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Lalanne: A Treat And A Treatment

This is the Jack who started out weak, who heard the lecture, who saw the light, who was reborn, who tells the ladies and sells the pills that pay for the house that health built

Huston Horn

The breakfast dishes are stacked in the sink, the beds are unmade, and the floors have not been swept. With their husbands' off-to-work kisses scarcely dry on their lips, legions of American women—fat women, thin women, robust women and pooped-out women—hover expectantly by their TV sets, dressed in slacks, slippers, kimonos and make-do gym suits. On the screen a spectral, back-lighted figure is flapping like an eagle and hopping like a frog to the buck-and-wing beat of *De Camptown Races*. As the organ music fades and the lights come up, a tousle-haired, muscle-laden, consciously seductive man in middle age steps across a **Hollywood** stage and projects himself—almost bodily—into the home of the beholder, his arms outstretched as if to embrace her. "Good morning, students, and what a wonderful, wonderful Tuesday morning this is," he burbles, a wonderful, wonderful smile on his face, a white German shepherd named Happy at his heels.

In **Salt Lake City, Dallas, New York, Los Angeles** and 14 other major **U.S.** cities, the women, their household cares suddenly evaporating, smile right back because the man in the skin-hugging jumper and black ballet slippers has promised to create for them "a new and lovelier you, looking the way the Lord intended you to look, feeling the way He meant you to feel." The man's name is **Jack LaLanne** (pronounced LaLane) and his recipe for renaissance is a 30-minute daily dose of calisthenics, nutrition, dog tricks, palsied jokes and uplifting palaver, all pasted together with a batter of elbow grease and whole-wheat flour. The only ingredient missing is cynicism. Not only does **Jack LaLanne** devoutly believe in himself, what he is doing and his "duty" to do it, but day in and day out—so his TV audience samplers tell him—he is being scrutinized, idolized and emulated by some 2• million American females. Moreover, as no one needs tell him, he is harvesting \$1,000 every week in the process.

Jack LaLanne, off the TV screen as on it, is a jovial, effusive, uncomplicated man but at the same time an unrelenting fist-in-palm exponent of good health and all-round well-being. Admitting to his rather abnormal preoccupation with physical fitness and nutrition, he characterizes himself as the "**Billy Graham** of the Here and Now" and views physical laxity as sinful. He is here and now trying to effect the conversion of all womankind ("The woman is the center of the family," he explains), and in this respect he is more like an athletic Moses leading women out of the waistland while finding along the way a promised land for himself.

Calling himself a "frugal" spender, **LaLanne** lives with his wife and their three children in a \$150,000 home in the well-to-do **Hollywood Hills**, owns two more \$35,000 houses in **Palm Springs, Calif.** and drapes his V-shaped (48-28-35) torso with \$200 tailor-made suits, which, for some reason, are equipped with padded shoulders. He also owns a \$6,000 boat "just to pull my water skis, mostly," and barrels around **Los Angeles**, giving the passing girls a semiprofessional once-over, in a 1961 **Cadillac convertible**. "A man doesn't necessarily need all this," he says, "except in **Hollywood**. Otherwise they take you for a nobody and a quack."

Everybody needs a somebody

Whether or not **LaLanne** is now a somebody (it seems certain he is no quack) is presumably for **Hollywood** to declare, but there was a time when **Jack LaLanne** was not worth his weight in dumbbells. Born of French immigrant parents in **San Francisco** "more than 40 years ago" ("Forty-five years ago exactly," says his matter-of-fact, 77-year-old mother), **LaLanne** entered adolescence shackled by a catalog of physical malfunctions. "At 15 I knew the tortures of the damned," he likes to say dramatically today. "I had boils, pimples, flat feet, bad eyes, bony arms and legs and my over-all disposition was rotten to the core. I lived on sugar. I was a sugarholic. But in a way, I'm thankful. It was these very liabilities that got me straightened out."

His body's deficiencies prepared his mind for salvation, but it remained for a health lecturer to reveal the way. "He said, 'If you obey nature's laws you can be reborn,' " **LaLanne** vividly remembers. Within eight weeks, after swearing off sugar, taking up exercises and vegetarianism, and giving nature her head, **LaLanne** says, "I was reborn. I went back to school, made friends all over the place and I went out for every single sport that the school had." A fellow student recalls: "You might say he seemed a little odd-ball on his health kick."

LaLanne's mother succumbed to the laws of nature too, and today, despite her age, still works a 15-hour day on her 17-acre ranch in **Santa Rosa, Calif.**, pruning and cultivating her fruit and nut orchard, sawing wood and milking her cow, Betty. His father, on the other hand, refused to be proselyted by his wife and son and in consequence, says **LaLanne**, he "died in the prime of his life."

This placed the burden of family finance on Jack's already muscular shoulders. He opened a gymnasium when he was 19, expanded as business grew and studied physiology, anatomy, biochemistry and acrobatics in his spare time. A calisthenics instructor in the Navy (after serving first in the **South Pacific**), **LaLanne** carried his rehabilitation message to the women of **San Francisco** when he went on television nine years ago. "My first shows were much like the ones today," he says, "and then as now I never said I had any magic cure-all. I told my listeners I was only like the doctor's helper. I didn't even say they shouldn't smoke [**LaLanne** doesn't] or drink [he does] because as soon as you do, they'll turn you off. Goodby, exercise, goodby, nutrition."

On these relaxed terms, the show caught on and to keep it going **LaLanne** began to peddle a line of pills and exercise paraphernalia of his own formulation and design. Two years ago he muscled in on **Los Angeles** ("This city is a swinging town") and there met Henry C. Akerberg. "Hank Akerberg's the greatest there is," says **LaLanne**. And well he might.

What **LaLanne** knows about making muscle and reducing "saddlebag thighs," Akerberg knows about making profits and reducing inventory. Formerly a vice-president of Macmillan Petroleum Corp., Akerberg left after 30 years' service to form **LaLanne Inc.** (The House that Health Built), acknowledged Jack as president, and set about letting health build houses from coast to coast. Under his blueprint, the **Jack LaLanne** show has become accessible to 45% of the **U.S.** population, and ratings are jumping. In swinging **Los Angeles** the show pulls almost as many viewers as the six other TV stations combined; in **Phoenix** the show is rerun one night each

week to combat the sedentary influence of **Jack Paar**. Akerberg is talking now about 100% saturation of the **U.S.**, and expansion into **South America, England** and **Australia**, "wherever the family of man can be benefited," he says. "The way things are going, we can almost see Jack as a world power."

In the 18 months the show has had national exposure, LaLanne Inc. has developed a \$3 million annual gross from the mail-order and grocery store sale of the products **LaLanne** pushes on the air. The leading item, at 40,000-odd orders a month, is the **Jack LaLanne** Glamour Stretcher, an elastic rope. Its exercise function is carefully integrated into the program's daily dozen. Other specialties include vitamins, "delicious" wild-cherry protein wafers, a face lotion "to keep skin glowingly moist," a "high-fashion, silhouette blue exercise suit, ideal, too, for marketing and gardening," and, on the West Coast, a high-protein loaf of bread. A businessman with a shrewd sense of product image, Akerberg also has directed that **LaLanne's** "Desiccated Liver Tablets" be renamed "Liver, Iron and Vitamin B-12 Tablets," and he has discontinued the manufacture and sale of a rubber-rope face exerciser designed to be clamped in the teeth and vigorously tugged. "We discovered too many of our students wore dentures," he explained blandly, popping a toothsome wild-cherry protein wafer into his mouth.

Because nearly all the **LaLanne** shows are taped or filmed for re-broadcast, **LaLanne** normally does a whole week of programs in one day, and the "wonderful, wonderful Tuesday morning" he talks about may be in fact a particularly gloomy, smoggy Friday afternoon. (When **LaLanne** is test-marketing new additions to his health line, he broadcasts live in **Los Angeles**, and when he says it's a wonderful Tuesday, it's certain to be Tuesday, at least.) Anyhow, the show is itself an unrehearsed, unscripted concoction as flexible as one of **LaLanne's** Glamour Stretches, and in the space of 30 minutes it will range through assorted exercises (which he calls Trimnastics or Funastics), heart-to-heart pep talks, LaLanne-tested recipes, questions and answers and two or three commercials.

Music for muscle building

The exercises, all cheerfully accompanied by organ music played by a man who once set the lugubrious moods for *Ma Perkins*, may include lateral jaw wagging ("to get rid of that biscuit-dough skin so many of you students have"), finger wriggling ("especially for you Senior Citizens, however decrepit you may think you are"), arm windmilling, leg kicking, stomach stretching and back bending. "You know, students, exercise makes you feel real good all over, doesn't it?" **LaLanne** may say, picking himself up off the floor, panting ever so slightly. "Do you know why? It's because it makes the blood race through your body and because it massages your internal organs. But now let's get back to the Trimnastics—you, too, Cuddles and Francine, on your feet—and go to work on the old back porch." Commercials, involving such props as children's blocks spelling BUILD BLOOD and guinea pigs, are almost as inspirational themselves ("Guinea pigs fed desiccated liver, the biochemists tell us, can swim in a tank for two hours, but those without desiccated liver may sink in 12 minutes"). While this thought sinks in, Happy, the dog, trots onstage with a note announcing "IT'S GLAMOUR STRETCHER TIME!" The earnestness and guilelessness of **LaLanne's** delivery is so compelling that prop men, advertising people and cameramen often find themselves doing leg kicks or arm waves during the program. "Well, the truth is, we've all been brainwashed by the man," says Russ Warner, the show's producer and an unblushing believer. "It's just what happens when you've been around Jack for any length of time." What also happens is that nearly everybody he comes close to loses weight: Akerberg is down 25 pounds since meeting **LaLanne**, Warner is off 20, and a **Hollywood** TV announcer whose program follows **LaLanne's** was wearing his 18-year-old son's trousers one morning last week. "One of the exceptions," Jack says, "is my wife Elaine. When I met her she was a bean pole living on coffee and cigarettes. I rebuilt her to my own specifications—36-24-36—and man alive, just look at her!"

After devoting so much time and energy to the health and fitness of others, **LaLanne**, it follows, spends an ample amount on his own. A book published by him last spring, ghostwritten companion text to his program, is called *The **Jack LaLanne** Way to Vibrant Good Health*. **Jack LaLanne's** own good health vibrates like the alarm clock that wakes him up every morning at 5.

He is out of bed by 5:05 a.m., not forgetting first to gently stretch his 170-pound, 5-foot-7•-inch frame, and to "arrange my thoughts in an orderly fashion." By 5:30 he is trotting a mile around his neighborhood, the German shepherd gamely trying to keep up. Back at home **LaLanne** whips the Glamour Stretcher off his bedroom doorknob for a quick workout, winds down the staircase to his study where, under a looming full-length oil portrait of himself, he reads bestsellers and medical journals "to keep up to date." His breakfast, like nearly all his meals ("I never violate my principles of nutrition"), consists of handfuls of **Jack LaLanne's** pills and tablets washed down with distilled water, fresh fruit, boiled fish or meat.

LaLanne eats meat because he abandoned vegetarianism years ago. His mother, however, still subscribes to the doctrine, painfully calling this family schism "our only nutritional disagreement." **LaLanne** does not eat bread, although he recommends his own brand "from the bottom of my heart, students." Privately he explains "people are going to eat bread no matter what I do, so I try to give them the best there is—mine—which contains stone-ground flour, brewers' yeast, honey and sea salt."


Later in the morning **LaLanne** may spend two hours lifting weights at a plush **Hollywood** gymnasium (other sometime lifters: **Gregory Peck**, Decathlete **C. K. Yang**). On alternate days he will torpedo his Cadillac out to the strong man's stronghold, Muscle Beach, where he passes another two hours standing on or hanging by his hands. Afternoons are given over to naps, reading and business matters, such as a recent interview with a **Jack Paar** talent scout who has tentatively booked **LaLanne** for an appearance early this year, despite—or maybe because of—the **Phoenix** situation.

"Jack's a tireless worker, in whatever he's doing," says Akerberg with appreciation. "Even when he's down on Muscle Beach he'll be working harder than five other men. Of course, we try to play down Jack's muscles. I don't mean there's anything wrong with having muscles, it's just that people tend to associate a muscular body with a muscle-bound mind."

Recently, waiting for a filming session to begin, **LaLanne** amplified these remarks. "Muscles are my hobby, not my business. I want the gals of **America** to feel and look good, not to go around lifting pianos."

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