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THE GLOBE AND MAIL

February 10, 2010

Testing TRX, a workout that (literally) hangs tough

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Globe and Mail Update

The TRX exercise system looks like a couple of dangling seatbelts. Don't be fooled by its simple design

For months, people kept telling me the same thing: TRX would work my body as hard, if not harder, than weights.

I assumed they had been brainwashed by infomercials or seduced by the promise of never having to lift a dumbbell again.

Then a funny thing happened: I took one 30-minute class, and 36 hours later could not move my arms without being reminded that this was the real deal, the kind of sore that feels achingly satisfying.

TRX is little more than two heavy-duty straps mounted to the ceiling or an overhead frame (it can even be anchored around a doorframe). At each end is a foamy hand grip that doubles as a stirrup. The straps are adjustable, which customizes the system for any body height while also affecting the degree of difficulty.

It's a ridiculously simple suspension system that, when not in use, looks kind of like dangling seatbelts.

The original TRX, conceived by U.S. Navy SEAL Randy Hetrick, was a harness made from pieces of parachute webbing stitched together with boat-repair tools. It helped him and colleagues stay in shape with its bodyweight-bearing exercises. More importantly, it was fully portable.

Flash forward five years, and the system is popular among elite athletes, including New Orleans Saints star Drew Brees.

I tried TRX at two boutique gyms in Toronto. At Get Spun, the program consists of a structured 30-minute "blast" class. The newly opened eMbody Fitness offers a 55-minute session that gauges the individual needs of participants.

During my first session at eMbody, veteran trainer Robert Steigele's mantra was, "You have to trust the TRX." Meaning, we can't be afraid to put our body weight into the exercises - even if doing so feels like we'll go splat on the floor.

Theoretically, the system could detach from the ceiling or frame, but it's highly unlikely, I'm told. I compare it to one of those trust-fall games you learn at summer camp: Only by letting yourself go do you experience the real benefit.

I learn quickly that keeping the tension is the name of the game.

"If you feel slack it's not working," says Get Spun trainer Chris Cecile. By the same token, he advises against gripping for dear life, which will only strain the forearms.

Almost all traditional exercises can be done using the TRX: bicep curls, rows, pushups, chest presses, triceps extensions, standing rollouts. A wide-legged stance is typically easier than with feet together because it distributes the body weight. Also, the closer I stand to where the TRX is anchored, the more body weight I use. Clearly there's geometry at work - but I can't think about math while focusing on my alignment.

The exercises I most enjoy involve being prostrate with my feet inside the stirrups. A TRX plank further isolates the core. Completing five atomic pushups - a pushup followed by a pike (legs straight, hips in the air) - feels like a major

accomplishment. Swinging my legs like a pendulum with my elbows on the ground goes straight to the obliques. At one point, Mr. Cecile has us do a back bend and diagonal reach that gets me thinking of Neo in *The Matrix*.

Nathan Mellalieu, owner of Studeo 55, a boutique gym in Vancouver, says TRX lends itself to people of all fitness levels. "It's more functional and applicable to everyday life than the traditional lat pull-down. It creates instability, whereas with a machine you don't get the same benefits because you are stable."

His only caution is directed toward people interested in buying a TRX for personal use, but not familiar with the system.

"You have to have good body awareness and good body control to keep the tension." He says. "A lot of changes you make to keep the tension are so subtle."

Other workout tweaks make a difference, too.

At eMbody, Mr. Steigele eschews music, which initially seems like a downer: Nothing pumps up the psyche like a little Lady Gaga. Then it occurs to me that the silence boosts my concentration. And by the next day, I have the sore abs to prove it.

Strap in

What is it?

A system consisting of two ropes with handles anchored to the ceiling or a frame. It introduces instability to traditional exercises, thereby engaging the entire body.

How hard is it?

It's challenging enough for U.S. Navy SEALs, but can be modified for a senior with little fitness experience. The determining factors are the position of the body and how much body weight goes into each exercise.

What does it work?

The entire body, with particular focus on the arms, chest and back. It's also killer for the core because the muscles help stabilize with every move. It will not meet your cardio quota unless you integrate jumping jacks and burpees between sets.

What are classes like?

They're typically small, almost like semi-personal training. Expect a range of styles across gyms. Some may be high-octane, others more methodical.

Who's taking it?

TRX takers are loyal to the core. Fit young men and women, they book classes weeks ahead, often shutting out newcomers. At some gyms, reserving one of the systems can be more difficult than scoring a table at a hot new restaurant.

Sign me up!

Single classes at Get Spun [<http://www.getspun.ca>] are \$20 or four for \$72; at eMbody Fitness [<http://www.embodyfitnessclubs.com>] packages of four classes are \$120, eight classes \$220. Both limit classes to four people. At-home systems can be purchased at www.fitnessanywhere.com, starting at \$189.95 (U.S.).

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