

THE FUTURE OF FITNESS



'Being able now to confidently run for 25 minutes non-stop is such a boost,' she says.

Hattie's not the only one: more than 850,000 of us downloaded Couch To 5K between the end of March and June, while other in-ear running apps, such as NTC, saw a surge in users. Many more of us 'found' our own lockdown exercise, be it yoga videos (such as Adriene Mishler, who has more than 7m subscribers), fitness workouts on YouTube (British YouTube fitness star Lilly Sabri saw more than 7m people download her free isolation workout guide during the pandemic) or the thousands of Instagram Lives available, including Barry's Bootcamp. Despite the fact that we *could* have worked out in our pants in our bedrooms, sales of fitness clothing also soared.

'Lots of people who have never done exercise before found that it's a way to mentally escape, which was so critical in lockdown,' says Professor Greg Whyte, former Olympian and founder of the Centre for Health & Human Performance. It's also crucial to our future ability to fight a second outbreak of coronavirus, according to England's deputy chief medical officer, Dr Jenny Harries, who wants us to lose weight and get fitter.

That's not to say everyone has been breaking a sweat: Sport England found that many women, along with those on lower income jobs, were doing *less* activity during lockdown, in part due to increased

childcare burdens, losing jobs or being key workers under increased pressure.

But now that restrictions are easing and we're slowly returning to all kinds of normal – including going back to the office for some, childcare options available for some parents and the reopening of gyms and pools in England (different timescales apply in other parts of the UK). Whatever fitness levels we managed during lockdown, more than 60% of us say we intend to be even more active as restrictions are eased, but how will we do that, and what will the fitness landscape look like? ▶



Online workouts have undoubtedly got us through lockdown. But, as time dragged on, providers had to adapt to keep us engaged, by creating personal plans over a course of weeks, such as Hollie Grant's 8 week+ Pilates PT plan that has been selling fast, live classes provided by many studios around the country, and a strong community around brands such as FRAME, who quickly introduced online workouts but also have a highly engaged Instagram audience.

Other clever tricks included Fiit.tv introducing virtual waiting rooms for its live classes, where you can chat to other people just as you would in real life, which helped boost its daily workouts by more than 500%. Meanwhile, Strava set virtual challenges and Freeletics app's Mindset Coach, a mental health add-on, saw an 80% increase by its users.

But just as Zoom fatigue has set in for our business meetings, so too there is a danger for online-only exercisers to lose momentum. Seeing a face on screen feels thrilling at first; by month three it can feel like an approximation of human interaction. Professor Whyte says that lots of exercisers will be motivated now that gyms have started to reopen (in England) – an issue he has consulted with the Government on because 'it's more social and that's what we need'. But will we *want* to go back? Although almost 13 million people in England used gyms and leisure centres pre-pandemic, only half of us plan to return, according to a survey of more than 11,000 gym-goers by the fitness shoe comparison site RunRepeat, in part due to fears about the virus, but also because many of our gyms are near our offices, and we are still working from home.

For those who do want to go back – and many crave that normality – Whyte says it won't be like pictures of US gyms with individual pods made from plexiglass. Instead, it will feel as normal as possible, but social distancing rules will mean that equipment, such as treadmills and cross trainers, will be spaced out, and extra hygiene measures will be in place, including temperature checks on arrival, water stations and changing rooms probably out of bounds, extra cleaning and increased ventilation. FRAME says it will be running at 50% capacity to accommodate the rules; for smaller studios, this could be a death knell after a very tricky financial year, so prepare for your local favourite to be struggling, or even to close for good.



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**WE TEND TO
EXERCISE
LONGER,
HARDER AND
MORE OFTEN
OUTDOORS**

One way to tempt nervous clients back is to hold classes outdoors. FRAME was one of the first boutique gyms to offer outdoor classes at two of its London sites before gyms were allowed to reopen. These have quickly sold out each week. Similarly, FLEX Chelsea launched FLEX in the Park to allow groups of up to five to work out, something many personal trainers around the country have been doing since the start of July.

Kelly Bedford, founder of Fitness Fox, is one of them, and says her clients overwhelmingly signed up for park sessions rather than more online workouts. 'We're all craving more human contact,' she says. I certainly felt this: working at home all day (albeit not alone; I had a three-year-old colleague with constant chatter), I felt a huge urge to see someone else in the flesh while I huffed through a workout. It's better for us, too. 'I worry that those doing online classes might pick up injuries,' says Kelly. 'You can never see a person's whole body on Zoom. I like to go around, check everyone is doing the exercise right and suggest tweaks and alterations.'

That's not to say we'll abandon online completely – it's too convenient and, by now, we've got our favourites. Big brands recognise this too and are pouring money into digital ventures. Peloton saw huge interest in its new app (which has workouts including boxing, strength and yoga),

increasing to 1.1m users over lockdown, while Lululemon Athletica paid \$500m earlier this month for the acquisition of the fitness tech brand Mirror, to increase its own 'digital and interactive capabilities'.

So the future of our workouts will be a more seamless merging of real world and virtual, but with a slice of community and social contact that we've been craving. Shara Tochia, founder of wellness brand DOSE, who has been doing her Barry's Bootcamp class on Instagram Live (while linking up with friends over Houseparty and having a juice together afterwards), says she's looking forward to going back to a real class. 'But I might continue a combination of both.'

Online classes with live workouts and virtual waiting rooms, and apps that coach you to run faster, employ advanced tech to seek to replicate a real world or human experience. And tech is getting smarter all the time. CAR.O.L. is an AI-powered bike that promises to work you so hard in 40 seconds that doing it three times a week is equivalent to a 45-minute run, according to a randomised independent trial run by the American Council on Exercise.

Professor Whyte says 'sexy tech' can end up as 'expensive clothes horses' and I've certainly trialled some duds, including a virtual PT that turned out to be a computer-animated woman doing squats and a 'digital' kettlebell that stopped working after a month. But Ratna Singh, co-founder and chief executive of CAR.O.L., says that tech like hers is serving 'people who've been ignored by the fitness industry. You have to start with why people don't do something. Lots of people don't have the time or motivation, so what needs to happen is changing behaviours and habits.' Ideally, as seamlessly as possible.

Another consideration is *why* we want to work out. Our health now (finally) seems to be of greater concern than how we look. As Laura Fountain, author of the blog Lazy Girl Running, says, 'You don't have to go back to the classes and trainers that shamed you into working out or that promised you a new body as though the one you're in isn't good enough.'

Many of us – like Hattie – have already established new habits over the last few months, and are constantly making new ones, such as cycling to work to avoid public transport, as evidenced by record bike sales over lockdown. As the sands continue to shift, we will keep discovering what our 'new normal' is, and find out how that fits into the way we work out.

How will our exercise habits change post-lockdown? *Jessica Salter* investigates...

HAVING NEVER BEEN a runner before, Hattie D'Souza, 26, decided that lockdown would be the perfect time to start. 'My life before was hectic with work and events, but lockdown put a stop to all my usual plans,' she says. 'I suddenly had more time and no excuse to be unfit.' She also had a 'huge yearning to be outside' – something many of us experienced. She downloaded the NHS's Couch To 5K app and started running near her home in Birmingham.