



Lift: Fitness Culture, From Naked Greeks and Acrobats to Jazzercise and Ninja Warriors

Daniel Kunitz

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A fascinating cultural history of fitness, from Greek antiquity to the era of the “big-box gym” and beyond, exploring the ways in which human exercise has changed over time—and what we can learn from our ancestors.

We humans have been conditioning our bodies for more than 2,500 years, yet it’s only recently that treadmills and weight machines have become the gold standard of fitness. For all this new technology, are we really healthier, stronger, and more flexible than our ancestors?

Where *Born to Run* began with an aching foot, *Lift* begins with a broken gym system—one founded on high-tech machinery and isolation techniques that aren’t necessarily as productive as we think. Looking to the past for context, Daniel Kunitz crafts an insightful cultural history of the human drive for exercise, concluding that we need to get back to basics to be truly healthy.

Lift takes us on an enlightening tour through time, beginning with the ancient Greeks, who made a cult of the human body—the word *gymnasium* derives from the Greek word for “naked”—and following Roman legions, medieval knights, Persian pahlavans, and eighteenth-century German gymnasts. Kunitz discovers the seeds of the modern gym in nineteenth-century Paris, where weight lifting machines were first employed, and takes us all the way up to the game-changer: the feminist movement of the 1960s, which popularized aerobics and calisthenics classes. This ignited the first true global fitness revolution, and Kunitz explores how it brought us to where we are today.

Once a fast-food inhaler and substance abuser, Kunitz reveals his own decade-long journey to becoming ultra-fit using ancient principals of strengthening and conditioning. With *Lift*, he argues that, as a culture, we are finally returning to this natural ideal—and that it’s to our great benefit to do so.

Lift: Fitness Culture, From Naked Greeks and Acrobats to Jazzercise and Ninja Warriors Details

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Strength of Story says

If you've ever wondered what black lagoon that CrossFit crawled out of or who started Muscle Beach or whether the Greeks really did practice sports in the nude, then "Lift" is for you. Kunitz melds personal experience and research into an easy nonfiction read. Although he tends to praise CrossFit perhaps too much, the chapters about antiquity, functional fitness, and bodyweight exercises illuminate facts I--a bit of a fitness freak--had never thought to ask about (such as where the name "jumping jacks" or "gymnasium" come from). Kunitz should also be commended for his feminist slight throughout the novel, and how he praises the contributions women have made throughout the century to what he calls the New Frontier of Fitness.

Bookalicious says

This book is fantastic if you are curious about the history of fitness and exercise. I was not very knowledgeable on the subject but now feel confident in seeking out more in depth books on the specific aspects he touches on. I particularly appreciated Daniel's interpretation on how feminism plays out in the fitness world. We need more men with his outlook.

The individual chapters were written quite well, but I wished to see a little more connectivity between chapters. I was not expecting him to be such a hard core CrossFit/NFF fan, but despite his numerous references to the fact, it never seemed overbearing. All in all a great read.

Emily says

I LOVED this.

I am a crossfitter, though I would say that my kool-aid is a little watered down.

This dude eats buckets of the powder by itself. As much as I love crossfit, it would probably seem a little biased to that to people who are not crossfitters.

Otherwise, it was super interesting, tracking the history of exercise, our preoccupation of people to exercise as a means of changing our bodies and a shift to an emphasis on performance. I also really liked his theories on feminism as it relates to women exercising. Fascinating.

Because exercise has changed SO much in the past 20 years more than any previous 20 years, i wish there was more time spent on talking about what's happened in our lifetimes.

The book was due yesterday to the library and I sat in the parking lot for 45 minutes finishing it before I turned it back in. Definitely one of my favorite nonfiction books in a long time.

Terri Schrandt says

A must read just for the historical aspects of fitness and exercise alone! Fascinating to read that the women's lib movement of the 60s and 70s was instrumental in the fitness boom of the 80s and beyond. Using this book for research into my own fitness book being self-published in 2018.

Travis says

First, a disclosure: I don't practice cross-fit - I didn't realize that the book was inadvertently about cross-fit. I've read a lot of opinions about it over the years and have observed people doing it and watched a documentary.

This book started out good and was for the most part pretty good until the final chapter. The book doesn't explicitly present itself as pro Cross-fit rhetoric, but it is.

First, the good thing is that the historical information is very interesting and I had some ah-ha moments about fitness trends and the fitness industry in general while I read this. The suggestion that feminism launched the modern fitness industry is interesting, but I don't know enough about it to be convinced that it was the cause. Otherwise, throughout the first half of the book, the author drops hints about cross-fit being superior to other types of fitness and this ramps up toward the end of the book. He is quite critical of other modes of fitness, but this same critical view is not applied to his own fitness methods. The final chapter melts into a mess of romanticized rhetoric, and even has some odd views about women. The oddest being that somehow women who do not choose to pursue intense fitness are not as attractive or are in some way inferior to women who do. "Strong is the new skinny" is not a healthy slogan, and slighting women for being skinny is no different than slighting them for being overweight. I almost felt like the author was interested in using this book as a means to recruit more women into cross-fit. The final chapter also delves into "muscle confusion" which from what I understand so far, is a concept that is often overused and misapplied, including in Cross-fit. Finally, the book tries to position cross-fit as a superior training method for everyone, including non-athletes. The non-athletes part is a hard sell - it's an awful lot of work and risk for what may just end up being diminishing returns from pushing yourself so hard (I say this for both men and women). There's nothing wrong with pursuing all sorts of different fitness activities, it depends on what people want. The hyperbole about "being fit and ready for anything (life)" is a bit much as well - most civilians just don't need this level of fitness, and if they want it, cross-fit isn't the only way and it has its drawbacks (which were not discussed in the book). Also, the author tries to sell the idea that cross-fit isn't about looks, after all, Cross-fit boxes lack mirrors. I think this is a bit simplistic and naive - no one would push themselves that hard without expecting a boost in their looks and overall attractiveness, if that's what they like.

From the last chapter, I felt disappointed and less interested in cross-fit as a whole and felt that it was unfairly presented through rose colored glasses compared to other fitness methods. In fact, I think Cross-fit has a lot more in common with the modern fitness industry than the author would like to believe - Cross-fit is not a post-modern fitness revolution.

Heather Fineisen says

3.5 Here's what I liked about this book. Kunitz is a former Paris Review Editor so he writes well and includes a great story about George Plimpton and the early days of his quest or non-quest for fitness. I wish

there was more personal narrative like that to balance the exhaustive history of fitness. The book is well-researched but tends to get a bit dry in places. This is timely chronicle with the Olympics coming up. The history is interesting and relevant. Kunitz more than shows his mind body connection premise with cross fit, again, best exhibited with personal narrative along with ancient and/or modern history. When he combines the two, the book flows.

Provided by the Publisher and TLC Book Tours

Janna Dorman says

I found this book fascinating and extremely boring all at once. It's an extensive history of fitness culture and Kunitz cites at least 100 references at the back of the book so it's well researched. I did take away a lot of new knowledge and appreciation for fitness and exercise. For instance, strenuous exercise of any kind was advised against BY doctors until as late as the 1970s!

Kunitz made it obvious that he's a huge fan of CrossFit, which has garnered a lot of criticism and totally clouded his credibility for me. If you are super interested in fitness, exercise, and the culture that surrounds it, then I think you'd find aspects of this book worthwhile. Otherwise, skip. This was a 2.5/5 for me. Typically, I'd round the Goodreads rating to a 3, but not for this one.

Full review will be posted on LiteraryQuicksand.com

Terri Schrandt says

Fascinating Look at Fitness

A must read just for the historical aspects of fitness and exercise alone! Fascinating to read that the women's lib movement of the 60s and 70s was instrumental in the fitness boom of the 80s and beyond. Using this book for research into my own book being self-published in 2018.

Sara says

You know that person at work who can't stop talking about CrossFit? Give them this book, on the condition they never talk about it with you again. I was really looking forward to the history of exercise, but couldn't get past the author's love of CrossFit (it's New Frontier Fitness!) and personal philosophy about exercise. I loved a book about the history of curry and loved it, and couldn't finish this.

Courtney says

There is a lot of interesting information in this book though it does get dry at times. I particularly liked

learning about the intersection of feminism and fitness culture, that was new to me.

Kharah says

The title of this book probably shouldn't have been "Lift." Rather, it should have been something like: "New Frontier Fitness: Everyone Should Do CrossFit" or

"New Frontier Fitness: The Historical Culmination of the Human Quest for Greatness."

I thought I was going to read a book on how physical activity and exercise had been approached by various civilizations over the ages - and something like that is definitely present in this book. But there's also an awful lot about how New Frontier Fitness is absolutely freaking amazing, and the best (maybe only) proper way to really get fit, and only namby-pamby average folks who don't have "the impulse to overcome yourself in the pursuit of a better iteration" wouldn't get it (because "the pursuit of a better iteration is never completely normal ... it is an impulse at odds with belonging to the crowd" - fair point, and yet why do I feel like I've just been dissed?).

Don't get me wrong - this was a really good read, well-written, informative. The only reason I didn't give it more stars was the weird combination of emotions it elicited. Inspiration (yahoo exercise!) mixed with lots and lots of annoyance. People often complain how CrossFit enthusiasts sound like cult members post-KoolAid, and that perception just keeps getting affirmed here. The author seems to assume that New Frontier Fitness is Final Frontier Fitness - which kind of ignores the historical mass of shifting ideas around exercise that he himself writes about. And there were plenty of places where the author was dismissive, even condescending, of other forms of exercise or the people who don't get the same joy out of tracking reps/time or have different goals when it comes to fitness.

And that's the problem in a nutshell, and the prime source of my annoyance. The ultimate goal is to get all of us active, healthy and fit - even the ones among us who have a lot of body fat, who can't walk up stairs without being winded (never mind manage a push-up or pull-up), who were taught to hate physical activity, and the humiliation that goes with it, at an early age. Those are the people who need to be welcomed into the fold of physical fitness and exercise, the ones whose initiation needs to be most carefully considered. And that smug, self-righteous tone of the devout, true believer - no matter how technically correct they may be - just turns away the most needy. What's the point of having the "perfect" fitness routine if you can't get off your high horse long enough to make it welcoming to those that could most benefit from it? Is it really (as the author suggests) about promoting universal fitness - or (given the author's tone) feeling smug about "seeing the light" when the dumb masses haven't?

Anyway, read the book. Be entertained. Learn about historical approaches to exercise. And the message you should be taking away is: No matter your shape, size, gender, age or current level of physical fitness - get inspired, get out there, get active! Because we can all do it, and we're all worth it!

Jennifer Abdo says

I assumed I was going to get substance and history, but got instead images of this guy's vomiting and pissing himself telling me he's better at life than me because of it while confoundingly substituting philosophy for

current medical evidence and contradicting himself right and left (p55 for example).

It's nice to read someone's reasons for doing what they are passionate about. This book is kind of that, in parts. It is at times a sappy sweet self glorifying memoir and for a brief moment it is what it purports to be - a narrative explaining the fitness culture.

I didn't hate two chapters at least. Chapters 6 and 7 are about the history of weightlifting and how gyms made it to the US and moves on into a survey and history of the high bar/calisthenics and Parkour and Ninja Warrior obstacle courses. He does mention names that will be recognized outside the CrossFit/ NFF movement, so I suspect these two chapters are pretty solid. Chapter 9 described a few influential women, Bonnie Prudden, for one (Presidential Council on Fitness) and her role in the history of fitness, but had much more self congratulatory language than mid book. Chapter 10 hits on a history of personal training amidst a final fit of CrossFit love and adoration.

He spends the first chapter justifying with a couple of ancient Greeks why it's ok for him to watch YouTube workout porn of CrossFitters doing fitness tasks for time. In chapter 2, he asks the question 'but is it good for you' and basically says the experts say no but I say OF COURSE! He also justifies use of all kinds of "tools" like massage, PT, saunas and supplements to help his "motor run smoothly" (or as a shoddy apology to his body for all the abuse? Or to mask the damage so he can attend the next competition?). He lightheartedly brushes off fears of injury as literally ancient history- as in gladiators straining their backs and runners freezing to death- and makes no mention of the mountain of evidence of CrossFit injuries that your local physician or orthopedist could give you. He also lists a bunch of very old objections to exertion and sweating, like sweating was associated with laborers, so exercise was not in fashion, instead of modern medical knowledge that you can in fact injure joints and ligaments going too hard too fast or too soon.

He doesn't mention race at all in his discussion of the history of fitness, but that's unsurprising really. He does mention feminism quite a bit and describes careers and contributions of a few famous women in the industry. He gets a lot of his analysis wrong and veers off course in feminism as well when he praises the trend toward muscular women being beautiful. He goes into how he used to think any lady other than model thin ones were best, now since he's around more muscular ones, he's ok with that and adores this trend that coincides with his own notion of what a woman should look like. I don't think that's a great definition of feminism or personal growth.

So if you can stomach all the self congratulation, pride, ego, and a litany of humble brag type phrases- he's a freak, his monkish rigor, cheerful drudgery, panting nutter- you might enjoy two chapters of history. I'd pick another book. He wants you to know he really loves CrossFit and at least that comes through loud and clear. I'd go elsewhere for a history of exercise though.

It is possible, the author is fascinated with the sport of weightlifting and how it has evolved and is now practiced by many more people. It's true that a fitness activity that requires skill is great for the body and mind, but I could write the same book about jiu-jitsu - just how it is superior for your mind and body and how training makes you want to eat better, looks are secondary to performance and all of his other points. It's an interesting book, but I disagree with him on many things. The bottom line (not stated quite this way in the CrossFit centric book) is- find physical activities you love to do because you'll be able to keep doing it - it'll be a lifestyle and not a fad, whatever you choose.

Dave says

The basic formula the book follows is:

1: Heres some weird things we used to think about fitness.

2: Heres what we know now.

3: That's why Cross-Fit is the best.

(Repeat)

Some of the history parts were very interesting, but it did get a bit tedious at times.

Sean Goh says

Learnt some fun trivia (origin of jumping jacks, the marathon run didn't actually happen), while getting peppered with liberal doses of crossfit kool-aid. Kunitz touches on many trends in fitness, from bodybuilding and muscle beach to aerobics (powered by feminists) and obstacle races. He also takes any opportunity to talk up the benefits of crossfit ._. But those sections are easily skimmed.

The state of your body isn't something you either choose to care about or leave be, for your body never just is - it is always either decaying or getting stronger. Not choosing is still a choice.

We are always practicing some sort of fitness regime, be it sitting or gymnastics. Thus athletic practice serves as a pattern for the shaping of our lives, continually.

What occasions the rise in frequency and intensity is an embrace of training as the basis of the practicing life, of seeing life itself as a challenge for which one must train, mentally and emotionally as well as physically.

Addiction is just the repetition of a habit; it's the sameness of the repeated act that mollifies us. The practicing life demands one continually reform and reevaluate one's habits as part of a process of deliberately shaping one's existence.

Quantifying one's existence and progress is another hallmark of New Frontier Fitness (crossfit and assorted similar movements)

The legendary run from Marathon never took place, the longest distance run in ancient Greece was closer to 5K.

Ancient physicians (Seneca) used to see exercise as something to avoid, for it was an unnecessary expenditure of energy, and exertion was seen as something for the labourer class.

Helping others persist through trials is the keystone of team training, a process of emotional development. Accountability and mutual support are implicitly part of military training.

Making things tougher isn't merely a technique, it is a counter-cultural ethos - a rejection of the ideology of ease, the belief that if we can just find the right technology or hack, life will be untroubled, convenient, pain-free.

It is through the breath, with its consciousness-changing, awareness-concentrating power, that fitness regimes connect with spiritual practice.

Fitness is part of everyday life, you have to train more days than you rest to see noticeable increases in physical ability - NFF insight

Perhaps no one social intervention changed what bodies represent - potential - more than the advent of photography, which forever altered how bodies are represented (the mirror with a memory).

The author of Sherlock Holmes, sir Arthur Conan Doyle, was one of the judges of the first bodybuilding contest.

Jumping Jacks are named after Jack LaLanne.

If physical practices can alter something as basic as our notions of beauty and to whom we are attracted, it begs the question what else they might affect.

NFF regimes partake of practice both in the sense of training for and of doing: we temporarily withdraw from the rush of existence in order to rehearse its most fundamental aspects - movement, the interplay of neuron and muscle, the presentness and oblivion of concentration - and, bettered by this training, slip back into the stream of life.

Jacob Mclaws says

Spoiler alert: This guy really likes Crossfit! I've never done crossfit and so after this book I'm curious to join in a session or two, but Daniel Kunitz is a Crossfit evangelist through and through. I didn't mind that too much though.

Some really interesting parts about Greek fitness as a part of a ancient arete and workout culture evolving in the US during the 20th century. Fun fact: "Gym" means "naked" in Greek. The Greeks had a sand-filled gymnasium area in the courtyard where Plato studied under Aristotle (Plato was supposed to have been a pretty successful athlete at the Greek competitions). They considered physical fitness as a crucial aspect of overall moral virtue.

I think my biggest take away from reading this book is the idea of developing a sort of Greek 'arete' attitude toward exercising- treating my workouts as a way to inflict something on myself that makes me stronger mentally as well as physically. I've noticed that just reframing my workouts this last week as acts of discipline for the purpose of making me a *better* man has made me much more motivated to get out of bed to work out before dawn than getting up and working out just for the purpose of becoming a *stronger* man.
