From Chalkboard to Washboard

How a mild mannered literature teacher became a Chippendales dancer in six weeks.

Every geek dreams of being a jock. That simple theorem is responsible for most of the fitness center memberships sold to men in America, valued at around $12 billion. But the truth is that it's almost impossible to maintain the kind of sustained effort necessary to change yourself from a wimp to a hunk.

That's why personal trainer J.J. Flizanes shook her head when she met UCLA literature professor Adam Wasson last year. Wasson, a bookish Westside resident who attended boarding schools in England and specializes in Eighteenth Century European literature, wasn't exactly the incredible hulk.

"He was pasty and flabby," Flizanes said.

On top of that, Wasson was recovering from a back injury, suffered from a curvature of the spine and had recently undergone surgery to repair torn cartilage in one of his shoulders.

Flizanes examined x-rays of the teacher's back and felt her heart sink. "He was a mess," she said.

But Wasson was also very lucky. He'd been chosen to appear on the cable TV show "Faking It," which takes ordinary people and gives them a few weeks to prepare for an extraordinary assignment. The challenge for the contestant is to fool a panel of experts into believing that he or she is the real thing. Recent shows have featured a park ranger pretending to be a hair stylist and a Midwest farmer posing as a New York socialite.

Wasson showed up for his audition without knowing precisely what he'd be asked to do. The casting agents – all women – interviewed him about his professional life and background.

"They asked me what subjects I teach and we talked about Shakespeare," Wasson said. "Then there was an awkward pause. Finally one of women said, 'Do you think you might take off your shirt?'"

For the next few minutes the casting agents discussed Wasson's physique while the professor tried to maintain a sense of detachment. When the debate concluded, they announced their verdict. Pointing to Wasson's chest, one of the women said, "We can work with this."

"Then they sent a guy down the hall to get a video camera so they could tape me with my shirt off to show the network," Wasson said.

As he slipped his shirt on and fastened the buttons, Wasson asked the women what he would be doing on the show.

"I figured they wanted me to be a fashion model," he said.

"Nothing that simple," he was told. "We're going to transform you into a Chippendales dancer."

For the next six weeks Wasson tuned out everything else in his life and focused every waking moment on preparing for his national television appearance. He met everyday with two of Chippendales' best trainers, lead dancer Kevin "Doc" Cornell and choreographer Wes Sellick, for four hours of dance training.

"When I started I had this image of Chippendales dancers as cheesy, greasy guys with hairy chests," Wasson said. "Once I met them I was pretty impressed. These guys were athletes."

Success as a Chippendales dancer, Wasson learned, comes down to two things – eyes and abs. Wasson spent hours perfecting a cocky, sexy smile topped off with a suggestive wink. And he developed an attitude, a critical part of his persona.

"I didn't look like a Chippendales dancer, but I felt cocky like a Chippendales dancer," he said. "I started walking with a bit of a swagger."

But Wasson needed more than attitude

Above, trainer J.J. Flizanes put literature professor Adam Wasson on a fitness regimen that helped him fake it as a Chippendales dancer. Confident and sexy Wasson (left) shows off his new body. Photos by David Green and David Hunt.

"I felt cocky like a Chippendales dancer. I started walking with a bit of a swagger."

to fake his way to stardom. That's where Flizanes came in. The trainer met with Wasson four days a week and shepherded him through a weight lifting program designed to build muscle and eliminate fat.

And she had to make sure Wasson's back was protected from injury at all times. Not only would an injury have derailed his chance to appear on TV, it could have left Wasson with a serious, long-term disability.

"Adam's earlier injuries were caused by bad training techniques when he was in college," Flizanes said. "Resistance training can be dangerous if done improperly. It's really important to work with a trainer who is educated about the biomechanics of the body."

The regimen she developed was an eye-opener for Wasson.

"With a male coach there's this testosterone thing that happens," he explained. "That pushes you to do more at the expense of using proper form. With J.J. my workouts had an intensity that was intellectual and emotional rather than testosterone driven."

Flizanes, the former director of education for New York Sports Clubs, was named one of the top personal trainers by Shape magazine in 2003. She's a certified nutrition specialist, certified kickboxing instructor, and has achieved multiple certifications with the National Academy of Sports Medicine and the Resistance Training Specialist Program.

"Hypertrophy, the process of building muscle, is based on physiology and genetics," she told Wasson. "It's not about the number on the plate, it's about the amount of resistance that the muscle has to endure long enough to make it fail."

Muscle growth occurs in the rest period between workouts. If you work a muscle to failure, the body will compensate by rebuilding the muscle to handle the stress even better next time.

Flizanes focuses on helping her clients achieve perfect form during their workouts. That, it turns out, is the most effective and efficient way to increase strength and achieve your goals.

In Wasson's case, there was one other factor – fear.

"He was going to be on national TV taking his shirt off," Flizanes said. "He was thinking, 'Oh my God, how many people are going to watch me undress?' That was a big motivating factor."

At the beginning of his training, Wasson was anything but confident that he could fool a panel of experts into thinking he was a Chippendales dancer.

"I thought I was screwed," he said.

But three weeks into his intense training program, Wasson changed his mind.

"I came to the realization that I looked good. I was getting bulky, my muscles were more defined and I was sexy."

Wasson's episode of Faking It was taped at the Rio Hotel in Las Vegas, in a 21,000 square foot dance club that was, in words of the hotel's marketing department, "designed by women for the pleasure of women." It's the regular home of the Chippendales dancers in Vegas and it boasts popular nightly shows that can be reserved well in advance via the Internet. It is, simply put, not necessarily the place you'd expect to start your career as a male exotic dancer.

But there, in front of a large and enthusiastic audience of mostly mature women, Adam Wasson swaggered center stage, flashed a cocky smile, gave a suggestive wink, ripped off his shirt and became a star.

Find out more about Meeting Your Fitness Goals

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