

Jack LaLanne Phone Interview with Ron Jones

Wednesday, June 19, 2002

(10:00-10:40 AM)

www.jacklalanne.com

I became interested in Jack LaLanne a few years ago when I got serious about health and fitness. I can remember seeing the Jack LaLanne Show on TV when I was quite young and recall many people talking about him over the years. Last year I started collecting Jack LaLanne memorabilia on *e-Bay* and purchasing his videos and T-shirts from his website plus a few personally autographed LaLanne photos.

When I started organizing ideas for my graduate thesis project at CSU, Northridge in Exercise/Sport Psychology, I again thought about Jack LaLanne. Interestingly, about the same time I was getting these thoughts together, I picked up a copy of LA Magazine/January 2002 while down in LA earlier this year. On the cover, they highlighted an article on “Jack LaLanne and the Pioneers of Fitness.” I tore into that article like Lance Armstrong eating a banana! I learned from this article that LaLanne was more than just the TV show—he was truly the King of American Fitness. LaLanne started the American fitness craze back in the 1930s down on SoCal’s Muscle Beach in Venice and up in Oakland where he established his first gym. Hmm...LaLanne was a guy I HAD TO speak with for my project!

I started working on the LaLanne interview and contacts around February of 2002. I finally got my chance on June 19th after a few scheduling complications. At 87, LaLanne is still busy speaking all over the country. I called the private number and asked for “Mr. LaLanne” (trying to respect my elders of course). The man said, “Mr. LaLanne isn’t here today.” I was crushed. Finally an interview and no Jack LaLanne! Then “*the man*” said, “but Jack took his place.” One thing about Jack—he likes good jokes and likes to keep things personal!

I’m glad I was sitting down because LaLanne launched full bore into the heart of health and fitness. I have been around a lot of dedicated health and fitness people in my day—but none as passionate as Jack LaLanne. He truly is the King of American Fitness. I had a number of very important questions I wanted to ask LaLanne. Because this interview is being used for my graduate project, I had put careful thought into what I felt were the important issues in terms of exercise psychology and what the most important issues were for American health and fitness today. He talked so hard and fast that I only got to ask one of my questions—but he answered all the others perfectly in the course of our conversation! It was like he read my mind. I was definitely the student, and he was the master during this interview. Forty minutes with LaLanne took about forty years off my life—what an experience! ☺

The following sections are highlights from my interview with LaLanne on June 19th. I’ve broken the key points into sections for easier reading.

LaLanne's Childhood in Bakersfield

I had been told LaLanne had ties to Bakersfield and actually lived here—and it's true. He lived in the Greenfield area just south of Bakersfield during the depression era. LaLanne's family had come from the Bay area of Oakland to start a sheep ranching business. They lived in an old Catholic church in Greenfield. LaLanne remembers riding a horse (named "Nelly") and buggy ten miles into Bakersfield. He went to the Greenfield Schoolhouse that had grades 1-8. His brother graduated from BHS. The LaLanne's sheep business went bankrupt when the herd got hoof and mouth disease, so they moved back to the Bay area. He joked about their herders taking the paychecks and going to the Woolgrowers Basque Restaurant in Bakersfield. LaLanne still likes to go to Woolgrower's if he's in Bakersfield during the summer (although it's to witness the stunning display of overeating by overweight people!).

The Jack LaLanne TV Show

LaLanne is in the Guinness Book of World Records for the longest running individual TV show, so he must have done something right! I wanted to know how he got so many people exercising for so many years at home. Here's the secrets of his success...LaLanne said, "You have to tell the truth and entertain people. Without humor, you're dead." These two actions made his show successful.

He emphasized the "here and now" on the show and still does today. Why? Because LaLanne says no one really knows about what happens after we die. Sure we all speculate about the afterlife, God, heaven, etc. but no one has actually been there. LaLanne gives God a lot of credit—but he doesn't use God for an excuse. The "here and now" philosophy got people moving today instead of procrastinating or waiting for divine intervention to reduce their fat and improve their health and fitness.

LaLanne & Religion

As I mentioned, LaLanne does not believe in, or respect, people that use God as an excuse to live unhealthy lifestyles. He has no sympathy for people that overeat and don't exercise then go to church asking God to heal them from diseases that they caused themselves! LaLanne quipped during our interview, "Does God knock at your gym door in the morning? NO! Jesus said he'd help those who help themselves." LaLanne feels that living in poor health is not honoring your body according to the bible. Allow me to summarize for Jack...you want good health? Don't wait for God to do it for you. Get your butt into the gym or a good workout and eat some nutritious food. That's the way to good health!

LaLanne enjoyed talking about "Happy" the dog. Happy was a marketing tool to get the kids' attention in the mornings during his show. When the show started, LaLanne didn't have much money and could only afford to buy early morning airtime. He said the only ones watching that early were the children—not really

the adults. That's funny because as I studied his shows the last year or so I always thought he was joking with the adults when he said, "Good morning boys and girls" but he was serious! He thought if he used Happy and taught Happy some good tricks the kids would be more interested. If the kids were interested, then LaLanne could get their attention and tell them to go and get their parents to the TV so the whole family could exercise. Guess what? It worked! Happy was a huge success with the children and LaLanne got reports from all over about kids throwing a fit until their parents went over to the TV to see what Jack LaLanne wanted—how hilarious but also simplistically brilliant. LaLanne likes to keep it simple and straightforward. The Jack LaLanne Show was just that—simple, basic, user-friendly exercise at home.

The show and LaLanne got incredible criticism. LaLanne was labeled as a "zealot and crack pot." LaLanne said if he hadn't have been beaten down so much he'd be 6'4"! (He's 5'4"). Specifically, LaLanne was criticized because he got women and people with disabilities to do strength work—what nerve! Now strength training is recommended for just about everyone—but LaLanne was getting people to do it back in the 1930s!

Another key point in the show's success was that he got "up close and personal" with the viewers. He would literally ask people to come in close to the screen. He wanted them to feel like he was talking to them personally—and they believed him. LaLanne's personal approach broke down barriers and exercise anxiety. People relaxed, had fun, and got moving just like LaLanne wanted them to do. Again...simple, straight forward, and very effective.

Every show also had a "Tip of the Day" and he always had a good joke and hook to bring them back for the next show. The Jack LaLanne Shows were fun, entertaining, and good for thousands of people for over 30 years...nothing wrong with that!

LaLanne Reflections & Brief Comments

- **Marketing:** We started talking about marketing at some point. Jack had some good suggestions for marketing health instead of junk food and unhealthy living. He said we are animals of habit. We buy and live according to habits that are established by successful promotions and marketing programs i.e. fast food, cars, etc. We need to raise the promotion of health and do it earlier so kindergarteners can get in the "habit" of living for health. "Start young!" was his exuberant challenge and recommendation. I totally agree. The fast food industry learned these valuable "youth marketing" lessons years ago. Our children are "hooked" on junk food before they even hear the word carrot!
- **Mind & Body:** LaLanne scoffs at people who think you can separate the mind from the body. If you follow LaLanne, he has believed for years in the mind/body/spirit connection. He said if you don't believe the mind is

connected to your body trying pulling on your finger—NO! Harder! Does it hurt? Now tell him your mind is not connected to your body! ☺

- **Genetics:** LaLanne says you can't control your genetics or DNA so get over it. If you are short—you are short. If you are tall—you are tall. He suggests working within yourself to have the best body and personal development possible with what you have to work with. However, he does not believe in using your genetics as an excuse. No excuses! Get moving no matter who you are!
- **Making Money:** LaLanne never really thought about making money in his career. His goal was, and still is, to help people live healthier lives. Sure he made some good money—but he never sold out for a buck. He has turned down millions of dollars in endorsements and business opportunities because he did not believe in the product—it just wasn't the right thing to do according to LaLanne. He cited some of our so-called “professional” athletes that sell out to advertise fast food to children that are already struggling with obesity. These athletes don't need the money. To LaLanne's values and code of honor, they have sold out American health for a cheap promo.
- **Simplicity:** LaLanne said Americans always want to make everything too complicated. He really stressed keeping things simple. Straight up. No Bull!
- **Getting Out of Ruts:** One of his closing comments was for people to get out of their ruts. He suggested buying some new clothes, getting your hair done, or whatever it takes for a person to keep their pride in the way that they look.

LaLanne's Recommendations for Today's Fitness Professionals

LaLanne could not stress enough the importance of today's health and fitness professionals to “tell the truth and tell people what they need to hear.” He believes in nothing short of honesty. He said, “I don't pull punches in my presentations...I tell 'em what they need to hear. If they look half dead—I tell them! I'll get them laughing, cheering, and crying all in the same presentation—anything to wake them up!” LaLanne feels it is of critical importance for health and fitness people to “practice what you preach!” He urged them to live the lifestyle of health if they are going to call themselves “health professionals.”

We also need to increase the exposure of health and fitness according to LaLanne with better promotional marketing. He urged health and fitness professionals to draw attention to the profession by doing something to get media and community attention. This was the motive for LaLanne's numerous feats of athletic accomplishments over the years. Whether doing over a thousand push-ups on live TV or pulling a barge with his teeth in the San Francisco Bay, LaLanne's motivation was always the same—to bring positive attention to the profession of health and fitness so more people could hear the message he was communicating.

LaLanne's Star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame

On Thursday, September, 26th @ 11:00 AM, Jack LaLanne will receive his own Hollywood Star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. Fitness legends like Arnold Schwarzenegger are supposed to attend and LaLanne's former client Clint Eastwood.

Cool Jack LaLanne Quotes from My Interview

"Pride and Discipline are the two most important things a person can have."

- These are paramount to Jack. With them, anything is possible.
- Pride=your looks, your body, etc.
- Discipline=this allows you to make it happen!

"Exercise is king; nutrition is queen."

- LaLanne offered the example of pro athletes who can only keep their body when they are working out so much, but as soon as they retire, their bodies go to crap because they never ate properly. Because exercise is king, you can get away with eating poorly at some level if you work out enough, but it still is not a balanced way to live. For optimal health, LaLanne stressed both exercise and solid nutrition.

"Wake up; you're half dead!"

- He uses this to speak to really unhealthy and overweight crowds. He believes in a very straight and honest message that is clear-cut—to the point. He gets them laughing, crying, and wanting to work out by the time he's done with this honest approach.

"Your bloodstream is the river of life."

- LaLanne is amazed at what kind of junk people put into their bodies. He wants people to understand that what you eat and drink goes directly into your bloodstream and circulates throughout your body—whether good or bad—it all gets circulated.

"Balance is the key with nutrition."

- He made a point about all the fad diets and how they work only because they reduce calories. He's critical of diets that don't have balance or people's lives that don't have a balance between personal health and other commitments.

"Anyone can die. You have to work at living."

- LaLanne is not sympathetic to people who are too lazy to take care of themselves. Staying healthy takes some proactive hard work according to LaLanne.

"You have to wake up in the morning and kick yourself in the butt and grab the bull by the horns or the bull will grab you. And that's no bull!"

- This was his final comment as we closed our interview...and undoubtedly my favorite! **Bottom Line: Get Moving!**

Summary: My interview with Jack LaLanne was an incredible experience—and one of the most important ones of my professional career. I learned more from talking to LaLanne than any forty minutes in a textbook could ever teach me about the "real world" of health and fitness. LaLanne's message is simple and valid: Get moving and eat better for optimal health and optimal quality of life. So what are you waiting for?! ☺

* www.ronjones.org "High-Performance Health" (7-6-02)