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 Health Feature

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Bored With the Gym?

Tired of the crowds, the pulsing music, and the beeping electronic gadgets in gyms, increasing numbers of trainers are organizing outdoor workouts.

By *Phil Barber*
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Reviewed By *Gary Vogin*

Aug. 20, 2001 -- Every Tuesday and Thursday just before dawn, a perky blond woman jounces along a trail in Marin County, Calif., the beam of her headlamp skittering over rocks as a gasping group of seven tries to keep up. Across the country in Chicago, as the sun rises, another group runs in army-style pairs, chanting as they go.

It's the newest trend in personal training.

Tired of the crowds, the pulsing music, and the beeping electronic gadgets in gyms, increasing numbers of trainers are organizing outdoor workouts. Fallen logs become platforms for push-ups; tree branches double as chin-up bars.

At first glance, this seems a bit silly: Jack LaLanne meets the Girl Scouts. But [fitness](#) experts and those who've tried outdoor workouts say that exercising al fresco offers benefits that can't be found indoors.

Tiring of the Treadmill

Just ask Susan Gonzalez. It was five years ago that the 30-something from San Francisco traded her health club for the great outdoors. She'd spent several years committed to the life of a gym rat. She went as often as four times a week, dutifully lifting weights and riding the stationary bikes. But it took just one great mountain-biking class -- organized by Tina Vindum, the Marin County trainer who leads the predawn trail runs -- to make her realize she was bored stiff with the gym scene.

"When you're on the Stairmaster or the treadmill, you're on autopilot," Gonzalez says. "There's no brain interaction." So she joined the growing number of exercisers who swear that the best gym is the one without walls.

Why Working Out Outside Works

Besides the boredom that Gonzalez experienced, there are plenty of reasons to dislike fitness clubs. Gyms can be stuffy and crowded, even smelly. Fluorescent lights flicker overhead. The sound system pumps out frenetic bass lines, often at decibels that would scatter the regulars of an underground rave club.

"There's always psychic clutter in a gym," says Peg Jordan, editor of *American Fitness* magazine and author of *The Fitness Instinct*. "The weights clanging, the discussion, the music. Now you've got five or six TVs going at the same time. A walk outside clears your head, gives your ears some time off."

This, clearly, is the most tangible benefit of outdoor exercise. It's more enjoyable, which translates to more frequent and more efficient participation.

"People respond to the peace of mind and freedom," says Suzanne Nottingham, a fitness instructor in Mammoth Lakes, Calif.

"They like not having to worry about anyone around them."

Nottingham occasionally trains clients in the gym but is best known for her open-air activities. In fact, she created a program of outdoor cross-training that has been adapted by firefighters and the Senior Olympics, among other organizations. "It can be as simple as walking, plus a couple of diversions like step-ups on curbs or pull-ups from tree branches," Nottingham says.

Fresh-Air Fitness

Tina Vindum keeps things lively by varying her workouts constantly. One day she leads clients on a trail run through Muir Woods, stopping at various stations for strength-training work (using elastic cords, not barbells). The next session they're toting 45-pound packs up the Dipsea stairs, a notorious series of 676 steps on a trail linking the town of Mill Valley with the Pacific Ocean. The variety keeps her clients coming back, but it's the outdoor angle that hooks them in the first place, Vindum says.

Compare gym-cycling, for example, with running on an uneven dirt path where a steep embankment drops off to one side. On the footpath, you are forced to concentrate on each step. Vindum calls this "kinesthetic awareness." It's the sort of intense focus that mentally invigorates her clients, even as they work to physical exhaustion.

True, not everyone has the ocean or the Dipsea stairs to incorporate into their regimens. But most of us can find a city park or a country lane without looking too hard.

And don't forget the safety issues to consider out in the real world. You have to look both ways for cars, of course, and carry water if you're exposed to the sun or exercising in a hot climate for an extended period of time. Rain and wind? Sorry, you're not necessarily excused on account of the elements. Vindum has canceled only two classes in five years, despite the El Niño winter of 1997-1998.

"There's no such thing as bad weather," she says merrily. "You just have to dress properly."

Of course, there are less extreme models of outdoor fitness. "You can entice people with the joys of a sunset or the smells of honeysuckle," says Jordan, who often leads litter-clearing, ecological hikes.

Still, don't expect health club memberships to decline any time soon, says Richard Cotton, an exercise physiologist and spokesman for the American Council on Exercise. More likely, he says, members will increasingly balance their aerobics classes and bench presses with short outdoor workouts. In many clubs that have become uncomfortably crowded, private trainers are leading their clients out into the sunshine whenever they can.

Once liberated from the gym, exercisers often find that they become more flexible in their approach to fitness. "Now when I travel for business, I don't have to rely on the hotel health club," Gonzalez says. "I don't even just run down the street. I'll stop to jump up and down on the curb."

A few years ago, that sort of behavior made onlookers cross the street to avoid you. Nowadays, they just might find a patch of curb and join in.

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