

ROLL UP FOR CIRCUS TRAINING

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FORGET CIRCUIT TRAINING, SWINGING FROM A TRAPEZE IS A MORE EXCITING WAY TO GET FIT, SAYS JANE HUGHES

SWINGING BY YOUR ARMS from the bar of a flying trapeze may not be the most obvious way to work out, but it is guaranteed to set the blood coursing through your veins. Aside from the adrenalin rush of hurtling through the air in a 180-degree swing, you will work — and stretch — muscles that you probably never knew existed (although you will notice them complaining the next day).

It is this combination of fun and fitness-building that is attracting growing numbers of people to circus training. Whether you have always dreamed of running away to the circus and never quite got round to it, or are simply looking for an enjoyable way to get into shape, venues such as the Circus Space in East London run weekend and evening classes to help you hone your skills.

Situated in a converted electricity generating station in Hoxton, East London, the Circus Space trained the aerialists for the Millennium Dome show, and also runs a degree course in Theatre Practice and Circus with the Central School of Speech and Drama.

Beginners, however, need only a basic level of fitness and flexibility to get started. Almost immediately, you might find yourself going far beyond what you thought was possible; as I did in an introductory acrobatic balancing session, when I managed to climb to the third tier of a wobbly pyramid of people balancing on all fours. This sense of achievement and rapid progression is what, for many, makes circus training addictive.

"We encourage people to break through their own limitations, and we can see their body shapes change as they get fitter," says Rob Colbert, the Circus Space's adult programme manager. "Posture improves, and people become leaner and toned."

Like Pilates, many circus skills help to build the stability and strength of the core abdominal muscles. To keep up the momentum on a flying trapeze, for instance, you need to swing your legs back, then throw them forward — an action powered mainly from the stomach. (Don't worry about falling — you are strapped into a safety harness that lowers you gently to the crash mats below when you let go.)

Flying and static trapeze exercises also work the upper body. Even simply hanging by your arms is a powerful antidote to a sedentary



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lifestyle, as it elongates the spine and releases tension in the back. Do this upside down, with your knees hooked over the bar, and you will boost your circulation and stimulate lymphatic drainage.

The emphasis in static trapeze is on keeping the bar still as you control your movements and stretches around it. "It's great for the tummy, back and arm muscles," says Clare Midgley, a trainer and performer. "Most people get strong quite quickly, and if they practise more than once a week their muscles begin to extend and lengthen."

"It is also important to be in the right positions and to learn how to align the body correctly, and this helps overall posture."

Acrobatic tumbling can start with something as straightforward as a forward roll or cartwheel. As you progress, your mid-section will tone up automatically, and since you will be moving and stretching nearly every muscle in your body, you will increase the supply of

oxygen and nutrients to them. Another benefit — shared with all balancing activities — is an increased sense of spatial awareness. This is particularly useful for footballers, but it is also the kind of skill that will help you to react quickly and stay on your feet if you trip.

Acrobatic balancing, initially on somebody else's upturned feet as they lie on the floor, is a great builder of confidence and strength, and requires total concentration.

Indeed, the degree of focus required for any form of circus training makes it a great stress-reliever. And even if you never make it to the big top, you will at least have a sparkling topic of conversation to keep your dinner party guests entertained.



www.thecircusspace.co.uk The Circus Space (020-7613 4141)
www.jugglingdb.com Gives information and lists juggling clubs in Britain