

Gym Gods

Going to the gym is just like going to church. Exercise is a religion.

There are holy mysteries and gym mysteries: Why do the pretty girls get on the treadmill next to me just as I can't take another step at the end of my workout? Why is it that when I return from a workout I always find another guy using a locker next to mine, so that the only two men in the large empty room are completely in each other's way?

I should first describe the church. There are two major sections: the pews and the sanctuary. Unlike a Christian church in which the sanctuary is the smaller of the two areas, it is reversed in the gym. The sanctuary, reserved for the gym elite, is the large weight training area in the back.

There are only four rows of pews. First are the treadmills. Then there is a row of step machines, mini escalators, and low bike machines. The third row contains the elliptical machines. Finally there are the normal stationary bikes.



Just as mortals who are not allowed to look upon the face of God, we, in the pews, face away from the sanctuary and the gods of the gym. We mustn't look upon them as we run, climb or bike. We can only look upon the face of mini TVs at each machine. We, who sweat, can not look upon the divine.

This produces quite a divide between the aerobic members of the gym, the folks who look like they need to be there, the folks who sweat, and the anaerobic gods who look like they live there and never sweat.

The sanctuary contains all manner of strange and mysterious machines.



Each machine has instructions on it's basic usage, but not about the number of sets and reps and why you should use this machine. That information is closely guarded by the priests of the gym.

As one progresses into the sanctuary you eventually break through to the holy of holies. There one finds the free weights. In front of the holy of holies is a huge floor to ceiling, wall to wall mirror. The gods like to see themselves strutting, lifting and admiring their perfect bodies.

Okay, so that's the set up: geared toward intimidation to those of us not gym gods.

I joined just this fall. My intent was to prevent the traditional spring start up injuries. Ever since I was about 18 and I joined the military I've run every summer. The winters are not conducive to running in Canada, so I sit back and relax and get out of shape. In the spring I start running as it gets warmer and the ice and snow leave the roads and sidewalks. This has been the cycle for many years. But the past 2 or 3 cycles have brought no end of injuries in the start up phase. The first were abductor muscles. I never knew I had any till they said, "Excuse me". The Internet provided some exercises and I worked through that. Then it was an Achilles heel. That sucker caused problems for several seasons. At first I figured it was a case of not warming up. (For years I figured the run was a good enough warm up☺.) So for two seasons I warmed up before each run and had no end of problems. This year I just ran and had no problems. It seems stretching is dangerous (far too easy to over stretch). My current philosophy is that it is best to skip stretching all together.

My season normally ends with the Terry Fox Run in September or early October. This year I trained hard for it and did well. I was very pleased, especially since the previous best time was 3 years prior and I was 10 pounds lighter. So per pound I was in the best shape ever (now if I can only lose the weight...)

So I bought a membership with the idea to preserve my conditioning and keep running all through the winter. Running and watching TV was a cool idea I thought.

My first time at the gym was certainly interesting and humbling. There are no instructions or anything. The membership gives you access, not knowledge! I got on the treadmill and plugged in my headphones: shit the cord is too short! (I had to run REAL close to the front). I selected "random" and a speed of 7mph and off I went. Now you must realize I was used to running 6 miles. On this random program the machine had me running up and down the bloody Alps! I hadn't got ½ mile and I was dead. I couldn't believe it! I was a finely conditioned athlete I thought. Oops, sorry no, according to the machine. I scaled back the height of the mountains and reduced the speed. After 20 minutes and not 3 miles I had enough and called it quits. Defeated.

Since that first day I learned my lesson. I now have an extension earphone cable and I can now run a respectable 4 miles on the treadmill, on the dead flat ☺. Guess what? Running in a heated gym is WAY tougher than running outside in the breeze.

Okay so that's the treadmills. What about all the other stuff? I tried one day on the elliptical trainers. Never again. They don't MAKE you move: with a treadmill if you don't run you fall. On the elliptical there is no motor, you can go fast or slow to suit yourself. And then there are the arm's things. Holy crow what a silly device: imagine cross-country skiing in 20° weather. I can't imagine cross-country skiing in the winter, never again in the hot gym! I worked and worked and the total mileage was frighteningly low. I'm a distance kind of guy: I've got to see that I've gone somewhere. This was like walking in water.

I tried the "spinning" class once. Never again. Spinning, sounds like a women's sewing circle. It was kinda: about 20 of us, mostly women in a circle in a room off from the main church, biking to music. The goddesses would issue decrees like, "Sit back and pedal easy". Then "Add in. Add in": increase the pressure on the tire and pedal like crazy. Then "UP": stand up and go even faster. They were nuts. The senior goddess had thighs the size of mini barrels. No keeping up with her. Holy cow. Though when I think of it there was this cute younger girl in front of me. It was definitely a religious experience to watch her ass as she pedaled to the max. Maybe I will go spinning again, now that I think of it...

Now the step machines are different. Those I will use again. To explain I must point out that I run for a reason: fear of death. I am destined to die of heart disease. So I run to delay that time as long as possible. That's the long term goal. Short term goals are things like the Terry Fox. So I don't exercise for exercise sake, I do it for some reason. So what reason is there to climb stairs? None except if you're going to do the CN Tower Stair

climb ☺. So for two weeks before that I got on this amazingly cool machine: it was a mini escalator with about 3 steps visible at any time. I had to count the steps, but about 17 made a floor and I hiked up 120 floors, more or less the 1800 steps in the CN Tower. So that really helped. This fall I climbed the Tower in a good pace, so I was not totally embarrassed.

Okay, so that has been my experience in the main church. About a month after I joined I ventured into the sanctuary. As I stood there dripping sweat from my run, looking about me in bewilderment, Hulk Hogan, a god if ever there was one, came up to me and offered to show how to do something. I hesitated for a second then said sure. He took me back to a machine I'm hard pressed to describe.

What it is, is a bar bell system, except the bar is attached to the machine and with a twist of the wrists it will catch and stay where you leave it, so you're not in danger of killing yourself. It's called a "Smith Machine". You can lie down on a bench and do bench presses or stand and do squats under the bar and weights. He showed my how to sit straight up and press the bar up over my head, in a traditional weight lifting stance, except that I was seated. So how much weight? How many reps? sets? These only the gods know. I was instructed to start with 10 lbs on each side and do 5 to 10 sets of 7 to 10 reps each. Rest a minute between sets. I can do that now. But it looks very silly with only 20 pounds in total.



You can use this machine either facing the mirrors or away. I prefer away! I find it far more interesting to watch the others.

In the aerobic section most of people are clearly out of shape. They need the exercise that a treadmill can provide. Back in the sanctuary, everyone, except me looks amazing: huge biceps and no stomachs. The men are shaped like inverted triangles: shoulders 3 feet wide, narrowing down to nothing at their toes. I never see them sweat. Not sure they could run ½ mile, but they got muscles aplenty.

The women are never alone in the sanctuary. They are ALWAYS with another girl or more likely with a guy: boyfriend, trainer or both. Few people in the sanctuary are over 25. Hulk Hogan was an exception. He was easy 50.

The single machine that I know how to use is off to the side of the holy of holies. From my bench I can watch the gods. The other day there was a real weight lifter god. He looked like they do in the Olympics. Belt to hold his guts in, white powder on his hands: the full monty. He was practicing the snatch. He had near 200 pounds on the bar and he

was not much more than 150 himself. A small god. But he could lift it. As he struggled, popping veins in his arms and neck, I lifted my 20 pounds 10 times to his one 200 lift. ☺

Then on Sunday I saw a super goddess. She looked as if she stepped out of those muscle magazines: any man would have loved to have her biceps. Everything was well proportioned. Not grotesque at all, as some can get. As I watched her, she also watched herself: every movement was “perfect”. She would grab the weights just so, and raise them just so, and bend over to get a drink just so. It was an amazing thing to watch.

Well that’s the gym. I’m off to run tonight.

P.S.

A minor update. The elliptical machine is now my friend. I’ve decided its calories and not miles that count. I have to run 4 miles in 32 minutes to burn 500 calories, but on the elliptical machine I can get to 500 calories in 25 minutes easy. Much less work and effort ... there must be a catch, but heck the numbers don’t lie ... do they?

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