

Fitness Caching:



high tech hits the trails

This fitness professional's innovative program combines physical activity, puzzles and technology to create a healthy adventure that's fun for everyone

by Leigh Crews

When my family and I parked beside a country road near a well-marked access point for the Pinhoti Trail, we knew from our maps that we had approached our objective as closely as possible by road. It was time to abandon the car and hit the trail.

Putting paper maps aside, we consulted our new Global Positioning System (GPS) receivers. According to these devices, our destination for the day was less than a mile to the northeast, near the summit of Flagpole Mountain. Decision time. We could take the well-worn Pinhoti trail, with its switchbacks, creek crossings and gradual slope. Or we could bushwhack directly from point A to point B, straight up the mountainside. We chose bravado over wisdom and challenged the mountain.

The steep climb up the rocky, wooded slope was tricky at times, but the effort was worth it. Near the summit, breathing hard and feeling energized, we closed in on our objective. When our GPS receivers told us we were within five feet of the target, we spotted a large rock outcrop and began searching around it. We zeroed in on a little niche under the outer face of the rock and there, tucked inside, we discovered a small canister. Once opened, the container revealed a logbook and a pencil stub.

We had found our first Geocache (pronounced gee-oh-cash), a hidden objective, the latitude and longitude of which its owner had posted on the Internet. Others had located the cache before us, and many more will have found it since.

On the way down, following the trail this time, I thought about our adventure from my perspective as a fitness program developer. I turned to my husband, Jeff, and said, "This is more than just fun: it's a great workout, too." That moment marked the beginning of Fitness Caching, although I did not realize it at the time.

An activity for all ages

Fitness Caching is an outdoor adventure workout, kicked up a notch by 21st century technology. This activity can be part hike, bike or run and part treasure hunt. It can also take people to undiscovered places, where they can enjoy the natural scenery, take a break for yoga, meditate, or scratch a few lines in a journal.

Fitness Caches build on the sport of Geocaching, in which participants search for an objective. Although Geocaching began less than five years ago, a quarter of a million caches now exist in hundreds of countries around the world. However, this sport was never intended to serve a fitness function. In contrast, Fitness Caching focuses on producing measurable exercise benefits through the physical activity associated with the search. The result? A new form of outdoor exercise suitable for people of any age or ability level.

What's involved in Fitness Caching

Before anyone can find a Fitness Cache, someone must create it and post the coordinates on the Web. A *cache* can be any outdoor objective, usually hidden in a place of interest (i.e. a park or historic landmark), or even in the middle of a city. Sometimes, the cache is *virtual*, meaning the site is the objective. Locating, reaching and finding the cache create the adventure and the workout, both mental and physical.

An inexpensive, handheld GPS receiver provides the key to caching. This

technology monitors signals from satellites in Earth's orbit to establish the receiver's exact position. Although it may sound intimidating, a GPS device usually features simple controls and can display data in a large font, making it easy for older adults to use.

Armed with a GPS receiver and a modest amount of determination, anyone can navigate to the given coordinates and seek the cache. By pressing a few buttons, a digital compass points individuals in the direction of the day's objective. People can follow the arrow on the compass or, by selecting a different screen, *walk with* an animated figure to reach their destination.

Once cachers find the objective, they record their visit in an on-site logbook and, if they wish, read entries by other people. Larger caches may also contain oddments and trinkets for trade. Just one rule applies to trading: *if you take something out, you put something in*. Call it *caching etiquette*.

A mental challenge

Despite using GPS technology to discover the cache location, Fitness Caching is far from a *no-brainer*. Participants have choices to make throughout the adventure. In addition, the cache creator can make the hunt as easy or difficult as they wish. Some caches even include puzzles that reveal the correct path. The outcome of this mental exercise can make the difference between participants strolling down a picturesque, tree-lined street or picking through a junkyard. As one cacher explains, "With GPS, you can locate any point on the planet, but there are at least 360 ways to get there." This combination of mental and physical exercise sets this workout apart from those that provide physical benefits only.

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For aging adults who dislike traditional forms of exercise or who have tired of indoor fitness activities, Fitness Caching offers the welcome opportunity to get in shape, do some mental gymnastics, and discover their surroundings.

The outdoor appeal

Most people value the chance to reconnect with the natural environment. Urban dwellers find a sense of well-being on bike paths, sidewalks or parks. Others head for the hills and trails to clear their heads, while increasing their strength and stamina.

Being outdoors is also a big part of the attraction of fitness walking. According to various surveys of sports participation, adults ages 55 and older consistently rate fitness walking as their number one form of exercise. A recent SGMA International survey shows that almost 6,300,000 individuals in this age group walked for fitness more than 100 times in 2003. Fitness Caching gives health and wellness organizations another opportunity to capitalize on this enthusiasm for outdoor exercise.

For a fraction of what a cardio machine costs, group fitness instructors and

Resources

Geocaching

www.geocaching.com

For information on geocaching, membership, and a database of caches

Fitness Caching

www.fitnesscaching.com

For information on Fitness Caching, workshop and training dates, and news regarding Fitness Caching

Cache In Trash Out

www.cacheintrashout.org

For information on the Cache In Trash Out program and events

personal trainers can create Fitness Caches in any locale with just a little training. Facilities can incorporate these caches as part of an ongoing outdoor fitness program. Or they can offer them as special events and team building activities, garnering the type of media coverage and favorable publicity a paid advertisement can never achieve. For instance, a group could go caching in a neglected park and pick up garbage along the way to restore the area's natural beauty. Called Cache In Trash Out, this activity could have a positive impact on any community, while offering clients a chance to improve their fitness.

Fitness Caching is a versatile, simple and inexpensive program that encompasses all six dimensions of wellness. Among its benefits, this giant game of hide-and-seek helps create an active social environment.

The social angle

As a group activity, Fitness Caching promotes team building. Participants have the opportunity to work together to solve puzzles and determine the best route for the entire group to reach its objective. This team effort fosters a sense of community and promotes the fun factor. Says physical therapist and athletic trainer Sarah Gibson, "I can't think of a better way to challenge and develop communication skills and teamwork, than to take on physically challenging work while having to think through a series of puzzle clues to reach your *final destination*."

At a recent event, cachers from the Vitality Center of the Harbin Clinic in Rome, Georgia, were divided into teams for a group cache hunt and team building exercise. Each team approached the challenge with different strategies and via different routes. The Foxes traversed a longer route, with more challenging terrain, while the Hounds navigated a shorter, flatter

route. Participants ranging from triathletes to a lung transplant recipient took pleasure in a morning of outdoor play, and later created a *buzz* in the club that has others eager to participate.

Another way health and wellness organizations can use Fitness Caching to penetrate their markets more deeply is in conjunction with the 10,000 steps-a-day fitness walking program. Through special programs, many facilities already provide participants with pedometers to monitor their step counts. What better way to add steps than a group Fitness Cache each week or month to different locations throughout the community?

In addition to counting miles and steps, cachers can monitor their workout intensity and progress using such means as perceived exertion, heart rate monitor, or sport-specific GPS unit that interacts with personal fitness software. Whether hiking, biking, walking, running or wheeling, individuals can enjoy challenging levels of exercise, thanks to the infinite variation of distance, pace and terrain.

Customizing an age-appropriate workout

On a Fitness Cache, individuals and groups pace themselves. But health and wellness professionals can also tailor a workout to fit the skill, fitness and functional levels of participants. Flat terrain allows cachers to increase their speed and cardiovascular benefit. Hills allow for muscular strength development, as well as endurance. And a flexibility component can be incorporated at various points along any route.

For those new to physical activity, even a one mile route may seem daunting. But any route can easily incorporate rest breaks, if needed. For example: a group Fitness Cache could start with a

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quarter-mile walk to a park bench, where participants could catch their breath and do quadriceps stretches using the bench as a support. After walking another quarter-mile, the group might arrive at a grassy area, where a fitness instructor could lead individuals in some tai chi moves. The route might then turn back toward the park bench, where the group could stop for a rest. Participants could write a few lines in their journals, before eventually walking back to where their journey started.

Cache creators delight in sharing their favorite locations. And most people can tell at least one story about discovering something in their surroundings they never knew existed until they took part in a cache. Yet even in unfamiliar territory, older adults without caching experience need not fear getting lost.

While a cacher roams the landscape, the GPS receiver stores a trail of digital *bread crumbs* in its memory, allowing the person to retrace his or her steps with the touch of a button. In addition, this personal navigation wizard tracks the person's pace, distance traveled and, on some models, even the altitude. This information helps people to measure the exercise benefits they receive on a cache.

A tool of value

Some older adults look for something to inspire a fitter lifestyle. Others are hesitant to join an indoor health and wellness facility. Fitness Caching's blend of puzzles, outdoor exercise, technology and fun delivers a unique experience that may encourage older adults to become more active and attract them to a facility.

Fitness Caching's potential benefits for health and wellness facilities are equally attractive. The appeal of outdoor exercise spans all age groups and fitness levels. And Fitness Caching, an innovative form of outdoor exercise, is appropriate for everyone—regardless of

age, skill or ability. As a result, this program provides health and wellness facilities with opportunities to offer intergenerational exercise and fun, as well as age-specific activities. Besides possibly increasing business and participation, Fitness Caching could also help set facilities apart from their competitors.

Because Fitness Caching is so new, only a few *real* Fitness Caches exist. But enthusiastic creators are starting to develop and post more workouts online. As awareness of Fitness Caching develops in North America, so will the number of caches available, encouraging growing numbers of people to participate in these healthy adventures. ☛

Leigh Crews, the originator of Fitness Caching and founder of Dynalife, Inc., is a Power Bar Team Elite member and spokesperson for the American College of Sports Medicine and the American Council on Exercise. Certified by ACE, AFAA, ACSM, and White Lotus Foundation, Leigh is also a registered yoga teacher with the Yoga Alliance. Her videos and DVDs include Reebok Final Cuts, the Flow Yoga series, and Unleashing the Athlete with Zen. For more information on Fitness Caching, step-by-step instruction on how to set up Fitness Caches, or to book training, please go to www.fitnesscaching.com.

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How to set up a Fitness Cache

Creators of Fitness Caches can place them almost anywhere outdoors—from country settings to city parks and street corners. Whether urban or rural, the objective must have a minimally obstructed view of the sky, to ensure the Global Positioning System (GPS) receiver will pick up the satellite signals needed for navigation. Great cache locations include walking and biking trails, recreation areas, historic districts, parks and green zones.

In addition to distance and terrain, guidelines for cache creators promote the safety and enjoyment of all cachers. When setting up a cache, health and wellness professionals should consider the following:

- **Accessibility.** A passer-by may discover and plunder a cache placed a few hundred feet from a highway. When creating a cache, individuals should look for a scenic place that requires some time and effort for people to reach. Furthermore, a Fitness Cache route should measure at least a mile from start to finish.
- **Difficulty.** As above, someone may stumble upon a cache that is too visible or too close to trails, dwellings, etc., so a cache should not be too easy to find. Moreover, creators can increase the fun of Fitness Caching with puzzles and cryptic clues. But these intellectual challenges should not be too difficult—after all, the goal is to keep moving. Individuals should also take mercy on the *newbies* and provide some hints in their cache descriptions.
- **Permission.** To place a cache on private land, creators must ask permission *before putting it there*. Individuals who want to place a cache on public lands must contact the managing agency about its rules, e.g. U.S. National Parks prohibit caches; many state parks allow them. In addition, it's best to avoid fragile environments, or places where too much human traffic could cause harm.

More information on how to set up a Fitness Cache is available on the official Fitness Caching website, www.fitnesscaching.com.