

Knee-jerk reactions

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In exercise and personal health, 'one must now mix egoism with electronics'

Knackered. I have just completed my first piece of serious exercise in 17 years. At school, I took up the guitar to make an escape from having to do games. But today I have succumbed at last to Britain's late 1980s mass hysteria about health and fitness – *mens sana in corpore sano* and all that. Sedentary by-inclination, I did no more, for the first decade of my working life, than overtake people on London Transport escalators: aerobics and Arnold (*Pumping Iron*) Schwarzenegger passed me by. Now, however, I stand in danger of becoming one of those body-conscious bores, the type of gosh-it's-wonderful Sunday newspaper review section hacks whose articles make you switch off before the first paragraph is finished.

Knackered. How has this happened? Because the firm for which I work has generously written membership of London's Arena health club into my contract. In Britain, I am told, Arena's highly quantitative methods of measuring and improving physical performance are second only to those of Bupa, the private medical insurance people; workouts, I therefore suspect, are regarded by my employers as a useful impetus to productivity at the desk. Go to Rank Xerox, and you'll find employees pedaling away on stationary bicycles at all hours of the day. There the commitment to the more athletic aspects of corporate culture borders on the fanatical. No Japanese company hymns, just speedometers and sweat. Encourages that old competitive spirit, you understand.

Like the old Nazi playwright, when I hear the word 'lifestyle' I reach for the safety catch of my revolver. But the facts are clear: regularly stretched hamstrings and bubbly biceps are becoming the indispensable complement to the British 9-to-5. Bob Tyrell, chief of the Henley Centre for Forecasting, says as much; so does the Sports Council's remarkably convincing piece of sociology, *Sport: The Next Ten Years*. Yet if the time spent in working out adds to your personal longevity – is, in effect, time salted away for future use, time in the bank – the workout craze is not confined to the young and upwardly mobile. Arena has plenty of 50-year-olds on its books and, though it charges a £300 annual fee, boasts no fewer than 10 presumably impoverished nurses among its members.

What they are there for is anybody's guess. I am ashamed to say that I found the atmosphere inside the gymnasium more than a little sexual – space-suitish black leotards, onanistic full-length mirrors, Grace Jones and Robert Palmer on the tape deck; but I am assured by my instructor Richard that the search for partners is not one of the club's important ingredients. Richard is patient, solicitous, professional. Denying that he himself is a health freak, he grins when you ask him what sort of people attend. 'Nutters', he confides. There is not a lot of money to be made in a career in physical education but for me the science involved in 'PE' appears at

least as baffling as undergraduate physics. Before your first workout at the Arena, you are given an assessment, complete with chart recorders, tubes to blow into, pulse-takers that clip on to your ears. I now know that 19.5 per cent of me consists of body fat (the average for my weight and height is 17.5 per cent). This is evident from a meter attached to a pair of forceps which, in turn, are used to pinch an otherwise innocent bit of flesh on the upper bit of my right arm. Again, my lungs are 5.8 litres in capacity – an extra half a litre is probably there, my assessor Philip agrees, because I enjoy singing. In my condition, 17 press-ups in a minute is judged creditable. Indeed, Philip tends to confirm longstanding prejudices in his overall verdict that, for somebody who has only punched a keyboard for so long, I am in pretty good shape.

So much for the good news. The point of all this assessment, though, is to establish exactly what sort of exercises you should do – in other words, the most demanding ones. Tests show you have strength, but lack stamina, therefore the accent in your workouts will be on the latter rather than the former. At the same time there is room for supplementary soft options based on your subjective preferences. Do you want to relieve stress, or relieve yourself of those Michelin-man tyres around the waist? Whatever your particular needs, a programme can be drawn up to match them.

The promotion of such individualism in the general fight against flab is, of course, very flattering. Instead of the uniformity of the parade-ground, in which all must submit to exactly the same discipline, you have only yourself to beat. It is the same with the kit you will need to buy. In sports shops, the range of different £30 running-shoes on display is quite bewildering in its variety. Nike, Reebok, Levi's: each flaunts scores of models, for workouts, jogging, sprinting, road, track, grass, basketball, tennis, gymnastics and plain old showing-off. Adidas makes £100 shoes which you plug in to some gadgetry to get a readout on how you've done. To be truly supple, it seems, one must now mix egoism with electronics.

The automation of fitness is perhaps the most striking feature of the Arena interior. You do a few warm-up flexings and leans unaided, and, later on, need only a mat to engage in dorsal spine-bending and 'abdominal crunches'. But otherwise the simple jigs of one's youth – press-ups and deliciously named 'burpees' – are nowhere to be seen. There are special machines for doing press-ups, and each time you increase the weight, you write down your achievement on your performance card.

There are, in fact, about 40 machines in the workout room. I have to say that the whole effect is deeply sinister. Watching the enthusiasts on treadmills, or strapped by two car seat-belts into spiky trees of white-painted metal and black foam rubber covered in the previous occupant's sweat, I conclude that the basic image is that of the Khomeini torture chamber. There are few smiles but plenty of grimaces. Is there a faint undertow of sado-masochism? Instead of the quest for higher levels of oxygen in the blood, it looks to me like the dispensing of measured amounts of

pain. Just getting in and out of the machines calls for excruciating contortions. There must be another way. Now that there is all the apparatus designed to stress this tendon, remove that embarrassment, perhaps it is time to turn the tables. Looking at my own physique, or lack of it, I have long wondered about the possibility of Britain's top designers linking up with geneticists, surgeons, ergonomists and engineers in a drastic rationalisation of the human frame: Out go old-style, fuddy-duddy appendices, tonsils, the gluteus maximus. In comes a product which, if not exactly bionic, has enough discreetly positioned prosthetics and liquid crystal displays to give the owner ample chance to avoid the terror of the organised training session. Like the new BMW saloons, it would tell you when you need a service; but the service required would be minimal.

The day may not be so far off. In the meantime, I am disturbed to relate that, though still knackered, I feel strangely – perversely – all right. Will I return for more Arena abnegation? Either way, I will lose all self-respect.