the accuracy of heart rate checks and it can be motivating for some but can also take a lot of time to disperse, collect, and clean between uses.

### ***Role Model for FUN***

I am a kid at heart and love to play anything so I discovered early in my teaching career that if I participated in the class activity, not just demonstrated, the students were more motivated and raised their activity level. I could also help feed the ball, or other manipulative, to various students to improve student involvement and balance of experience. For example, in the junior high flag football unit, I would make three teams. Two would play each other and I would quarterback for both teams and spread out the running and receiving opportunities to all students. No one was stuck blocking all the time and I could spread the ball around more evenly. Some members of the third team would help officiate the game and the remainder would practice and develop plays on their own. The students had more success, developed independence running their practice, and had more FUN. Of course, this organizational arrangement was only possible if the students were well-behaved and managed. A side benefit was an additional fitness opportunity for me as the teacher and, I believe, has helped me to stay focused and achieve greater job gratification and longevity in the educational field.

***Stay Focused on FUN***

This area is perhaps the most crucial and difficult to maintain over time, but the rewards are worth the effort if you want to make a difference. Start by feeding from and focusing on the students who want to succeed rather than the ones who don't. You will not be successful with every student, especially at first, but stay positive and enjoy the ride. The negative, low-energy students have very difficult lives and learned helplessness, and you may be the only bright spot in their day. Often, they will come around if they know you care and do not give up on them. You do not always see the results of your effort short term, but some of my most rewarding moments of seeing students achieve success were preceded by very difficult behavior problems or circumstances. You can maintain high expectations for students, and most will rise to the challenge if they know you love and respect them. They may fail the first time, but you are in their corner pushing for a second chance. This does not mean giving in or going soft, just the opposite. Students respect you when you make your expectations clear and help them develop the tools and discipline to reach them.

**IV. Summery**

***Results are FUN and Life-Changing***

In summary, to make fitness FUN:

- Modify activities, both competitive and non
- Use innovative games and surprise your students
- Use socialization and a lot of positive feedback including name usage
- Role model and participate when appropriate
- Use enthusiasm and efficiency to help grease the wheels of motivation

Remember, good motivation always helps with behavior. At its foundation, the skills and habits developed in this fitness class are first meant to address individual health needs and second to influence the health needs of the next generation. Such is the case with one of my students named Ryan who was overweight, bordering on obesity. He was inspired by the class to address his overweight issues, has lost over 50 pounds, and is in the best shape of his life. In addition, he is a PE major and wants to be an example and change-maker in his future students' lives. Nothing is more rewarding than making a difference in someone else's life. Teaching PE and fitness is challenging in today's culture, but I believe the students are worth the effort and you can make fitness FUN.

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