

Time for a Change or More of the Same? Les Mills and the Masculinisation of Aerobics

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Two stories sketch the direction of this research. The first occurred on January 3, 2000 – a public holiday Monday – when Les Mills' Body Combat arrived in Western Australia. As I walked around the calico bags framing the door, the sounds of sirens and bombs whirred from the speakers. The stage was surrounded by (hopefully) unarmed missiles, and backed by an unfurled parachute. A windsock clung from the air vent. Two men, both wearing khaki fatigues, paced rigorously around the room. One was oiled up and muscled. The other looked like a (slightly more toned) Sergeant Schultz. After this sensory assault, my attention turned to the participants: the room was split evenly between men and women. The soundtrack encouraged men to behave badly: not one, but *two* Queen songs is enough for any aerobics room. In fact, it is too much for *any* room. Another one bites the dust - another feminine sphere is lost. With the men now back at aerobics after relinquishing the space fifteen years ago to leotards and lycra, the resultant class was quiet, uncomfortable, uncoordinated and far more aggressive than was necessary. Without looking or thinking, clumsy men kicked women without considering where their flying feet may have landed. This was not a good experience.

Story two: whispering women throughout the ensuing week asked each other whether or not they would try Body Combat again. The usual 9:30am Friday class had been given over to the new aerobics phenomenon. The consensus was that we would give it one more go. I was on holidays, so I joined the mums, retired women and others on leave for another combative experience. With a female instructor leading us, there was not a single man in the room.

The resultant class was brilliant, capturing an essence of aerobics. With much laughter, silliness and giggling, it was one of the best hours I have ever spent in a gym. After the instructor told us to 'think about kicking and killing someone in particular, as it always improves your form,' the class fought imagined husbands, boyfriends and bosses for sixty minutes. Indeed the form did improve. The knees and elbows were sharply jolted into imagined foes.

During a moment of silliness within the pre-choreographed cool down – involving a Dungeons and Dragons-like scenario where the good guy (that is, the participant) holds an imagined sword/light sabre and kills a dragon/Darth Maul – the instructor looked at us with a grin and said ‘a bit blokey, eh?’

This paper investigates the Les Mills ‘phenomenon’ and its two main advertising motifs - of evolution and revolution. I investigate the history of this aerobics movement, while granting particular attention to the gendered nature of its formation. However I also recognise the importance of the Les Mills palate of classes to the long-term survival of aerobics. Such an article may appear inappropriate for inclusion in *Sporting Traditions*. Indeed some readers may already be questioning whether aerobics is a sport, let alone a tradition. I suggest that the study of activities such as this, demonstrate that the boundaries between leisure, fitness, exercise and sport are far more permeable than many of us assume. To study aerobics requires distinct methodologies, poaching paradigms from fashion theory,¹ popular music studies, cultural studies, feminism and men’s studies. It conflates with histories of bodybuilding and weight lifting. The thesis of this paper is that disempowered groups (such as women), use disempowered sites (such as aerobics) to renegotiate their social position. Obviously this is a hegemonic struggle, which reveals ambiguous, contradictory ideologies that question our understandings of both sport and tradition.

Make it bum

While sports aerobics is a description, sports football is a tautology To add a ‘corrective’ noun to aerobics serves to demean the ‘mass participation’ activity. Considering the breadth of movements loaded into the word ‘aerobics,’ it remains difficult to write about, historically or socially The small entry in *The Oxford Companion to Australian Sport*,² mentioned both popular and elite participation. This continuum approach to the history of aerobics is beneficial, problematising the elite/sport and mass participation/fitness binary opposition. The presentation of aerobics as both exercise and sport also performs the shift from trivial to serious, and feminine to masculine spheres. While aerobics is framed as something that women do ‘to stay in shape,’ at the elite level such as the world championships, there are frequently more men than women in each national team.

Aerobics, in its current form, has multiple origins. Derived from gymnastic traditions, dance culture, the martial arts, yoga and weight training, it is difficult to define and historicise. Writers frequently remain loyal to their moment in aerobics history. As Dennis Hemphill disclosed,

The fitness classes that I taught were co-ed and involved a lot of

group exercise, partner exercise, circuits, fitness games and the like. While these activities were largely non-competitive, there were usually more women than men in the classes. However, aerobics was then 'colonised' by the dancers, who brought in the choreography, leotards, mirrors, etc. It was at this stage that more women began participating, but many men left.³

Hemphill is obviously authenticating a particular period in the aerobics narrative, attacking the late 1970s and 1980s 'colonisation' by the dancers. He frames it as a 'problem' when men left aerobics, rather than a time of feminine autonomy and space. Confluent with this change was the arrival of competitive, performance-based aerobics, resulting in FIG incorporating sports aerobics as one of their four disciplines.⁴ While Hemphill's melancholy at a loss of general (insert masculine) participation is understandable, he did not recognise that the feminine modality of aerobics has an alternative history to reveal. As David Rowe has suggested,

There is a powerfully resilient association between sport and masculinity that obstructs equality of access, participation and reward for women. Sport has been one of the major means by which masculinity is constructed against femininity in a manner that presents a clear hierarchy of cultural power.⁵

While Rowe focuses on 'the deep inequalities within sport itself,'⁶ he has not addressed how the definitional matrix framing sport is also an act of critical disempowerment. Lynda Nilges has realised that 'continued scholarship is needed that focuses on transforming male dominated versions of sport and physical activity.'⁷ To explore the role of women in sport must decentre the masculinity that saturates notions of sport. Women are not excluded through 'mainstream' investigations of sport because of supposed biological difference/inferiority. Instead, it is the ideologies that encircle feminine corporeality that renders women's sport less worthy of attention. That is why aerobics is integral to this modified rendering of sport. As it occupies the space between sport, leisure, fitness and exercise, it is an ideal case study

Sports Aerobics, like other elite, competitive gymnastics, has clear rules and marking criteria. Each routine is 65 seconds in length, and must exhibit a balanced movement between floor, upright and airborne positionings. The participant must move aerobically over a 7m by 7m stage, mobilising steps appropriate to the set music. There are rewards for rhythmic variations, with scores determined through difficulty, execution, artistic acuity and originality. Outside of this elite activity, a distinct meaning system permeates the semiosphere.

Aerobics is an intrinsic activity that gains meaning of and for itself. It is the McDonalds of the fitness industry: fast, ubiquitous and cheap. It involves a combination of cardiovascular, strength and flexibility exercises to music over a 40-60 minute period. As a fitness practice activating large muscle groups, it is expected to produce benefits such as improved heart and lung function, increased muscle tone as well as fat reduction. Aerobics, as a term and format for exercise, was 'invented' by Kenneth H. Cooper, a U.S. Air Force surgeon. His concept of aerobics was presented in a 1968 book that revealed the benefits of exercise and the importance of cardiovascular activity. From this American base, there is now a far greater diversity of classes. While Jane Fonda and Richard Simmons are ghost-like phantoms in contemporary aerobics halls, much has changed since the 'make it burn' days of striped leotards and leg warmers. Aerobics remains a promiscuous paradigm, borrowing concepts from martial arts, ballroom dancing, funk and salsa rhythms. Depending on the level of the participant's fitness, there are barbell classes, toning classes, rebounding classes, cross-training classes, stationary-based cycling classes,⁸ high impact classes, martial-arts fitness classes, yoga-based stretching and flexibility classes and step. Aquarobics is available for those wanting a gentler programme. During a lifetime, participants may move between different modes and movements to suit their lifestyle or goals. Also, new hybrid classes are continually being formed, of which Tae Bo is the most obvious example. It is no surprise that aerobics is second only to swimming as the most popular general participation sport for women in Australia.⁹

Aerobic exercise, by the literal definition of the word, refers to the presence of oxygen. The point of the activity is to train the heart, lungs and cardiovascular system to deliver oxygen to the body. Obviously, such a practice becomes increasingly important in an era where many Australians and Americans engage in no physical activity.¹⁰ Aerobics is important as it provides a site for women to enter a highly masculine sphere, the gym. Yet how women handle the (metaphoric and literal) weights is more difficult to determine.

Disciplining the body politic

The aim of exercise, and particularly weight-bearing activity, is to create micro trauma in the muscles. When the muscles repair, they become stronger. Particularly for women attempting to lose weight, which has perhaps become the most popular feminine hobby of our times, it has been discovered that weight-bearing exercise allows the maintenance of lean muscle tissue and the loss of fat.¹¹ Therefore, fitness, health and slimming magazines have been recommending that women use weights.¹² Aerobic and anaerobic movements combine to build both muscular strength and endurance. The Les Mills suite of programmes actualises these concerns, while forming new relationships

between aerobics and adjoining fitness activities.

Bodybuilding, like aerobics, incorporates a wide array of practices and behaviours. The desire to improve musculature through weight training has triggered a fetishisation and fragmentation of the body. As Kenneth Dutton and Ronald Laura have shown, photography has a clear role in the history of bodybuilding.¹³ Therefore, it is not surprising that debates about representations of gender have a place in the analysis of both weight training and bodybuilding. The practices serve to critique, question and perhaps rupture accepted notions of masculinity and femininity. In the last ten years, the level of acceptable musculature on a female body has changed radically, resulting in shifting configurations of both fitness and beauty.

Not surprisingly, feminist theorists have been drawn to the physique of female weight trainers and bodybuilders. These women have been described as occupying a 'contested terrain [of] technological interventions and bodily manipulation.'¹⁴ Women who build their body occupy a space outside of Wolf's 'female weakness, asexuality and hunger.'¹⁵ Weight training is particularly important for older women. Margie Sheedy, for example, explained the life of her fifty-something mother who, through most of her adult life, had played tennis and walked regularly.

Now Carmel and her friend Patty have decided they want to improve their fitness levels, not by increasing the kilometres they walk or the number of balls they hit, but by going to pump aerobics once a week. For some people this mightn't seem like much, but Mum is on the other side of 50, and she has probably only done aerobics a couple of times in her life. After her first class, she was thrilled because she had done something different to improve how she feels about herself, and she had kept up with women half her age.¹⁶

Such activities, although recently bundled up into the Les Mills programme of Body Pump, are obviously part of a longer narrative of callisthenics. Importantly, weight training brings inactive women and men to a point where they can become more active. The research conducted by Miriam Nelson, at the USDA Human Nutrition Research Centre on Ageing at Tufts University, confirmed that strengthening exercise prevents muscle and bone loss from older women, but also increases the effectiveness of weight loss.¹⁷

This research into weight training dialogues awkwardly with feminist theory and sports historiography. It is an ideologically volatile intervention, but does demonstrate that the old aerobics - of high impact, high energy movements conducted to a bridge-free soundtrack - has changed to incorporate

these new ideologies. Aerobics has never been static, and has always been fashionable, ephemeral and fickle. The difficulty is determining how these new notions of acceptable body image and behaviour have impacted on contemporary notions of fit femininity.

The ladies who lunge

The young body, taut and sexualised, holds a solipsistic mirror to a Dorian Graying society that, through the surgical knife or the aerobics class, attempts to stave off the wrinkles in the mirror.¹⁸ Slicing through this vanity is the community-building component of aerobics. Throughout Australia and New Zealand, women gather at 9am and 10am classes, placing their children into creches, and – for one hour – have a jump and laugh with their friends. Studies have found positive physical and psychological outcomes from the practice.

The findings from the present study suggest that aerobics might have the capacity to liberate women by enhancing their physical self-perceptions. Therefore, although differentiating tasks may intensify the culture of gender, the results from the present study indicate that aerobics may be an activity through which young women can attain positive psychological outcomes.¹⁹

This study which focussed on 113 women between the ages of 15 and 16, emphasised both the feminine and non-competitive elements of the practice. Similarly Annette Farnsworth found that 100% of 645 women polled, aged between 25 and 49, affirmed the great importance of being fit and healthy.²⁰ With the 1970s being the decade of tough fitness (no pain no gain) and the 1980s a time of body shop feminism, stress reduction and diet, the 1990s was bound to be a calmer era of aromatherapy and yoga. With sport and leisure always configured by understandings of work, women's incorporation into physical culture is relationally formed by their immersion in the workforce. It is no coincidence that the Les Mills franchise has implemented a more ordered, rigid and predictable pattern within aerobics classes, which accompanies the increasing demands of women's contribution to the public sphere.

Aerobics has a pedagogical function, teaching physical coordination, balance, fitness and also intricate and complicated affiliations between individual goals and desires, and those of the group. It is not a reification of femininity, but one of the few places where women of different ages, classes, ethnicities and educational levels can meet, mingle and talk. This 'new style women's club'²¹ accesses narratives of femininity, through the changes of marriage, pregnancy, divorce, illness and ageing. As Reed has suggested, these classes are 'one of the last places that women regularly gather without men around.'²² As most of us work in male-dominated environments, aerobics can

offer feminine space, a (transitory) movement away from men and masculinity.

Aerobics may seem to present women in their natural state, but it is a highly vulnerable space. Devoid of make-up, squeezed into lycra and facing an enormous mirror, the female body is rarely presented with such fragility. However Moya Lloyd has been critical of aerobics' role in changing the aesthetics of the female body. She described it as the 'one area of activity that engages many women in search of slenderness [that] has escaped sustained scrutiny.'²³ For Lloyd, aerobics is affiliated with eating disorders. Other ideological possibilities are lost. I agree that the health industries have been professionalised, transforming participants into consumers of exercise. But Lloyd simplifies this process, by arguing that 'the discourse of health and fitness is no less disciplinary or regulatory than the discourse surrounding aesthetics; and although it may appear more benign, that is all it is – an appearance.'²⁴ The time has come for us to grant attention to appearances, representations, surfaces and superficialities.

Where research needs to be conducted is in the connection between aerobics and personal control. Bordo, quoting Aimee Liu, stated that 'I will be master of my own body, if nothing else, I vow.'²⁵ Locked in a pumping panopticon, the good body is thin, toned and streamlined. Aerobics is not so easily framed as a symptom of disordered eating. Susan Benson asks, 'what exactly is going on when women begin – as they have done – to adopt these "masculine" concerns, and to take up gym culture and body-building?'²⁶ These women are not ensconced in the home, counting calories and monitoring fat content. Certainly, they are transforming the self into a project. But it is a negotiated self, a site of both anxiety and display. It is ironic that, for men, exercise and sport are naturalised, while women's fitness practices are pathologised. Judith Rodin has presented this problem best, instructing her readers that 'You must overcome the notion that how hard you work is the measure of what kind of person you are.'²⁷ These studies do not explore the construction of aerobics-based communities as a positive force. Instead, the old ideologies of narcissism, beauty and youth re-clothe fitness participants.²⁸ Defiantly, women are rewriting femininity, and building a new type of feminist movement.

Many narratives – of strength, flexibility and competency – wash across the mobile body. Each adds potential and problems to understanding the relationship between sport and feminism. For feminists such as Naomi Wolf, fitness and exercise are synonymous with bodily management.²⁹ While high profile women have attacked aerobics for its retrograde politics, it is apparent that the power encircling the aerobicising body is hegemonic, rather than coercive. Aerobics is not only, or even mainly, a negative force in contemporary society. Rather, it provides a site of negotiation by women and an interrogative space for critical debates in feminism. By aligning aerobics and anorexia, the

positive social (and political) benefits of the former are overlooked or displaced. Put another way, when aerobics participants turn to face the mirror, myriad ambiguous, if not contradictory, gazes are reflected back. The critical eye – that compares, critiques and attacks the self – is concurrently paired with the challenging ‘I’ of empowerment, community and fitness. Women moving into the masculine zones of gyms and weight training centres are framed as ‘a problem.’ Ironically, it is the feminists who first determined this *problem*. The analytical tragedy of this work is that aerobics has been trivialised, demeaned and made vulnerable to a masculine (re)colonisation. Ironically, this reclamation of lost territory has been sourced from the most Antipodean nations of the old Empire.

Start the revolution today

By the mid-1990s, burned out on grapevines and step aerobics, ‘the signs of aerobics demise ... [could not] be denied.’³⁰ The irony is that the next ‘revolution’ in aerobics did not come from the United States: it was not a Tae-Bo led recovery. The ‘evolution’ commenced in Auckland. Aerobics, as the most American of fitness pursuits, has triggered the most Antipodean of grafts. Therese Iknoian reported in 1993 that

Aerobics has come full circle. A quarter of a century ago, it started as a fitness activity for the US masses. Fifteen years later, that activity spawned elite competition in the US which, through the magic of television, sparked grass-root classes around the world. Next came national competitions in many countries.³¹

Clearly, this ‘full circle’ extended further than Iknoian’s imagining. By the 1997 World Sports Aerobics Championships, held in Perth, there were no American winners in the male and female singles, duo or trio competitions. In all, forty nations have registered for the international Sports Aerobics competition. From within this global expansion, innovation emerged. The surprise was that it was derived from Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Les Mills is famous in Auckland. Holder of an MBE, and a four times New Zealand Olympic field athlete, he was also a controversial mayor of the city from 1990-1998. He formed the first Les Mills World of Fitness in 1968 and, although he retired from the fitness industry, his family continues to run and expand the chain of clubs. One of the Auckland gyms has 10,000 members. They feature an inordinate number of classes (144 classes per week), with many participants. The overall quality of the classes is high, with an English-based instructor describing the classes of Mike McSweeney (Director of Body Pump choreography at Les Mills Auckland) as ‘something normally only experienced at fitness conventions -yet for these New Zealanders, this was a “regular time-

tabled" session!³² The key is that all instructors perform the same pre-choreographed routines for three months. Although based in Auckland, Les Mills International sells franchise rights to fitness centres, provides the choreography, music, clothes and instruction. Then, a new Les Mills audio and video tape, notes and choreography are released.³³ Therefore, each of the programmes releases four routines a year. Quality control, like all Fordist enterprises, is high. Because of the set choreography, consistency is elevated, but there are many problems, both for instructors and participants.

When Body Pump arrived in Australia, under the banner of *Start the revolution today*, a potent mix of politics and sport was revealed. The accompanying poster utilised a Darwin-like evolution chart. Instead of developing from apes to modern man, a man squatting under a bar and weights slowly reached full extension. The rationale for the connection of evolution and revolution was clear. The income from aerobics had declined, replaced by both personal training and home exercise equipment and videos. A way to increase participation was to make aerobics – with its intense feminine modality – male-compliant. The addition of weights, along with simple, repetitive movements and minimal choreography, were the strategies used to fulfil this goal.³⁴ Body Pump was the first Les Mills programme to be internationalised. It arrived in Australia during 1996. Formed in Auckland by Les Mills, it is an 'aerobics workout' that uses a bar and weights. It was discovered that the use of a bar, rather than barbells, improved the form and posture of participants. It is a user-friendly weights package. The successful launch of this programme has been enhanced through the arrival of Body Step, Body Attack (the high intensity workout), RPM (the cycling programme) and Bodybalance (the yoga and stretching session) – all from Les Mills. Besides the combative exercise formats and the more masculine language of 'pump' and 'attack,' what distinguishes these sessions from conventional aerobics is the increased emphasis on strength work.

There are currently 455 centres across Australia using the Les Mills body training systems, growing at a rate of 14 new licensees a week.³⁵ The Les Mills package of classes has instigated two major changes to the conventional aerobics. Firstly the musical soundtrack has breaks. For non-aerobics readers, this change may seem minor. However so much of aerobics through the 1980s and 1990s was based on dance choreography, and a soundtrack resembling a disco-club mix of continual beats between and through songs. Les Mills separated the tracks, which also distinguished between the muscle groups and exercises used for each song.³⁶ In this way, a high repetition of movement and action could be layered, learnt and remembered. This innovation removes a major definitional component of aerobics, as being based on a bridge-free soundtrack.³⁷ The aim is to minimise the number of stops and starts. This leads

to the second major innovation of the package – the rigid choreography. Instructors attend intense workshops and obtain videos and tapes to learn the precise movements to accompany the specific phrasing of the music. There is no diversity of steps between instructors and little creativity from the fitness leaders. Put simply, the participants complete the same class, sometimes two and three times a week until a new tape, music and choreography arrives.

Newson realised that ‘pre-choreographed classes takes away the creativity of the teacher.’³⁸ The fitness leaders move from moments of high stress – having to deliver a perfectly formed new choreography every three months – to the boring repetition of the same class at the end of that period. Every instructor I have asked has mentioned the lack of initiative and interest at the closing stages of the three months. There is even a formal recognition of this problem on the website.

At the end of the day, we can only do so much. We provide world class training and programs for instructors. We take the hard work out of it by providing all the music and movements. If instructors don’t have the personal drive and commitment, the rest can fall down.³⁹

In an ironic reversal, the creative energy has been removed from instructors, but if they fail to perform the script correctly, it must be blamed on a lack of personal commitment. -When I asked Rod Harvey, General Manager of Les Mills Australia, about this problem, his reply was staunchly critical of other modes of aerobics leadership.

TB: There has been discussion in some of the fitness industry magazines that the Les Mills training systems reduce the innovation and creativity of individual instructors, because of the pre-choreographed style. -I am sure you have heard this criticism as well. -How do you counter it?

RH: The issue of restriction of creativity does not come up very often as the industry fell into a big black hole in the late 80s as a result of the freestyle instructors complicating their programmes to the extent that people were not able to follow them. It has only been in the last 3-4 years that there has been a resurgence in the group fitness industry and we find it extremely coincidental that since the pre-choreography of Aerobics the numbers and quality of instruction has lifted. This in turn has ensured that most gyms have followed suit in simplifying their programmes.⁴⁰

Mr Harvey’s comments could be rewritten to acknowledge the link between dance and aerobics, which allowed female participants to challenge themselves

to learn new movements. The desire for new steps is still observed in participants, waiting for the arrival of new choreography – or ‘the launch.’ Completing the identical class, at the identical time, with the identical instructor for three months can be quite debilitating for a workout. This is most obviously a problem for Body Step programmes. Steppers are generally the most experienced of aerobics participants, with the highest capacity to manage choreography and quick transitions.⁴¹ Therefore, the movements are mastered quickly, rendering much of the three-month period repetitive and dull. The only way this paradox has been addressed is that, through Body Step 40, the speed of the music has been increased to 135 beats per minute, compared to the usual 124/5 BPM. This is a method to access the fitness of experienced steppers, but makes the situation even more difficult for those new to this mode of movement. The Les Mills programme is based on the premise that aerobics became too complicated, thereby eroding the participant base. They wanted to form an ‘interesting, yet easily repeatable workout’.⁴² The conflicts of the past and present history of aerobics are therefore revealed in the presentation of Body Step. This was exemplified by the club I attend in suburban Perth. A new Body Step tape emerged in the October of 1999, but was not replaced until February 2000. By the end of the period, most participants were groaning at the opening bars of the tape. Other steppers stopped attending – until the launch.

While there are difficulties, it is obvious that Les Mills International has instigated a major change in the fitness industry. In January 1999, there were 11,157 instructors trained in the choreography world wide, with 40% of the fitness club market in Australia featuring a Les Mills programme. The choreography has spread to forty three countries.⁴³ This means that the Body Pump class attended in Auckland should be the same as that conducted in London or Perth. The movements, music and directions are the same. This has been confirmed as being of a great advantage to instructors.

Dear Bodypump team, I am a bodypump instructor from Dunedin, now working in Dublin, Ireland at the West Wood Club. I thought that I would like to pass on a thankyou to whoever it is out there that has made Bodypump such an international fitness craze. What I mean to say is what other job can you travel to another country on the other side of the world and have a class from home going just as strong. Hands up for New Zealand made.⁴⁴

While utilising an international mode of music, generally sung in English, there has been only one overt New Zealand reference in the soundtracks. Pump 32 featured a haka squat track. However no other Maori or Pacific Islander interventions have been used. Certainly, the success of these programmes with

participants is high. The website features an array of testimonials for each of the choreography styles.⁴⁵

The desire to increase the testosterone in the aerobics hall has been the trigger for the 'innovations' mobilised by Les Mills Training Systems. Aeroboxing, circuit training and Pump make weights part of the fitness experience. The Les Mills Franchise, aware of the intense femininity attached to aerobics, instigated a change to the name of the practice. This re-languaging transformed aerobics timetables into group fitness timetables. Other masculinist interventions have also taken place.

The aim of Body Pump by Les Mills is to increase participation levels in aerobic studios world-wide by providing a memorable, results oriented workout.⁴⁶

A sport without winners, losers or finishing lines, has been transformed into a site of clearly-specified results. Similarly, the slogan for Body Combat - the combat class - is *Go hard or go home*. Combat-style moves allow for the strengthening of both heart and body through self-defence chops and kicks. Its simple, athletic movements works at the anaerobic threshold, thereby improving stamina. However, the marketing slogans used to advertise the programme are laughable.

We call it bodycombat for a reason. You're fighting for your life, for the fitness you deserve and the total body wellness you must have. You want to stay in shape? Put your hands up and start defending yourself.⁴⁷

The happy collectivity of aerobics is diffused. Improving fitness, having fun with friends, has been distorted into 'you're fighting for your life.' However, the Master Instructors in Auckland would be horrified to see how suburban women play with their choreography at their 9am and 10am classes. The staunch maleness of 'defending yourself' has resulting in giggling and mocking of the hyper-masculinity of the movements. Much to their displeasure, men have been pushed out of these 'aerobics classes' once more, not through the complexity of the choreography, but through women's laughter. Continuities remain between the history of aerobics and the revolution of Les Mills.

Aerobics classes – even in the free-style mode – have increasingly become structured. The Les Mills training systems merely intensify this principle. When American-styled aerobics arrived in Australia during the late 1970s, it was not overtly choreographed and exhibited little musical phrasing. Being repetitious and high impact, its leisure life was short lived, to be replaced by the 1980s mainstream boom in aerobics. However in the desire for innovation, new steps and movements became more specialised, resulting in niche marketing of

myriad aerobics activities. Certainly step aerobics, for the first time participant, is both daunting and embarrassing. Through the 1990s, those who were comfortable with aerobics were also comfortable with coordinated movements and themselves. Simultaneously it also created a group belonging in a non-competitive structure. The professionalisation of aerobics instructors resulted in these fitness leaders attaining greater skills and accreditation.

While the Les Mills Franchise wished to frame their practice as both a revolution and evolution, actually it was far more embedded in aerobics history than they imagined. Like all previous revolutions – for hi lo, step, circuit training XTC, shape, grid, aqua and aeroboxing, it will be replaced by the next trend. For example, CS, from Western Australia, recorded on the Website,

I am a regular user of your programs. I do Bodypump, Bodybalance and Bodystep. I wanted to write to you and tell you how much I am enjoying them from the normal aerobics. I am especially enjoying Bodybalance, as it is quite new over here.⁴⁸

The key is that CS, like all aerobics participants, is a neophiliac, a lover of the new. Intriguingly, Les Mills is the other to 'normal aerobics.' But like all *others*, they actually mould and change the centre, *the normal*. Glancing at the current Group Fitness Timetable for my suburban club, I see that, of the 36 classes in the timetable, 21 are part of the Les Mills suite. That is, they have become the normal choreography for contemporary aerobics participants. All the theoretical/political problems of earlier aerobic modes have recurred: from the desire for weight loss ('RPM is my calorie killer. I have lost seven pounds in the last three months.'⁴⁹) to the difficulty of women finding time to exercise ('They give you the muscle tone and fitness if you don't have much time you get an excellent workout.'⁵⁰)

It will only be a matter of time before the next revolution emerges. However like all previous interventions in the history of aerobics, this Les Mills moment will be carried forward. Body Pump will remain, alongside perhaps Body Balance, but the others will be replaced with distinct modes of collective exercise. Problems are already surfacing. The aerobics coordinator at the Body Club Bullcreek released the following message:

I know a lot of you are concerned about the timetable going totally Les Mills programmes, I want to assure you that if a freestyle class is popular it will stay that way. You have to admit though, that all of the Les Mills programmes cater for the beginner right through to the advanced all at the same time.⁵¹

The only class that successfully caters for all beginner and advanced users is Bodypump, because a variety of weights can be added. However Body Step

requires a high level of fitness, and low levels of skill. I have seen new participants slink out of classes in puffing embarrassment. Similarly, I have seen experienced steppers walk away in boredom. Body Combat is quirky, fashionable and funny, but will be replaced. Body Balance offers a solid, effective integration of simple yoga poses, while dynamically connecting the moves.

Les Mills has mobilised myriad ideologies of our age. The desire for muscle tautness and fitness, when matched with a lack of time and a need for visible results, has created a successful programme. However, as with all texts, the audience responses are not within the control of the creator, even with such a high level of choreographic standardisation. Throughout suburban aerobics classes, Les Mills has slotted into familiar patterns. Women may have their 'guard up,' their 'bar up,' or place their arms in 'body step position,' but the older histories flood the floor. While the increasing use of weights will have a long term impact on aerobics movements, the other revolutions will pass. In the end, aerobics is not about fitness, fat or finesse. It is about community, conversation and catharsis. These attributes cannot be pre-choreographed, but are an embedded presence in contemporary femininity.

NOTES

- 1 There are many awkward – and interesting – fashion interventions in the history of women's sport. For example, Reebok was built on the success of aerobics. Joe Schwartz reports that 'In the early days of the fitness movement, executives at a small British athletic-shoe company noticed that growing numbers of women were going to exercise classes. The company also found that women exercised barefoot or in men's athletic shoes because they had nothing else to wear', from 'How Reebok fits shoes,' *American Demographics*, vol 15, no. 3, May 1993, p. 54. By 1991, 72% of all Americans aged between 13 and 75 bought athletic footwear.
- 2 Wray Vamplew, Katharine Moore, John O'Hara, Richard Cashman and Ian Jobling (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to Australian Sport*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1992.
- 3 D. Hemphill, private correspondence, July 19, 1999.
- 4 The FIG (Federation Internationale de Gymnastique) is 115 years old, with Sports Aerobics introduced as a discipline at the Geneva Congress in 1994. The other three disciplines include Men and Women's Artistic Gymnastics, Rhythmic Gymnastics and General Gymnastics.
- 5 D. Rowe, *Popular Cultures*, SAGE Publications, London, 1995, p. 133.
- 6 *ibid.*, p. 107.
- 7 L. Nilges, 'Five years of women in sport and physical activity journal: a content review,' *Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal*, vol. 6, no. 1, [full-text article], <http://www.lifetimetv.com/WoSport/stage/RESLIB/html/spajrev.htm>, viewed on July 23rd, 1999.
- 8 An excellent short article on spinning is Joe Kita's 'We're gonna make you sweat!' *Bicycling*, Vol. 38, No. 2, February 1997, [full-text article]. Importantly, he shows how diverse social practices in these classes enact a hybrid of the nightclub and

the health club.

- 9 Statistics derived from 'Sports,' [on-line], <http://members.xoom.com/XOOM/rudeone/Sports.htm>, accessed September 9, 1999.
- 10 Betsy Streisand reported that '60 percent of Americans now engage in virtually no leisure-time physical activity,' *US News and World Report*, vol. 120, no. 19, May 13, 1996, p. 84.
- 11 Interestingly, this movement to muscle has required a reprogramming of women's obsession with the scales. Selene Yeager, in 'From fat to firm,' *Prevention*, vol. 50, no. 6, June 1998, p. 112, told women 'don't get hung up if the number on the scale goes up. Muscle weighs more than fat.'
- 12 An example of such an article is Joanna McMillan's 'Home Toning,' *Slimming*, June 2000, p. 46-47. See also Michele Meyer 'The minimal workout,' *Working Woman*, vol. 29, no. 6, June 1995, pp. 61-61. This is quite a remarkable piece, as it explores how exercise that builds muscle can alleviate levels of stress and depression on working women.
- 13 K. Dutton and R. Laura, 'Toward a history of bodybuilding,' *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 6, no. 1, November 1989, pp. 25-41.
- 14 Krista Scott-Dixon, 'Cyborgs in the Gym: the technopolitics of female muscle,' paper presented at *Discipline and Deviance: Gender, technologies, machines conference* at Duke University, Durham NC, October 2-4, 1998, [on-line], <http://krista.tico.com/dukepaper.htm>, accessed on July 23, 1999.
- 15 N. Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, Vintage, Toronto, 1990, p. 184.
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- 17 Miriam Nelson, *Strong Women Stay Slim*, Griffin Press, Melbourne 1998, p. 4.
- 18 Kathleen Woodward states that 'the surgically youthful body is the postmodern version of Oscar Wilde's haunting tale of Dorian Gray,' from 'Youthfulness as a masquerade,' *Discourse*, vol. 11, no. 1, Fall-Winter 1988-9, p. 136.
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- 25 A. Liu, in Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: feminism, western culture and the body*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1993, p. 150.
- 26 S. Benson, 'The body, health and eating disorders,' in Kathryn Woodward (ed.), *Identity and Difference*, SAGE, London, 1997, p. 125.
- 27 J. Rodin, *Body Traps*, Angus and Robertson, Pymble, 1992, p. 225.
- 28 One of the worst examples of this simplistic analysis is Ramona Koval's *Eating your heart out: food, shape and the body industry*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1986, particularly pp. 134-137.
- 29 Naomi Wolf, for example, believed that this attention to fitness is 'not an obsession about female beauty but an obsession about female obedience,' *The Beauty Myth*, 1990, p. 187.
- 30 D. Eller, 'Is aerobics dead?' *Women's Sports and Fitness*, vol. 18, no. 1, January-February 1996, [full-text article].

- 31 T. Iknioian, 'Stepping across borders,' *Women's sports and fitness*, vol. 15, no. 1, Jan-February 1993, p. 34.
- 32 A. Newson, 'The Les Mills Phenomenon,' *Utrafit*, Annual Edition, 1999, p. 43.
- 33 See *Body Attack: Research and development*, [on-line], <http://www.lesmills.com/attack/research.asp>, accessed on March 25, 2000.
- 34 I asked Rod Harvey, General Manager of Les Mills Australia, in a personal e-mail, about the consciousness of using Bodypump to bring men back to aerobics. He stated that 'It was a deliberate focus and was mainly achieved by the introduction of Body Pump, then the influence of Body Combat has further increased the number of men in the classes,' March 23, 2000.
- 35 These statistics were derived from a personal E-mail from Rod Harvey, February 7, 2000.
- 36 These pauses in the soundtrack were explained by Rod Harvey, *ibid*. He stated that 'the pausing is a deliberate move to allow the instructors time to cue their attendees and give them breaks to consume liquids, along with definite tracks that work different sections of the body ie ab track, warm up, cool down etc.
- 37 See for example John Mason's *Aerobic Fitness*, Kangaroo Press, East Roseville 1999, p. 22. He discusses, in great detail, the importance of music to the aerobics experience, focussing on the routines, choreography and speed.
- 38 Newson, *op cit.*, p. 44.
- 39 Pete Manuel, *Body Attack*, <http://www.lesmills.com/attack/forum/showmessage.asp?messageID=444>, [on-line]. accessed on March 25, 2000.
- 40 Rod Harvey and Tara Brabazon, *op. cit*.
- 41 The difficulty is that Body Step was formed to be "simple enough for everyone." However, for experienced steppers, the level of challenge is too low. See *What is bodystep?* [on-line], <http://www.lesmills.com/step/what.asp>, accessed on March 25, 2000.
- 42 *Les Mills Aerobics Australia Step*, [on-line], <http://www.lesmills.com.au/programs/bodystep/home.htm>, accessed on March 25, 2000
- 43 These statistics are derived from Newson, *op. cit.*, p. 44.
- 44 *Bodypump testimonials*, <http://www.lesmills.com/pump/testimonials.asp>, [on-line], accessed on March 25, 2000.
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- 51 Lorraine 'Loz's Corner,' *The Bullcreek Bulletin*, vol. 1, issue 2, p. 1