



photo courtesy APEX PERFORMANCE INC.

**HIGH-TECH CENTER:** Apex Performance Inc. founder Louis Csoka demonstrates the equipment and techniques used at the company's new facility in Ballantyne.

# Training firm adapts Army program for business use

## New Apex operation in Ballantyne focuses on methods to control stress

**FRED TANNENBAUM**  
STAFF WRITER

Using training techniques developed at the U.S. Military Academy, two West Point grads are launching a local business that will teach business executives how to improve their performance by controlling stress and sharpening their focus.

"At some point, the performance of the team and the organization does come down to the individual performance of the person in charge," says Louis Csoka, president and founder of Apex Performance Inc., which opened last week in Ballantyne.

Csoka (pronounced "CHO-kah"), a retired U.S. Army colonel who was an infantry platoon leader in Vietnam, previously taught behavioral science and leadership at West Point, creating the academy's Center for Enhanced Performance.

Apex has adapted the West Point center's training techniques. The program, which Apex's principals have used in other business-, athletic- and military-training settings, emphasize goal-setting skills, positive thinking, response to stress, concentration and visualizing positive outcomes.

"This is not a bunch of voodoo," Csoka says. "To me, a business person can benefit from this more than an athlete or a soldier."

The company will conduct workshops at its 3,000-square-foot headquarters, including three-day classes costing \$4,985 and one-on-one coaching programs costing \$15,000. The Apex principals also hope to conduct seminars at client companies' sites.

A key feature of the program is the use of biofeedback sensors to determine how well participants are learning the techniques for controlling stress. As participants are trained in methods such as deep breathing, they sit in padded, noise-deadening egg-shaped chairs, and sensors measure their heart rate, brain waves and other responses.

Area companies already are showing interest in Apex and its methods. Executives from SouthPark-based steel manufacturer Nucor Corp. have visited comparable centers at West Point and Hil-

lenbrand Industries Inc. near Cincinnati. They are evaluating if the training is a good fit for the steel industry, says Jim Coblin, Nucor vice president of human resources.

Csoka graduated from West Point in 1965 and taught there in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

In the late 1980s, then-Army head football coach Jim Young asked Csoka to create a program to help players improve their concentration, says Maj. Joe Ross, the West Point center's assistant director and a former student of Csoka.

By 1993, the program was opened to all academy students to help prepare them for stressful battlefield situations. Soldiers receiving the training have been deployed to hot spots from Bosnia to Iraq. The Army wants to establish training centers on individual military posts, and Apex is bidding on a contract to open the first three, says Paul Maggiano, Apex chief executive.

"We've been asked a lot, 'What makes you different?'" says Maggiano, who graduated from West Point in 1995 and flew Blackhawk helicopters for seven years before leaving the military. "It's very individualized and customized," he says of the training. "We don't put people in a mass auditorium. We give them follow-up coaching and give them ways to practice the skills."

Csoka retired from the Army in 1993 and conducted human-resources studies for the New York-based Conference Board. In that role, he interviewed executives at Nucor, Bank of America Corp. and Duke Energy Corp. and became familiar with Charlotte.

He then ran an HR department in London for heavy-equipment maker New Holland for three years before buying a home in Waxhaw and launching Maximum Performance Group, a consulting business, in 2002.

While operating that company, Csoka spent three years creating and running an in-house training center at Hillenbrand, a Batesville, Ind.-based maker of health-care supplies and caskets. It was the first center outside West Point to use Csoka's training methods.

The operation gave the company a more highly skilled cadre of leaders, says Fred Rockwood, who was Hillenbrand chief executive from 1999 to 2005.

"The tools are fundamental tools people have used in combat and athletics," says Rockwood, who completed the training. "They allow ordinary people to be extraordinary."