

THE LEGAL SHAPE UP

from weight training to Pilates, yoga to aerobics, the UAE's fitness industry is bursting with instructors ready to whip you into shape. But with a number of new gyms and studios cropping up on every corner and private classes on offer citywide, how do you know if your instructor is the real deal? **Cheryl Parsons** takes a look at how local authorities are clamping down on 'cowboy' trainers

Muscle tone or qualifications? What is your first consideration when choosing a personal trainer? And do you really study the paperwork they hold before you put your body in their trust? With so many courses in the UAE enticing people to swap the corporate world for a career in everything from gym instruction to yoga teaching, regulating the Emirates' burgeoning fitness industry has become an important challenge.

"I witness some quite frightening instances when I go to certain gyms and residences to train my clients. There are a lot of unqualified and inexperienced people posing as fitness professionals for their own gain and to the detriment of the consumers," says Leon Knight, a freelance personal trainer. "There are some sanctions in place at certain locations, but this needs to be greatly improved – first and foremost for the health and safety of the client, and secondly, for the protection and professionalism of the industry in Dubai."

Shaping up to this challenge is the Register of Exercise Professionals UAE system. First launched in the United Kingdom in 2002, REPs is an independent body that regulates instructors and trainers to ensure they meet the government's agreed health and fitness industry standards. In Dubai, the deadline for fitness professionals to register under the REPs network was set for the end of January.

"Before REPs came into play here, the fitness industry in the UAE was not regulated and there was no real quality control on the training that was being offered," explains Catherine Hanson Farid, director of operations at REPs UAE. "The Dubai Sports Council was receiving numerous complaints, mostly from five-star hotels, calling out for some sort of regulation – this prompted the start of REPs UAE. Making the register mandatory was a brave move by the authorities [Sharjah and Abu Dhabi are following suit] and will ensure that the standard of our instructors in the UAE will be second to none."

Freelance personal trainer Jean Schutte has been in Dubai for three-and-a-half years and says he was surprised when he first arrived to see that there was no institution overseeing the fitness industry. "Gyms were filled with super-toned individuals passing as personal trainers to clients, often without any real qualifications," says Schutte, who works at Regime Fitness. "No commercial gyms required any proof of education and you could walk into any apartment gym and offer personal training services. Now I get stopped at most facilities I go to and asked for my REPs card before I can enter."

"REPs UAE ensures that instructors have a qualification that meets international standards," continues Farid. "With so many people here from various countries with an array of different fitness qualifications, the REPs registration takes the guesswork away for employers and clients. Knowing that a trainer is REPs-registered gives you the reassurance that they do in fact meet the necessary standards required for their job. It also ensures the qualifications of instructors in the UAE are kept up to date, and with an ever-changing and evolving industry, this is very important."

Kimberley Stokes
from Urban Yoga in Dubai.



What you need to know

WHO NEEDS TO REGISTER UNDER REPs?

- Personal trainers
- Gym instructors
- Assistant / group fitness instructors
- Aqua instructors
- Pilates and yoga teachers

HOW DO YOU GET CERTIFIED?

- Log on to www.repsuae.com or visit its office at Dubai's Gold & Diamond Park.
- Upload your fitness certificates – these will be checked by REPs to see if they comply with the occupational standards required. If not, you will have to undergo additional REPs-approved training. It has a list of courses on offer, from personal training and anatomy to yoga teaching.
- Pay the Dh400 registration fee.
- Membership is valid for one year.
- Failure to renew within one year – incurs a Dh100 penalty (which puts annual fee up to Dh500).
- To renew, certificates of ongoing fitness education must be submitted.
- A minimum of 10 hours of further learning is required each year, which equates to 10 REPs CPD (continuing professional development) points.



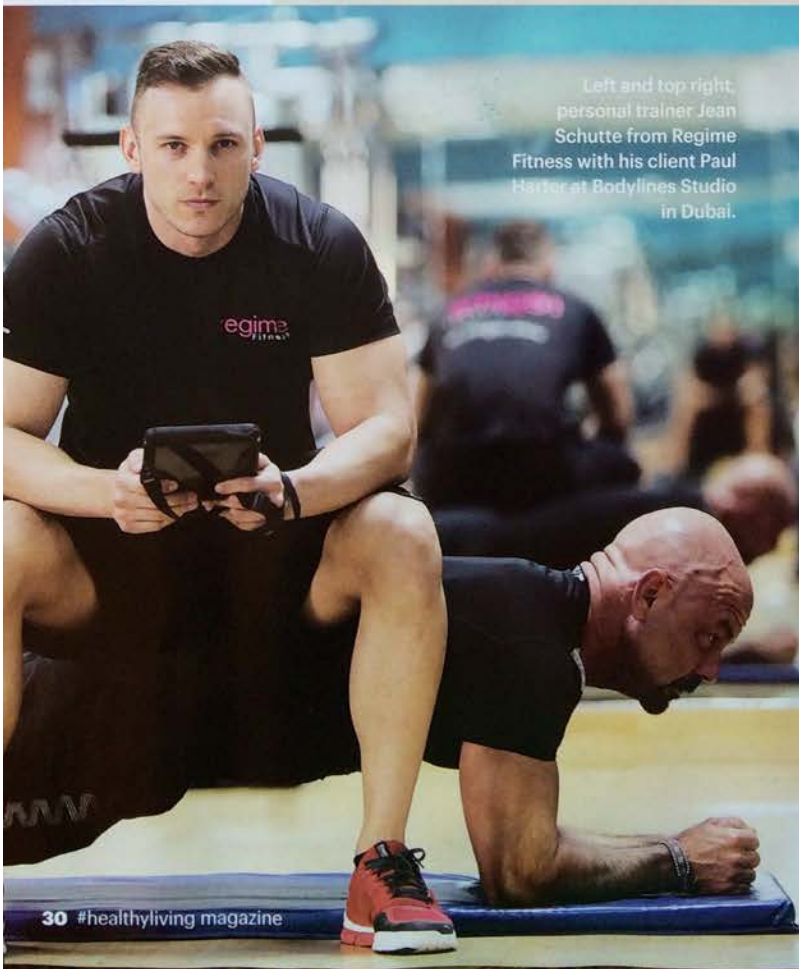
“Dubai offers golden opportunities for trainers to further their fitness education and expertise, thanks to its vast multicultural client base,” agrees Anna Holmes, a full-time personal trainer with Smart fitness and one of last year's Fit Awards finalists. “There has been such a huge growth in competition here for both larger gyms and smaller companies, and I feel this has caused talented individuals to become diluted and unidentifiable. With so many trainers out there obtaining qualifications and the client base also continuously changing, a body like REPs is a necessity.”

Yoga studio manager and teacher Kimberley Stokes, from Urban Yoga in Dubai, agrees that implementing the REPs system here is an excellent move for the sake of consumer fairness and safety, but that making people comply with the rules can prove difficult. “There are too many horror stories of injuries caused by trainers who lacked the experience or qualifications to know better. The task REPs face is how to make membership valuable to trainers, thereby making the Dh400 annual fee an investment, rather than just one more business expense.”

While the benefits of REPs are easy to see, implementing the regulations is indeed proving a challenge, with some fitness professionals, gyms and clubs continuing to evade registration. Perhaps this is due to a lack of awareness of the system or a desire to save the annual Dh400 membership fee. But, with 1,400 people currently registered under REPs UAE, the number seems somewhat low in comparison to the deluge of classes and thousands of registered or freelance fitness services the UAE has to offer.

“Yes, there should be a lot more people registered by now and of course there are still some trainers working under the radar and trying to avoid the process,” says Farid. “With more public awareness of REPs and the importance of only working with a REPs-registered fitness professional, the pressure will be on for them to sign up.”

While REPs UAE has been in force since 2013, the Dubai Sports Council has already allowed instructors lengthy extensions on the deadline to get registered. With that grace period now over, the penalty for being caught without the REPs stamp could include legal action against a studio or club and a ban on working in the UAE's fitness industry. And trainers out there beware: Dubai Sports Council authorities are already on the prowl.



Left and top right, personal trainer Jean Schutte from Regime Fitness with his client Paul Harter at Bodylines Studio in Dubai.