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July 17, 2006

Hearts racing

Looking for love but pressed for time? "Speed dating" lets you knock out several first dates in one sitting. We sent two staffers, Tom Rabeno and Eileen Zaffiro, to check it out.

He said: 8 dates for \$35 -- what a deal!

Eight women, eight dates, an hour and a half out of my life and \$35 out of my wallet. For any single man who's been on a date, spending beaucoup bucks for dinner and activities -- only later to find out he has nothing in common with the person across from him -- speed dating can be a godsend.

A few years back I had tried speed dating. The event was fun, I met people I wouldn't otherwise have met and I made a very good friend out of the experience. Years later, I was asked to partake in another such event and write about it.

On a recent Wednesday evening at a nice South Daytona Beach restaurant, I began my speed dating experience. Always nervous on dates, I was no different on this evening. Worries crossed my mind: Will I get any matches? What kind of people will I talk to?

The host and some of the participants were gathered around the bar. I sized up my male competition, kind of laughed inside and moved on to the women. The women were an eclectic group, varied in age and demeanor. I later found out the speed dating group I was supposed to be in -- ages 26 to 39 was combined with the 40-and-older group. Considering myself a young'un at the ripe age of 29, I looked forward to an interesting night.

Men and women alike were given name tags with numbers. The women sat down at their corresponding tables with the men in a "holding pattern," waiting to start at a numbered table. Every six minutes the men would move to the next table. My number was two and I went up to lady No. 2's table, asked if I could sit down and began the speed dating event. Here is what happened during the night, in a nutshell:

Lady No. 2: An attractive blonde in a pretty dress. Physically, she was the type I normally would be interested in. But I found out quickly there was not much in the way of conversation or similarities. Her body language told me she wasn't interested, and her mannerisms were aloof. Talking to her was hard. The six minutes dragged for what felt like an eternity. I marked "no" on my sheet.

Lady No. 3: My ex-boss from a previous job. Yes, you meet all kinds of strange people at these events (just kidding). I had a good time catching up on the latest with her, her high-school-aged son and all the people who still work where I used to.



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Lady No. 4: A brunette with a funny personality who had me laughing out loud. I thought she would be a hoot to hang out with, so I wrote "yes" on my sheet.

Lady No. 5: A blond flight attendant who was nice and had a good sense of humor. She was very appealing to the eye, and we had a good conversation. We made frequent eye contact, but I didn't know if there was a mutual connection. I gave her a yes.

Lady No. 6: A brunette with long hair, past her shoulders. From the get-go I had a hard time talking to this person. I could not understand much of what she said because she didn't talk loud enough. There was very little eye-contact. I didn't know whether she was nervous or she just didn't want to be there. I marked "no" next to her name.

Lady No. 7: I really felt bad about this one. Lady No. 7 was a real sweetheart of a person. She was down-to-earth, and there was good eye contact and body language. She was someone I could get along with very well. But when she told me she had two kids, a 10-year-old and a teen,, that seemed to be the kiss of death. In the stage of life I'm in right now, I'm looking for someone who hasn't been married or doesn't have kids. I want to work up to kids, not be thrust into a family. I felt bad, because I know it is harder for single parents to date. But I have certain things I'm looking for. She got a no.

Lady No. 8: A nurse, who seemed pretty cool and fun to talk to. She had a good vibe to her. I said yes on my sheet.

Lady No. 1: A friend of lady No. 8 and also a nurse, I had seen her at the last speed dating event, a number of years back. She was nice, and I got a friend or networking vibe more than anything else. I voted yes for her.

After the event, I thanked my host, climbed into my car and drove home. The following morning, I went online, put in my "yes" and "no" votes and waited to see if I got any matches. At the end of the day I went back online and saw that two people for whom I'd voted yes also said yes for me.

One person said yes to me for whom I had said no.

I sent messages to the two mutual matches and hope that something good comes from this. Wish me luck.

Eight women, eight dates, 90 minutes out of my life . . . \$35.

Knowing I didn't spend a fortune on a first or seven other dates . . . priceless!

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She said: Nine first dates pretty bright

You know those tacky, late-night blind date shows that never resemble any first date you've ever been on?

Well, one recent night I was afraid I had been thrust into something similar.

I was giving speed dating a whirl for the first time. It was a chance to go on nine, six-minute

dates all in one handy location.

I figured if nothing else, I'd walk away with more fodder for that witty short story or book on my bachelorette days I'll write someday when I've finally found Mr. Right.

The evening began like a seventh-grade dance with some gray hair and alcohol added into the mix. As the event organizer slapped nametags on our chests and corralled us into a bar area, the guys talked to other guys, and the women gravitated toward one another.

We had a 20-minute wait for the official part of the matchmaking to begin, and as I struck up a conversation with one of the women I glanced around the room, casually checking out the men I'd be sitting across from in a few minutes.

One man in particular caught my eye. I detest tired cliches, but he really was tall, dark and handsome.

I didn't want to jinx myself, but I couldn't help but remember it was the same feeling I had when I first looked at a few guys who became serious boyfriends over the years. The locking of the eyes, the mysterious pull to a complete stranger, the hope it could be a glimpse into something happy in the future.

I also used the wait time to size up my competition and felt pretty good about my chances. The very nice, attractive woman I was talking to actually belonged in a younger age group, and through no fault of her own showed up not realizing that gathering had been rescheduled.

She said yes to the organizer's offer to stick around, and I'm sure she was catnip for the men who were 10 to 20 years older.

When the fun finally began, we were escorted into another room of the South Daytona restaurant. The women sat down at assigned tables, and the men were instructed they'd be moving from table to table. Just my luck, I got the only table with light bright enough for a cop to interrogate a serial killer.

The next hour or so was a blur of men coming and going from my well-lit area. I realized halfway through I had made a rookie mistake: I wasn't writing down enough details on my score sheet to remember who was who.

But my system of stars and smiley faces did eventually save me when I had a few minutes toward the end to match names with faces.

The men who made my stomach flip-flop had to get up long before I was ready to stop talking. As for my time with the fellows I instantly knew would not be the love of my life, I'll just say I didn't know six minutes could be so long.

Everyone was very nice, and all in all, I was impressed with the caliber of men the event attracted.

My main regret was not approaching Mr. Tall, Dark and Handsome -- or one of the other guys who intrigued me -- when everyone was heading out the door. I got caught in an unwanted conversation that I had no polite way of ending abruptly, and by the time I was liberated, almost every other guy had gone or was rapidly approaching his car.

The day after the multi-date extravaganza, participants logged on to a Web site to officially say with whom they'd like to talk again. As it turned out, the guys who wanted to go out with me were not the ones I chose, and vice versa.

But that's OK. I trust fate. The man I'm meant to ride off into the sunset with just didn't happen to be in the room that night.

Ultimately, I believe it's all very Darwinian, and I think I've evolved into someone who will find her soul mate someday -- if not during speed dating, then somewhere else.

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[Cupid.com/PreDating](#) is in the midst of a series of local speed dating events, and the next is Aug. 9. The fee is \$35. Those interested in future events can register at [Cupid.com/PreDating](#) or by calling 877-477-3328.

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