

TEN-HUT!



Military style fitness takes the country by storm

by Dena Braun



“Here We Go All the Way
Here We Go Hoohraah!”

The 15-person strong company quickly scrambles into formation and chants again in cadence:

“Here We Go All the Way
Here We Go Hoohraah!”

It's 5 a.m. and some new recruits are gearing up for a punishing hour of physical fitness. But these aren't fresh-faced teenagers just signed to the military, they're doctors, lawyers, professionals and housewives who believe that a military-style boot camp is just what they need to get into shape.

“I had gone to the gym off and on, but I got lazy,” admits Mary-Ann Bagnoli, a new recruit at FitBoot in Boston. “I needed something that was intense to get me motivated. If I just relied on myself to get to the gym, I'd make excuses.”

No worries about that at a boot camp. One of the hallmarks of a good program is that you're held accountable for your performance and your attendance. With FitBoot, there are rules of engagement. If you can't make a day, you call; two days in a row and the squad leader calls you. Skip three days and the entire squad will be working out on your lawn.

Not surprisingly, boot camps tend to attract type-A personalities, individuals who've achieved a high-degree of success in their professional lives, but are still round about the edges when it comes to fitness. Despite the military style, more women than men attend boot camps.

True boot camps are held outdoors and use the same exercises you'd expect to see completed during basic training—running, push-ups, squat thrusts, drills, pull-ups, sit-ups and bench dips, to name a few. Since its explosion in popularity, many programs calling themselves boot camps have sprung up nationwide. To ensure you're getting the real deal, look for camps run by former military personnel who know what to teach and understand what the recruits go through during the typical 6- (Air Force) to 13-week (Marines) program.

“The class starts with stretching, formation and my giving instructions on what we're going to do that day. We might run to a location carrying body bars, and when we get there, do crunches, sprints, lunges, pull-ups or relays. The routine will work every muscle group you have,” says Ron Holland, owner of SWAT in Tucson, Ariz.

Unless you are some anomaly, there is almost no way you can't get healthier and in better shape when entering a boot camp fitness program.

Tonia Gentile, a 35-year-old attendee of FitBoot, says her strength and energy level increased and she's now running—something she wasn't previously able to do. According to Holland, the typical recruit in his program sheds four pounds of fat and adds two to three pounds of muscle. Ritz has had students drop up to 20 pounds during his four-week course.

“Most programs are not designed to be progressive, but this is,” says FitBoot owner, Charla McMillian. “No one cares about the progress you're making or not making in the back of the aerobics class. That's not the case at boot camp.”

Most boot camps offer an initial course and then ongoing classes. The motivation provided by the drill sergeant and fellow recruits is a key reason for the success and popularity of boot camps.

"Boot camps appeal to high-driven individuals with a need to excel and prove something to themselves," says Dr. Louis Csoka, president of Apex Performance and the founder of the U.S. Military Academy's first performance enhancement center. "It's a challenge that goes beyond what you normally engage in every day."

McMillian puts it more bluntly, "They're looking for someone to kick their butt."

But if you're thinking it's a Gunnery Sergeant Hartman sort of thing from *Full Metal Jacket*, it's not that sadistic. While the movies usually depict drill sergeants as loud and intimidating, most fitness boot camp instructors are more toned down.

"It wasn't as scary as I thought it would be," says Bagnoli. "McMillian's strict with us, but she isn't up yelling in your face."

Besides the motivation of the instructor, the group dynamics of the boot camp breed individual success. Just like the military, the boot camp group functions as a team and adheres to the principle of leaving no one behind. Much on Darwinian principles, like a herd of buffalo, the group is only as fast as the slowest person. Because of that, team members strive not to be that person, and encourage their teammates in the exercises.

"People want their team to win and they push their limits so their teammates will also push theirs," says Lehigh University sports psychologist Ian Birky, PhD. "If you see someone like you do something, you believe you can do it as well or better."

And if you thought it was tough not to take up the activities of your friends in high school, deviant or not, the motivation of boot camps could have you working out at levels you never thought possible. "They really are the ultimate in peer group pressure," says Nick Lowery, former NFL place kicker and host of *Headgames*, a radio talk show focusing on optimal performance. "It pushes you to work at a level you wouldn't work at alone. You get the group reinforcement that you're all in it together."

In addition to improving your physical fitness, boot camps are designed to improve your mental toughness. For recruits to succeed in the program, they're forced to push themselves physically, and work through fatigue and pain.

"To be successful, you learn to focus and concentrate on a whole new level," says Csoka. "You learn positive thinking. The instructor is telling you that you can do it. They're talking you into success. It goes beyond boot camp and becomes a life skill." ☺

Measuring up to the Military

As you're working up a sweat running sprints, doing push-ups or working on creating your six-pack, you no doubt will start to wonder how your performance compares to an actual military recruit. With many boot camps, you'll get the chance to find out.

"At the end of boot camp, each recruit completes the Marine Corps physical test," says Charla McMillian, owner of FitBoot in Boston. "If they pass, they're invited to advanced training."

The Marine Corps Physical Test consists of pull-ups, sit-ups and a three-mile run. A male in his 30s needs to perform three pull-ups, 45 sit-ups in two minutes and complete the run in 29 minutes. A female must perform a flex-arm hang for 15 seconds, 45 sit-ups in two minutes and finish the run in 32 minutes.

Most camps will have you complete a fitness test at the start of the program and upon completion so you can clearly see how your hard work has paid off.



Find Your Perfect Fit

To find a true boot camp experience, you should investigate the program you're considering to ensure that the instructor has prior military experience, that the camp is held outdoors and that the program mimics what you'd expect to find in basic training.

The first place to look is through Internet search engines. Chances are there could be several in your area. Because of the popularity of boot camps, do your homework to make sure the program you're considering is a real boot camp, not simply an outdoor exercise class or a class held at an indoor gym.

Several top military style boot camps in the country include:

- > FitBoot, Boston—fitboot.com
- > SWAT, Tucson—swatfitness.com
- > Platoon Fitness, Philadelphia—platoonfitness.com
- > SEAL, Houston and New York City—sealpt.com
- > The Sergeant, Washington, DC—sarge.com
- > Operation Fitness, Los Angeles—bootcampla.com
- > Ultimate Body Boot Camp, Scottsdale, Ariz.—cometobootcamp.com