

# Fast, Furious and Functional: Three Trends Shaping Today's Fitness Landscape

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## **These old and new training ideas offer alternative and time-efficient methods for helping clients achieve their goals.**

The fitness industry is constantly evolving. Each day a new exercise protocol or piece of equipment is unveiled, claiming to be “the next big thing.” Some programs and products make waves; others fade into obscurity. But what defines a lasting trend? Ryan Junk, general manager of the newly opened UFC Gym in Los Angeles, believes that successful programs are created with one eye on the future and a critical eye on the past. “We have more health clubs than we did 10 years ago, yet the obesity rate continues to climb,” he says. Standard “push-pull strength training” and steady-state cardiovascular routines are not attractive to enough people anymore, he adds.

So how do we keep members coming back and entice others to join? Jade Teta, ND, co-owner of Metabolic Effect in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, suggests that it's time to change the way we exercise. “The average person doesn't have a lot of time or money to devote to fitness,” he says. “People are looking for high-quality training, but without the cost. They also want programs that are exciting and challenge the mind *and* body.”

In spite of a fitness landscape where tried isn't always shaping up to be true, there *are* programs that are helping ignite the consumer's passion for physical activity. This article will take a look at three emerging trends, what makes them successful and why you should be involved.

## **Fight Club**

The practice of martial arts has deep roots. Before there were guns and bombs, early civilizations relied on hand-to-hand combat for protection. Once such methods became overshadowed by technology, martial arts developed more into sport. Though the practices have remained present in societies worldwide, they have recently enjoyed a significant resurgence in interest. Thanks to the popular Ultimate Fighting Championship® (UFC®), a sort of hybrid martial arts competition shown on cable television, mixed martial arts (MMA) has been thrust into the spotlight. As a result, viewers intrigued by the physical prowess of competitors are heading in droves to boxing clubs or MMA facilities in the hope of achieving similar levels of fitness.

John Spencer Ellis of Rancho Santa Margarita, California, founder and chief executive officer of NESTA and creator of the MMA Conditioning Coach certification, believes that this is only the beginning. "I've been in this business a long time and have never seen anything on this scale. MMA conditioning is going to be the biggest trend of 2010."

## **WHAT IS MMA?**

According to *The Mixed Martial Arts Handbook* (Skyhorse 2010), MMA is a full-contact activity that includes elements from a variety of martial arts. A competitor uses strikes, kicks, throws and submission techniques to gain dominance over an opponent and win the match. Skills are derived from karate; Muay Thai and traditional kickboxing; Brazilian jiu-jitsu; wrestling; boxing; judo; kung fu; tae kwon do; and more.

## **WHY MMA?**

What is it about MMA conditioning that is attractive to today's consumer? Teta, who works with MMA competitors, says that the training methods yield results much faster than many other training modalities. Katalin Rodriguez-Ogren, martial arts and fitness educator and co-owner of POW! in Chicago, agrees: "I think [the popularity] is simply because of the growth of [UFC] and the fact that people recognize the difficulty of all these combat sports coming together in one workout regimen."

Many participants also appreciate the self-defense aspect of this type of training. They develop a skill that may help them protect themselves if a threatening situation arises. Ellis adds that MMA participants seem to garner a degree of respect and awe from their peers: "It's fun to tell people you practice MMA."

## **TRAINING PROTOCOL**

There are several types of MMA classes. Some are specific to one form of martial art, such as Muay Thai or jiu-jitsu; others are combination classes that include elements of various modalities. Upright classes—such as boxing or kickboxing—focus on executing combinations of sport-specific striking techniques for a predetermined period of time. Exercisers work continuously for approximately 3–5 minutes, as they would in competition rounds. Some instructors include traditional conditioning exercises like push-ups, squats, lunges and sit-ups. In ground-based classes, participants spend a great deal of time learning effective holds, takedowns, submission techniques and escapes.

## **THE BENEFITS**

"One of the major benefits of MMA conditioning is that you see a broad spectrum of movement ability," says Michol Dalcourt, San Diego-based IDEA fitness presenter. "We often make the mistake of saying that there are only one or two ways of performing an exercise. Tissues and joints wear down

more quickly when the same exercise is performed in the same range of motion over and over. MMA requires exercisers to perform a variety of movements in differing ranges of motion.”

Energy expenditure during MMA classes is also thought to be significantly high (Crisafulli 2009; Glass, Reeg & Bierma 2002; Turner 2009). Studies have found participation in martial arts or MMA can yield an expenditure of 450–650 calories per 1-hour session (Crisafulli 2009; Glass, Reeg & Bierma 2002).

## **THE DRAWBACKS**

One of the major concerns with MMA conditioning is that its high intensity may come with an increased potential for injury. Many of today’s instructors use age-old school techniques designed for competitors, says Teta. With so many *noncompetitors* entering MMA facilities, greater control and understanding of movement is necessary to keep people safe. “Ultimately, instructors should have an exercise science background,” suggests Teta, who also works with professional MMA fighters. If there is a lack of attention to detail on the instructor’s part, even the most highly conditioned exerciser can suffer fractures and soft-tissue strains (Burks & Satterfield 1998; Gartland, Malik & Lovell 2001; Turner 2009).

Junk believes that commonly used training methods are due for an upgrade. “For example, I’ve been to many [MMA] gyms, and the most common warm-up consists of jumping rope for a few minutes. While this helps increase core temperature and blood flow, it doesn’t adequately prepare the exerciser for the work that’s coming.” UFC Gym instructors are required to take everyone through an ability-appropriate dynamic warm-up that helps develop neural awareness, flexibility, muscular activation and more.

“It is also common to see everyone performing the same exercises, which can be problematic,” says Junk. Before teaching a single class, his trainers must complete an MMA-oriented curriculum created by the National Academy of Sports Medicine. “Our trainers don’t necessarily have to have extensive MMA experience. We can teach that. However, an instructor does need to know how to separate the class by ability and provide a fun, safe and challenging workout for each group.”

## **THE BOTTOM LINE**

Just as with any exercise program, it’s important to understand each individual’s limits. Understanding appropriate progressions and regressions is paramount to keeping participants safe and successful. Fitness professionals interested in MMA conditioning should first become participants, says Teta. It is necessary to understand and become proficient at movement patterns before taking anyone through a workout. MMA-specific continuing education should also be completed, adds Ellis.

## **Metabolic Conditioning**

Another exercise method that is increasing in popularity is metabolic conditioning. CrossFit, P90X<sup>®</sup> and other high-intensity, fast-paced programs capitalize on its success. These workouts are considered especially challenging and promise exercisers a fast-track approach to improving fitness levels. But is this type of training appropriate for everyone? And do the promises hold up?

## **METABOLIC CONDITIONING DEFINED**

Metabolic conditioning is a swift-paced form of training designed to yield significant caloric expenditure during and after the workout. Because of the high intensity of many metabolic conditioning formats, session duration is kept to a minimum. “Metabolic conditioning tends to be loaded,” says Fraser Quelch of Canmore, Alberta, head coach and director of training and development for Fitness Anywhere Inc. “It usually involves strength training done at as high a rate of speed as possible.” Exercises are performed in a circuit training style, with minimal—if any—rest in between them, he adds.

## **WHY IT WORKS**

Over the past decade, several research studies have emerged in support of metabolic conditioning. “The interesting thing about the research is that it states that what we’ve been doing for fat loss has not been nearly as effective or efficient as we thought it was,” says Quelch. “It seems that the so-called ‘fat-burning zone’ was misinterpreted. What it didn’t look at was total caloric yield.”

In one of the studies (Schuenke, Mikat & McBride 2002), participants performed four rounds of three exercises (bench press, power clean and parallel squat) for approximately 30 minutes. The goal was to determine the extent of excess post-oxygen consumption (EPOC) during strength-specific training. The results were startling. According to the researchers, the participants experienced EPOC for up to 38 hours after workout completion. It was estimated that the participants could have burned more than 770 extra calories during those 38 hours.

Another potential positive associated with metabolic conditioning is that, when performed in groups, it becomes more of a sport than a plain workout. Neil Khant, owner of CrossFit Naperville, in Naperville, Illinois, has found that friendly rivalries tend to develop, which motivates participants to push a bit harder than they would if exercising on their own. “People actually consider this fun,” he jests. “For some it’s competitive. For others it’s about camaraderie and working with others toward a common goal.”

## **THE DRAWBACKS**

Its potential caloric yield notwithstanding, is metabolic training safe for everyone? Some organizations take extreme measures to deliver results, but at what cost? For example, many CrossFit facilities push participants to their limits. There are reports of people suffering significant musculoskeletal damage. In fact, training can be so intense that it is possible to develop rhabdomyolysis, a condition in which

muscle fibers break down and the contents are released into the bloodstream. Rhabdomyolysis is extremely harmful to the kidneys and may even result in organ failure. But Khant states that not all CrossFit gyms are interested in pushing people to extremes. “Trainers at some gyms want to see you go so hard that you throw up,” he admits. “In my opinion, those gyms won’t last. Or, at the very least, they will appeal to a very small sector of the population.”

Another aspect of metabolic conditioning that may raise a red flag is the repetitive nature of the exercises. For instance, one CrossFit “Workout of the Day” requires participants to complete 100 chin-ups, 100 sit-ups, 100 thrusters and a 400-meter run. Dalcourt, who has dabbled in CrossFit workouts, is concerned that these repetitious workouts may prove harmful. “As I’m doing 100 sit-ups, there is a metabolic requirement, but there is also a physiological demand,” he says. “This workout can initiate a significant isolated trauma on my body. The pattern overload will likely wear out tissues and joints more quickly.” Dalcourt is also concerned about how well people are integrated into these workouts. “A lot of injuries from certain forms of high-intensity training happen because people aren’t prepared.”

## **BOTTOM LINE**

Metabolic conditioning can be extremely intense, but Teta believes there is always room for regression and progression to keep people safe. “You have to be highly vigilant when leading a metabolic conditioning class,” he cautions. “Another thing we need to do is make sure the exercises are appropriate for everyone.” To keep participants feeling successful but also challenged, Teta teaches them how to determine appropriate load and when to rest. He calls this “rest-based training.” Teta’s clients learn a 1–4 scale that helps them determine when they should take a break. He has found this method effective and appropriate for individuals of all levels. “[Metabolic conditioning] can be done, but it has to be executed well,” he says. “We need to set up seminars and training to teach people what it is and how to do it safely.”

“Just like with any new modality, there is room for it to evolve,” states Quelch. He calls for building regression and progression models into each workout. “Know how to reduce or increase the intensity for each selected exercise. If you’re intelligent about the way to progress exercises, people will find the joy in the high-intensity challenge.” In a safe environment, metabolic conditioning can offer a time-efficient method for helping people fast-track fat loss goals, he adds.

See the sidebar “Sample Multiplanar Metabolic Conditioning Workout” for a sample training program.

## **Body Leverage Training**

Using the body as primary resistance during exercise is not new. However, modern twists on age-old methods have given body leverage training new life. Interest in “functional training” continues to grow as people realize that true fitness involves more than what can be seen in a mirror. Quelch describes body leverage training as “anything that’s using your own body as resistance.” As reflected by a wide

range of athletes—from gymnasts on parallel bars to trapeze artists swinging in front of an audience—the methods of body leverage training are countless.

## WHAT IS IT?

Body leverage training comes in all sorts of packages. The popularity of the TRX® Suspension Trainer™ from Fitness Anywhere® has helped propel consumer interest in this type of training. According to San Francisco-based Randy Hetrick, creator of the TRX, more than 6,000 fitness professionals have become certified instructors through Fitness Anywhere courses. Hetrick believes that the popularity of the equipment continues to grow because it offers an alternative to traditional gym workouts. The TRX is applicable to a wide variety of users and offers built-in progression models that are safe and effective, says Quelch. “It is extremely effective with high-performance users, but it can be dialed down to the pace of the deconditioned and rehabilitation populations.”

TRX Suspension Training® is not the only form of body leverage training available today. Others include fitness pole dancing, the Lifeline® Jungle Gym, JUKARI Fit to Fly by Reebok, aerial forms of yoga and Pilates, Gravity® by efi, and more. IDEA member Elizabeth Skwiot, of Plymouth, Minnesota, is the creator of Aerialates®, a program that combines Pilates and aerial arts. She suggests that body leverage training brings joy back to movement. “I think body leverage is a ‘grown-up’ version of how we exercised as children,” she says. “People are ‘gymmed-out.’ When many of us were children, we played tag and went to the playground for fun. What I have done with my programs is to create an indoor playground for adults.” She also adds that body leverage training offers participants a “task-based” approach to exercise. Dalcourt concurs, adding that body leverage training incorporates movements that the body was meant to perform.

## Fun and Functional

Sara Haley, Reebok Creative Coach and a JUKARI Fit to Fly instructor in New York City, says that body leverage training can be as effective as it is fun. “Body leverage training helps improve muscular endurance and strength, balance, flexibility and joint stability and offers easy adjustments and options.” Quelch has found that fitness professionals and consumers appreciate its versatility. “Body weight exercise can be modified to fit all types of people,” he says. Workouts can be extremely simple or highly complex and dynamic. “In a single class, you can have a deconditioned client working right next to a high-performance athlete. Progression models are easy for the exerciser to understand and execute.”

Skwiot has found that body leverage training has helped her clients develop greater body awareness. “When people aren’t supported by a machine, they have to learn how to use their bodies in space,” she says.

## DRAWBACKS

A potential downfall of body leverage training is that many people lack familiarity with their bodies, says Dalcourt. "We can put ourselves in a biomechanically dangerous situation if we don't know how to regress and progress," he says. "I might not initially be aware that I've put myself at an angle where I've created too much resistance."

"People aren't as aware of their bodies and their strengths as they think they are," adds Skwiot. "As a result they can become apprehensive about performing certain activities. This type of client can benefit from being 'pushed' in a safe, supportive environment." Personal trainers and instructors must have a good eye and pay careful attention to keep participants safe, she continues. Dalcourt suggests that those new to body leverage training should have an opportunity to become familiar with it before being allowed to participate in a class. "An instructor should coach individuals one-on-one at first," he says. "If that's not possible, always start with the most regressed position and then feed progressions to those who are ready for [them]."

Quelch believes that body leverage training can be much safer than weight training or other exercise methods. "Generally speaking, if you are using your own body you are much safer than if you are carrying external resistance." While he cautions instructors to be keenly aware of their participants, he also believes that the participants must practice personal responsibility.

## **BOTTOM LINE**

Body leverage training can offer exercisers an alternative to traditional workouts. It can be used to build muscle; to enhance body awareness; to improve stability and mobility; and more. According to Quelch, progression models are limitless and can help all types of exercisers achieve a variety of different goals. "You can incorporate body leverage training into metabolic conditioning programs to help people drop fat," he says. "It can help weight-conscious MMA competitors improve their fighting skills without bulking up. There really is no end to how body leverage training can be utilized."

## **The CrossFit Craze**

The CrossFit Community has a reputation for fast-track fitness results, but also for questionable exercise protocols. At some facilities, exercisers are encouraged to work so hard that they regurgitate food. And with mascots like "Pukey" and "Uncle Rhabdo" (short for "rhabdomyolysis," a condition that causes muscle tissue to break down and enter the bloodstream, possibly resulting in kidney failure)," it's no surprise that CrossFit has been criticized.

However, Neil Khant, owner of CrossFit Naperville in Naperville, Illinois, argues that not all CrossFit Gyms support this type of training. "I think the media latches on to some of the most alarming stories, which is why CrossFit gets a bad rap," he says. "But, in my opinion, trainers that insist on putting members through these super-intense workouts are going to run out of business." While he uses many of the tactics developed by CrossFit co-founder and CEO Greg Glassman, Khant is careful to progress his members safely. Prior to setting members free on the gym floor, he requires that they

successfully complete his “elements” program. “It’s typically 2 weeks in length and teaches the fundamental movements we use,” he says. Khant and his trainers are then conscientious about progressing each individual based on his or her capabilities. “Some need to improve cardio capacity, so we scale down the load and guide them to move faster, for example.” At the end of the day, says Khant, if people are getting hurt at your gym, they won’t come back and business will fail. He prefers to offer programs that are safe and accessible to everyone.

## Sample Multiplanar Metabolic Conditioning Workout

Metabolic conditioning workouts are fast-paced circuit-style strength training programs designed to maximize energy expenditure. Typical workouts are performed for a set time or number of repetitions and include minimal rest periods. The following workout includes built-in rest/transition periods after each exercise. The goal is to perform as many good-quality repetitions as possible within a 45-second timeframe. The remaining 15 seconds in the minute are to be used as rest/transition time. Depending on ability level, exercisers should perform 3–4 rounds of each exercise.

1. Squat With Biceps Curl to Overhead Press. Start with feet at least hip width apart and core engaged. Sink hips into squat position. Then, upon standing, perform a biceps curl followed by an overhead press.
2. Lateral Crawl Push-Up. Start with hands close together, feet wide, and engage the core. Simultaneously move right hand and left leg so that hands are wide and feet are together. Perform a push-up. Move in other direction two paces until hands are again wide and feet are together. Perform another push-up and repeat.
3. Reverse Lunge With Medicine Ball Rotation. Grip medicine ball with both hands, arms extended in front of chest. Lunge back with right leg and twist body toward left side, keeping core engaged and spine long. Return to start and repeat on other side.
4. TRX® Suspension Trainer™ Elevated Back Row. Place straps in most shortened position. Grip handles, and walk feet until they are below the anchor point. Start with arms extended. Engage core and pull chest toward hands. Release to start, and repeat.
5. Mountain Climber. Start in push-up position with hands under shoulders, feet hip width apart and core engaged. Bring alternating knees toward chest. Progress this exercise by increasing the tempo.