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Zumba: fun trumps technique in dancing calories away

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NEW YORK (Reuters Life!) - There's a party going on next door. While you're dutifully pounding that treadmill, the Zumba folks are dancing their calories away.

Taking a class in Zumba-high-energy aerobics workout performed to a fusion of mostly Latin dance rhythms is a bit like going to a short, sober, and very hip wedding.

"Zumba is very accessible, really fun, and all ages participate," Carol Espel, spokesperson for Equinox Fitness, said in an interview.

"You get a really nice cardiovascular workout and walk away sweaty and smiling," Espel, group fitness director for the national chain of luxury health clubs, explained. "It's not like you have to think about every single step."

At a recent Zumba class in New York City, fun trumped technique as a merry band of exercisers danced the samba, merengue and rumba to a mix of Latin, hip hop and oldies.

"If the teacher is motivational," said Espel, "they create this environment that gives you permission to let loose."

And let loose they did. shimmying with abandon to "Rockin' Robin," cooling down to "Chain of Fools."

"Some work hard and others not as hard. You can go all out if you want to," said Espel.

A combination of fast and slow rhythms provides the interval training and the dance steps are designed to be easy to follow.

"There's a lot of repetition, so the moves become very familiar and can be learned quickly," Espel said. "But there's not a lot of emphasis on technique; it's more about having fun."

The Zumba workout began one day in the 1990's when Colombian-born fitness trainer Beto Perez was about to start his class only to realize he had mistakenly left his usual aerobics music at home.

Improvising, he substituted his favorite car tapes -- traditional Latin salsa and merengue music -- and Zumba was born.

Perez brought his class to the United States in 1999. Today Zumba is taught at more than 40,000 locations in 75 countries, according to the official website.

"The idea that exercise should be fun is very appealing to a lot of people who wouldn't want to exercise," Fabio Comana, of the American Council on Exercise (ACE), said in an interview.

"Zumba is one way to bridge that gap," said Comana, who believes Zumba was buoyed by the success of the TV shows "So You Think You Can Dance" and "Dancing with the Stars."

"The dance craze really helped spur interest," Comana said from ACE headquarters in San Diego, California.

He said a one-hour class can burn up to 500 calories.

"I think Zumba was originally geared to the young hip person," Comana said. In fact, the name Zumba comes from a Colombian word meaning fast.

"Now Zumba has expanded," Comana said. "Some classes have added dumbbells for resistance training."

And Aqua Zumba -- traditional aquatic exercise set to Latin music -- is coming in September.

"Aqua fitness is very appealing to the older adult because one gets resistance from water in a non-impacting workout," he said.

"But Zumba is all in the hips, like Latin dance," Comana said. "And that's tough to do in the water."

Whatever questions Comana may have about the offshoots of Zumba, he's all for the concept.

"To make it fun and then bring in the exercise," he said. "That's not a bad thing."

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