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look good, feel good

DRILLS 'N' THRILLS



HOLD ON Sara is put through her paces by an instructor

SARA MCCORQUODALE
for thelondonpaper

IT'S a balmy early summer's evening in Hampstead Heath. Couples and friends amble through the park and several suited workers are sipping well-earned beers.

Yet disturbing the ambience is a troop of 40 red-faced people pounding across the green as a man in military fatigues bellows, "Stay together! Single file! Hup!"

It's an exercise class, but not as we know it. This is British Military Fitness (BMF) – and it could be exactly what you need if you are a natural-born slacker or getting little joy from the gym.

The classes are a mixture of running, racing, squatting and resistance. Participants are split into three groups – blue for beginners, red for seasoned pros and green for masochists. Each group is overseen by a former member of the military who threatens exercisers with 20 press-ups if they do not put the effort in.

Jen Greenway, from Archway, has been going to BMF for 18 months and is in the blue group.

The 25-year-old, who works in publishing, says: "At the gym you can avoid running if you don't like it, or skip working on one part of your

body. Here you have to do things you might not like but you use every part of your body.

"The other people in the group make you work harder. You don't want to be the last person to arrive back after a run, so you push yourself."

Red group member Ed Wilkinson, 26, agrees. The accountant, of West Hampstead, says: "Initially, I came because my friends said it was really good. It's a really thorough workout and I kept going because I liked it."

"They work you harder than you would make yourself at the gym and it's really well organised. I like the fact it lets you exercise outside."

For the majority of people who rely on gyms to maintain fitness, exercising outside can be a novel experience. However, the fresh air is surely better for you than going from an air-conditioned office to an air-conditioned gym.

Meanwhile, being part of a large group and feeling



BENT DOUBLE Back muscles get a workout



YOU 'ORRIBLE LOT | Burning calories military-style on Hampstead Heath

intimidated by the instructor relieves self-consciousness.

However, this is a high-level cardio workout that not everyone can physically handle.

Before joining, aspiring members have to complete a questionnaire on their personal health, allowing instructors to judge whether BMF is for them.

Instructor Barney Larkin, an ex-Territorial Army soldier who has served in

Iraq, says: "I think it would be nearly impossible for people who are very unfit or quite overweight, especially if they go to ses-

sions in Hampstead Heath, where runs can be hilly.

"But if you have a reasonable level of fitness, and can run 100 metres or so, you should be able to take part."

Larkin says 76 per cent of people who try BMF sign up within 24 hours.

He adds: "It's an effective way to get fit. We don't focus on weight loss but if you come to classes you will see a difference in muscle tone. Unlike gyms, we're a fitness provider, not a facility provider."

BMF charges £35 per month for one session per week, £46 for unlimited sessions or a corporate rate of £38. Under 21s and over 60s get unlimited sessions for £25. www.britmilfit.com

sara's verdict

"BMF is probably the hardest exercise class I've endured – but it's also the best. I felt like I might vomit on the fourth run around the field, but it worked each part of my body thoroughly. If you haven't exercised for a while, you will find it very difficult. Don't attempt it if you prefer the softly, softly approach. I'll be back, even though I hated almost every minute."

urban doc

DR ANJLEE SHETH



>> DONOR CAMPAIGN

Q I've been reading about the campaign for more bone marrow donors. I'd like to go on the register, but is donating risky or painful?

A It's important to have plenty of bone marrow donors on the national register to increase the chances of a near-perfect match to treat cancers such as leukaemia.

If you offer yourself as a donor, a blood sample is taken to establish your tissue type. If a patient who matches your type needs bone marrow, you will get called in for a full medical and be talked through donating. You will either be asked to give blood containing

stem cells or donate bone marrow pulp itself. To collect stem cells from blood, you have injections to stimulate their production beforehand.

To donate bone marrow, you need to have a general anaesthetic so that the pulp can be removed from your hip bone using a needle. This can be uncomfortable. It requires about 48 hours in hospital and a week to fully recover. The risks are small but infection and reactions to the anaesthetic can occur.

We are particularly short of bone marrow to treat cancers in ethnic groups, including African-Caribbean, Asian, Chinese, Jewish, Eastern European and Mediterranean.

For more information on the British Bone Marrow Registry, see www.bbmr.co.uk. You will have to be a blood donor already, or be prepared to give blood.



HEAVY Diet pills are not yet a wonder cure

>> WEIGHT FIX?

Q I've heard about a new pill that lets you lose weight without dieting or exercising. Is it available yet?

A Unfortunately, there is not yet a "magic bullet" weight-loss pill to replace diet and exercise. But recently, some interesting findings from a study on genetically engineered mice have been reported.

Australian scientists noted that mice lacking a particular protein – the angiotensin-converting enzyme (ACE) – weighed 20 per cent less and had around half the body fat of mice that carried the gene and ate the same food.

The research suggests that inhibiting ACE in humans will help to lower weight, although

no studies have been specifically carried out to test this.

The ACE-inhibitor drugs are already widely used to treat high blood pressure in humans, while many overweight people are taking them for conditions such as heart disease and diabetes – and they don't appear to lose weight as a result.

Cutting down on calories and exercising more is the best route to weight loss.

Anjee Sheth is a GP in London

IF YOU HAVE A QUESTION EMAIL health@thelondonpaper.com