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L-screens, old jocks, denial

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| Sports Column By Karl Lindholm

I love the L-screen.

It makes me feel years younger. I am always on the lookout for ways to feel younger these days. I have a bad case of Old Jock Syndrome.

The L-screen is a simple concept: It's netting on an aluminum frame shaped like a fat "L." It has revolutionized batting practice in baseball.

You set it up about halfway to home plate (or closer) and stand behind it and pitch to a hitter, remembering always to duck behind the tall portion of the L, to avoid being struck by a lethal blow off the bat.

I turned back the years last week and threw some BP, behind the L-screen, to my son and a couple of his teammates, dozens of pitches, all or mostly all strikes. The boys whacked the ball to all precincts of the playing field. Fun.

Then I hit them dozens of infield and outfield fungoes (grounders and fly balls). I was reminded of how much I loved coaching baseball as a young teacher in my 20s and 30s.

The next morning I had a 9:45 tee time at the Ralph Myhre Golf Course. I'm trying to play more golf this summer. I played twice last week, and that's two times more than last year.

My family is encouraging me. My big kids bought me a season's pass. They see it as exercise for me, as I like to walk the course and carry my own bag. It brings back good memories of caddying in the summers as a teenager.

By the end of nine holes, I could barely lift the club. It wasn't the golf that did me in, it was the baseball the day before. Exhausted, I went home and took a nap, reminded anew of what I can't do.

I have to be fitter. I know it. That means losing some weight, giving my body a break.

It's a simple formula: less in (calories); more out (exercise). Works every time.

It's harder than it sounds, of course. It's especially hard for me as I am dedicated to my local routines:

- A couple of mornings a week I get a bagel (with cream cheese) at the Bagel Bakery, and chat with Jim and his friendly staff, and the local celebrities who congregate there in the mornings;
- I have lunch every Friday at Two Brothers with old friends; I get a creemee most days this time of year at the Middlebury Market, kiddie mixed, and say hello to Sama and Marie; and of course there's Monday's coffee club at Steve's, where they know I'll have my "regular" Morning Sandwich.

Food and social intercourse also produces an endorphin high, for me anyway. But it doesn't take off the pounds.

I have reached equilibrium. The numbers on the scale are no longer going up, after years of inflation. I am indeed exercising more, but I'm an Old Jock and I feel faintly humiliated in the process. I have always considered "exercise" something that requires special clothes and involves a lot of sweating, and cursing.

Now, for exercise, I walk. I walk the dog. *I walk the dog*. No more noon hoops, no more senior baseball, no more sweating and cursing. Walk the dog. It's come to this. But there you go. Stage of life.

Despite how mild my exercise regimen has become, I hurt. My feet hurt. My knees hurt. My back hurts. My wife invites me to join her pilates class, which has cured her sciatica. "You need to strengthen your core," she says.

"You need to strengthen your core," I repeat childishly.

Not taking the bait, she then suggests I join her yoga class: "You have no flexibility," an accurate assessment.

I should also eat my vegetables.

My college friend, Jeff, came through last week for a visit. He's very fit. I shared with him my various states of denial. He recommended I get a "personal trainer." I told him I would die of embarrassment. He shrugged, "One way or another."

Old Jocks are prideful, and stubborn.

I don't need to be told how to get in shape. I know how. You do pushups, sit-ups, and go for a run, preferably a long one. For us Old Jocks, manly men, it's all a variant on military basic training.

But these days, for me, the sit-ups and pushups are fewer, way fewer (sometimes I "forget" altogether), and ... instead of running, I *walk the dog*. I don't want an elliptical machine, a personal trainer; I need to summon my inner Drill Sergeant.

I'm like my late dad. I like to drive around in my car. I'm comfortable in the car. The years slip away. I'm ageless. Nothing hurts, in the car. I can recall athletic exploits from the past and imagine similar adventures to come.

I could do it, I think. Noon hoops. Senior baseball ... if I just got in shape. Anything's possible. In the car.

At home, the Red Sox game is on. The couch beckons. I think I'll get a beer. Pass the chips please.

Old Jock Syndrome: regret, denial, resolve, retreat.

