Survival of the fittest

How London swapped going out for working out
IT'S A FRIDAY NIGHT and I'm in a dark basement in east London. Twentysomethings in expensive trainers whoop and cheer as they wipe their sweaty faces on Nike vests. Grime blares out of the sound system and spotlights swoop around the room. I'm not in a club, though, I'm at Rumble, the cult boxing class run by boutique gym Rebel.

A few months ago, if you'd told me I'd ever kick off the weekend with a workout, I'd have laughed in your face and accused you of calling me boring. Yet here I am, planking rather than drinking on a Friday evening.

Fitness fever has hit London. Once the gym was the preserve of the super fit and ultra-vain; now it's hard to find people who don't spend a good chunk of their monthly wages on a gym membership. In the past, we might have had to drag ourselves to the treadmill, praying we wouldn't bump into anyone we knew, but these days we're so into working out that we're taking selfies in the changing rooms.

Over the past few years, the capital's seen an explosion of amazingly luxurious gyms that look more like upmarket spas than Fitness Firsts. Liverpool Street's Rebel has changing rooms that feature a fridge of lavender-scented...
The cult of exercise

Exercise has become an aspirational part of pop culture, rather than something yucky done behind the scenes,’ says political and cultural historian Natalia Petrzela, who’s working on a book about exercise through the ages. ‘There is a kind of glamour attached to exercise culture, and a particular celebration of group exercise classes.’

Londoners have started to apply the same ‘shopping around’ attitude to working out as they do to eating out. ‘People want the best,’ says Ed Stanbury, one of the founders of Blok. ‘They’re willing to spend £15 on a class as long as they feel they’re going to get something from it.’ A recent study found that under-35s are more willing to pay a premium for ‘healthier products’ compared to older generations and sportswear sales in the UK last year surpassed £6 billion last year.

Petrzela thinks that fitness has become a status symbol. ‘It’s a way to display not only your self-discipline, but the fact that you can afford these establishments. It’s okay in a way that bragging about a fancy car or handbag isn’t, because it’s “good” rather than just indulgent.’

Over the past year, conversation in the Time Out office has shifted from where the most exciting street-food spots are to which are the city’s best spinning classes. ‘If I don’t get delayed onset muscle soreness a few days later, it wasn’t good enough,’ says one工作机制 who runs as well as going to kettlebell, yoga and spinning classes. ‘The more I spend on exercise, the less I spend boozing and eating, so it’s all relative,’ says another, who blows more than £100 a month on her gym membership.

It would be easy to put this shift down to increased vanity. Human beings now collectively take almost a trillion photos a year: that’s more pictures every few minutes than in the entire nineteenth century. The rise of fitness bloggers and model Instagram accounts has made us more aware than ever about what we need to do to get the body of our dreams. One Blok member tells me: ‘I’ve realised that I’m never going to get a better chance of being fit and having a hot body. I’m turning 30, I can’t do three 6am nights out in a row any more, so I might as well get healthy.’

It’s about more than just looking good, though. Petrzela says that people now see the gym as a source of general wellness and ‘loving ourselves’. ‘When you go to the gym, the message is now not only “Lose weight! Get ripped!” but also “Get happy! Feel good! Be your best!” When your whole personhood hangs in the balance, it makes it a lot harder to say “I don’t work out”.’

It’s something echoed by Talitha Rye, a Bishopsgate-based personal trainer and founder of online fitness community GirlGains: ‘There are lots of people who seek identity in the fitness world,’ she says. ‘It can be a status symbol or a talking point in the office.’ So stuffy classes down the local leisure centre are old hat, but things like CrossFit or ballet barre have cool reputations. Basically, people want to do exercise that they could mention on a date without sounding lame.

Does this mean we’re all getting boring? There was a time when my weekend exercise was six hours of clubbing on a Saturday, but I recently cancelled on a night out because an 8.30am run meant I was falling asleep while eating my dinner. Petrzela says I can take solace in the fact that at least it’s not good enough, ‘I have interviewed many people involved in the ’80s exercise scene who had been big clubbers during the disco era and found the same kind of release and thrill in aerobics.’

I used to think that the rise of gym obsession was just another example of Londoners caring more about appearances than fun. Now, after three months of getting involved in the exercise scene, my view has changed. Nearly every fitness fan I talked to told me exercise adds to their lives. For one of them, it’s because she was worried she was developing RSI; for another it was to offset the stress of work.

For me, this shift in thinking has had a massive impact. Working out used to be a tedious, miserable chore that I had to force myself to do: but now I do it to get stronger, have fun and clear my head. It’s about getting something rather than shedding something. And that’s a great thing, right? Oh God, I’m part of the cult! ■

Time Out London April 19 – 25 2016

By Kate Lloyd, admire her abs at kate loud

Classes feel like high-energy parties, with garage MCs and prosecco