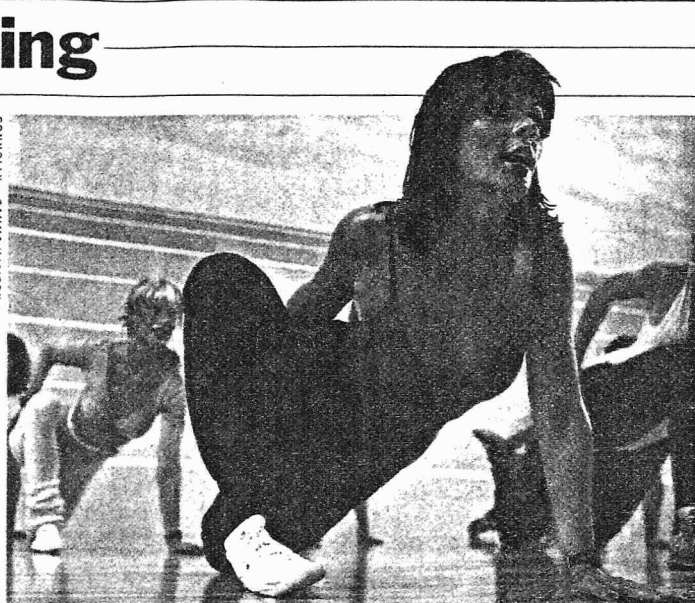


Houston's Kent Wittman muscling up at the Texas Club



Stretching out and loosening up at a San Francisco health club

Make Way for the New Spartans

Fitness addicts are changing images as well as bodies

"I'm in a special group because I have the discipline to keep myself in top shape. I feel far superior to those who don't take care of their bodies. I'm not scared to do anything, and sometimes I feel insurmountable. I have a right to be proud."

—Kent Wittman, 27, a banker in Houston

They are still young, although the impertinent encroachments of middle age are beginning to make themselves felt in lungs and limbs. Deskbound by day, they work at fast-track jobs whose rewards and stresses balance in a tenuous equilibrium. Orphans of the "me" decade and survivors of the sexual revolution, many are newly divorced or never married, forlornly sizing up their nubile contemporaries and yearning for a more permanent relationship.

Instead of meekly succumbing to these hazards, which many assume to be modern man's natural lot, they are saying no to ennui and enervation by fighting back in a directly physical way—in the gym. Muscles rippling as they strain against heavy weights, chests swelling as they dance in an energized aerobics class, they are venting frustrations, building bodies and sharpening minds with one of mankind's oldest panaceas: exercise. They are America's physical elite, the new Spartans.

An hour of vigorous squash or racquet ball is followed by a 70-minute workout on the Nautilus weight-training equipment and a brisk four-mile run. A hundred sit-ups on a steep slant board, then 60 leg

lifts, are topped off by 45 minutes of aerobics, propelled by pulse-pounding rock music. A muscle-stretching, gut-wrenching hour of calisthenics is succeeded by a karate class or a lengthy swim.

These grueling regimens, and others like them, are all in a day's play for a growing band of men and women to whom fitness is a top priority. Although they are not professional athletes, many of the new hard-bodied elite are familiar with the burning pain, pounding hearts and gasping lungs that come when tissue has been pushed to its limits. They have faced the dreaded wall, the invisible obstacle that looms just beyond the threshold of agony, and filled the air with their grunts and cries. But they also know, as their sedentary peers cannot, the joys and rewards such effort brings.

"It's a catharsis, a release. It's my moment of solitude," says Paul Karlin, 30, a restaurant owner and weight lifter from

Bethesda, Md. "It gets you breathing hard. You sweat. Your mind is consumed by the motion of what you are trying to do and by the pain factor. But when you stop, it's like coming down from a high." Like some proud corps of crack troops, the new Spartans are dedicated to an ideal of fitness that far surpasses conventional images of weekend joggers. "I enjoy being strong," says Houston Librarian Amy Mollberg, 39, who lifts free weights. "I have a sense of security knowing that I have the stamina and strength to do almost anything I want to do, physically. It's O.K. for women to be strong now." Sums up Chicago Attorney Jerry Mayster, 37, whose weekday routine includes both weight lifting and running: "I know I have a physical edge, and just knowing it makes the difference."

"Health clubs have replaced bars and the old hangouts. If you're not in shape or trying to get in shape, you're not into what's happening."

—Jeffrey Marks, 34, Miami health-club co-owner

Pumping iron on the Nautilus: "It's O.K. for women to be strong"



The East Bank Club, where Mayster and 8,000 other puffing Chicagoans work out, is one of the glittering sweat palaces that have proliferated to service these upscale fitness enthusiasts. Like its fancy counterparts elsewhere—New York City's Vertical Club and the New York Health & Racquet Club, suburban Washington's Sporting Club, Houston's Texas Club, the San Francisco Bay Club, West Los Angeles' Holiday Health Spa—the club has a clientele of well-to-do professionals, whose Jaguars, Mercedes and BMWs crowd the underground garage.

But fitness has other, more enticing attractions besides



Aerobics class on the roof of Chicago's glittering sweat palace, the East Bank Club



In New York City, the elite meet to reach

health. "Meeting people goes with it," says Dale Price, 29, a restaurateur in Arlington, Va., who spends a couple of hours daily playing racquet ball, pumping iron and jumping rope. "No one's hitting on someone, like in singles bars. The meeting is casual and easygoing." At some of the fancier coed clubs, the appeal is strongly sexual, and less serious members spend more time cruising poolside or matching sweatbands with leg warmers than they do working out. The laid-back atmosphere of the clubs and the sheer physicality of sleek, scantily clad bodies in close proximity make meetings less artificial. "At the club, you can start a conversation naturally," says Art Kratkiewicz, 26, a Houston banker and member of the Texas Club. "It's not like going up to someone in a bar and asking them what sign they are." Notes Accountant Chris Sands, 31, whose habitat is the flashy McLean Sporting Club, half an hour from downtown Washington: "If you can't meet somebody here, you can't meet her anywhere."

The physically fit have an undeniable appeal to each other. Says Writer Rocco Saragosa, 31, furiously pedaling a stationary exercise bicycle at Los Angeles' Nautilus Spectrum: "I can't fathom being with a woman who's not in good shape." Glancing at the tall, slender, dark-haired woman pedaling next to him, he observes, "Any time you see a woman who knows how to sweat like that, you just gotta get to know her." The woman, A.J. Bernstein, 35, a freelance photographer, has the same ideal. "I'm not turned on by flab," she says. "Men get hostile when I take off my clothes and they discover what kind of shape I'm in. Two of them started lifting weights within a week of meeting me."

The true fanatics, however, try to avoid sexual distractions,

as they strain to emulate the perfect bodies that are on display in venues like Muscle Beach in Venice, Calif. They muscle up in purely functional sweatshops; Rena's Gym in Chicago, for example, has no juice bars, hanging plants or fancy locker rooms here, just true grit. "You don't come to this gym to meet people," says Owner Rena Ettlinger, whose exercise instructors are all physiologists trained in kinesiology, the science of body movement. "The goal here is long, lean, tight, firm bodies that are powerful all over." At the no-frills Mike's Gym in Cambridge, Mass., Bodybuilder Vinny Greco, 31, scoffs at what he views as the promise of instant fitness promoted by flashier health clubs: "It's like fast food. It's a fast workout." Greco, a former runner-up in the Mr. New England contest, revels in the supermarket of muscle machines that he manages. "It looks like a gym out of *Rocky*," he says. "It's got a lot of character." With a solid 205 lbs. compressed on a 5-ft. 8½-in. frame, so does Greco.

"It's a different kind of power, easy and graceful. It's like an inner strength, a depth

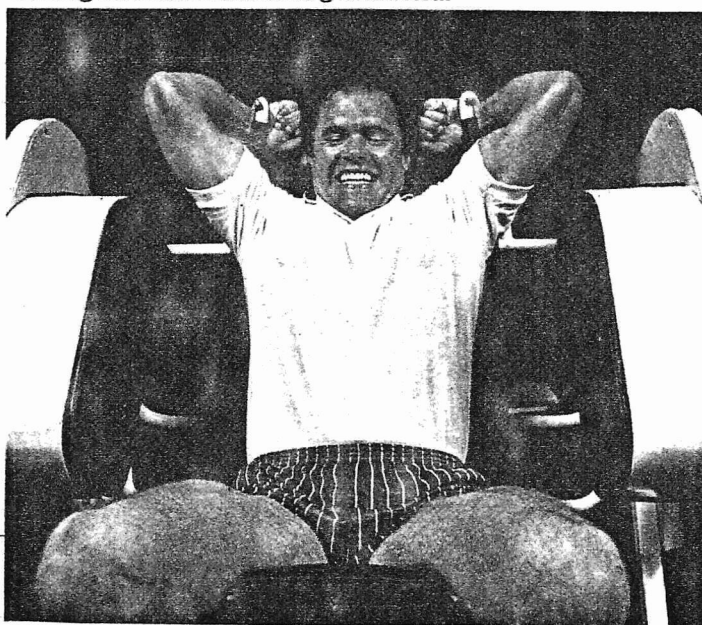
of strength, an inner reserve. You feel like you could run with ease for a hundred miles."

—Craig Chambers, 34, a Santa Monica, Calif., ultra-marathoner

Whether they prefer glamorous health club or old-fashioned gym, the new Spartans strive for improvement at each workout. This objective, which is achieved by exerting the muscles to their limits, paradoxically expands those limits, improving strength, flexibility and the capacity to use oxygen efficiently. Recent studies advise that regular exercise may help stave off heart attacks and clogged arteries; it is now being suggested as therapy for such noncardiovascular diseases as certain types of diabetes (the body's cells make better use of insulin) and asthma. For some people, heavy exercise like weight training seems to slow down the effects of aging, keeping the skin youthful and muscles taut.

The main biological reward of working out is more immediate: the mystical "runner's high" associated with strenuous exertion. Some experts speculate that during prolonged, intense exercise, the right, or creative, hemisphere of the brain takes over from the normally dominant left, or analytical, side, allowing associations to flow freely. The body releases natural opiates, called endorphins, which induce the trance-like state that runners in particular achieve after about 40 minutes of strenuous effort. Athletes sometimes become addicted to these opiates and push themselves to

Working the abdominals: learning to suck it in



the point of injury to get their usual dosage. Generally, though, the effects are benign. William Glasser, a Brentwood, Calif., psychotherapist and author of *Positive Addiction*, offers the laid-back argument that running "becomes a way to access your own creativity."

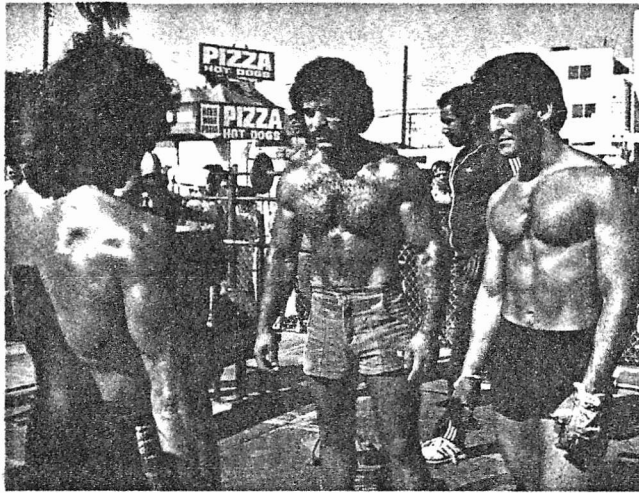
"I'm young, strong, healthy, happy, harmonious and successful."
—Exercise mantra of Matthew Hunter, 31, a Los Angeles actor and writer

Fitness addicts agree that exercise makes them better able to compete not only on the playing fields but in the business arena as well. Being fit, they feel, gives them an edge at work over more sluggish colleagues. "If I'm working with or competing with someone who's really out of shape, I feel like I can do a better job than he," says Houston's Kent Wittman. A daily workout may pay off in less obvious ways. Notes Paul Karlin, who pumps iron at Bethesda's Racquet and Health Club: "Ninety-five percent of the people here are after the other 5%'s money. The real estate salesmen and attorneys are always drumming up business. When I was a stockbroker, I had a lot of clients who were handball players." Fitness may also enhance one's job prospects. Says Attorney Mayster: "There's absolutely no doubt about it. All other things being equal, the job applicant who is in top physical condition will be chosen by a corporation over the other applicants."

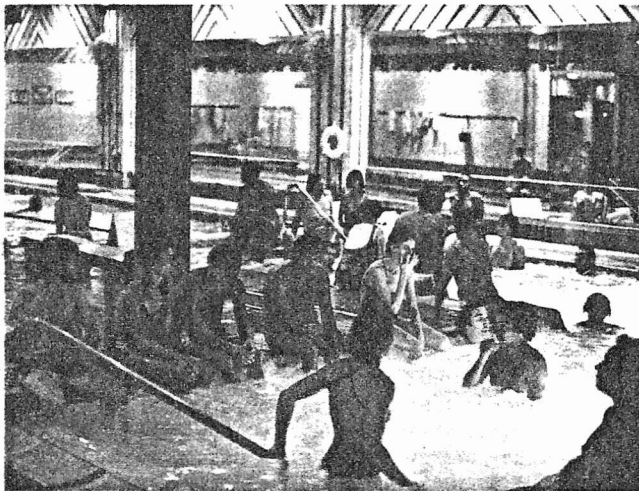
Increasingly, businesses are encouraging employees to take care of their bodies, often to the extent of financing company fitness programs. A prime example is the Ohio-based cosmetics firm of Bonne Bell. Its chief executive, Jess Bell, 59, is a born-again runner who takes his employees' health personally. Bell has built a two-mile track at his company's Westlake factory; every Wednesday morning about 30 staffers gather at 6:45 for an eight-mile run. Bell also offers financial incentives for physical self-improvement: \$5 for each pound lost by overweight employees, \$250 for those who quit smoking for at least six months. Recidivists, though, are penalized with fines that are double the size of their rewards.

"Guys like you aren't relationships. You're exercise."
—Woman to Tony Manero (John Travolta) in *Staying Alive*

When Sylvester Stallone stepped into the ring, took off his robe and flashed his pecs at Mr. T in *Rocky III*, it was a sign

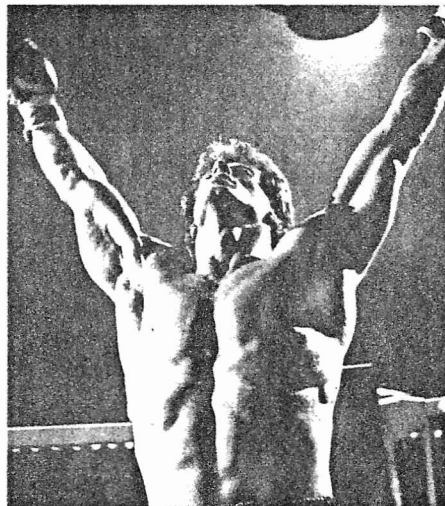


Hunks at California's Muscle Beach: the no-frills approach



Checking out the scene at poolside in West Los Angeles

that fitness chic was breaking out in the land of the image makers. Since then, Hollywood has been flexing its limbs in an effort to take advantage of the new muscling of America. "People today want to see healthy people on the screen," notes Los Angeles Trainer Dan Isaacson, 33, who helped Stallone get Travolta into top



Sylvester Stallone and body in *Rocky III*
Fitness chic goes Hollywood.

shape for *Staying Alive*. This summer's surprise hit, *Flashdance*, owes its popularity as much to the lithe, athletic bodies of Star Jennifer Beals and her dancing double, Marine Jahan, as it does to its driving rock score or its trend-setting, torn-sweatshirt fashions.

Madison Avenue, too, has been working out. Bodies in gym shorts and leotards now decorate ads for everything from soft drinks to cigarettes. One current television spot for a toothpaste is set in a health club ("Get in condition with Ultra Brite... It gets you noticed"). Diet Rite cola employs Actor Lee Majors, the erstwhile Six Million Dollar Man, in a series of commercials that all but shout the message that fitness is sexy. "When women were staying home with babies and waxing floors, we were showing that," notes Burt Manning, chairman of J. Walter Thompson U.S.A. In today's ads, Majors is getting smacked on the belly by an attractive, fit woman and exhorted to "Suck it in."

"People say, 'How do you do it?' You know, I can still beat my kids up Mount Washington."
—Edward Veasey, 53, co-owner of a Haverhill, Mass., health club

Beyond all the luring talk about clearer minds and better sex lives, the appeal of exercise is even more fundamental: no one can do it for you. Success in business may have an element of luck, and success in love depends even more heavily on the whims of fortune, but building one's body is purely personal, as are the satisfactions it brings. "I just don't ever feel as totally alive as I do after a workout, when the blood is rushing through my veins," says Flight Attendant Diane Liska, 39, of Chicago. "The more I expend, the more I get out of it."

For a generation raised to experience so much of life secondhand—flickering on a television screen, blurring past a car window—fitness offers a hands-on opportunity to participate in a basic human activity. To the executive frustrated by the glacial pace of corporate decision making or an attorney confounded by the delay of logjammed courts, a bout with the barbells or a ten-mile run is, by contrast, a challenge almost Grecian in its one-on-one classicism. It is not man, and woman, against the elements or against the world. Rather, it is self against self—the most difficult struggle of all. —By Michael Walsh.
Reported by Karen Feld/Washington and Michelle Flourney/Los Angeles, with other bureaus