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Four minutes to fitness

The four-minute intensive exercise regime is back in the news. Hailed by some as a potential solution to the relationship between health and leisure, the dream of the quick fitness fix prompts Jonathan Ives to wonder whether it serves to highlight the failure of leisure to address one of the most important societal issues of our age.

Anyone with a working knowledge of the sport, leisure and culture sector is likely to be familiar with the work of Dr Izumi Tabata even if they are not able to place the name. Dr Tabata published research findings based on his work with the Japanese speed skating team in the 1990s that shows short bursts of extremely high-intensity exercise are as effective as the more accepted approach to training involving long periods of moderate-intensity work. The programme that emerged gave rise to the tantalising prospect of the four-minute workout, a fast track to the health and fitness industry's promised land of fantastic results with minimal effort, and, by implication, a real contribution to the health of the nation. However, in common with almost all short cuts to anywhere, it is not quite as easy as it sounds.

The principle is essentially simple. Having noticed the impact of high-intensity bursts while working with the speed skating team, Tabata set out to test the theory in laboratory conditions. One group of students – the control – maintained an exercise regime of steady cardiovascular exercise on a bike for one hour five times a week. The other group's approach comprised a 10-minute warm-up and four minutes of 'Tabata intervals' – 20 seconds of maximal effort with ten seconds of rest repeated eight times – four times a week; this regime was supplemented by one 30-minute session of steady exercise plus two minutes of Tabata intervals. The results showed that the Tabata group's 88 minutes of exercise produced a 28% increase in anaerobic capacity and an increase in VO2 max of 15%, while the control group showed a 10% increase in VO2 max and no change in the anaerobic capacity.

This research confirmed that this intensive approach to fitness can deliver markedly improved results: in just 88 minutes a week you could replicate, and indeed exceed, the results of five-plus hours in the gym. Surely this was at last the golden ticket for which the health and fitness sector had been searching: proven results achieved very quickly. However, for all the allure of a quick fix, the Tabata model has remained the preserve of the performance athlete and the seriously committed gym-goer. While the Tabata regime has many advocates, none of them are under the illusion that this is an easy option. Results are not achieved without a serious level of effort. As Tabata is quoted as saying, "If you feel OK afterwards you have not done it properly."

Although the Tabata model has not taken the health and fitness world by storm, it seems that the possibility remains alive. Tabata is in the news now because a new licensing deal has been signed with Universal Studios to produce a series of instruction DVDs and create a phalanx of Tabata instructors trained to take the message of commitment and intensity to the fitness rooms of the world. After 20 years is Dr Tabata's message about to change the way we think of health and fitness? Is the money invested in changing the name of the Fitness Industry Association to UK Active about to pay off with a transformation of the health of the nation via a new understanding of physical activity?

From the safety of my desk I pondered these questions and arrived at a www.theleisurereview.co.uk

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largely unscientific answer: probably not. Like most people who have reached and enjoyed the fruits of adulthood I would like to be fitter, exercise a bit more and lose a bit of weight. Leaving aside for a minute the issue of the gut-wrenching intensity of the exercise regime in question, I would love to be able to find 88 minutes in a week to exercise. Some weeks I might be able to find this sort of time but, in common with most people, once the commitments of work, family and all the necessary minutiae of life have been dealt with, time to exercise is quite a luxury. Being disciplined to stick to an exercise programme is one thing; explaining to Mrs Editor that I plan to disappear for a hour and a half on my bike for a little me-time is quite another.

And discipline is no small matter. Like most people who can occasionally be bothered to be physically active on purpose, I quite like that feeling of driving myself the extra mile, metre or repetition but the intensity required by the Tabata regime is a whole different level of commitment. If we all had a small percentage of the drive required to implement the Tabata principles the nation would not be wondering how it is going to deal with the health and obesity issues slumped on its doorstep. For me, an ageing but not yet aged veteran of various gym inductions, charity walks, Swimathons and Etapes du Tours, it all sounds a bit too much like hard work. If I could find the 88 minutes a week I would not choose to spend it in a gym and even if I could be motivated to walk among the CV machinery the intensity of the whole Tabata approach does not sound like much fun unless you are still in the pursuit of your twenties and the possession of two uncreaking knees.

The statistics of physical activity – we are all familiar with them by now, whatever their sources and scale of despair or wishful thinking – suggest that I am not alone in this ennui of exercise. And yet, surveying the scene before me in the bathroom mirror, I am not in too bad a state, even without the luxury of 88 focused minutes for exercise every week. With such a lackadaisical approach to fitness, I am forced to wonder why I am not a good bit heavier (for which read ‘fatter’) than I am at present.

The answer is transport. Having thought about it beyond the immediate constraint of the waistband of my trousers, I am increasingly drawn to the conclusion that here lies the realistic solution to the nation’s health challenges, a solution that is (whisper it) actually likely to rank rather higher on the list of possibilities than sport or the health and fitness sector. I ride a bike two or three time a day for short journeys to and from nurseries, shops and various church halls. I use public transport – buses, the occasional train – and use a shared car every so often. All this adds up to a lot more than 88 minutes a week and has kept my belt on roughly the same notch for a good few years now.

I am no longer much of a sportsman, if I ever was, but I understand that plenty of people enjoy playing their sport regularly; plenty of people enjoy their visit to their gym; plenty of people enjoy running. Sport and leisure does have a role in addressing the health of the nation but it is going to have to be a lot smarter than pinning its hopes on persistent statements to the effect that we get the limited number of people motivated to play sport or go to the gym a bit fitter and bit healthier. From my leisure-centric perspective it pains me to say it but UK Active, national governing bodies of sport (NGB) and Sport England are going to have to face facts. UK Active needs to accept that fitness companies are not socially motivated operations however much it rebrands and expands its marketing budget. NGBs need to accept that school sport is not just a recruiting ground for the numbers that will swell their clubs and look good on their funding applications. Sport England is going to have to realise that a £5-million fund is not going to establish sport and leisure at the forefront of the health debate; it is not even going to scratch the surface.

Ultimately sport and leisure is going to have to accept that it needs to look for partners beyond the Department for Health and the Department for Education and Employment. The increasingly obvious reality of the situation is that the solution to health and physical activity challenges are in the hands of the Department for Transport. British Cycling's ambition to get one million women back on their bikes by 2020 may be plausible but it will be achieved by persuading women to cycle to the shops or to school, not by pointing them in the direction of competitive sport or gym-based exercise regimes.

Sport and leisure will need to work out how it can work with an approach to physical activity promotion that involves low-level activity such as walking and cycling instead of persisting with the assertion that competitive sport and gym membership is the route to national wellness. Unless the sector comes up with some new thinking pretty quickly the best advice for anyone looking to improve their health will remain unchanged from the current most sensible approach: find your local gym, walk to it, find out how much it would cost per month to join, and walk home again; repeat three times a week and with the money you save buy a bike.

Jonathan Ives is the editor of *The Leisure Review*. His transport preferences are revealed in the blog *A Precious Cargo*.

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