The shape we’re in

The bodies we covet, and the state-of-the-art training techniques that create them, have changed dramatically in recent years. Dedicated follower of exercise fashion Charlotte Sinclair investigates the 21st-century fitness revolution

Photograph by Rick Pushinsky

I’m 10 minutes into a work-out at Bodyism, the hottest gym in London, and, frankly, it’s not what I expected. Founded by James Duigan, the food and fitness guru behind the Clean & Lean diet whose growing fan base includes the models Rosie Huntington-Whiteley and Elle Macpherson and the actress Jennifer Lawrence, Bodyism is housed in a serene space in the Bulgari Hotel in Knightsbridge, all wood panelling and glass walls. The trainers are as handsome as their environs: Albert, who is currentlyfitting a thick elastic band around my ankles, is a part-time model.

Up until this moment, it’s been pretty familiar: a quick five-minute warm-up on a cross-trainer followed by warm-up stretches to ensure my body is injury-proofed. But just as I’m steeling myself for the inevitable treadmill sprint, on goes the elastic band and I’m now being coached into a complicated series of crab-like side lunges. The work-out is a combination of Gwyneth Paltrow (toned, defined stomach, shoulders, legs), and the aerobiscised curves of a Victoria’s Secret model, that elite squad of mannequins who skip and kick-box (and juice-fast) their way into their frilly knickers. If the sacrifices involved in even attempting to look like a lingerie model sound unpalatable – not to mention genetically impossible – what about Michelle Obama and her world-trending delts? Or Team GB’s Olympic heroines Jessica Ennis and Victoria Pendleton, women with abs of steel beneath their Victoria Beckham dresses? The look is lean and sculpted but feminine, exuding a bright-eyed, bouncy vitality. And this is where the new thinking in exercise comes in: short bursts of high-intensity interval training (HIIT) combined with resistance training influenced by different disciplines such as yoga and ballet, all intended to deliver muscle without the bulk. That old gym challenging, not exhausting: Pilates-style core-strength exercises on the mat are enough to get my muscles shaking but I’m not out of breath. Then it’s back to leg exercises, this time using a slider – a round disc upon which I place my foot and, yes, slide around the floor while trying not to fall over. I can feel the burn, but where’s the sweat? “Fitness isn’t about long cardio sessions anymore,” says Albert. No kidding. My total cardio amounts to 10 minutes, tops – that burst at the beginning, and a five-minute burn on a climbing-machine to finish. But the following day I can feel my legs and abs aching, previously forgotten, underused muscles brought reluctantly to life.

Bodyism speaks to a new thinking in exercise – and its glamorous, growing following also says something of our current body aspirations and where we want to be. Or, more aptly, who we want to be. And according to a straw poll of my friends and the internet, that seems to be a combination of Gwyneth Paltrow (toned, defined stomach, shoulders, legs), and the aerobiscised curves of a Victoria’s Secret model, that elite squad of mannequins who skip and kick-box (and juice-fast) their way into their frilly knickers. If the sacrifices involved in even attempting to look like a lingerie model sound unpalatable – not to mention genetically impossible – what about Michelle Obama and her world-trending delts? Or Team GB’s Olympic heroines Jessica Ennis and Victoria Pendleton, women with abs of steel beneath their Victoria Beckham dresses? The look is lean and sculpted but feminine, exuding a bright-eyed, bouncy vitality. And this is where the new thinking in exercise comes in: short bursts of high-intensity interval training (HIIT) combined with resistance training influenced by different disciplines such as yoga and ballet, all intended to deliver muscle without the bulk. That old gym
routine of 30 minutes on the cross-trainer followed by a few sit-ups? Dead. Now it’s all about sweating smarter.

“In the past five years, there’s been a revolution in training,” says the trainer Christina Howells of Body by Christina, who’s responsible for sculpting the bodies of some of the pickiest women on the planet: fashion editors (Katie Grand, the super-stylist and editor of Love magazine, is a client). “Personal trainers don’t use machines at the gym anymore. Instead, she says, it’s all about “body weight training”, using equipment such as those elastic bands, plus ViPRs (weighted tubes) and TRX (pulleys from which you dangle, doing press-ups or pull-ups), alongside more traditional weights and kettle bells, while also doing plyometrics (exercises using explosive, jumping movements). “I also incorporate barre work, for lengthening and toning, and animal flow – a form of freestyle bodyweight training that incorporates elements of gymnastics, break dancing and parkour,” she says.

Behind it is a new way of thinking that explains why all those weekly runs don’t alter the numbers on the scales. “Long cardio sessions don’t give you results, don’t get you the muscle tone you want, and rarely change your shape,” says Howells. “You don’t really get any increased muscle with long cardio workouts, and increased muscle will mean you burn more calories, even at rest. Resistance training is the secret to overall fat loss and changing shape.”

‘Increased muscle means you burn more calories. Resistance training is the secret to overall fat loss and changing shape’

HIT also boosts human growth hormone (hGH) levels, the stuff that keeps you looking younger for longer. Morris asserts that understanding how hormones impact on our body shape is the future of fitness. Hormones are responsible for fat distribution patterns. Jiggly, “bingo wing” arms? That’ll be handled? Classic insulin and blood-sugar intolerance. The drop-off in hGH as we age is responsible for a corelle loss in body muscle. But short, sharp exercise promises to fight off middle-age spread. In a 2003 study at Brunel University, the highest levels of hGH secretion were registered in subjects who exercised at high intensity for a minimum of 10 minutes. The same study showed that endurance exercise depletes hGH.

For those of us who have always exercised, this feels like a return to basics, with some whizzy new science and methodology to keep it interesting. Fitness has always been part of my life. From doing Cindy Crawford’s aerobics video as a teenager (a generation of women raised on tinned-beans-for-

The celebrity bodies we’ve idolised over the years

Jone Fonda Over a million of us bought the original 1982 Workout video in an attempt to gain her ballet-dancer’s body – and feel that burn.

Diana, Princess of Wales Famously photographed in 1993 pumping iron in a leotard and cycling shorts, the statuesque blonde was a gym bunny who kept those calves taut with running and tennis.

Christy Turlington The embodiment of the 1990s yoga waif look, coveted in every yoga studio (and shown off on the cover of American Vogue in 2002).

Jennifer Aniston We were fascinated by her soft but strong shape, honed (post-divorce from Brad Pitt in 2005) through spinning, yoga and Pilates.

Gwyneth Paltrow Her trainer, Tracy Anderson, with whom Paltrow worked from 2006, seeks the “teeny-tiny dancer’s body” in everyone – including Cameron Diaz and Christy Turlington (showing that even committed yogis are susceptible to a hot trend).

Madonna Proving that yoga can make you sweat, her over-trained arm and Astanga arms become a tabloid obsession in 2008.

Jennifer Lawrence The Hunger Games star personifies the New Body today: softer and curvier than her contemporaries, but you wouldn’t want to arm-wrestle her. Those biceps are honed through a combination of high-intensity exercise and resistance training.
dumbbells bicep curls), I graduated to kick boxing, Astanga yoga and Bikram (which I fast fell out of love with when I raised my head during a bow pose to the sight of a man exposing himself inches from my face). I’ve done BodyPump, personal training, Tracy Anderson’s Method (does anyone actually have a living-room big enough to perform Anderson’s ‘dance cardio’?), reformer Pilates, Nike Training Club, swimming, running, dance classes, ballet barre, Jivamukti yoga and circuit training. Some have stayed constants – running, Pilates – some fell by the wayside, proven to be unsustainable or ineffectual. The only trend I haven’t tried is Zumba. It scares me.

That list makes me sound like an obsessive. I’m not. I exercise – three times a week, sometimes more – because it makes me feel good in a different way from completing a hard day’s work. It also helps maintain my weight because I don’t diet. (I follow a healthy eating policy of my own devising – lots of green things, lean protein – with room for error, and by error I mean chocolate and wine.) The number of fitness regimes I’ve attempted is more about seeing what works best, and also because I get bored. Boredom is the enemy of the hot bod. And it is always the hot bod we’ve aspired to. Ever since the dawn of Britain’s obsession with fitness in the 1980s – when a Jazzercised Jane Fonda figure became the ultimate consumer accessory – celebrities and their exercise regimes have defined our times.

“A few years ago it was all very Madonna-y,” says Duigan. “That very sinewy look wasn’t healthy or achievable at all, and it was the result of really strenuous, body-breaking routines for two hours a day. Women were making a virtue of the fact that they ate a lettuce leaf and a bowl of dust. It was crazy.”

If you’ve exercised for years, you come to an empirical understanding about what works for you and your body and what’s a waste of time and money. Those regimes that endure – running, yoga, circuit training – are those that are most effective.

(‘Women always look for a quick fix. The trends that have longevity keep you interested and stimulated’)

For me, weights work. Not big ones, but heavy enough that it’s a struggle to keep going. Personal-trainer-led cardio, as instructed by Olu Adepitan at Lomax, also works, but not if it’s so exhausting I replace every last calorie burnt due to hunger. Pilates works too, especially under the tutelage of David Higgins at Ten Pilates. (Those girls with perfectly flat tummies on the beach? Reformer pilates.) It’s in the balance of all three where I find my best body: lean and strong, not skinny. (Not that skinny is even possible for my genetic make-up.)

Nutrition is as important as ever. “To get the body you want you have to have dedication but your nutrition also has to be good: no sugar, no processed food,” says Howells. “Eighty per cent of an exercise regime is what you put in your body.” Duigan goes further, noting that what we eat is influenced by how we think. “The best piece of equipment you have is your body. The most powerful tool is your brain. Exercise is evolving past, ‘Set your goals and don’t let anything get in your way,’ to getting to the root cause of why you’re unhealthy, why you’re unmotivated to eat right or get fit. A lot of people believe they don’t deserve to be happy and healthy. Your body believes what your mind tells it. I’m all about letting go of shame and guilt.”

This psychological, therapeutic approach to fitness is echoed by the popularity of the New York spin class SoulCycle, where serious cardio is accompanied by a stream of life-enhancing messages. Jake Gyllenhaal, Lady Gaga and Lena Dunham are fans. SoulCycle reaches London next year, to add to the fever for boutique exercise classes. (Prime-time sessions for cult work-outs Barrecore or Barry’s Bootcamp are as difficult to get into as VIP clubs.)

Of course, there’s no such thing as an ideal body. Celebrities and models are paid to look a certain way, and have genetics to thank for much of it. In real terms, the new body is only ever going to be the best version of yourself. But the new thinking is reassuring for its not-newness, for its focus on achievable results through proven methods, for loosening up the old strictures – and a more incorporative, anti-boredom, mindful approach to exercise. After all, you cannot, through magic or willpower, grow longer legs. Perhaps a dose of reality is just what we need.