

Moves, motivation, and

inspiration for the active life

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fitness

that '70s workout

Jumping jacks? Sit-ups?
This retro challenge isn't
just a walk in the park.

by Teresa Wiltz

LET ME BE THE FIRST to say it: I had become a slug. That's sad to admit, because normally I'm a high-energy, marathon-biking, Ashtanga yoga-ing endorphin junkie. Normally. But what a difference a few months can make. First, I broke my foot, a move that left me couch-bound for weeks. (Pizza Hut, anyone? Pass the remote.) As soon as the cast came off, I was shuttled away on a monthlong reporting trip to Afghanistan, a country where fresh veggies are a rarity and where



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PE FLASHBACK:
Obstacle courses
can bring back
playground memo-
ries and get your
heart pumping.

a woman walking down the street attracts stares if she's not cloaked in a burka—forget about running.

When I returned to the States, I was in pitiful shape: high stress, low energy, burgeoning inner tube around the middle. I looked in the mirror and saw a shar-pei. Clearly, it was time to sweat.

So I offered myself up as a guinea pig to try a throwback from the '70s called fitness trails, a series of outdoor exercise stations scattered along a running or walking route. Known by brand names like Par-courses and Fit-Trails, they were completely new to me, although I later realized that I'd zipped past one on my bike without noticing it. Never mind that they've been around since the Ford Administration. Never mind that they were put in thousands of parks, on college and university campuses, and at corporations and hospitals as alternatives to gyms. I had no idea that a few minutes at each of these deceptively simple exercise islands (with a little walking or jogging

thrown into the mix) amounted to a full workout in about 45 minutes, from cardiovascular and strength training to stretching and agility challenges. All that, and all in the great outdoors.

My first task was to find one. I'd heard that there are two in Washington, D.C., one located in the gorgeously scenic Rock Creek Park. A quick Internet search yielded a map and a brief description of the 1.5-mile course. I grabbed a buddy, slapped on some sunscreen, and trudged toward the trailhead. A big sign announced that this was an 18-station jaunt—a low-tech obstacle course of sorts, constructed of water-resistant (and sometimes splintery, as I was to discover) lumber. Signs at each station listed exercise instructions and three fitness levels to choose from: beginner, sporting, and champion. Or, in other words, beginner, intermediate, and show-off.

It started out easily enough. First there was the warm-up. Then we moved on to jumping jacks. Jumping jacks! How retro. Hadn't done those since seventh-grade PE class. They would be the first of many things that day that I hadn't done since seventh grade.

I felt a little silly—all right, *very* silly—jumping up and down as runners and bikers sped past. But then a woman plopped down on the grass beside us, gesticulating wildly as she argued with her invisible friend. I relaxed, knowing that I wasn't the only one attracting attention from passersby.

From there, we went to the "log hop" station—three parallel planks spaced out in the grass. The idea was to jump from one to another and then back again, and again. It seemed easy enough. Except that when I finished, my little heart was pumping away.

I was having fun, power walking along the path, gulping in fresh air, gabbing with my friend, and gazing at the scenery, until we arrived at the chin-up bar. The horror! There was a time when I could hang up there for what seemed like hours. Like when I was 12 back in the '70s and weighed about 85 pounds. With those days long gone, I needed an assist to squeeze out five weak reps. My friend, a former competitive diver who had nevertheless spent the past month on his couch, cranked out 10 with no help from me. Show-off.

As we moved from the vault bar to the balance beam to the leg lifts, I saw only a few others working the course. Most folks seemed content to do the biking/jogging thing. Reem Labib, a D.C. resident, was at the push-up bars, earphones stuffed in her ears. "Instead of the gym, I do this," said the 25-year-old schoolteacher; she much prefers

hot on the trail

To find a fitness trail in your city, check with your local parks department, or visit www.fit-trail.com for a partial listing.

the outdoors to toiling on the treadmill, as long as the weather's good. Still, she said, she's a little too skittish to do the entire fitness trail alone, so she avoids the stations that are tucked away in leafy corners—good advice in any park.

I found Kevin Sherman, a part-time waiter who lives in D.C., at the chin-up bars, improvising a Herculean ab workout as he dangled from the bars, pulling his knees to his chest over and over again. "I do it for the six-pack," he said, pulling up his sweatshirt to reveal dangerously low-hanging baggies and an, um, eight-pack. "And," Sherman added, almost as an afterthought, "for the oxygen." All righty, then.

We were all getting a good workout, but I noticed a few anachronisms—to be expected since fitness advice has been fine-tuned over the last 30 years. The warm-up included moves like a hamstring stretch, a fitness no-no according to Alicia Villarosa, a New York City-based fitness coach. She says that a walk or other form of moderate cardio activity is more effective than static stretching. At the sit-up station, signs directed us to do the outdated straight-legged version, but we opted to do back-friendlier crunches instead. Updated signage might have helped, too. We walked a good half-mile in search of the last station before realizing we'd already passed it.

But on a beautiful day, it didn't really matter. I felt energized, virtuous, victorious. My friend saw it as a good way to ease back into a fitness routine. Having a workout buddy made it that much more fun. Maybe now I'll put down the remote and head back to the trail. And maybe, just maybe, I'll take Pizza Hut off speed dial (I've got the number memorized).

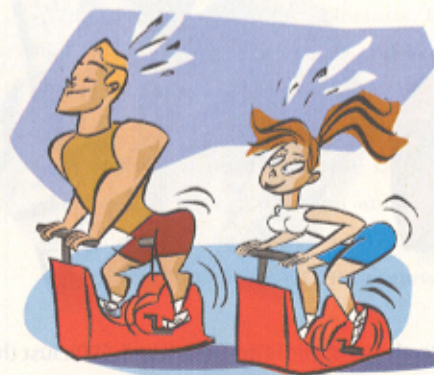
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[MOVING WORDS]

kids don't ask why

"Our bodies were made to be physically active, to move for their own sake. You need only watch preschoolers at a playground for a short while to know this truth. If you ask these children why they move their bodies so passionately, they look at you as if you were from another planet, then run off to swing on the monkey bars for the umpteenth time. I bet you forgot that you and I were once those children. It's time to remember."—*From The Intrinsic Exerciser by Jay Kimiecik (Houghton Mifflin, 2002)*



[NEWS]

a workout with a view

Gym shopping? After you check the StairMaster for rust and the shower for mildew, make sure you like the wall and carpet colors. Researchers have found that people are more apt to

work out regularly if they're pleased with the look of their surroundings. Of course, we prefer tree-lined paths and lakeside trails, but when we can't get outdoors, a little paint, a well-placed window, or even that hottie in Spinning class will do.