Seniors shake it: Zumba drawing older fans

By Diane C. Lade, Staff writer

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Yoga classes. Circuit training. And now Zumba, the fitness phenomenon that's taking over where step aerobics left off, is the latest group exercise trend being embraced by seniors who want to shape up.

The elder-friendly version, Zumba Gold, has popped up at senior centers, gyms and retirement communities throughout South Florida. It keeps original Zumba's Latin party vibe, giving a participants a workout while dancing to salsa and merengue beats. But Gold classes scale back on the high-impact and tricky moves.

"Once something gets popular, a lot of people want to do it," said Dr. Orly Avitzur, a neurologist and medical adviser for Consumer Reports. "We drag our friends, our sisters and our mothers along with us." Avitzur has seen two generations of the same family Zumba-ing together.

At the Northwest Focal Point Senior Center in Margate, tables and chairs were pushed aside on a Tuesday morning and 17 women gathered in the center of the lunchroom. Loretta Bartley, 93, stood behind her walker. Everyone had on tennis shoes (except a woman in ballet flats); another wore a fuzzy lavender, short-sleeved sweater.

Within 10 minutes, they were shaking, side-stepping and smiling as Latina superstar singer Shakira purred in Spanish through the CD player: "You know I want ya! You got a lot of the sex appeal." Pop standard "Hit the Road Jack" followed later and everyone sang along.

"It keeps me active and keeps my brain moving, too," said Pat Kramer, 73, a retired school crossing guard sporting a star-spangled headband.

Kramer and her classmates like Zumba for all of the reasons group fitness is particularly popular with senior women, experts say: They have fun and make new friends.

Joy Prouty, a former Radio City Music Hall Rockette with 45 years in the exercise industry, didn't forget that fact when she and her business partner joined forces with Zumba Fitness LLC six years ago to create Zumba Gold.

"There is a big social factor to these classes," said Prouty, 71, of Delray Beach. "As people get older in life, they may have lost a spouse."

And it was important that the Gold version stick with its rockin' roots, added Prouty, a Zumba education specialist for South Florida-based Zumba Fitness: "This older population, we LOVE
dancing. It's something we grew up with. Zumba has the reputation of being fun and we didn't want to diminish that."

Zumba has several specialty programs, such as Zumbatomic for kids, but Gold is one of the most popular. There are 46 classes meeting in the Fort Lauderdale area, for example, and 23 around Boca Raton. Different types of facilities can offer Zumba Gold as long as they use instructors certified by Zumba Fitness trainers.

At Northwest Focal Point, it is offered through SilverSneakers, which is testing its market appeal there as well as at the Southeast Focal Point in Hollywood and Northeast Focal Point in Deerfield Beach.

Senior account manager Melissa Perez said SilverSneakers picked the locations because they offer bus transportation: "We know one reason older people don't go to exercise classes is because they can't get there," she said.

SilverSneakers members participate in Zumba at no cost to them, as it's a benefit covered under their Medicare managed care plans. Seniors who aren't enrolled with SilverSneakers usually pay by the class at recreation or senior centers, or join gyms offering Zumba.

SilverSneakers is a private company run by Healthways, an Arizona firm that designs and manages health promotion programs for large employers or insurance carriers. It is available to many of the roughly 300,000 South Florida seniors who are on Medicare Advantage plans offered by Humana, AvMed or some of the 11 other carriers in the state. Those too young for Medicare also may be eligible for SilverSneakers through government benefits or retirement plans.

Tom Arpei, general manager of Palm Beach Gym in Delray Beach, plans to start offering Zumba Gold once the snowbirds return in the fall. Other fitness classes offered through SilverSneakers already occupy Arpei’s mid-morning scheduling slot five days a week.

"The average senior guy doesn't go into the group classes, the ladies do and they are pretty devoted," Arpei said.

Of course, as with any exercise regimen, fitness experts say seniors should be cautious about busting new moves and check with their physicians before starting classes.

Consumer Reports' Avitzur, who wrote about Zumba dangers this summer, said she and her medical colleagues have seen lateral knee injuries requiring, back strain and ankle sprains due to wrong-way Zumba sashays.

Part of the problem is that lively fitness classes often attract retirees who, suddenly free from work and family responsibilities, are regularly exercising for the first time in their lives. Novices quickly can get hooked on an endorphin-fueled high, Avitzur said, setting themselves up for over-exertion and injury.
Anita D'Angelo, an instructor at Florida Atlantic University exercise science and health promotion department, said many types of classes, even spinning or kick-boxing, could work for elders as long as they're adjusted for age-related physical changes. And group fitness often helps people of all ages stick with their exercise routine — although D'Angelo warns seniors not to get carried away.

"It's very funny; when people take a class, they sometimes are inspired by the others to keep going when they shouldn't," said D'Angelo, who coordinates the FAU-Well fitness program for elders. "Seniors should understand they need to work at their own pace."

Senior fitness class tips

**Talk to your doctor** before you begin a new fitness class, especially if you have exercised very little before.

**People who have** heart or kidney disease, asthma, emphysema, high blood pressure, arthritis, osteoporosis or disc herniations should take special care with high-intensity exercise.

**Go watch a class** before signing up. Are participants offered lower-impact alternative moves and encouraged to go at their own pace? Does the instructor monitor how each class member is doing and give individual instruction?

**Check instructor's credentials.** Zumba Gold teachers must be licensed specifically for that class. Check at zumba.com. Additional credentials are desirable: Check National Academy of Sports Medicine at nasm.org (put "credential validation tool" in site search field) or call 800-460-6276. A college degree in exercise physiology is ideal.

**Wear running or track shoes,** not sandals. Zumba students should get shoes with less tread or grips than running shoes, so they can move laterally without sticking to the floor.

**Sources:** Anita D'Angelo at FAU-Well Program, Dr. Orly Avitzur for Consumer Reports

What is Zumba?

The Zumba Fitness empire was launched a decade ago by Alberto "Beto" Perez, who was a national lambada champion in his native Colombia before coming to South Florida. His formula: Turn an exercise class into a dance party.

Zumba is a cardiovascular workout that can burn up to 500 calories an hour and is propelled by high-energy dance music with Latin dance steps like salsa and merengue.

There are 14 million Zumba fans worldwide taking classes, according to the company, making it the largest dance-fitness program. Specialty offshoots include Zumba Gold for seniors, Zumbatomic for kids, water-based Aqua Zumba and Zumba Toning. There also is a line of Zumba workout clothing, footwear, accessories, music and DVDs.
— Diane C. Lade