Thinking Outside the Gym Box

by Ryan Halvorson on Jan 19, 2015

Back-to-basics training on obstacle courses invigorates a rising fitness trend.

The fitness world is steeped in innovation. From super-high-tech monitoring systems to machines that target even the smallest muscles, gyms are brimming with the latest and greatest gadgets.

But the fact remains that we are heavier and less healthy than ever. Some experts suggest that all these advancements—both in and out of the gym—have something to do with it. And today, amid the rise of a less-is-more ethic in fitness programming (for example, body weight training, CrossFit®, Animal Flow® and MovNat®), many gym owners are building equipment-light facilities that they believe could be the healthful response to the maladies arising from our sedentary lifestyle. Obstacle course-themed events like Tough Mudder® and Spartan Race®—and even the popular television show American Ninja Warrior—have inspired the development of event-specific gyms. These events and programs have also motivated the owners of existing facilities to retrofit with obstacles to capture their clients’ increased interest in this type of training. And it’s working. These locations are drawing crowds that have sworn off the traditional big box. The result is greater participation and healthier finances.

Here, gym owners and trainers explain why they believe this is the new wave of fitness. They also advise you on how to capture the attention of this growing population of movement enthusiasts.

**RACE STATS**

According to “Obstacle Race World: The State of the Mud Run Business” (the first report on the topic), obstacle course racing is considered one of the fastest-growing sports in the world. OCR events can require participants to complete a course ranging from 2 to 20+ miles and featuring obstacles like tire drags, wall climbs, spear throws and fire jumps. In 2013, nearly 3.4 million people participated in obstacle races, producing registration revenue of $290.1 million for event organizers.

Why the big draw?

“After completing an OCR, most people feel empowered and are more motivated—whether it’s to improve their completion time or just to get through the race without penalties,” explains Palmdale, California, personal trainer Ashley Seeger, who notes that a Spartan Race requires 30 burpees for an obstacle fail. “These races attract elite athletes [as well as] weekend warriors trying to do something different and couch potatoes who decide they want to change their lives.”

Since she became a regular OCR competitor, this certified Spartan SGX trainer has noticed a significant uptick in clients looking for guidance on how to follow in her muddy footsteps.

“Since the OCR scene has grown, I have had new and previous clients ask for my help,” she notes. “My clientele has become a different breed of people.”

**GYMS ON DEMAND**

Mylo Villanueva of Austin, Texas, got his first taste of OCR nearly 4 years ago. At the time, the former U.S. Marine was a regular participant in triathlons, but his interest in the sport had begun to wane.

“A buddy of mine introduced me to the Tough Mudder, and I fell in love with it,” recalls Villanueva. “I used to be in the Marine Corps, and I loved obstacles, jumping, running and crawling through mud. So when I found Tough Mudder, I signed up for every single mud run around.”

That simple introduction changed Villanueva’s life. “During that time, I had also made a New Year’s resolution to help improve people’s lives.”

So the trainer decided to coach five people for 3 months—with the caveat that once the training was finished, each of them had to complete a mud run. He was so inspired by the process that he decided to shelve his plans to open a bar and grill and instead focus on building a business centered on OCR training.

Soon, a challenge presented itself.

He recalls, “One day I noticed that there was nowhere to train for a mud run, except for on military bases. In order to use an obstacle course at a base, you have to have special permission and a trainer out there with you.”
He thought of the many people who participate in these races but lack an opportunity to really prepare for them. “So the idea came to me to open an obstacle course gym so you could train for mud runs or the fire academy or a SWAT team or military boot camp,” says Villanueva. “Or maybe people want to train for overall fitness in a way that would be functionally useful, and do it using things they never thought they could use.”

MYLO Obstacle Fitness was born 2 years later, featuring 75 acres and 30 obstacles.

MOVING BEYOND CROSSFIT

Alex Nicholas, founder of Epic Hybrid Training, which boasts two locations in New York City, got into the obstacle course gym life to offer an alternative to CrossFit.

“I did CrossFit and became a coach,” says the Spartan-sponsored athlete. “I think there are benefits to doing it. But I wanted to combine all of the most beneficial elements of fitness and put a program together. That's how Epic came to be and how it's been evolving.”

Those aspects include tools like monkey bars, spears and ropes. “Basically,” Nicholas explains, “it's functional fitness, and we've started to embrace the trend of obstacle racing. I did my first Spartan Race in 2012, and that's very close to when I opened the smaller gym. People training for these courses didn't really have a place to go, so a lot of our training methods lean toward people who are looking to train for the next obstacle race.”

THE PARKOUR PHENOMENON

While not necessarily geared toward OCR, parkour gyms have also seen increased demand as the training protocol has been featured more and more in films and commercials. The increasing popularity of American Ninja Warrior also helps, observes Ryan Ford, cofounder of APEX Movement, which now has five locations.

“This year's American Ninja Warrior was the most popular season yet, so it’s not uncommon that new people come through our door and ask if we have things like a salmon ladder [a popular ‘obstacle’ featured on the television competition]. ANW has generated quite a buzz.”

Ford has been in the parkour gym game since 2006, when he opened his first location, which at the time was one of only three worldwide. He now has a number of gyms in Colorado: in Denver, Boulder and Fort Collins, and a satellite program in Colorado Springs. He opened a gym near San Francisco about a year ago, and San Diego is next on his list.

UP FROM “THE UNDERGROUND”

“I've been training in parkour since late 2002, when it was a fledgling discipline and very underground,” recalls Dan Edwardes, cofounder of Parkour Generations in the United Kingdom. “Back then there was no teaching, no access and only a handful of people on the planet who knew what it was. But it grabbed me as soon as I encountered it, and I've been training ever since. Along with several other pioneers and early practitioners from France and the U.K., I've ended up building what is now the world's largest professional parkour organization.”

He helped found Parkour Generations in 2005 and went on to open The Chainstore Parkour Gym in London. He describes the facility as “raw, functional and simple.”

“It isn't your standard gym with rows of useless treadmills, TV screens to distract you from the present moment of what you are doing, etc. The place changes and grows organically all the time, with the parkour zone being modular so that it can be altered every few weeks to present new challenges and training tasks. So you have to adapt all the time, which again is what your body has evolved to do.”

Alongside the rails, walls and ramps commonly found in parkour gyms, The Chainstore houses squat racks, lifting platforms, kettlebells, tractor tires, Prowlers®, sledgehammers and more. Edwardes adds that the space isn't designed to be a soft, comfortable zone, because he believes that physical improvement comes from overcoming difficulty.

“Think of it as a circle of sand for boxers or fighters. It's not designed for comfort; it's designed to challenge you and make you the best you can be.”

THE ATTRACTION OF SPECIALTY GYMS

Although parkour and OCR are fairly new to the mainstream, exercisers are finding their way to these specialty gyms.

“The biggest draw is results,” asserts Andres Schwartz, head trainer and owner of FTX CrossFit in Carol Stream, Illinois. “I would argue that machines are, in a lot of cases, counterproductive in achieving real-world results. Machines are good for rehab or physical therapy or shaping a muscle for bodybuilding.”

As the name suggests, FTX CrossFit is first and foremost a CrossFit affiliate, but the 4,500-square-foot, indoor/outdoor facility also includes more than a dozen obstacles.

“Every sport is going to require a transfer of power. To achieve that transfer of power, you need to do a multijoint exercise. You can’t do that if you’re locked into a single plane of motion with a machine. Machines often prevent the use of balancing muscles, and that, I would argue, may lead to decreased strength and power.”

Ford, the parkour advocate, agrees with this assessment. He also believes we are reaching a pivotal point in which people are looking at fitness differently.
“It’s a paradigm shift, moving away from what I call the ‘Globo’ gyms and going toward the smaller gyms,” he declares. “We thought we were so smart, and we invented this super-technological footprint and this gimmicky diet and these weight machines that are supposed to make us better. What we’re realizing is that a lot of this stuff is making us worse. It’s taking us too far away from what we’re naturally supposed to be doing, like eating real, whole foods and moving our bodies through running and jumping and climbing and crawling.”

Ford also finds that people visit an APEX gym because they’re tired of slogging through uninspired workouts. “I feel like a lot of people think working out is exactly what is implied in that statement: It’s work. It shouldn’t have to be work. It should be fun; it should be play.”

DEMOGRAPHICS

Interestingly, when it comes to obstacle course gyms, females make up the greater membership base. Villanueva believes this is because women aren’t afraid to ask for help or to face their weaknesses. Men, however, are a harder sell.

Nicholas, whose member base is 65% female and 35% male, concedes.

“I think men have the interest, but their egos get in the way sometimes,” he claims. “A lot of them think they can just jump into OCRs and do well. Women study it, do the work, know what they have to work on—that they need to learn how to climb a rope and do the monkey bar, for example—so it seems women are training more for these races.”

Villanueva aims to overcome men’s potential aversion to training, by hitting them with a bit of tough love.

“Oftentimes, festival organizers ask me to bring a small obstacle course for people to complete. You see a lot of guys go through 10 or so obstacles and then come to the rope climb, and they can’t do it. It hurts to see the look on their faces, especially when their kid says something like, ‘It’s okay, Dad. You’ll do better next time.’ So I make sure they understand that these are things they can learn to do and practice before the actual race. That way they’re not getting injured, and they look like that superhero their kids think they are.”

In Ford’s and Edwardes’s parkour gyms, the male/female split is the exact opposite of Nicholas’s. Ford attributes the smaller female population to the notion that a lot of people think you have to be a fit 20-year-old male to do parkour. But he sees that mindset slowly shifting.

“It used to be 70% or 80% male, but we’re starting to get some really talented females both as professionals and as coaches,” Ford observes. “It takes strong female leadership to inspire other females to get into it. More women are giving it a chance.”

Edwardes has seen marked growth in the female movement training community of late, and he believes that parkour will soon see a significant increase in female participation.

While the age range at FTX CrossFit tends to skew toward 30 and 40-somethings, Schwartz says obstacle course training can be applicable and beneficial to athletes of just about any age.

“We scale and adapt to anyone,” he explains. “I’ve worked with kids and 70-year-olds. Some of our members aren’t going to be able to complete all of the obstacles. For example, not everyone can get up and over the cargo net, so I have them climb up part of the way. There are always modifications and progressions we can do with the most sedentary, out-of-shape or injured people to help them improve from where they’re at.”

THE FACILITY

As Edwardes noted, these facilities offer a far different landscape from the traditional big-box gym. Instead of rows and rows of fixed-range equipment, you’ll see rows of climbing ropes, tires, logs and telephone poles.

Epic Hybrid Training has two locations. One of them features 2,500 square feet of outdoor space, where most of the obstacles are kept.

“The outdoor section has a lot of obstacles you will see in a Spartan or obstacle race. We have rope climb, traverse wall, tire flip and spear throw, to name just a few that are on our roof. The indoor part of our facility has monkey bars, Tarzan traverse, ring traverse, slam balls, giant jump rope . . . pretty much anything you would find in an obstacle race.”

Schwartz, the Illinois CrossFit gym owner, describes his external layout: “We have an outside yard with obstacles spread throughout the yard,” he reports. “The entire back area is close to an acre. We have an open area where we can have kids’ classes out on the grass. The obstacles are strategically placed throughout the entire space. When we run the obstacle course, there’s a lot of running involved.”

On his course, you’ll find a cargo net, a large pit, balance beams, a tall wall and a “weaver,” which is an A-framed structure built of logs or beams.

Ford and Edwardes have outfitted their facilities with obstacles you’d find in an urban landscape: movable walls, platforms, large boxes, railings, scaffolding bars and more. “Our gym is, for the most part, all wood and metal with some mats, like in a gymnastics gym,” says Ford.

BUILDING YOUR OWN COURSE

THE SPACE

While the experts quoted in this article have large facilities, they agree you don’t need to devote significant square footage to an obstacle course. Nicholas suggests that 500 square feet offers
He reveals, “To get free tires, go to tire shops. You're doing them a lot of times I look on Craigslist for logs or telephone poles,” he adds. “A lot of times for free. You just have to know where to look.”

Many components of the obstacles at MYLO Fitness were given for free. You don’t need to break the bank to build an obstacle course. “I get with a couple other people and we just try to tear these obstacles apart,” he explains. “We have people who weigh 300 pounds attack the equipment and try to break it. A buddy who's a licensed structural engineer tests everything on the computer. I also have an engineer to make certain that your space is as safe as possible.

Nicholas also built many of the obstacles himself, but he hired a licensed structural engineer to ensure the safety of his monkey bars.

“I think a lot of [your equipment] will depend on how crafty you are and how good you are at building a simple wood structure,” Schwartz says. “You can find a lot of ideas on the Internet. Anyone who has a basic understanding of carpentry can put some of these obstacles together. We’ve kept ours simple.”

THE EQUIPMENT

“Obstacle course gyms are a carpenter’s delight, so if you're good with your hands, building your own obstacles shouldn’t be too difficult,” advises Villanueva. If you’re DIY-averse, he recommends working with a high-quality carpenter and an engineer to make certain that your space is as safe as possible.

Villanueva preferred to do much of the work on his own, or with the help of some of his friends. To make sure his equipment was safe for use, he employed a unique quality inspection protocol: “I get with a couple other people and we just try to tear these obstacles apart,” he explains. “We have people who weigh 300 pounds attack the equipment and try to break it. A buddy who’s an engineer tests everything on the computer. I also have a contractor—and even clients—help me out.”

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GET CREATIVE

You don’t need to break the bank to build an obstacle course. Many components of the obstacles at MYLO Fitness were given for free. You just have to know where to look.

“A lot of times I look on Craigslist for logs or telephone poles,” he reveals. “To get free tires, go to tire shops. You're doing them a favor. Tire shops have to cut bigger holes in the tires so that the ones that are about to blow can’t be resold. So they cut big holes, and then they still have to take the tires to a dump. They pay labor to cut them and dispose of them, so they’re willing to give these tires away for free instead.”

He adds that tires can become an extremely versatile piece of equipment, and that you’re limited only by your imagination. “Tires can be used for lots of different obstacles. You can run through them. Attach a rope to a tire, and have clients pull it up the hill, or attach a chain and have them drag it. I made a wall out of tires, and my clients have to climb up and over the tires. Use your imagination. Your obstacles don’t always have to be what you find at these races. You can make whatever you want. It just has to be fun and challenging.”

CATCH THE NEXT WAVE OF FITNESS

Interest and participation in obstacle course–style events and activities seem poised for continued growth. As a fitness professional and gym owner, you are in a good position to cash in on this exciting new trend and help the general public train safely and effectively. Whether you’re interested in opening an obstacle course gym or retrofitting your current space to be more obstacle-friendly, our experts feel that the time is right to capture this audience.

“I believe you’ll see more of these alternative gyms pop up,” Nicholas says. “There is a decent need for people who don’t like CrossFit or big-box gyms or who just want something different. I think this type of training will go on for a long time.”

SIDEBAR: SAFER TRAINING FOR OBSTACLE RACES

Health authorities have been alarmed by the injuries—and deaths—that have occurred during OCRs. Owners of obstacle course gyms say they are addressing the risks of these competitions by focusing on more extensive prerace training.

“We encourage people to train a lot further out from the event,” says Mylo Villanueva, who started an obstacle course gym in Austin, Texas. “What we find is that people train only 2 weeks to a month before a Spartan Beast, which is 15 miles and includes 30-plus obstacles. I ask those clients, ‘How long would you train for a half marathon?’ And they say, ‘I train anywhere from 3 to 6 months.’”

“A Spartan Beast is longer and more intense than that, yet many people complete a more comprehensive training program before a half marathon,” he observes, baffled. It turns out that race organizers are wise to the problem.

“I’m being approached by various obstacle course organizers about this, because people are getting injured left and right,” he shares. “They have no clue how to do the obstacles, and they’re in poor shape. Yeah, Spartan Races get people off the couch, but people need to get off the couch months ahead of time.”
Villanueva works diligently to help his clients and members improve their fitness levels and understand the techniques required to navigate the obstacles, so they can complete a race as safely as possible.

**SIDEBAR: INSURANCE CONSIDERATIONS**

Given the unique nature of obstacle course and parkour gyms, finding a comprehensive, cost-effective insurance policy may require a bit of legwork. Mylo Villanueva struggled for some time before locking down the right coverage with the right company. He suggests looking to the USA Obstacle Racing Association (www.obstacleusa.com) for guidance.

Unlike Villanueva, Alex Nicholas had little difficulty acquiring insurance for his two gyms. “I reported to my insurance company what I have—I had to list all the equipment—and they gave me a rate based on what I told them I use,” he says. Andres Schwartz’s insurance is through CrossFit, but that’s because his obstacles aren’t terribly risky or complicated. He explains: “If I built a climbing wall, then I’d need to look at different insurance. Another consideration that might require further research is if we were to do something like parkour.”

Ryan Ford, who has also experienced difficulty obtaining insurance, believes that this will change as soon as insurance companies better understand what these specialty gyms offer. And as the popularity of these gyms grows, insurance companies will be more eager to provide appropriate coverage to cater to them.

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