



# HOW FITNESS JUST GOT COOL

Pretending you don't have to try is so last century – now everyone wants to be seen to be keeping in shape, and looking good while doing it

WORDS: Joanna Ebsworth

**W**ant to know what London's trend-setters look for when they need to let off steam?

A darkened venue with flashing lights? Check. Thumping 90s music blasting out of the PA? Check. Like-minded people all looking to get high? Check.

You won't find them in nightclubs, though. If you want to know where all the cool people go to have fun, just head to the gym. From early morning fitness raves and late-night Spinning sessions to fashionistas teaming the latest trainers with high fashion and substituting tequila for wheatgerm shots, being into your health and fitness has never been hotter.

The days of being made to feel like a leper because you turn down after-work drinks for a fitness class or would rather splash out on new gym kit instead of the latest must-have handbag are well and truly over. Thanks to a massive explosion of fitness cool and style, fit is now the new 'it', making exercise a central part of any hip and happening lifestyle.

Boutique gyms, Spin studios and pop-up fitness events are replacing private members bars, clubs and music festivals as THE places to be seen, and Twitter feeds are inundated with fitness-related posts from celebrities and regular people alike, all desperate to tell us about the workouts they're doing, where they're

doing them and who they're doing them with, what they're wearing and, naturally, the amazing results they're getting from their new regimes.

It might have taken a few decades, but finally it's being recognised that fitness isn't just good for your health, it can also be seriously fun – something us long-time lycra-loving gym bunnies, yogis and runners have always known. But why has it suddenly become so cool to work out (and look like you're working out) in 2014, and is the trend here to stay?

'Keeping fit and taking care of your health isn't a fad that's going to come and go in one season – it's the new standard

*'Boutique gyms are replacing bars, clubs and festivals as THE places to be seen'*

of living,' says Anjhe Mules, fitness devotee and creative director of luxury athletic wear brand Lucas Hugh (lucashugh.com). 'Only a few years ago, many women still wouldn't

admit they exercised to stay in shape. Now however, it's not only socially acceptable, it's also totally cool to invest time, money and energy into working out.'

## HOW FIT GOT HIP

So how has exercise morphed from being a big zero in many people's lives to such a huge hero? Both fitness and style experts agree it's down to a host of factors. 'Over the past few years, the celebration of the 'fit' body – as endorsed by a number of celebrities such as Cameron Diaz, Jessica Alba and Gwyneth Paltrow – coupled with the opening of interesting exercise studios all offering exciting and different workouts,

has led to an enormous increase of interest in health and fitness,' says Pip Black, co-founder of über-trendy London-based dance, fitness and holistic studios Frame (moveyourframe.com). 'There's also been vast investment from sportswear companies into developing their clothing lines, gadgetry, and online training communities. The mainstream media is also really pushing fitness as a lifestyle now – often citing celebrities and the workouts they're doing to achieve their look.

'Meanwhile, they're featuring athletic



COOL CLASSES

RAVE



MORNING GLORY



FRAME



BOOM



wear in their fashion pages and launching fitness-based events and crusades, such as the *Elle* running team and the *Sunday Times Style's* Fit Not Thin campaign. Glossy magazines are central to setting trends, so it's fabulous they've caught the bug and made fitness fashionable.'

SUPPLY AND DEMAND

When Frame launched five years ago as a destination for 'fun and fashionable fitness', the concept was lost on many, Black admits. While their dance-focused classes went down a storm with a certain crowd, she says most people at the time were 'more interested in a bottle of wine, a few cigarettes and denying themselves food, rather than working out and eating a healthy, balanced diet. I don't think anyone could work out how pushing yourself to the point of exhaustion could be fun.'

Fast forward to the here and now, and Frame has a constantly evolving roster of quirky cardio, conditioning, dance, yoga and Pilates classes to keep up with customer (and media) demand. The most notable change, says Black, is that the classes have had to get tougher to meet clients' needs. 'The number of people wanting the benefits of endorphins rushing around their body is forever increasing,' she says. 'Once someone finds a form of exercise they like, it's easy to get hooked. Seeing changes in your body and feeling incredible is like a healthy drug!'

The fact that fitness is cool (and potentially addictive) means people are now actively seeking out bigger and better workouts for their next adrenaline fix, which, in turn, is fuelling demand for new ways to get fit. Someone who's seen the effect of this chain reaction first hand is fitness entrepreneur Shara Tochia. When she launched Fitness Freak last year – an online booking system to help Londoners find last-minute places for exciting pay-as-you-go fitness classes – she needed a PR stunt to raise awareness of the service. As an instructor at trend-spotting London fitness chain GymBox at the time, Tochia was aware of a little-known dance class being held called Rave (where participants worked up a sweat with glow sticks to 90's music) and decided it would be the perfect workout to hold on a mass scale. In partnership with London listings magazine *Time Out*, a one-off pop-up event turned into a sell-out, four-night rave fitness extravaganza in June last year. And such

was the demand, they did another four nights all over again in September in a bigger venue, selling out 1,200 tickets.

While the original concept for Fitness Freak didn't initially work out – it has since re-launched itself as Fynder (fynder.io) – Tochia spotted that what people really wanted to hear more about was unique, one-off fitness events, so Sweat Mob (sweatmob.co.uk) was born, with the purpose of hosting and spreading the word about such events to the masses. 'Regular exercisers need something else every now and then that shakes them up and gets them falling in love with fitness all over again,' says Tochia. 'And for those new to exercise, trying a fun event can open their eyes to how fantastic it can be.'

Such is the popularity of unusual workouts, new fitness concept Morning Glory (morningglorylondon.yolasite.com) now holds early morning raves on a regular monthly basis, while Spin studios such as BOOMCycle (boommybody.com) and Psytle (psytlelondon.com) – both of which have super cool dancers and models for instructors – have branches springing up all over the capital. The days when a workout equalled a 30-minute run on the treadmill followed by a few sit-ups are long gone.

FITNESS GOES SOCIAL

One reason for the success of these cool fitness events and boutique gyms, says Tochia, is that they offer people a chance

to become part of a community at a time when our lives are busier and more isolated than ever.

'Not everyone wants to go to a nightclub and get drunk for fun

any more. Some of us like to lead sociable, exciting lifestyles by going somewhere we can exercise with like-minded people, and have a juice or almond milkshake with them afterwards. You might not get to experience that at your local leisure centre, but you can certainly get it at a cool fitness event or boutique gym.'

And if you're part of a community that exercises and eats a certain way, it's only natural you should want to show off this fact, which is perhaps why we're increasingly seeing branded gymwear emblazoned with the names of boutique gyms or popular workouts – think CrossFit hoodies, Bodyism jackets and Tracy Anderson leggings – becoming part of mainstream fashion. We're in the midst of an active-wear revolution, with British women devoting more thought and money

'We want to lead sociable lifestyles by exercising with like-minded people'

ARE YOU A FITNESS FASHIONISTA? HERE ARE A FEW SIGNS!

- You own more than 10 pairs of trainers, including at least one metallic pair.
- You sign up to emails to hear about Nike's latest Liberty collaboration.
- You have countless pairs of gym leggings, but none of them are black.
- You wear a wristband for any form of exercise.
- You'd rather buy Lucas Hugh than Isabel Marant.
- You go for style over substance when choosing sports bras.
- Your workout-only hair accessories collection is bigger than your everyday equivalent.





into their workout wardrobes than ever – whether they intend to exercise or not.

‘Sportswear has undergone a serious makeover,’ says fashion stylist and USA Pro Style expert, Charlotte Kewley ([charlottekewley.com](http://charlottekewley.com)). ‘High street stores like Top Shop, H&M, Urban Outfitters and even Primark have launched gymwear lines, this season’s catwalks are teeming with sports luxe outfits, and designer athletic-wear brands such as Lucas Hugh, Hey Jo and Charli Cohen are featuring as much in *Vogue* and on Net-a-Porter as in gyms. We’ve never had so much choice, and the fact you can easily pay over £100 for a pair of workout leggings means you don’t just want to show them off in the gym – you want to show them off outside too.’

### STYLE MEETS COMFORT

Comfort is also a big factor, says Kewley, not just for fitness fans, but even those in the fashion industry too. ‘Fashionistas love the fact they can wear trainers and leggings and still look cool. One of the biggest street style trends we saw at the last few fashion weeks was statement trainers, from classic New Balance to Saucony Neon. There were also a lot of gym-to-brunch looks – workout wear that you can wear all day and look good in. I love this idea! It’s cool but fits in with your life.’

It’s for exactly this reason that Mules says she set up her high-end athletic-wear clothing line, Lucas Hugh, in the first place. ‘As someone who trained regularly but was always travelling for meetings, I needed

stylish, interesting and functional outfits that worked as well outside of the gym as inside it. The influence of sportswear we’re seeing on the catwalk – and the fact that sales of denim dropped by one per cent in America last year while the active-wear market grew by five per cent – reflects the fact that women are exercising more and squeezing more into their days. They’re putting their athletic wear on in the morning, doing the school run, heading to work, and fitting in a workout before diving to the shops, so they need clothing that crosses over and still looks smart.’

### HAS IT GOT TOO COOL?

We couldn’t be happier that the latest trends are helping attract more women than ever to get fit, and that stylish gymwear is making their lives a whole lot easier. But is there a downside to the fact that fitness is now so cool? Does it mean women are simply under more social and financial pressure than ever to secure membership at the swankiest of gyms or look a certain way for their workouts, rather than simply throw on a baggy t-shirt to the local leisure centre? With annual memberships at London-based, über-trendy gyms such as Equinox and Bodyism costing thousands of pounds, and the fact that a pair of the the latest designer leggings can set you back as much as £200, some fear fitness is becoming elitist.

‘The gym used to be the one place where I could dress down and go make-up free without having to worry that people were judging me,’ says Flora Docherty, 27, from London. ‘But now, the women training around me are becoming more and more glamorous and I feel under pressure to match up to them. But I don’t have the money to spend on fancy gym kit and trendy gyms, and why should I, when I’m perfectly happy training in my comfy old

gear at my local leisure centre?’ Don’t worry, says Tochia. ‘The point is that there is now so much choice out there, there is something for everyone. You can pay

thousands for membership at an elite gym, £20 for a unique one-off fitness event, or take advantage of the Nike Training Club which is completely free. Equally, you can splash out hundreds on one gym outfit or pick up cool pieces on the high street for a fraction of the price. The main thing is women are now feeling inspired to work out – and that can only be a positive thing.’

‘One of the trends we saw at the last few fashion weeks was statement trainers’

### SUPER COOL FITNESS THINGS



#### GREAT ALL-ROUNDER

Charli Cohen’s statement Voltage Sweat, can be worn with anything from skinny jeans to leggings, it’s an easy gym-to-daywear wardrobe staple. (£195, [avenue.com](http://avenue.com))

#### MAKE A SPLASH

Neon Wetsuit’s colour-customisable surf bikini pants, tops and ‘wetsuit swimsuits’ are loved by the likes of *Vogue* and *i-D* as much as pro surfers. (£35-£100, [neonwetsuits.com](http://neonwetsuits.com))



#### LUXE LEGS

Lucas Hugh has become the go-to destination for high-fashion fitness. It took 32 panels to make these Prism Shard Leggings, ensuring you get a lot of bang for your buck. (£225, [lucashugh.com](http://lucashugh.com))

#### STEP IT UP

These über-lightweight and ultra-cushioning Nike Lunar Elite Sky Hi QS Women’s Shoes are the go-to shoe for fashion stylists on the run. (£177, [net-a-porter.com](http://net-a-porter.com))

