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Fit to be tried: Pumping plush

By **Jennifer Lord**/ Daily News Staff

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Matt Elder wants YOU to give him your Beanie Babies.

And then he wants you to drop and give him 50.

Pushups, jumping jacks, sit-ups and little stuffed beanbag animals -- it's all part of the Framingham fitness trainer's master plan to get people in shape while helping soldiers in Iraq pass on a snuggly piece of America to war-torn children.

"It's Beanie Baby Boot Camp," said Elder, a personal trainer at Evolve Fitness in Framingham. "You bring me two Beanie Babies, and I'm going to give you a workout that's going to be a lot of fun."

The road to boot camp began when Elder was browsing the anysoldier.com Web site looking for ways to aid soldiers fighting the war in Iraq. He was intrigued when he saw a photograph of soldiers handing out Beanie Babies to children -- the small plush animals are easily tucked into pockets and carry an appeal that transcends the language barrier.

The idea clicked: Beanie Baby Boot Camp. Elder decided to hold a total of four boot camps, Sept. 19 and Sept. 21 at Reardon Park in Framingham. A donation of two Beanie Babies gives the donor admission to either the 7:15 a.m. or 5:30 p.m. session on each day. Registration is through www.beaniebabybootcamp.com.

Boot camps are one of the hotter trends in fitness, ranging from weeks-long regimented sessions based on military training to group empowerment exercises. Elder plans to combine calisthenics and running exercises in 45-minute sessions of 15 people each. He may add other sessions if there's enough interest.

"It's an upbeat environment that really brings people together," Elder said. "You may not think you can make that last few situps, but when you have people yelling your name and cheering you on, it gives you that much more confidence.

"Let's put it this way," he added. "It's not going to be a boring class. It's just designed to get people out there, away from their typical workout, and it's also for a good cause."

Beanie Babies were the hottest toy in America in the late 1990s, with collectors and kids lining up for the newest styles. While some made -- and spent -- money for limited models, most people simply collected them for their cuddly appeal.

Elder is accepting both new and used Beanie Babies, in good condition. Ear tags, a must for collectors, are not necessary for this effort.

"Everybody has Beanie Babies, and why not give them up for kids who have lost everything?" Elder asked. "No matter what your views are on the war, you have to care about the kids."

Elder, 23, a Framingham native, has been in the personal training business for the past eight months, training clients both at Evolve Fitness in Framingham and in their homes. He came to personal training from over a decade of training himself and is certified through the National Academy of Sports Medicine.

"My car is pretty much a two-seater because I have all this equipment in the back of it," he joked. "People think you need to go to this huge gym to get in shape, but you can get just as much a workout with just the basics."

The benefit has been seeing the change in his clients and their excitement at meeting their goals.

"I was talking to one of my clients a couple days ago and she was going on about



Personal trainer Matt Elder will be holding a Beanie Baby Boot Camp next month. (Ed Hopfman photo)

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how she felt so much better and she had an ex-boyfriend come up to her to say 'You look so good!' and she was like 'Get away from me!' It was a great moment for her," he said. "It's exciting to see how psyched they are when they look in the mirror and their clothes are fitting so much looser."

Know a fitness program that's Fit to Be Tried? Contact Daily News staffer Jennifer Lord at 508-626-3880 or jpaluzzi@cnc.com.

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