

Matchmaker to the young and sweaty

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Leanne Delap



One woman's worst nightmare is another woman's dream date. Sandra, who's shy about using her real name, isn't hesitant about her criteria for a man. She wants someone who will bike 100 kilometres a day with her through the United States. She turned to Tory Howat, an amateur athlete who mines a rich (and sweaty) niche in this city hooking up hard-core jocks — especially endurance athletes into marathons, triathlons and the like.

Ms. Howat, 38, has cooled it on the marathon circuit since having her third child, and now prefers duathlons — running five kilometres in an impressive 19 minutes. Her lifelong penchant for fixing up friends (she has brought together eight people who ended up at the altar, and later in the delivery room) became a business last October, and the ribbon-busting set is flushed with news of her service. One day last week, she received 28 calls from prospective clients referred by top trainers around town.

Ms. Howat's selling point is that

she headhunts the perfect person for each client, meaning that one client is seldom dating another. And "there are no pictures," she says. "People who want pictures can go to Lavalife."

She gathers info from each client in an interview that typically takes two hours, then meticulously builds a prototype of the ideal match. Then she sets out to find him or her, trolling gyms and boardrooms. "I'm a big networker," she says, using her connections as a Branksome Hall and Queen's University alumna, as well as her Muskoka history. She was also previously the marketing director for the YMCA of Greater Toronto and worked as an ad exec. Her big client was Mr. Lube.

Now, I'd love to make a crude joke at this juncture, but sitting across from Ms. Howat, so fresh-faced and energetic and healthy, it just seems rude. In fact, my whole worldview seems seedy when I hold it up to Ms. Howat. As the girl voted most likely to take home the barback with the surly attitude at 6 a.m., I would never be eligible for Equal Chemistry.

So I am not the type of woman Wayne (also shy with his name) is looking for. "You are just not going to meet committed athletes in bars, or even at the gym," the former NHL player says. "They are too focused on their workout."

Now in his early 40s, he'd been out of the dating game for nearly



DEBORAH BAIC/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

If you're single and work out at least three times a week, you're Tory Howat's type. She runs Equal Chemistry, a dating service that brings together like-minded fitness fanatics.

20 years when his marriage ended. He has "never had any trouble meeting people," he says, but is over the puck bunnies and turned to Equal Chemistry. He has enjoyed the company of the four women, all buff and tough athletes, to whom Ms. Howat has introduced him, but sparks flew with the most recent one, and he is still

hanging out with her.

After each date, Ms. Howat calls to do a debrief, and see if her picks are hitting the mark. In her world, you "build the perfect person," same as you would a business plan, analyzing past performance, trends and preferences.

Steven Bentley, a professional trainer who has recommended sin-

gle clients to the service, says elite athletes are drawn to it because of their focus on results. "It's about mindset, personality type," he says. "Extreme athletes are focused on themselves, in a good way. We want to be the best we can be, in everything we do."

From the 50 or so clients Ms. Howat has worked with since October, a clear pattern is developing. The same qualities that drive folks to push against their "PBs" (athlete lingo for personal bests) at the gym make them push just as hard at work. The women generally pull down six figures. The guys, all in the 28-to-55 range, fall in the quarter-of-a-million to seven-figure-plus range. For them, her \$1,500 yearly fee is no big impediment to love.

Oddly, fingernails are. One of the mini-trends Ms. Howat has observed is that millionaires aren't looking for trophy boobs, long legs or Robert Gage hair. Instead, they request women with a nice manicure. But she won't take on serial modelizers. "Guys who fit my company profile can be jerks, but I don't take the pompous ones," she says. She also won't take on a guy who "is an obvious play-ah. It may not seem fair, but it is my business after all, and I have to do a lot of intimate and intensive work with clients."

And she insists on old-fashioned manners. "I'm very traditional. The guy has to call the girl, and pretty much the guy pays, but they can

certainly all afford it and like to do it."

Not all the clients are gym junkies though. Jacqueline (she's shy too), a bank branch manager, is on the edge of 40 and lives in the Beaches with two small children. Her passion is Pilates and yoga. She spends a lot of time strapped into the Reformer, so she understands the mindset and craves an athletic mate who will give her space to assume her positions.

She describes herself as very social and has no trouble meeting guys, but what with her job, her kids, her volunteer work and exercise commitments, she has no time left over. "I tried Internet dating a while back," she says, "but it all was so much work, it's just not cost-effective, when you look at your time as money."

Thus far, she has been on four dates arranged by Ms. Howat. With one of the guys "there was a definite spark," and she reports a relationship in the early, still tentative stages (in other words, the e-mail is becoming increasingly racy). Unsurprisingly, they have a lot in common — similar senior-level positions in the money world — and both understand training commitments.

In the world of the young and sweaty, it seems, Ms. Howat's maxim that "couples that play together, stay together" may just be true.

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