

I am a hula hoop girl!

Forget cosy evenings in the pub or popcorn laden trips to the cinema. In the 2010s, exercise has taken over as the millennial's pastime of choice. It seems everyone is dashing from work for a Zumba class or spending Saturday mornings at a spinning lesson. Good for them! Whether for health, socialising or simply looking svelte in ones' skinny jeans, I applaud this legion of gym bunnies. Here in the UK, 4 out of 5 of us spend our working hours stapled to a swivel chair, rarely exerting ourselves beyond a trip the coffee machine. This sedentary culture mean getting enough exercise takes some planning and serious dedication. But apart from conditioning our lungs and trimming our derrieres, can exercise ever be... fun?

My personal stance has always been firmly in the negative. I believe a leisure activity should involve a comfy chair, good company and absolutely no lycra. The mere idea of flailing around in an aerobics class makes me want to hide under my duvet. It's not just my shameful lack of fitness and fear of wobbly bits escaping that puts me off. I've always found standard exercise plans monotonous, contrived and downright dull. It seems I am not alone. Many fit-Brits are seeking offbeat alternatives to traditional sports. You can strike a pose while toning up in the disco-yoga fusion that is Voga. If you pine for the snowy slopes but live in the concrete jungle, strapping on a pair of roller skis may prove ideal. Those hungering for an adrenaline fix may might enjoy hurtling along downhill slopes in Urban Mountain Biking.

I pondered that with so many unique fitness trends popping up, there must be one to suit this exercise phobic Londoner. Team sports such as Bike Polo or Ultimate Frisbee were definitely out as I'd be anxious about disappointing teammates. I also vetoed anything too acrobatic such as Pole Dancing classes or Trapeze lessons. What I hankered for was a dynamic and lively solo activity that all fitness levels could participate in. The answer whirled out of my computer screen like a spinning sphere of cardiovascular promise. Hula hooping!

There are several hula hoop classes available in London, but I was drawn to a company called HulaFit. This endeavor was started by husband and wife hoopers, Anna and Rob Byrne, offering multiple classes throughout the city. Combining hula

skills with aerobic movements, HulaFit promises to tone my stomach, increase my core strength and burn off those pesky calories. Most appealingly, was the website's declaration "**the most important thing we hope you achieve is quite simply, a lot of fun!**" My mind was made up. I would be a hula girl! I would spin that hoop like a whirling dervish and get fit into the bargain. So, having paid the £7 class fee online, I headed off to Vauxhall, trainers on my feet and joy in my heart.

OK, that might be stretching it a little. Whilst I was really excited about trying out this new trend, I was also incredibly nervous. What if I couldn't keep pace? What if I was laughed at? What if the class was populated by sylph like fitness fanatics? What if (horror of horrors) I couldn't keep my hoop up?! By the time I arrived at the exercise studio I was petrified, but grimly determined to give this hula hooping lark a shot. And what do you know- it was really good.

I should mention that forty people hooping at once is a mesmerizing view, like a Duracell bunny convention. The atmosphere felt upbeat and relaxed, ages ranged from teens to late forties and there wasn't a leotard in sight. The full size boxing ring in the studio also added to the quirky ambience. Whilst some hoopers were super trim, hulas circling their midriffs like a bangle around a pencil, there were also plenty of average, curvy and voluptuous women hooping with aplomb. HulaFit founder, Anna was leading the class, and after a friendly greeting invited me to pick a hoop. Having been advised that the bigger and heavier the hoop, the easier the hooping I opted for the biggest mother-hooper going. A 1 metre across hula, lightly padded with green foam and weighing in at 1.3kg. Before we got down to some serious HulaFit, Anna gave a quick 101 in keeping a hoop up. She instructs us to stand tall, give the hoop a firm spin and then move our mid sections back and forth in time with the hoop. If a hoop starts to fall, we were advised to scooch down, speed up and catch it with our hips. With that fundamental covered and Beyoncé warbling from Anna's stereo, all was in readiness. Let hooping commence!

With hoops in full spin, the class was guided through a series of leg stretches, arm presses and squats. These were interspersed with segments of fervent hooping as the class was instructed to keep their backs straight and stomachs tensed. The bouncy soundtrack kept energy levels high, with lots of Lady Gaga, Michael Jackson and

other retro club anthems. As another hip-hop classic boomed across the room, we were told to drop our hoops and get down to some floor exercises. Using the hoop as an area guide, we practiced planks, push ups and hamstring curls. Then we were up on our feet again as Anna explained how to pulse our thighs so the hoop would spin seamlessly around our bottoms. For an exercise class centred around a child's toy, this was a surprisingly intense workout.

By now I had a newfound respect for the humble hula. Amazingly versatile, throughout the class the hoops were used to skip with, as arm extenders and for practicing stomach crunches. Mostly though, the hoops were used for hooping. Sadly, this was the part I had the greatest trouble with. For all my spinning, thrusting and scooching, after a few rotations my hoop would clatter inexorably to the floor, hitting the same place on my outer knee as it fell. But despite my frustration and impending bruise, I decided to persevere. Against all odds, I was actually enjoying this class. Having a prop to work my body around made it easier to focus and gauge my progress. I found the slightly cheesy music added some playfulness and the short, fast changing routines kept the class interesting. I carried on for the hour, and by the end of the class my hoop was spending marginally more time circling my waist than it was on the floor.

As I was leaving, furtively mopping my sweaty brow, Anna asked how I'd found my first session. When I admitted my failure at keeping my hoop up, she kindly revealed this basic skill had taken her a week to master. Eleven years later she's teaching full time and performing as a professional fire-hooper named Anna the Hulagan. So there was hope for all hoopers, even me. Anna advised me to get a hoop and practice, assuring me it was all in the thrust. I have since ordered my own weighted hoop and can't wait to get thrusting. Having spent most of my adult life shunning any kind of sport, finding an activity that felt more like a game than a sweaty travail was a complete revelation. Obviously we're all different, spinning a hoop may not be the answer to your fitness prayers. But there are so many alternatives to the drudgery of the gym that are well worth trying out. I'm a long way from strapping on a coconut bra and sharing my hula hoop skills with the world. But much to my amazement, I have at last found an exercise which is fun.

Gill Fisher