

WELLBEING

New Yorkers bored with gyms are being bullied by US Navy fitness instructors. **Charles Laurence** shared their pain

A hard way to start the day

IT IS still not quite 5.30am and my hands, buried an inch deep in a fresh fall of snow, are approaching some terminal stage of frostbite. I am in Central Park, New York, trying to complete my 30th press-up, but however hard I push, all I get is a sharp pain between the shoulder blades. The whole idea of trotting off into the pre-dawn gloom of mid-winter Manhattan to join an exercise programme seems suddenly to have been complete lunacy.

"If you quit, shame on you!" A voice that could only have been honed in uniform is bellowing from above. "Quitting in life will get you nowhere!"

Unbelievably, 20 men and women of all shapes and sizes, heed the ferocious call. We slog on. "This is not some gym," the voice shouts, "some exercise club that you've come to make as big a jerk of yourself as the guy on the machine next door! This is the real thing!"

It certainly is. We have gathered at this unearthy hour to experience the cutting edge of the national fitness craze: the Original Seal Physical Training Bootcamp. This is not the first time some muscle entrepreneur has spotted a niche in the enormous market dominated by fruit-juice-and-Lycra fitness emporiums.

Upscale personal trainers have warned that too much time on exercise machines can broaden your bottom. There has been a general shift back to the simple ways of exercise mats and skipping ropes. But none has been quite so unrelentingly devoted to its boot-camp origins as this class. Seal is the acronym for US Navy Seals (Sea, Air, Land) Commandos — the American version of the SAS and Royal Marine Commando SBS elite forces

— and it has the same superman status in the public mind. Petty Officer Jack Walston, 33, a nine-year Seal veteran, is our instructor. "People associate Seal with quality," he explains, "and that's what we offer. Come to us and you will get fit. But this is about more than fitness. We can teach some basics in citizenship. Teamwork. Discipline. Tighten up your mind, get the trash out right now!"

"Exercise machines and gyms have their place, but most of our customers find they can only go so far with that. They get bored — and find that no amount of 'virtual' pedalling, rowing or stationary jogging will develop that extra ripple in the stomach muscles. They find that doing things the old way gets them breathing harder."

New Yorkers have seen similar classes before. Brian Vezina discovered a hot new market when he started an outdoor class in Central Park in 1997. The only equipment he used was a skipping rope. He had found that too much work on exercise machines added "bulk" where his clients least wanted it. "You don't need weights and machines to work out," he said. "That was so Eighties. People in this city are always looking for something different: clothes and restaurants — and fitness, too."

But the Seal boot camp goes beyond mere fashion. The promised training for the mind, says Walston, means teaching people to take the pain, in order to reach their "maximum potential". He barks at his customers as if they are raw recruits, because that is what they are paying him for.

"It is all between the ears. These simple exercises will make you as fit as you want to be, because they will take you to the limit. If you put out 110



Picture: TOM DALLAL

Back to basics: middle-aged New Yorkers pay handsomely to gather in Central Park for boot camp training by a former Seal officer

percent today, you'll conquer tomorrow, and the people who come to us know that is true."

He looks a bit like Action Man, with the same sculpted form, the tight sunken cheeks and the macho moustache. His pulse ticks evenly, however great the exertion, and he talks in the staccato tones of the drill sergeant.

His customers this morning have a long way to go to match him. Mostly in our forties, we would look more at home on the commuter train than the parade ground. All my classmates, however, have devoted years to exercise machines and aerobic sessions, and have spent fortunes on health clubs. Now, they are looking for new

thrills, and have shelled out \$450 (about £270) a head for 14 mornings of Seal training.

"I used to work out six days a week, doing aerobics and even boxing," says Deborah Lanchan, an executive in her early forties. "Then I let myself go. Why am I here? I need to lose weight." She gestures towards her tummy, a distinct bulge in her well-used run-

ning kit. Dr Richard Pearl, an orthopaedic surgeon with a practice on the Upper East Side, Manhattan's wealthiest enclave, signed up after hearing of the course from a patient. "I've been doing the gym and aerobics stuff for years and I'm bored with it. I'm looking for a higher level of exertion."

This seemed a rather

alarming declaration, as Dr Pearl looks as if he has devoted more time to good restaurants than to his exercise regimen, and he is soon huffing and puffing like a steam train. But, along with the rest of us, he keeps going; there is iron in the soul of the New Yorker.

The classes started more or less by accident. Walston had

retired from the Navy and moved to Texas to work as a diver on off-shore oil rigs when he thought of starting an exercise class for his own children.

He advertised in the local newspaper and drew a flood of responses from adults who wanted to know if he ran courses for grown-ups. Why not? he thought. Texas has a particular reverence for all things tough and military and, within weeks, his classes in Houston and Dallas were fully booked.

Months later, he quit the oil business and was selling robust fitness tuition full time, flicking through his old address book to recruit former comrades as instructors.

With his wife, Terry, manning the office at home, Walston has charged out to conquer the country. He has launched 60 courses, taking in New York last autumn, and is soon to expand to Los Angeles. "We've hit on something. People want a challenge, something they don't get in those gyms."

A challenge is what we get. We are put through jumping jacks, knee-bends and press-ups — horrors reminiscent of good old-fashioned British PE lessons. We lie on our backs in the snow, lifting our heads to touch our knees in pursuit of the rippling tummy, and do something fearful to the thighs called "chasing the rabbit". We are soaked and cold and seriously short of breath.

"It's mind over matter," Walston is shouting. "If you don't mind, it doesn't matter!" Oh, please. I stagger over to a snow-covered park bench, and flop.

Jessica Clapp, a very well-toned blonde in her early thirties, has been submitting to Walston's iron rod since he arrived in New York and is thrilled at the shape she is in. "OK, it hurts, but it's only really S&M for the first few days. Then it's great."

Her boyfriend, Ted Bicking, explains that he had been going nuts sitting behind a computer all day before he discovered the real Seal. He was an athlete at college, but had gone soft and fat and lethargic.

"The truth is, the armed forces always had it right. You do not need fashion or comfort for physical fitness, but you do need discipline and determination."

"That's right!" barks Walston.

A dirty pink smear is spreading over the rooftops and the traffic is building up to a chorus of honks along Central Park West. At last, we are at ease — and can hobble off for hot baths, breakfast and the comfort of nice, warm offices.

Out on manoeuvres — from jumping jacks to 'chasing the rabbit'

Warm-ups

Arm rotations: hold arms out to side, make fist, rotate forward at about one rotation per second. Repeat for one minute, then reverse direction. Let circles get bigger, then smaller again. Stand with arms stretched forward, rotate fists in each direction.

Jumping jacks: jumping from standing position to legs apart while clapping hands above head — just like school. Do 30.

Half-jumping jacks: 20 of these. Same as above, except stop the arms on upward flight at shoulder level.

Press, press, fling: this is the one where you start with your elbows sticking out and fists under chin, and fling your arms out; 15 of these.

Trunk rotations: stand with legs apart, hands on hips. Bend forward from hips, head straight, looking at floor and rotate trunk (take care when bending backwards, to avoid slipped discs) first right, then left; 10 each way.

Now the tough ones

Push-ups (press-ups): this, say the Seals, is still the basic and most popular calisthenics exercise in the US military programme. It warms you up, gets the heart and lungs going, and is used to develop upper body strength in the chest, shoulders and arms. We did three sessions of 30 a time, which was pretty tough!

Sit-ups: lying on your back in the snow, without a mat ("Who said anything about a mat, sir?"), hands at the side of our heads,

pains over ears, we did partial sits, as there was no one to hold down our feet. We did 15.

Leg crunch: the tough version of the sit-up, lifting just the head and neck from the floor, feeling the pull on the stomach muscles. Hold the up position for a couple of seconds, then lower the head, but not to the ground.

Half-deep knee bend: this we did with hands on hips. Keep knees more or less facing forward, thighs parallel, and lower but till thighs are as close as possible to horizontal. Do it slowly, holding sitting position for two or three seconds; repeat 10 times.

Chase the rabbit: go to up position in a press-up, and then "run" the legs in place, keeping back level. Pump legs as fast as possible. This was our punishment... as in "Too slow! Chase the Rabbit!" We did 20.



The ever popular push-up