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For a Good Workout, Try Some Channel Surfing

By Vicky Hallett

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I'll admit it: The first thought on my mind when I walk into the gym in the morning isn't a game plan for the day's workout. It's how can I snag a treadmill or elliptical near the television tuned to the "Today" show.

My legs are content to stride away as long as my brain is occupied with exclusive interviews and snappy segments. And if [Matt Lauer](#) promises something irresistible in the next half-hour, I may go the extra mile -- or miles -- to stick around and see it.

Habits like mine are why health clubs have gotten into show biz in the past 15 years. Although once upon a time a single TV in a gym would have been a luxury, now it's odd not to find several sets and frequently a bunch of machines with their own personal TVs. [Gold's Gym](#) has recently introduced the idea of the "Cardio Cinema," where movies play on a large screen in a darkened room set up like a theater, only with bikes, treadmills and ellipticals instead of cushy seats. Increasingly, gyms are also offering equipment like Espresso Bikes, which have screens that riders can use to watch regular television programming or take a virtual-reality ride through a choice of environments (including outer space!).

If that's what it takes to get the general population moving, Pete McCall, an exercise physiologist with the [American Council on Exercise](#), is all for it. "The perception is exercise is work; it makes me sweat," he says. "So if we have to use TVs as a puppy dog, it's a necessary evil."

Diane Whaley, a sports psychologist at the [University of Virginia](#), says there are two goals for any exercise session: to be enjoyable and effective. And while getting engrossed in television seems to help with the former, it can take away from the latter. "You have to find out what will result in a good workout, not just going through the motions," she says.

Although Costas Karageorghis, a sports psychologist at Brunel University in London, firmly believes that distractions reduce pain during exercise, his groundbreaking investigations of the effect of visual stimulus have him worried that television can be too great a diversion. "Watching TV while you exercise is such a distraction that it diminishes the quality of exercise. When you combine video with audio, it requires more from your brain," he says.

However, Karageorghis -- who orchestrated the live soundtrack of this month's "Run to the Beat" half-marathon in London, where musicians performed along the course -- has found that upbeat programming that requires little mental energy could have an "additive effect." He favors comedies, music videos or cartoons over plot-heavy shows that demand extra attention.

"The very best thing would be edited highlights of athletes to inspiring music," he says, offering as an example "I Feel Good" by [James Brown](#) coupled with carefully selected Olympic moments. "Highlights are better than a game because you get timeouts or injuries, and those aren't motivational," he says.

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The timeouts clearly didn't bother Gwydion Suilebhan, a 40-year-old playwright who was burning up an elliptical at the [Dupont Circle](#) location of Results, the Gym, on a recent Saturday while watching the Clemson-[Georgia Tech](#) football game.

"I don't care a lick about either team, but I just like to watch the action," he said. When he's exercising, he'll seek out any form of athletic competition: "American Gladiator," [Arena Football](#) or whatever is on [ESPN](#). He said he got what he calls "the greatest workout of my life" when the U.S. women's soccer team won the World Cup.

"I got on the elliptical partway through the match," Suilebhan recalled. "It was the first soccer game I'd ever watched on television, and I would not get off the machine until the end. At an hour and 15 minutes, I should have been exhausted, but they were running around the field wildly and I was cheering and going."

Experiences like that happen because TV allows us to disassociate, says Jesse Pittsley, program coordinator of the exercise science program at [Winston-Salem State University](#). He knew a guy who used to set his treadmill to a seven-minute-mile pace while watching football games. Several times a season, he'd cover marathon-length distances.

Running 26 miles is a killer workout whether you're watching TV or not, and his body burned the same number of calories it would have if he'd been staring at a blank wall. "For most workouts you don't need to be there," Pittsley said. "Be on the [French Riviera](#)." But commercials can be a problem, he warns, because "the disassociation stops."

McCall advises harnessing the rhythms of TV to your advantage. When the commercial comes on, that's when you pick up the speed. "It's the old Chuck Woolery 'two and two,' and then you go easy for five to eight minutes," he says. "That's a good recovery interval."

Folks using a Gold's Gym Cardio Cinema have entire movies to go through, with no commercial breaks. "You can get really lost in it," says manager Cameron Child. So although people who stay for an entire two-hour film tend not to work out at a high intensity the whole way, he says the ones who come in for shorter periods usually crank it up. "We have to keep it two to three degrees cooler than the rest of the gym," he says.

Using a large screen also avoids one of the problems of combining TV and exercise: bad biomechanics. Karageorghis fears people watching television lower or raise their chin for a better view of a screen, and McCall reports seeing neck-craning -- especially when the TVs were smaller -- by exercisers who weren't wearing their glasses.

That's why Equinox, the super-high-end health club chain (with a location in Tysons Corner) avoids personal TV screens in favor of a large bank of plasmas. "We felt that was the wrong posture. You shouldn't be looking down; you should be focused straight ahead," says Chris Carnecchia, general manager of the Tysons location. Besides, adds David Harris, Equinox's national director for training, beyond the postural concerns, personal TVs disrupt what he calls the right "staging" of an exercise environment. "The energy is different. People aren't looking around and learning from other things going on."

So there are some concerns blocking television's total dominance in gyms. And even though experts believe the trend toward more screens will continue, especially using new interactive technologies to give exercisers more game-like experiences, there's one part of the gym that everyone agrees should stay TV-free: the weight room. Form is crucial when you're lifting, and it takes focus and concentration. Distraction there doesn't mask pain -- it creates it.

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