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BRITISH MILITARY FITNESS

Punishment and reward

There's nothing like being screamed at to get you running up hills and performing squat thrusts. Andrew Spooner gets motivated military-style



I am sick of gyms, with their treadmills, headphone-induced isolation, nasty techno music and endless parade of body-fascist bores. I've really had enough. Sure, staying fit is important and I am certainly no couch potato, but the idea of spending another fortune on an unused membership that eventually becomes a source of guilt, I don't need.

So, when I was asked to try out British Military Fitness (BMF), a kind of collective personal training staged in parks up and down the country by ex and serving forces people, I did so with some trepidation. Had I actually discovered a form of exercise that would prove to be even more soul-destroying than a day in the battery-farm conditions of my local

gym? Was I going to be screamed at by some battle-hardened Afghanistan war veteran while enduring a life-threatening and humiliating "beasting"? I certainly felt a little anxious.

"Don't worry, it won't be that bad," says Brian Fernie, BMF's Scotland area manager and a qualified instructor. We've met at a small cafe just beside Glasgow's Kelvingrove Park, the site for today's training session, in the city's leafy West End. Fernie, an ex-Army squaddie and police officer, is joined by ex-submariner, Donald

MacGregor, a giant of a man and BMF's lead instructor for Glasgow. Both are kitted out in combat trousers, BMF T-shirts and black boots, and have arrived in professional-looking BMF-logo adorned vehicles. Yet, in spite of

intimidating appearances, these two ex-forces guys are disarmingly affable. "Would you like a tea or a bit of cake?" says MacGregor as we sit down. Hardly a beasting.

"We do push people but we want them to enjoy themselves. After all, we need them to come back," says Fernie, as we make our way from tea and cake to the park. And, despite any anxiety I might have, it appears that after their first, free session with BMF a lot of people do come back. At present the organisation claims a 70% return rate with approximately 10,000 members up and down the country and growth of over 50% per annum.

Set up in Hyde Park in 1999 by retired Army Major Robin Cope, BMF's concept has been to focus on quality instruction rather than impressive facilities. Their work ranges from programmes with

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the homeless and recovering drug addicts in London to corporate training. They stage sessions in more than 55 parks and open public spaces in the UK — including, in Scotland, Perth, Aberdeen and Edinburgh — and hold more than 50 classes every day of the week. It is clear BMF is something of a quiet phenomenon.

“Beginners put on blue bibs, intermediates green and advanced red,” says Charlie McKee as I arrive at the park. McKee, an instructor, is the third member of the BMF team and an ex-naval buddy of MacGregor. “We served 20 years on submarines,” says McKee, “and now we’ve ended up doing this together.” The gathered throng of roughly 40 participants quickly gather up their bibs — I am, of course, in blue, number 72 — and we head off for a quick warm-up routine around the park.

The range of people taking part in this BMF session is also a pleasant surprise; different ages, body shapes and backgrounds all seem to be here. Take Imran Shah, a slightly chubby accountant from Hamilton, Lanarkshire. “I’ve been doing this for three weeks,” he says as we run around the park. “I couldn’t even jog before but I’ve already lost a bit of weight.” So why do you keep coming back? “The instructors are just great,” he says. “They’ve really motivated me and helped me build up my confidence. And anyway, I’m looking for a new girlfriend.”

With the warm-up completed, the reds depart with MacGregor, while the blues set off with McKee and Fernie for a short run around the park, until we reach the foot of a short slope. “Right, I want you to line up in two ranks,” says Fernie, “and when I say ‘sprint’ I want those at the front to go hell for leather up this hill. Those waiting for their partners to return will have to do an exercise of my choosing.”

I look up the short hill and think this doesn’t look too bad. “Those at the bottom give me 10 press ups, the rest of you SPRINT!” I set off at a fair clip

with McKee and Fernie shouting “Come on, push, push, faster, faster,” and am one of the first back down, my partner setting off in relay-like fashion. I stand there getting my breath back. “Blue 72, what the bloody hell are you doing?” shouts Fernie. “Get down and give me those press-ups! And when you’ve finished, if you’re still waiting for your partner, I want to see jogging on the spot. There is no slacking in my class.”

Some 20 minutes, numerous sprints and several different varieties of push-up, sit-up and squat thrust later, I am slaughtered. My stomach is churning and the sweat is pouring off me. This is some serious work out; I can barely stand. “We’ll have a quick water break,” says McKee as a scrum forms around the bags of water the instructors have brought along. At last, a chance for a breather. “Quickly people,” says Fernie within 30 seconds. “Line up in twos with your partner,” adds McKee. “We’re going to run around the park.” So much for a rest.

This proven method of constant and dynamic movement is one of the keys to BMF’s regime. Heart rates are held at high levels for extended periods with the resultant dramatic improvements in fitness levels and weight loss. This is something most people exercising alone would struggle to accomplish. With Fernie and McKee providing the necessary verbal motivation, these high-end fitness targets suddenly become achievable.

While we’ve been out running, Fernie has set up for the next part of the session and laid out a line of mini cones on a patch of grass. Once again, we’re arranged into twos, facing off. “This time you do a set exercise of my choice and when I say touch, you will touch the cone with a body part of my choice,” says Fernie. “The person who touches last out of each buddy pairing will then do a forfeit.”

We’re taken through the most bewildering variety of thrusts, press-ups and sit-ups humanly imaginable. Chins, noses and backsides are all thrown at the cones in rapid succession

as Fernie leads us through a comic and exhausting schedule. I keep beating my partner so allow her to win one time. Fernie spots me. “Blue 72! Not you again. Stop being a bloody gentleman. Now, as a punishment, sprint up the hill.” Good-natured expletives are muttered in Fernie’s general direction as I carry out my forfeit.

We complete a 10-minute cool-down of stretches and jogs and I finally get a chance to rest. The session has been

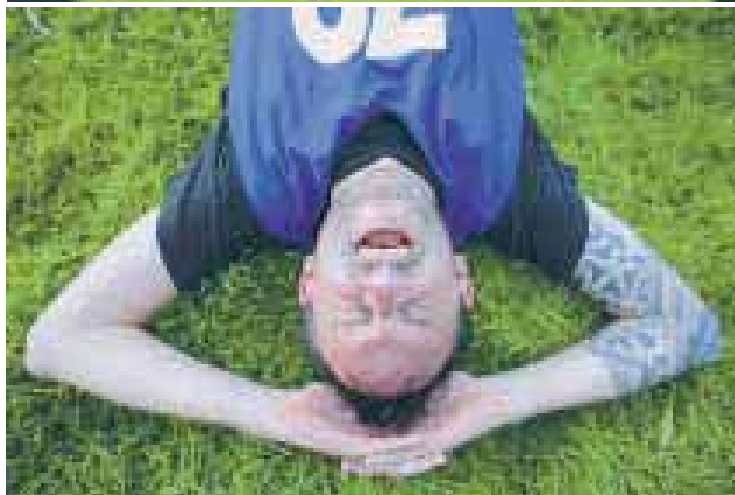
one of the toughest workouts of my adult life. I am soaked with sweat, aching yet exhilarated. And while the instructors Fernie and McKee have pushed me to the limit, I have not once felt undermined, bullied or badgered — it’s been pure motivation. “As a company we really value our instructors,” says Fernie. “We cherry-pick the best we can find and constantly help them improve their skills.”

On the way back from Kelvingrove Park I pass a gym. I look at the grimacing, bored faces, iPods at the ready, each lost on their own treadmill-centred world. Would I be one of BMF’s returning 70%? You betcha.

I set off at a fair clip with McKee and Fernie shouting ‘Push, push, faster, faster!’

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ASHLEY COOMBE/EPIC SCOTLAND

This is no walk in the park. Andrew collapses in a heap at the end of the hardest workout of his life, but vows not to make it a one-time performance



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The class are put through their paces