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Getting fit, naturally

This fitness club takes workouts out of the gym and into the great outdoors.

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Article Text:

Three days a week, before dawn breaks over Lake Calhoun, you can find Chris and Lee Blum there, leading a dozen people through an hour-long workout. They huff up stairwells and hills, run along the lake and do pushups, dips and other strength- and flexibility-building exercises. Motivated by their love of fitness, the Edina couple - he teaches physical education at St. Paul Academy, she's a marathoner, counselor and public speaker - started Outdoor Fitness Clubs last summer (outdoorfitnessclubs.com). Their classes meet in the mornings and evenings at the lake, rain or shine.

Q. How did you get the idea for an outdoor fitness program?

Chris: Lee and I were visiting my sister-in-law in California. They kept talking about this great fitness boot camp they were doing on the beach every morning. We were never able to get down there, but we looked it up online. We read about a guy who'd show up every day in a Hummer and Army fatigue boots. Kind of a show. But it motivated people. It was all outside. I'd never heard of that concept before.

Q How does something like that translate to Minnesota?

Chris: Minnesotans are cooped up all winter. First sign of sun, people swarm to the beaches and the lakes. I thought the lakes would be a great place to start something like this.

Q. How did you develop your workout routines?

Chris: I started looking at what was down near the lakes, including jungle gym equipment, the beach - which is an excellent unstable surface - park benches, picnic tables. There's stairwells, hills, tennis courts. There's a ton of stuff you can do with all that. And there's stability balls, bands and cords, jump-ropes you can throw in a backpack and bring along. So it's super mobile.

Q Are all of your workouts different?

Chris: They all hold to the same theme. They cover cardio, strength, flexibility and core work. I have six or seven routes that incorporate different things when we're out there. That adds the element of adventure and keeping it fun.

Q. Is there anything else like this out there?

Lee: There are boot camps, but you have to be a member of a health club. You don't have to be a member of a health club this way, so it's cheaper.

Q. How is an outdoor fitness focus better than being inside?

Lee: When the sun's coming up, it's incredible. You're so invigorated. There are mornings where we see ducks and geese, deer and all that stuff.

Chris: You don't have to wait in line. And going to a health club can become routine and boring. Workouts become so individualistic: Throw on your iPod and get in your own world. That works for some people, but others enjoy being outside in the fresh air.

Q. How varied are the ability levels of the people you're training?

Lee: We've had all levels. We had a woman who could just walk, and we've had people training for marathons. I take the more advanced folks and push them harder.

Q. Have you thought about doing a winter outdoor fitness club?

Chris: Our clients started requesting it last year. I'm open to it, but at the very least we'd need to get some skis or snowshoes for people who don't have them. That's the main hurdle.

Q. You both have full-time jobs and three kids under the age of 6. How do you squeeze this into your already busy lives?

Lee: I think it complements our life. I have more energy and I'm a 10 times better person if I get up and do OFC. And it gives us time together without the kids.

Chris: It's nice to be able to connect that way.

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