

Survival of the fittest in Victoria Park

RIDING THE PAIN TRAIN

FORGET those fitness videos where former *Big Brother* contestants such as Jade Goody squeeze another few quid out of their ailing careers by working up a minor sweat in the comfort of your living room.

Want to get really fit? Meet Barney Larkin, 32, an ex-member of the Honourable Artillery Company, the second most senior regiment in the Territorial Army.

Want to get super fit? Meet his mates, Ahmed Dermish, who parachuted into northern Iraq with the 173rd Airborne Division, and Vladimir Turek, a former paratrooper with the Czech army.

These three tough guys are instructors for British Military Fitness (BMF), a sort of "wild gym", where groups of people are led through army-style work-outs around parks and green spaces.

Two months ago, BMF started running sessions in Victoria Park and now boasts more than 150 members.

I joined Barney one evening last week to find out how former servicemen are offering an open-air alternative to the gym.

First task is to cast away my identity and become, for the next hour, a blue-bibbed entity known as "Number 32".

Images spring to mind of Sgt Hartman, the frightening drill instructor in the film, *Full Metal Jacket*.

In fact, Barney is just the opposite – mild-mannered, encouraging and polite throughout the session.

"We don't scream and shout, we just use our experience," explains the veteran of back-to-back marathons.

We are split into two groups – the blues as beginners and reds, the

Gazette reporter Peter "Sparrow Legs" Sherlock breaks the pain barrier as he gets a taste of military fitness training

intermediates, taken by the meaner-looking Vladimir.

A third group of "green" bibs lie unused in the bottom of the box. "That's the advanced group," said Barney, who has a friendly but serious manner. "They're for super-fit athletes who come to us for a real good thrashing."

We mere mortals, the "blues", are a mixed bunch of all shapes and sizes, around two-thirds of whom are women.

Most appear between 25 and 35, the age when a bottle of red wine on a Friday night transfers immediately to your waist line.

But there are older members and appearances can be deceptive. The fittest looking lad among us looks ready for the grave after 10 minutes.

Most people told me they signed up because they want the motivation of an instructor, or just want to be outdoors.

"We feel quite strongly that people don't receive the attention when they go to the gym," said Barney, a Bristol University graduate, who also has a masters degree in public health.

"Gyms work for some people, but for others it's completely anathema. What we say is that we are a fitness provider, whereas gyms just provide facilities," he added.

"A lot of people lack motivation and the last thing they want to be is sat in front of a television screen. They want to be outside in the park."

The session begins with a fast paced aerobic work-out involving running and cardiovascular exercises.

The routine flows well, moving

from legs to stomach to arms, interspersed with sprints.

There's a lot of work in pairs, locking feet together for sit-ups, or running with linked arms around the park. We're encouraged to act as cheerleaders as our partners puff and wheeze through their umpteenth squat thrust.

"Go on Pete, you're doing really well," urges first partner, Suzie, as my trainers lose their grip mid-push-up, sending me crashing to the ground.

Nobody but me appears to feel self-conscious or afraid of looking a bit silly during these early stages – but I soon get into the swing of things, enjoying the fresh air and the open space with a new-found resolve.

The session is good-natured, like an exuberant Scouts session led by Mr Motivator.

The instructor pushes you to the limit, but not beyond, and those struggling are given lighter exercises to do.

Towards the end, my thighs have turned to jelly and there is a dull ache all over my upper body.

"You'll feel sore tomorrow," warns Barney as he collects the bibs and an exhausted few undo the good work by heading to the pub for a pint.

Two days later and I still feel as if I have been beaten repeatedly with a stick. Dreams of one day sporting a green bib are firmly on hold.

For more information about British Military Fitness, visit www.britmilfit.com. Sessions are also run in Finsbury Park.



British Military Fitness instructor Barney Larkin puts Gazette reporter Peter Sherlock through his paces.



"Two days later and I still feel as if I have been beaten repeatedly with a stick"