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An Exercise in Gym Culture

In which our intrepid author works out her feelings about L.A.'s fitness scene, and asks the immortal question: Will they let her eat cake?

by Rachel Zients

Dear reader, I have frolicked in and out of many of the greater Greater Los Angeles health clubs. Gyms are not foreign territory to me. Indeed, it is practically impossible not to join a gym, at least on a trial basis, in L.A. I've had free memberships literally thrown at me by strangers, along with those free cell phone offers. *Be in Shape and Be in Touch*—I'm nominating this as the new town motto.

But am I what you'd call... gym-friendly? Gym-conversant? A frequenter of gyms? No. My relationship with exercise is rather like my relationship with boyfriends: needy, non-committal, sporadic, euphoric, lazy, ongoing, disgraceful, desperate, disappointing. (Surprisingly, I am still available for dinner this Saturday. Anyone?)

Yes, I have always shied away from heavy lifting; recently, as an excuse for said laziness, I've been professing a need to work out my mind, to expand my wit. Is there a gym for that, you may ask? Yes—it's called a library.

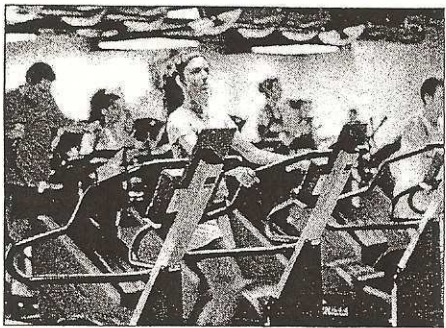
But, since being attractive is actually a job requirement for most of us here in the entertainment industry, and since I've been assigned to cover gym culture, I'll have to do better than that. I think back to John Travolta—in pre-beefy mode—who found himself in a similar predicament (*Perfect*, circa 1985) as a *Rolling Stone* reporter sent to infiltrate the 1980s health club craze. He did not waver in his assignment; he pressed harder. He took Jamie's class. He sweated. He panted. He was not satisfied with preconceived notions.

So, something like a good reporter (I can pass for one in the right light), I am off to lands of prettier-than-me and more-disciplined-than-I-could-ever-be.

Pump and Grind

Bally's on Sunset and Gower in Hollywood is my first stop. I've had an on-and-off-again relationship with this place for years. Its contract is very hard to get out of, as there are so many locations everywhere; they just keep following you if you leave town. But like Klinger, when I finally was free, I went and signed up again. Go ahead, charge my Visa \$8.99 a month for the rest of my life—see if I care!

This is my gym, but I still don't know my way around, so a lovely



girl from the staff serves as my guide. And she's already fairly skeptical of me: Who comes to the gym with a pen and spiral, anyway? But I'm ready for whatever story is about to break as we tour the showers.

"So," I begin, clearing my throat for the appropriate dramatic pause... But instead of formulating a dynamic question on the business of perpetuating over-training, poor body image, and the ongoing sales of dangerous diet supplements in this very gym, I pose the ever-important question: "Is this really where they shoot the commercials?"

"Here and North Hollywood," she says, unimpressed.

I am swimming in pride: That's *my* gym on TV. She goes on to tell me certain specifics of the club: eight times around the track equals a mile, \$30-50 an hour will get you a personal trainer, 35 cents to park.

"So what kind of people work out here?"

"Mostly wannabe actors"—stressing the "wannabe" a little too much for my liking—"old people, and Asian people."

"Who?"

"Asian people, they love the jacuzzi."

"Oh."

"People come here to be social, to pick up each other, but mostly to work out. Those who socialize—I don't want to stereotype, but I've heard stories about the men's steam room."

Tempting as it is to follow up these rumors, I show some decorum and decide it's best to bid my guide adieu and do some of my own on-site reporting—you know, hang out, see what the scene is like. A few minutes on my own and I'm a little disappointed. I was hoping for a crew, a gang, an in-crowd that sorta ran the place. They would gather around the rowing machines, sip sports drinks, and make you jealous when you entered as they giggled from some hilarious joke about cellulite one of them just told (though you would notice that as they laughed heartily nothing would shake on their bodies). But this is a serious crowd, all keeping to themselves and their machines, aside from one guy walking on his hands in the other room, who I'm sure is a barrel of fun.

This massive room full of pumping and thumping seems to be made up of a handful of individuals as opposed to a collective group. Maybe the essence of gym culture is to be alone together. Maybe this is their precious time away from the daily grind.

"You want a carrot cake?" a woman screams at another across the gym café, breaking the silence.

Ah, my people have arrived.

"You should have a fruit bar," she scolds her friend as she taps on the freezer, "instead of that cake."

And then, leaving her cake-eating friend in the corner, she—sweating, Evian bottle in hand—heads back out to the gym with a flourish. And the cake eater patiently, carefully, painstakingly begins to open the wrapper, hopeful the calorie police aren't coming for her.

I am suddenly reminded of the time my best friend and I joined a gym together (Beverly Hills Health and Fitness). At the time, my days were long, spent waiting for the phone to ring with a hopeful appointment, so to fill my time she and I went often. Or rather, *she* went often; she was productive. When I'd spot her car, I'd run inside, enjoy the air-conditioning, and wait for her to finish her treadmill. I'd talk, she'd run. Then we'd head down to King's Road Café for a nice lemonade. It was a lovely way to spend the day.

Back to Bally's: I figure there may be clues to this culture on the common bulletin board. No, just gym information—classes, rules—and pictures of pretty people. No announcements of parties or secret locations you can only go if your thighs meet regulations.

Something for Every Body

Enough information gathering. The moment of truth has arrived: I will have to actually exercise myself to get this story right. Hey, if that's what it takes—a little exercise should do me good.

I am biking. I have a lovely view of the pool, and everyone is Asian. I have no idea what this means. All around me, no one's talking. This looks more like doing time than hanging out. Actually, one guy seems to be having an awfully good time just jumping up and down in the sauna. Has he met the hand walker?

has crept up behind me. "I'm just kidding. The other day, I'm struggling to keep up and this guy, like 80 years old, sits down next to me and he's *zooming*... See ya!" And he's off to quietly prove his masculinity on a Versaclimber. At my old gym, I used to watch this girl who I'm sure I've seen on *90210*, thinking, If I worked out as hard as she did, Dylan would love me, too. Worth noting: Competitive nature a factor of gym culture.

Also worth noting: You can always count on lots of naked ladies in the locker rooms. But a woman perched like a bird on the sink counter, wrapped in a towel, in a white face mask? And then, only seconds later, a bikini-clad woman exiting a bathroom stall, hitting all four hand dryers—then returning just as mysteriously to her stall? At least the line, four people deep, for the scale I recognize and understand.

Back at home, I compare notes with my roommate on what I've witnessed: the isolation, the solemnity, the stray odd behavior. He offers this observation: "Since they pay a membership, they feel like it's their home, like they can act like they do when they're home, and usually worse!" He goes to L.A. Fitness.

As I was trying to pick up a dance class schedule at the Edge on North Cole Ave.—I didn't know it was closed on Sundays—I overheard a mysterious, seemingly coded argument between a pair of guys in front of Gold's gym next door. The clink-clanking of Gold's has always kept me away. It seems so scary, all that pumping iron—I could get hurt.

"Come back here—I want to talk to you," pleads one.

"No," the other snorts, defiantly heading toward the gym door. "I'll make a scene in there."

Oooh. This stops first guy in his tracks. What makes "in there" such a tremendous threat? A disturbance of the tranquility? More likely their perceived place in their gym community could be disturbed.

What was this "community" really about? I decided to delve further and check it out in the ultimate exercise-avoiding way: on the Internet. At the Gold's website, I found out that the "Gold rush" started in Venice, Calif. in 1965, and the gym is now the mecca of body-building and "serious fitness for every body." (Get it?) The page titled "Lifestyles of the Fit and Famous" highlights such muscled fellas as Jean-Claude Van Damme, Steve Austin, Dennis Hopper... Dennis Hopper? Huh? Pictured in a weight belt, no less. Isn't this the same person who claimed there was no cocaine left in the United States because of him? (I don't understand. I don't understand!)

While the "frequently asked questions" page of the Bally's website is pretty straightforward—stuff like, "If I move, how do I get you to stop billing me?"—the Gold's F.A.Q. page is a little more hardcore. It's a series of "what is" questions, with definitions for such terms of the trade as aerobics, atrophy, burn, exercise physiology, glycogen (yeah, what is glycogen?), muscle failure, overfat (that I know), overload (know that too), overtraining (not familiar with this one), negative resistancy (possibly familiar with this as well), spotters, steroids, tone, and so on ad gymnasium. Glycogen, by the by, "is the 'storage' form of carbohydrates in humans, an energy source used by the blood." I'm sorry—does glycogen even exist in L.A.? I thought it was run out of town courtesy of some official edict involving Atkins and other fad diets.

And a spotter, if you didn't know, is defined as "a partner who watches over someone doing weightlifting exercises to make sure the exerciser does not drop a barbell or pair of dumbbells." They go on to add, "Spotters are used for safety reasons." Now, this one is helpful, "cause in my world a "spotter" is that friend at a party who alerts you to an ex-boyfriend's arrival prior to his "spotting" you—an indicator to fancy up that lipstick, move away from the hors d'oeuvres.

The Peanut Gallery

Now that my friends and relations know I'm doing a story on gyms, they've all got a piece of their mind to share with me, most along the lines of, "Come to my gym!" There are variants: "It's a hoot!" (Bodies in Motion). "Not very gym-y." (The YMCA.) "I schlep three times a week from Hollywood to Sherman Oaks for a 7:30 a.m. class, but it's worth it." (Taebob.)

There are more general comments, not all directed at me: "I prefer yoga at home." (My sister.) "And look how ripped I am." (My

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Gym Culture

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sister again.) "A lot of times they use trainers as their therapists, and I'm like, 'Focus on your workout, not your weekend!'" (My friend the Pilates instructor.) "Spend more time in the gym and less time on your phone!" (My roommate to some big naked guy wheeling and dealing in the L.A. Fitness locker room today.)

"I got to play basketball inside all morning!" (Another friend very excited on this new Sports Club/L.A. membership.) "Come with me," he offers. But after looking through his new membership welcome folder, I feel a little out of place (read: poor). They even ask your income on the membership application! Like you can only use a treadmill if you have a 401k plan?

So to clear my head, I'm going to get some exercise I can do for free: a walk up around the Hollywood Reservoir.

Ah—calm, peaceful. This is one of my happy places in L.A. The Hollywood sign looms above, people say hello when they pass, birds chirp... really loud, very near to my head, bringing to mind a pterodactyl ready for a feeding. Oh—it's just a lady jogging with her pet parrot. Only in L.A.

Soon I'm sweating. That's where I stop. For now. I know, I know—my readers are counting on me. So it's back to the Edge for that dance schedule. This time they're open. But there's so much sashaying, so much "in my way"ing with turns and twirls, the dancers almost knock me over as they show off in the hall. Competitive much?

The pen is mightier than the grand jeté, I repeat to myself—the pen is mightier than the grand jeté.

Home at Last

I gather what's left of my weary self and hoof it out of there and over to Crunch on the corner of Sunset & Crescent Heights. The closest I've been to this gym was to help my friend jumpstart his car in the Laemmle parking lot after he'd "crunched" up a sweat.

It'll be a little closer this time—across the way, at Buzz, catching some sun and sipping coffee. I can do my observing from here. A woman with huge (huge!) biceps sips coffee next to me. She seems more like a Gold's person. I'm catching on.

There's a constant stream of traffic of Adidas-clad, tight-abbled, tremendously purposeful, gym-bag-toting types, all well-coiffed but with a heavy preference for bandanas. They are all *very attractive*, and obviously prepare to arrive for the workout almost as diligently as they work out. But does anyone else see the irony in taking an escalator up to the gym when there's a perfectly good staircase ready for the taking? I'm just sayin'.

Word has it there's a scandalous see-through shower door up the way. Again, I will show some decorum.

More my speed is Beverly Hills Health and Fitness—yes, my old gym, on Beverly & Sweetzer. It was voted Best Gym in L.A. for the money by the *L.A. Weekly*. It may not be as fancy or have as many options, and maybe one year they seemed to move the equipment around every day—but how can you go wrong when next to the Promax bars in the vending machine are Brown Sugar Frosted Pop Tarts?

I go running in, like returning to an old friend. I end up in the back of the ladies' locker room, a room with nothing but a chair, a counter, and a mirror. When I would come looking for my friend, we'd usually meet back here. She even carries around a picture of us we took in that mirror.

I feel very much at home.

When I joined, the deciding factor was a stretch room upstairs full of color and full of quiet, dressed up with wood beams—kind of like summer camp. And like at camp, the gym's staff remind me of those counselors from other bunks whom you know and acknowledge, even though you don't know their names; you just know you're on the same team.

"Where have you been?" one of trainers exclaims. His face lights up so genuinely that I'm a little taken aback. He sits down with me, tells me how busy it's been, that people come here longterm. It's a true community. He points out a woman who's been coming six days a week for the last 10 years.

That's a little insane, I think. But when he smiles at her and waves, "Bye, Karen," I think, Well, that's nice.

He tells me people like the equipment, the atmosphere. It's cheap. And then I remember he used to invite me to barbecues, and always made sure to introduce me to people walking by. I inquire about his holidays and he wishes me well. Then I see a face I know, and think I must be a face someone else knows.

That's nice, too.

You can get in shape, look pretty, and feel good in any capacity in this town. You've got a lot of choices. So while you go about it, and to make sure you continue with it, you should surround yourself in the world in which you feel the most comfortable—whether it's raging biceps with pumping music, Adidas-sleek Adonises in the center of town, or stubborn quiet while working up a nice sweat. The goal is the same—the getting there and the enjoyment depend on you.

Before I start to sound like a motivational speaker, I need a nap. I'm exhausted.

BSW

Rachel Zients is a writer based in Los Angeles.
Photos of Crunch by Gary Leonard