



# Fitness Industry

*A person who is able to carry out daily tasks without limitations is considered fit. Fitness, however, means more than just being fit, which has led to the creation of a huge and successful industry. Some of the ideologies and promises that are attached to fitness have a long tradition, but it is still a growing market with an expanding variety of manifestations. There are three main categories of fitness: muscular fitness, aerobic (or cardiovascular/respiratory) fitness, and flexibility.*

**Keywords:** fitness, health, body, physical, sport, running, strength, training, industry, history, exercise, equipment, market, aerobic, culture

**F**itness refers both to biological and social adaptiveness. Fitness usually means striving for and achieving a good physical condition; it also means having enough energy. A person who is fit is able to carry out daily tasks without limitations; for example, being able to walk the stairs without becoming exhausted. Fitness may refer to a variety of physical capacities, such as agility, balance, power, speed, a healthy heart and lungs, good flexibility, muscular strength, and endurance. It is about muscle size, body contour, body composition (how much muscle and fat you have), and body symmetry. To summarize, three definitions of fitness may be distinguished:

- Muscular fitness, generally by means of strength training (weight lifting), mainly directed to enlarging, building, and reinforcing the muscles.
- Aerobic fitness (or cardiovascular/respiratory fitness), primarily to develop the circulation of oxygen through the body. Aerobic fitness conditions the heart and lungs.
- Flexibility through gymnastics and stretching (calisthenics) to increase the suppleness of muscles and joints.

These different types of fitness also correspond to the origin and emergence of different kinds of exercises. Later on we will discuss the specific origins and histories of muscular and aerobic fitness.

## Induced Sports

Physical education and fitness have been described as “induced sports” (van Hilvoorde 2008). In other words, they are generally organized by state organizations and are intended to reinforce the strength and health of the state’s population. Health policies are being developed to reduce diseases such as high blood pressure, coronary artery disease, and diabetes. These are considered typically modern diseases of developed countries. This attention to lack of exercise and related health risks is, however, not just a modern phenomenon. In 1725 the Scottish physician George Cheyne (1671–1743) published *An Essay on Health and Long Life*. According to Cheyne, the upper classes, in particular “the Rich, the Lazy, the Luxurious, and the Unactive,” were threatened by a lack of exercise, a surplus of food, intoxicating drinks, and urban lifestyles (1991, 28). Cheyne may be considered a pioneer of “induced sport,” using sport for purposes of health and weight loss. Cheyne (who at one time weighed more than 470 pounds [213 kilograms] himself) gave advice on a healthy diet and on the best way of keeping fit.

## A Modern Success Story

The quest for well-being through physical exercise has increased dramatically since the 1970s. Ample available food, a decrease in heavy physical labor, and the motorization of transport have resulted in sedentary lifestyles and the fattening of the population in wealthy countries. At the same time a slender body and a healthy, toned appearance have become assets in the competition for jobs and



**A park in China outfitted with exercise equipment to encourage physical fitness.** Photo by Tom Christensen.

sexual partners. The social pressure for self-control concerning food and physical activity has increased while the cultural tolerance for body fat has decreased.

These cultural changes have helped revolutionize the fitness industry. Through a combination of sophisticated marketing, its omnipresence in cities worldwide, and the use of highly technologized equipment (with parameters that tell you how “fit” you are), the industry has transformed itself into a successful modern marketing product. With the flexibility and adaptability to be introduced into a variety of contexts, including working environments, fitness puts the individual participant into the position of a consumer in the market for sport goods and services.

## Origins of Muscular Fitness

Ancient Greeks used weights and resistance exercises to build the human body. Their equipment can be considered the forerunners of modern halters and dumbbells. In the early nineteenth century, Johann Christoph Friedrich GutsMuths and “Turnvater” Friedrich Ludwig Jahn incorporated resistance training into physical-education programs in school. In 1840 Hippolyte Triat opened the largest gym in the world in Brussels and a decade later opened an enormous gymnasium in Paris. Many of Paris’s most distinguished citizens signed up for classes (Todd 1995). Other important fitness educators of that time were Dudley Allen Sargent and Gustav Zander. They were pioneers in

creating systematic methods for mechanized physical training. The machines they built were also used as preventive measures against the threats of a sedentary life. At the same time, these machines contributed to “a subtle redefinition of masculinity” (Thomas de la Peña 2002).

## Advent of Strong Men

Bodybuilding became popular in the late nineteenth century. From the second half of the nineteenth century onward, “strong men” were able not only to promote themselves on stage but also to market strength courses, sport institutes, food, clothing, and equipment that carried their name. These strength courses and equipment had much in common with practices in the related fields of physical education and physiotherapy. Internationally, the earliest successful *strong man* and founder of a fitness business was Eugen Sandow (1867–1925). Other well-known people who succeeded him were Bernarr Macfadden (1868–1955), Charles Atlas (1893–1972) and Bob Hoffman (1898–1985).

The promotion tour that Eugen Sandow made through Europe in the 1880s, for example, led to the founding of many clubs for strength sports. Sandow established a chain of Institutes of Physical Culture in London and Boston, and developed and marketed equipment for strength training, including a chest expander and a spring-grip dumbbell, a light halter to train the grip as well as the biceps.

Another typical story of the time concerns the brand Maxalding. Max Sick, born in Germany in 1882, was also a pioneer in bodybuilding. Sick was a very small, sickly boy, who tried to compensate for his physical insecurities by extreme attention to his body. In 1909 he moved to London and changed his name to Maxick. In 1911 he published the book, *How to become a Great Athlete*, in which he put down his methods for a “natural training of the body” without the use of instruments. Sick was able to control each muscle of his body independently and without the use of equipment. The way in which these training methods spread through Europe was typical for this period. Important also was the role of advertisements in journals like *Health & Strength*, *The Strand Magazine*, and Bernarr Macfadden’s journal *Physical Culture*.

Macfadden was Sandow’s most successful successor. He became inspired to build his own body after having

seen Sandow perform. His magazine *Physical Culture* had more than 100,000 subscribers in 1900 (one year after its introduction) and more than 340,000 by the 1930s. Macfadden became one of the largest publishers in the United States; during his lifetime he wrote close to 150 books. His magnum opus was *Macfadden’s Encyclopedia of Physical Culture* (1911).

Sandow and Macfadden were also the organizers and promoters of the first large-scale bodybuilding competitions. In 1901 Sandow’s Great Competition took place in the overcrowded Royal Albert Hall in London. This event was followed in 1903 by Macfadden’s contest for “The World’s Most Perfectly Developed Man” in New York, with a prize of US\$1,000 for the winner—won by Charles Atlas. In talent for marketing, however, Sandow and Macfadden were surpassed by Atlas and his business partner, Charles P. Roman. Atlas acquired fame after winning Macfadden’s “The World’s Most Handsome Man” contest twice, in 1921 and 1922, and went on to use these titles to market his Total Health and Fitness Program, which still thrives today.

Bob Hoffman is considered the most influential figure for the adoption of weight training in sports other than weightlifting and bodybuilding. In 1935 Hoffman bought the Milo Barbell Company that had been founded in 1902 by Allen Calvert. This company was the first to develop adjustable barbell sets with plates of different weights. With the help of his magazine *Strength and Health*, Hoffman was successful in selling barbells and *High-Proteen* tablets.

## Striving for Respectability

Charles Atlas and other “strength seekers” strived for a respectable place in society. The association of bodybuilding and strength training with the Californian beach culture (“Muscle Beach”) was an important step in achieving social respectability. And respectability meant an enormous growth of the market for products and services. The first modern fitness chains originated around Muscle Beach. The first founder of a major chain was bodybuilder Vic Tanny, who opened his first gym near Muscle Beach at the end of the 1930s. In 1950 he owned 45 gyms in Southern California, and by 1960 he had 84 gyms with 300,000 members. At that point he was spending US\$2 million a year just for advertising.

The most well-known person in the milieu of Muscle Beach was Jack LaLanne (1914–2011), also called “The Godfather of Fitness.” In 1936 he opened what he called the nation’s first modern health studio and experimented with primitive forms of strength-training equipment. In 1951 he was offered an opportunity to do daily morning gymnastics shows on local television in San Francisco, and from 1958 to 1985, this show was broadcast on national television. He used his name to establish a business empire of institutes, foods and drinks (with his Jack LaLanne Power Juicer), and books.

## The Influence of Exercise Machines

Sport schools for strength training acquired their modern form with the introduction of innovative strength machines. One important breakthrough during the 1980s was the computerization of exercising machines. With these one can now monitor the intensity of the exercises on computer screens and observe the effects on the body and heart rate. The increasing popularity of exercise machines has contributed to a convergence of the profession of physiotherapy and the sport-school business. More people can be “treated” at the same time, in the same place, and on identical machines. The work of the fitness trainer and physiotherapist is very much alike in terms of making schedules and explaining the technology of fitness machines.

## Origins of Aerobic Fitness

Running and “aerobic dancing” developed a little later as the propagation of “muscular fitness.” A US physician, Dr. Kenneth Cooper, the author of *Aerobics* (1968), can be considered one of the main catalysts of these forms of physical exercise. Before he published his best seller, running was mainly practiced as a sport in track and field. Few people ran on public roads, and those who did were predominantly training for marathons, which at that time were small-scale events, often with no more than a hundred participants.

Cooper’s book had just been published when the adverse effects of being overweight were defined as a general threat to the health of the population. Running became a solution for “manager’s disease.” An increasing number of managers had to keep their bodies in shape. Cooper’s name is still connected to the famous “Cooper test,” in which an individual’s fitness and endurance are evaluated based on a twelve-minute run, with distance covered and age factored in.

Aerobics as a way to achieve fitness was successfully claimed by women entrepreneurs, who offered courses in the form of dance steps to the rhythm of modern music. In this way they were able to create the same aerobic effects as Cooper had associated with running but in a more appealing way of exercising than running along public roads. One of the first of these women entrepreneurs was Jacky Sorensen, who in 1969 established an international franchise chain of aerobic classes. Others, such as Judi Sheppard Missett (Jazzercise), Kathy Smith, Richard Simmons, and Jane Fonda soon followed her example. In 1972, Judi Sheppard Missett claimed the term “Jazzercise” as an official trademark, and by 2002 she had 5,300 instructors in thirty-eight countries active under her trademark. In that year her company earned US\$63 million.

## Development of the Running Industry

The running and aerobics industry developed along two main lines: marketing of running shoes and publishing of magazines devoted to running. One company that played a major role in developing and marketing running shoes was Nike. During the 1970s and 1980s Nike associated itself with the famous middle-distance runner Steve Prefontaine (1951–1975), who, because of his alternative looks and antisport-establishment activities, inspired many people to run and to buy Nike shoes. Of course, other shoe companies also entered the runners’ market or, like Adidas and Puma, were forced to defend their place in that market. Gradually, these companies diversified from the shoe business into the general sport-clothing business; they also supported the development of running magazines with their advertising.

Commercially, magazines with a focus on the runner’s world are able to exist and thrive because of the abundance of advertisements by the sport-shoe industry and other sport-related businesses—for example, those who offer special drinks, clothing, treatments for injuries, and computerized measuring equipment for heart rate. *Runner’s World* is one of the most prominent of these magazines. Modern running has developed largely outside the established sport organizations, so the organization of long-distance races is often orchestrated through these magazines. At the same time these magazines are also connected with organizations that offer travel and lodging arrangements for races all over the globe.

## Fitness as Ideology

Many of the modern claims about health and exercise actually have a long tradition. Quite new, however, is the huge scale of the industry and the moral imperatives that are attached to the contemporary health-and-fitness movement (van Hilvoorde and Steenbergen 2012). Fitness and slimness have become associated not only with energy, drive, and vitality but also with worthiness as a person; a fit and healthy body is taken as a sign of self-control. Being fit has become a civic duty.

The ideology of “healthism” also places heavy emphasis on personal responsibility. Fitness is not just a matter of individual health choices; it has become a matter of social status. It is a tool for distinction and individual comparison. Fitness helps to construct an identity. Fitness represents a dream of absolute health. “The body has become a system of differentiation. The body has become its own garment. The fashion is called fitness” (de Wachter 1984). The fitness industry has been successful in combining elements of traditional sport and cosmetic industries; it successfully blends the pursuit of flexibility and good health with moral, aesthetic, and commercial imperatives.

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See also Aerobics; Beauty; Bodybuilding; Endurance; Exercise and Health; Fitness; Strength; Weightlifting; Yoga

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