



THE VIRTUAL REVOLUTION

Get completely immersed in your gym routine with the workout world's latest breed of high-tech classes

Working out with the hottest trainers on the planet – it's the kind of stuff that fitness fantasies are made of. And yet, increasingly, I've been attending indoor cycling classes at my local gym with some of Les Mills' world-leading instructors. The personal trainers come from all over the globe – America, Germany, the UK – and they definitely know their stuff. Have I embarked on the most expensive gym membership around? Er, no. I've simply been taking advantage of a number of the Les Mills RPM Virtual classes on offer outside of peak training hours.

Immersive fitness classes, which boast a cinema-quality video projection of anything, from mass participation workouts, to cycling around a digital velodrome, are taking 'screen time' to a whole new level. 'Immersive fitness is an emerging trend that seems to have filtered

over from the States,' says Claire Finlay, founder of Transition Zone (transitionzone.co.uk), which hosts the Hiper Zone workout in which team performances are recorded on a big screen. 'Its premise is that it takes your workout beyond the purely physical by tapping into your senses, creating an experience that keeps people motivated and prevents boredom.' This type of training has been around for a while – the Les Mills Immersive Fitness studio officially launched at David Lloyd Rayne's Park in 2015 – but has only recently started to penetrate popular British gym culture, thanks to a growing familiarity with high-tech training. Numerous gyms across the nation now offer immersive workouts, and they're widely accessible around the globe, with brands such as European operator Basic Fit and US-based 24-Hour Fitness leading virtual sessions across the coast. The question is – are you ready to take your training to the next level?

+THE NEXT BEST THING

The immersive sessions on offer vary. Some gyms boast pure visual experiences; others hold workouts that tickle all of the senses, with video projections, special lighting, carefully chosen sounds and real-time updates. Global gym provider Fitness First has MOVE studios at its Bishopsgate, Hammersmith, London Bridge Cottons and Poole clubs. Each studio fuses fitness with modern-day technology – there's an interactive LED mood wall, giant screen and 'live feed' class cameras. Members can follow virtual lessons, such as Les Mills Bodypump, Body Balance, Sh'Bam and CX Worx, but, when the classes are being led by an instructor, the screen displays a live feed from the cameras that shows participants moving in real time. Let's hope you're not camera shy!

Spin or pump not your thing? Virtual workouts extend beyond the cycling and weights studios. Following America's on-trend rowing workouts Brooklyn Crew and ROW, rowing-machine classes are set to be a big UK trend in 2018 – and Technogym has gone one step further by offering an immersive rowing experience. SKILLROW, Technogym's pioneering rowing machine, has recently featured in a class format, cropping up as taster workouts at the Lululemon Sweatlife Festival and other British fitness pop-ups. Not only do participants follow the pace set by a trainer, they also watch a big screen that has an overview of the whole class, enabling rowers to compete against class mates or follow the on-screen challenge.

+A VIRTUAL SOLUTION

But haven't we been doing just fine with person-led sessions? While virtual classes might seem quirky, they make a lot of sense – a luxury studio doesn't have to go unused outside of instructor-training times, for example. Virtual sessions enable gym providers to offer a more varied and fuller class schedule, which means that you can get expert-led instruction whether you work out at midday or midnight. All you do is book in, turn up to class and follow the on-screen guidance. 'There are definite pros and cons to immersive fitness,' adds Finlay. 'On the one hand, it's great for escapism and an exciting experience. On the other, we need to be aware of the risks of sensory overload, and who's checking

THE FUTURE OF WELLNESS

Immersive experiences are set to be big. Read on for the virtual trends to look out for in 2018

VIRTUAL SPAS

Virtual reality is moving into the spa sector. Virtual spa experiences will capture the calmness of a spa and project it via a virtual device to those at home. Aqua Sana (aquasana.co.uk) is leading the way with its Sensory Experience at Woburn Forest. Spa goers will experience the four seasons – colours, scents and temperatures – during each session.

CONNECTED CLIMBING

Love scaling walls? Virtual tracking is set to hit the indoor climbing world. Ascendo (ascendo.entreprises.com) is a pioneering app that records climbs, notifies members of new routes, details training stats and allows climbers to communicate with one another virtually. Nifty.

REWARD WORKOUTS

If you enjoy a challenge, there's good news – virtual competitions that offer the chance to win prizes are growing in popularity. In September, Fitbit launched the Virtual Half competition, in which users logged miles via a device or the free app. Every time exercisers reached 13 miles, they were entered into a prize draw. Amazing.

TEAM CHALLENGES

More gyms are also set to offer fully immersive team workouts in 2018. Centres such as Transition Zone use video screens to project team fitness data, such as heart-rate monitoring or distance travelled, that motivates exercisers to move together.

that you're doing the moves correctly?' It sounds like a good idea to do both virtual workouts and instructor-led sessions to learn the ropes.

And it's not just gyms that benefit from virtual sessions. Immersive training is set to make your home workout a little less lonely. Zwift (zwift.com), a virtual training platform for cyclists, enables riders to link their turbo trainers to a game, in which they can join virtual rides with friends, follow structured training sessions and even race against other competitors. It was created because

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founder, Jon Mayfield, discovered home rides were the best way to train after his first child was born. He wanted to balance time efficiency with entertainment, so he married his love of gaming with his passion for cycling to make home workouts more appealing. 'As our lives become increasingly busy, virtual reality training increases in appeal because it means we can exercise in an efficient but exciting manner,' explains Christopher Snook, Zwift PR manager. 'The next stage is to expand Zwift to runners in 2018 in a new format. People will be able to run in the same "world" as others on treadmills, by using a phone or tablet device and a footpod.' Watch this space! ■

