

OLD DOGS, NEW TRICKS

BY SHIRLEY ARCHER, JD, MA

WHY THE FITNESS EQUIPMENT
OF OUR CHILDHOOD IS ENJOYING A RESURGENCE
IN TODAY'S LATEST PROGRAMMING TRENDS.

People cherish their memories of playful childhood activities. Bouncing on a trampoline, jumping rope and playing ball are some of our favorites. Capitalizing on the way these memories resonate with baby boomers, creative fitness entrepreneurs are now making the well-loved devices of the past the focus of some of today's most popular branded fitness programs. What accounts for the popularity of equipment that harks back to the gym classes of old? "Because sports-based activities take us back to our youth, fun, nonchoreographed fitness is in," says Mindy Mylrea, 1999 IDEA Fitness Instructor of the Year and owner of Jump Inc. in Santa Cruz, California.

The fact is these new programs are putting the fun back in fitness for many consumers. Plus, they provide a range of fitness benefits, such as training clients for specific sports, providing customized workouts, relieving stress and providing an alternative to choreographed routines. This article explores the dynamics affecting programming that uses three popular types of equipment: trampolines, jump ropes and medicine balls. ►

TRAMPOLINE-BASED PROGRAMS

J. B. Berns is the creator of Urban Rebounding™, a program that debuted in 1999. "Today, Urban Rebounding is in approximately 130 clubs nationwide," says Berns. One club chain that can attest to the program's popularity among members is Crunch Fitness, since all 19 of its facilities offer Urban Rebounding. According to Dayna Crawford, director of public relations for Crunch, the classes have been a hit from the start with people of all ages and sizes. "Classes fill up every time, with an average attendance of 50 to 60 people per session," she says.

EQUIPMENT DESIGN

Classes offer a full workout on a specially designed mini-trampoline, known as a "rebounder." It should be noted that rebounders are not new and have been used in fitness classes in the past. However, today's equipment is much improved. "These rebounders are far superior to the ones of the past," says Lisa Druxman, fitness and programs director for the Sporting Club at Aventine in La Jolla, California.

What separates today's equipment from that of yesteryear? "This equipment was originally designed for rehab applications, so it's safe, effective and versatile," says Berns. "It's larger than other products, which makes it safer. The high-quality material doesn't break down like other fabrics or stretch during the downward landing, but still provides a resilient bounce. The heavy-grade, all-steel round frame and spring mechanisms also ensure a soft and safe bounce. There's a stabilizing bar that can be added for older clients who may need help with balance. Plus, the units can be folded and stacked."

PROGRAM DESIGN

An Urban Rebounding class features bounces: basic, aerobic, strength and abdominal. Participants warm up then bounce through a cardiovascular workout that entails sport-specific moves, plyometrics, abdominal training and flexibility training. The class objective is total body conditioning; much emphasis is placed on avoiding joint strain and ensuring clients maintain the fun quotient.

The rebounder is at the core of the workout and is used for simple stretches as well as more strenuous movements. According to Berns, the name "Urban Rebounding" reflects the spirit of the community it builds within class participants. "There's a real 'wow' effect when you see 30 or 40 people jumping together," he says.

PROGRAM BENEFITS

While most participants take an Urban Rebounding class for fun, Crunch's Crawford points to the program's impressive fitness benefits. "What's fueling the continued interest are the results people are achieving," she says. According to Berns, those benefits include cardiovascular training and improvements in balance, agility and coordination. Berns cites NASA studies from the 1980s that document how the training helped astronauts recover from the physical effects of life in the weightless environment of outer space.

The bottom line, however, is that rebounding is pure and simple fun. "Class is a time for a rediscovery of joy, for a rediscovery of instincts toward simple childlike play," says Berns. Rebounding provides an opportunity to play in a group setting and feel like a kid again.

GROUP APPLICATIONS

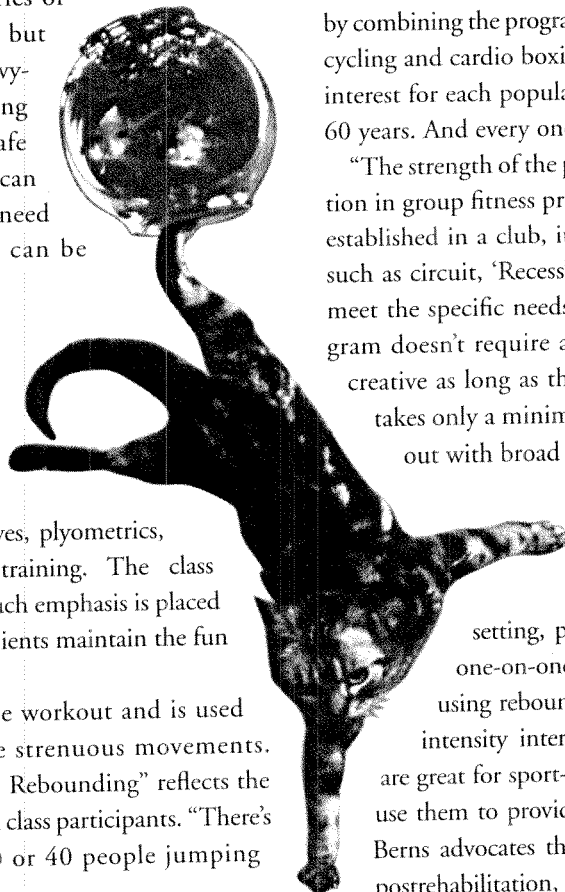
Apparently, much fun is being had at La Jolla's Sporting Club at Aventine. "It's the hottest new workout at our facility," claims Druxman. "We decided to get it after trying a class at the World Fitness IDEA® conference this past summer in Las Vegas. The energy was incredible, and the workout was impressive. Our members have loved it, and the classes just keep growing. We have 10 classes per week with 30 rebounders in each class, and they're often maxed."

Druxman introduced Urban Rebounding into the Sporting Club by combining the program with other popular classes, such as indoor cycling and cardio boxing. "Rebounding has added a new level of interest for each population. Participants range in age from 20 to 60 years. And every one of them comments that it's fun."

"The strength of the program [shows in] what it's done for retention in group fitness programs," says Berns. "Once the program is established in a club, it can be diversified to include new classes, such as circuit, 'Recess' and 'Box 'n' Bounce.' This allows you to meet the specific needs of different client profiles. Plus, the program doesn't require any licensing fees, and instructors can be creative as long as they stay within certain safety guidelines. It takes only a minimal investment to offer a very eclectic workout with broad appeal."

PERSONAL TRAINING APPLICATIONS

While the rebounder is effective in a class setting, personal trainers can also incorporate it into one-on-one client sessions. "Our personal trainers are using rebounders for circuit training programs and high-intensity interval programs," says Druxman. "Rebounders are great for sport-specific training, such as skiing. Trainers also use them to provide balance training for seniors." In addition, Berns advocates the broad use of the rebounder for clients in postrehabilitation, people with osteoporosis and, of course, kids.



JUMP ROPE PROGRAMS

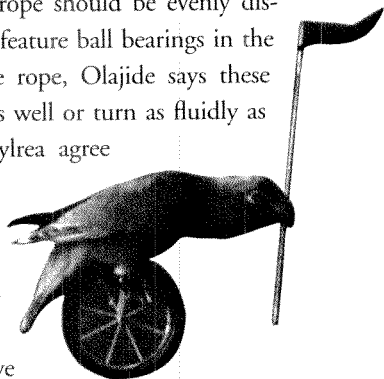
In another trend that harks back to school yard days, fitness programs that feature jump rope training are also taking clubs by storm. While some of these workouts are newcomers to the scene, others have been around for a while. For example, Mylrea introduced group jump rope classes at the 1994 World Fitness IDEA international convention; her classes included a high-low and jump rope workout called "Jump This" and a floor workout with step intervals called "Jump Step." Mylrea now offers six popular videos that incorporate rope jumping. "There's definitely been an increase in tape sales," she reports. "And I'm frequently being asked to lead sports movement workshops that include rope jumping and medicine ball training."

Michael "Silk" Olajide Jr., former boxer and world middleweight titleholder, is another jump rope pioneer. In 1992, Olajide developed the Aerobox[®] workout, which included some jump rope training in what was primarily a boxing format. Ultimately, to satisfy client demand he created an independent rope workout, now called Aerojump[®]. "People were genuinely interested in jumping rope for fitness," he said. "They would come and ask me for more training after boxing class."

Olajide points to two reasons why clients are ready for jump rope workouts: the growing popularity of fitness boxing programs and the fact that people want simpler fitness tools. "It makes sense for people to emulate what an athlete would do, and jumping rope is the way many high-performance athletes get or stay in shape," he says. "Using simple tools to condition the body is putting the emphasis back on the body doing the exercise and not the machine. I call it 'effective simplicity.'"

EQUIPMENT DESIGN

Like Berns, Olajide emphasizes the significance of high-quality equipment and recommends using a well-engineered jump rope. He developed a product called the Aerojump Rainmaker, constructed of plastic. "Leather ropes are slower than the nylon/plastic breed," says Olajide. "Leather is also harder to turn and tends to get slowed down by the air, which resists the movement. Beaded jump ropes are cumbersome because the beads can slide and cause a weight imbalance. The weight on any rope should be evenly distributed." While some products feature ball bearings in the handles to assist in turning the rope, Olajide says these break easily and don't respond as well or turn as fluidly as plastic models. Olajide and Mylrea agree that weighted ropes are best for achieving overload and stressing different muscle groups, especially in advanced participants. However, both recommend that exercisers first improve



WHAT THESE NEW EQUIPMENT-BASED PROGRAMS SHARE

- A NEW, IMPROVED EQUIPMENT DESIGN
- NOMINAL EQUIPMENT INVESTMENT
- THE ABILITY TO BE MODIFIED FOR ALL FITNESS LEVELS
- EQUIPMENT THAT IS EASILY PORTABLE AND STORABLE
- AN INTERACTIVE ASPECT THAT ENCOURAGES CAMARADERIE AND HEALTHY COMPETITION
- THE ABILITY TO BE EASILY INCORPORATED INTO GROUP OR PERSONAL TRAINER SESSIONS
- A HIGH FUN QUOTIENT

their agility and coordination using a speed rope, which is lightweight and turns quickly.

PROGRAM DESIGN

Olajide's Aerojump program is a challenging one-hour workout that includes various maneuvers designed to condition select upper- and lower-body muscle groups while continuously working the cardiovascular system. The program consists of a warm-up, stretches, a movement preview, 10 short jumping segments that progress in intensity, push-up segments and a cool-down. The routine is based on Olajide's own boxing experience, in which the rope was used as a training tool to achieve total body conditioning.

PROGRAM BENEFITS

Participants like jump rope training because it's tough, efficient, fun and self-paced. Because most people remember jumping effortlessly when they were young, as adults they can challenge themselves to regain long-lost childhood skills. Beyond the fun factor, rope work offers multiple benefits, such as improved agility, dexterity, coordination, timing, rhythm and focus; anaerobic and aerobic conditioning; improved upper- and lower-body muscular endurance; and effective weight management. Rope jumping is also an excellent cross-training activity for many sports, including tennis, basketball, running, football and skiing. Exercisers can easily modify their workouts to increase the physical challenge or produce different results. Furthermore, the jump rope's portability as a convenient, efficient, urban workout is hard to beat. "It's a confidence booster each time you nail a new maneuver and an intense workout that can travel with you anywhere," says Olajide.

GROUP APPLICATIONS

In a group setting, jump rope classes provide mass motivation, great music and a coached workout without complex choreography. Participants can focus on their own workout, without having to constantly tune into an instructor's cues. Each individual works at

his or her own pace, while enjoying the group camaraderie. And because it's associated with sports training, rope work is also bringing a lot more men into classes. Seth Denberg, a regular in Olajide's classes, says, "For me, it's a total release, a stress killer. I'd be a mess without it."

PERSONAL TRAINING APPLICATIONS

Jumping rope can also be readily and handily incorporated into personal training sessions. The rope's versatility as a conditioning tool lets personal trainers customize workouts for clients. According to Mylrea, "It's easy, it's cheap and it gets the job done. Rope jumping with a coach as a motivator and a timer is all beneficial."

Olajide thinks jumping rope will only increase in popularity among trainers, especially as a sports conditioning method. "I see the rope being used in conjunction with free weights and isometrics, as well as intense stretching exercises and plyometrics." Don't be surprised if your own clients soon start requesting rope training. "The reason jumping rope is showing a resurgence is because exercisers can see measurable results from their efforts," says Mylrea.

MEDICINE BALL PROGRAMS

In yet another nod to the gym classes of our youth, medicine balls are also making a comeback. Paul Chek, owner of the C.H.E.K. Institute in Encinitas, California, and creator of Paul Chek Seminars, has been training athletes with medicine balls since 1985. Over the years, he's developed an effective medicine ball program for group instructors, personal trainers and rehab professionals using a new product called the NRG BALL™, which he developed in conjunction with Sports Training Devices LLC.

Brien Shamp is a fitness trainer and creator of the Athletic Training Program™ (ATP), a medicine ball program that incorporates athletic training drills for people at all levels of fitness. "The motto of the program is 'You don't have to be an athlete to train like one,'" says Shamp.

Maureen Hagan, national director of fitness for the GoodLife Fitness Clubs in Canada and 1998 IDEA Program Director of the Year, introduced Golf Fit, a group exercise program that uses a medicine ball to help clients cross train to improve their golf performance. The ball is used specifically to improve core stabilization and enhance power in the golf swing.

EQUIPMENT DESIGN

Like the new, improved trampoline and jump rope programs, today's medicine ball programs use current technology to create a

training tool that is superior to that offered in the past. In general, state-of-the-art medicine balls are weighted balls, anywhere from 1 to 50 pounds. They are available in a variety of surfaces, sizes and colors and come in two types: bouncy ("live balls") and nonbouncy ("dead balls").

Chek designed his medicine ball with features that specifically enhance his workout program. "The NRG BALL has a unique handle system that affords many interesting hand-eye coordination development options and can mimic sports implements, such as golf clubs, hockey sticks, tennis racquets or baseball bats," he says. "The handles also make the ball easier for the elderly population to hold."

PROGRAM DESIGN

In addition to the NRG BALL, Chek offers six videos that teach fitness professionals how to format beginner, intermediate and advanced workouts.

Shamp's ATP program also features workouts in a specific progression. The balls are used in a general warm-up and then in drills to develop upper-, lower- and core-body strength, power and balance. While Shamp's program enhances aerobic capacity due to the continuous movement, anaerobic metabolism is dominant during the ATP workouts, which replicate sports involving quick bursts of activity.

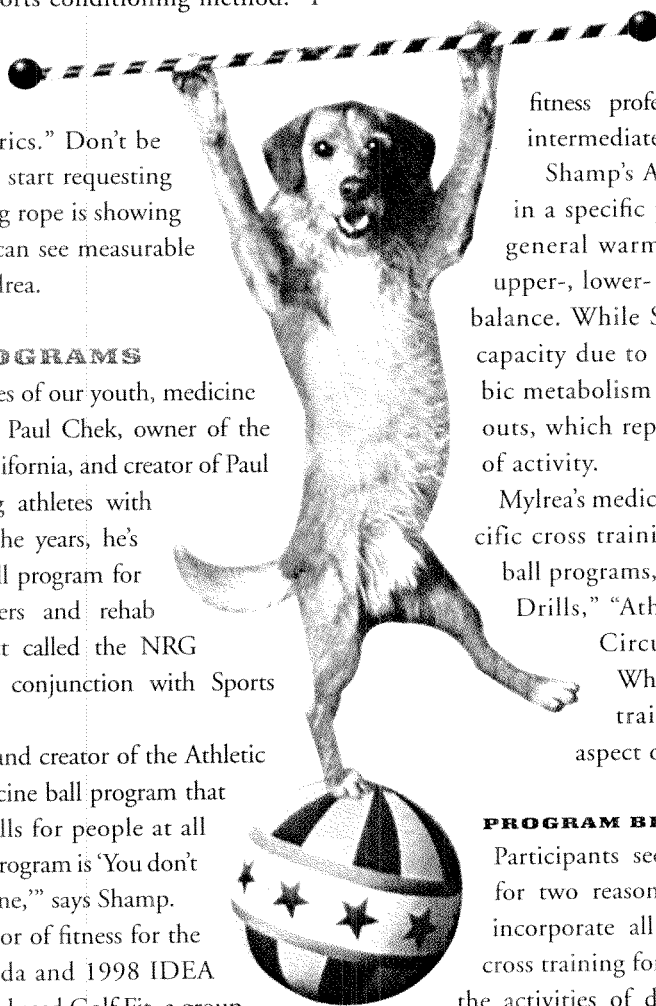
Mylrea's medicine ball workouts focus on sport-specific cross training. She offers a range of medicine ball programs, including "Medicine Ball Skills and Drills," "Athletic Training Drills," "The Super Circuits Sampler" and "Play Ground."

While all of these feature functional sports training, they also emphasize the fun aspect of working out with medicine balls.

PROGRAM BENEFITS

Participants seem to enjoy medicine ball training for two reasons: It's fun and it's effective. It can incorporate all aspects and levels of fitness, from cross training for sports to enhancing function during the activities of daily living. Ball workouts can train

functional movement patterns in multiple planes; simulate sport- or work-specific throwing patterns; stimulate high-speed eccentric loading (using bouncing balls); provide constant activation of core stabilizers during standing exercises; and promote eye-hand coordination and neuromuscular training. Plus, medicine balls can be used indoors or outdoors and are easily transported from place to place.



GROUP APPLICATIONS

Medicine balls are ideal for group exercise, since training is interactive. Partners or teams play together, increasing camaraderie and creating friendly, energizing competition. The most successful group programs tend to have a sports focus, like Golf Fit. According to Hagan, "This class immediately became popular and is continuing to grow in our clubs." Because ATP cuts across all fitness levels, classes in this format are just as effective for the mother who simply wants to stay in shape as they are for the weekend warrior athlete or the more serious, competitive athlete. "At one club [that offers ATP training], most of the members are older and deconditioned," Shamp says. "The program was successfully modified to match their fitness level." Shamp thinks medicine ball training in a group is growing because it generates fun—and results. "It's boring to sit on a machine and press weight up and down. Also, strength generated from machine weight training doesn't carry over much into real-life situations." With medicine ball training, Shamp says, clients can train to replicate movements from specific sports or the types of activities people actually engage in on a daily basis.

Mylrea says medicine ball training can easily be incorporated into other group workouts, giving clients a double dose of fun. "It's easy to add the balls into a preexisting workout, such as a weight routine. Different sizes of balls produce different results. Choose according to the desired outcome. Instructors can also incorporate the balls into circuit-type classes."

PERSONAL TRAINING APPLICATIONS

The medicine ball is ideal for personal trainers because it often requires two people to execute drills and it's very versatile. Hagan thinks the medicine ball has enhanced personal training in GoodLife clubs because the ball provides a workout focus. "Trainers can design workouts for clients with specific sports performance goals. When a client's game improves, he's sold," she says.

Paul Collins developed the REBOUND medicine ball programs in Sydney, Australia. He says, "As a transportable tool, the medicine ball is great for the personal trainer and people on the go. As a result, it seems to be popular with individual athletes." Collins's program features a medicine ball that can be used on land or in the water. REBOUND is also popular among older fitness enthusiasts, who use the ball for seated exercises and group activities.

FUTURE GAMES

Clearly, nonchoreographed, sports-based training with old equipment standbys is quickly becoming an integral part of fitness programming. Consumers are seeking workouts that meet their individual needs, develop skills and are fun and energizing to boot! Programs that feature simple, improved equipment such as

RESOURCES

TRAMPOLINE PROGRAM

Urban Rebounding Athletics, (888) 522-3767,
(212) 734-6313

JUMP ROPE PROGRAMS

Aerobox Athletic Enterprises Inc., (888) 237-6586,
(212) 679-8488, www.goaero.com

Jump Inc., (877) JUMPINC, (831) 457-2512,
www.Jumpincfitness.com

MEDICINE BALL PROGRAMS

NRG BALL Exercise Program, (800) 552-8789,
(760) 632-6360, www.paulchekseminars.com

NRG BALL, (877) 422-5534, (973) 992-8665

Athletic Training Program (ATP), (800) 330-7296,
www.shamps-atp.com

Golf Fit, GoodLife Fitness Club, (519) 661-0190

minitrampolines, jump ropes and medicine balls appeal to clients and produce visible results. And by their nature these types of equipment allow facilities to introduce new programs with a minimal purchasing investment.

Yet effective use of these tools as training devices does require the staff to have special knowledge. Fitness leaders and trainers need to understand how to use these tools safely and effectively and how to customize workouts to meet participants' individual needs. Even in a group context, instructors must know how to let individuals go at their own pace—imperative in these new, playful, nonchoreographed routines. As more participants rely on such programs to produce functional results, fitness professionals will be held more accountable for the services they provide.

Group fitness has continued to reinvent itself to meet people's evolving needs, to reflect findings in exercise science and to incorporate technological improvements in equipment design. As we enter the new millennium, our industry continues to challenge itself to find better ways to encourage and support new participants. The only limits we face are imposed by our own imaginations. ♦

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