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Feeling playful

Web site founder wants folks to have fun while exercising

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Tim Piai
Special to The Plain Dealer

Spring has sprung and guess what thought keeps running through my mind?

"Has it ever snowed after Memorial Day?" No. "Where is the Tribe's offense?" No. "Why pay retail?" No.

It's the phrase "Dodgeball yourself to fitness."

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It's not as sexy a marketing concept as those new Nike ads, where a pack of handsome folk rattle off their favorite long-distance race. But the truth is that I seem to be meeting more kickballers than kickboxers these days, and this post-graduate playground trend is still very much in the air.

So what gives? Why are games like kickball, dodgeball, and wiffleball - not to mention more mainstream sports like ultimate Frisbee and sand volleyball - continuing to convert people who prefer to take the stationary bike for a ride to nowhere?

Perhaps the better question is "Why not?" After all, when your mad-as-hell planet sometimes feels like a leaking tetherball, what sounds like a better hour spent? Battling the stair climber in a sweaty club with cable news blaring Axis-of-Evil updates from 15 televisions, or taking a big hit of fresh air as you lazily boot a kickball into a grassy outfield, where it startles a group of grazing bunnies?

OK, I'm just having fun. The bunnies are probably a reach.

But if they were real, I'd suggest we keep them away from Drew Holland of game snake.com, whom I met while catching a pickup game of dodgeball in a claustrophobic, shoebox-shaped gym designed for four-on-four

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indoor soccer at the UXL Sports & Fitness complex in Brunswick. It's a perfect setting for dodgeball.

Holland, an Akron resident, is a friendly, high-energy, progressive playholc who, incidentally, has no time (or patience) for the treadmill culture. His Web site - which he runs with partners/players Glenn Somodi of Brunswick and Andy Hopkins of Akron - is the anti-treadmill, a nationwide sign-up site that allows willing sportsters to arrange local pickup games with other interested players. It's the reason balls are flying in Brunswick on this night.

Watching the two dodgeball teams laugh and leap around the court - taking note that these groups have little or no association with one another - it's easy to get caught up in Holland's love for interactive sports. Kind of.

He is preaching revolution, while all I want to do is to stop finching. Imagine motivational guru Tony Robbins riffing to you within the pandemonium of a bottle-rocket war. Holland emphatically urges me to cut loose from the isolation of my treadmill workout, insisting that I "get outside, get stoked and smell the pines." He drives this all home while I sit 3 feet away from an endless swarm of round, rubber rocketballs that are ripping through the air and exploding off the back walls - or somebody's sternum - like firework reports.

Holland then goes for the kill shot.

"Treadmills are Habitrails," he says, laughing with disdain, which leaves me a few beats to conjure up an image of those sad little workout-wheel cages that constitute hamster heaven.

"They suck, they're harsh and they're sad," he says, sounding like someone describing a tongue piercing and not a treadmill. "It's a conformist workout where you put on the headphones and run silently in place with all the other drones."

When the dust finally settles from the final round of dodgeball, his message still makes sense.

"Sports like dodgeball and kickball are old school," he says. "And they take us back to the days when we played fun games for the love of it.

"When we were kids, we didn't say we played kickball or soccer to get a workout in and to burn some calories. I think people are starting to figure out that these sports are still really fun. How about that? You don't have to ride a spinning bike. You can go outside and play. Good things will happen and you'll get stoked."

Holland says his Web site (which offers a ton of sports that don't include bumming your preschooler's balls and bats) takes it a step further.

"Competitive sports all have one thing in common, and that is you can't do it alone," he says. "So for a lot of people, the only way to participate in these fun sports is to join a league or a facility, and that's often a big commitment of dollars and time. There's no serendipity, and you're paying Benjamins to play. With our site, people can find a game - or set up a game - anywhere in the country. With anybody. It's inclusive, it's spontaneous, and it's usually free."

And that Habitrail lifestyle?

"Our home-to-car-to-cubicle-to treadmill-to-television-to-bed routine is a vacuum. It's isolating. And the longer we isolate ourselves, the less tolerant we become to other people and things. Our filters start to work off a socioeconomic or cultural model.

"I'm willing to bet that the more someone gets involved, the more their filter returns to a love of sports."

My treadmill will have to wait. I have a game of horseshoes that needs some players.

Piai is a free-lance writer in Rocky River.

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