

# Me vs Exercise

BY JAMES WALKER

One man's lifelong effort to work out, but not too hard.

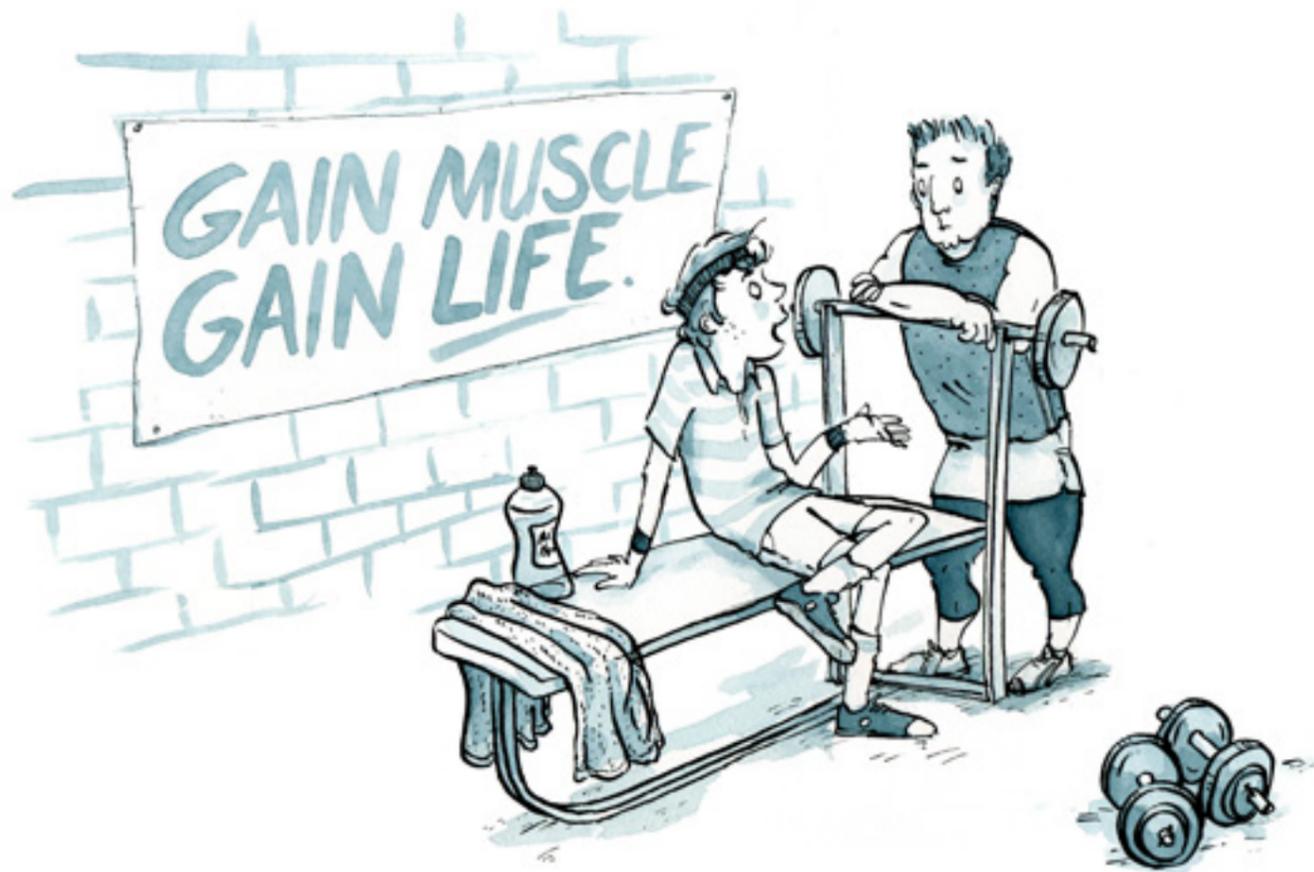


Illustration: Cat Chapman

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I used to visit a personal trainer at a nearby park for a one-on-one boot camp. I prefer to exercise alone. I don't want the presence of others to stoke my competitive streak and make me try harder than I ever intended at 6:30 in the morning.

At these sessions, my affable Argentine trainer, Thiago, would encourage me to jump and squat, while I would do my best to while away the session with distracting chit-chat. I had set up a Google Alert on Argentina, so I would have topical material and always avoided closed Yes/No questions.

One day, at the end of a session that I had successfully hijacked by raising the fate of former socialist President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, Thiago revealed, without nearly enough cushioning, that this would be our last session. He was moving to Australia with his girlfriend.

I was devastated. Not because I had made any physical progress, but because Thiago and I got to hang out in comfortable exercise wear and shoot the breeze three times a week. This was more quality time than I spent with any other friend, and given I was paying him, he was usually more attentive.

After considering various scenarios to stymie Thiago's departure, I came to the conclusion that it would be self-centred to ask him to leave his girlfriend and stay on to keep me company, under the guise of exercise. I would have to let Thiago go and seek solace in a gym.

The decision to join a gym was also an important one for my projected life expectancy, given that a sports doctor had recently liberated me from running. The kindly doctor had told me I had

early onset arthritis in my knee and issued me a lifetime excuse note. For the 13-year-old me, who came last in high school cross country, this was a much-awaited moment.

After an online search, I found a slick gym to join on the outskirts of Newmarket in Auckland. I selected it on the criteria of most invigorating slogans: "Gain Muscle, Gain Life" and "TRUTH: Activity Matters, Fitness Matters More." My first question, when I arrived at the gym, was whether the person who coined the slogans was around, as I wanted to know what it felt like to be that alive. I was told, however, that Marjorie was cleaning the pool.

Instead, I was introduced to Brady, one of the trainers. Uniformed in head-to-toe Asics, Brady explained that he and his comrades patrolled the gym floor to oversee member's every press, pull and crunch. I could tell it was going to be much more difficult to avoid progress at this gym. Brady's omnipresence would be pitted against my self-defeating cunning.

A few days into my new gym membership, Brady came up to me while I was on the Chest Press and said, "Hey bro, have you worked out much before? For a beginner, you've got great technique."

It would be hypocritical of me to take offense at the fact that, even with his certificate in exercise science, he couldn't tell that I had been working out for at least 15 years. Instead, I took the chance to stop pushing and talk at length about the importance of correct form. As soon as Brady had the chance, he disappeared in a flash of Asics. I left the gym that day satisfied. Another trainer thwarted.

My self-satisfaction was short-lived, however. That evening, I was at a family dinner when Dad revealed to the table that, at the gym that day, he had cracked his "PB" on the bench press: 110kg. My father is a retired banker who lives in Auckland's inner east and his 'gym' is actually a tennis club. Dad's gains didn't seem reasonable. The only explanation was his trainer, a former bodybuilder from Romania who regularly feeds Dad "protein shakes".

Being more than 30 years my senior and sensing victory, Dad asked me how my new gym was going and how much I was "benching these days". I welcomed this conversation about as much as the one I had just finished with Mum. She was off to her first hen's night in 25 years and was in a quandary about the ethics of male strip tease. "Do you think they feel taken advantage of?"

Still half-wondering what Mum had in mind for the male dancer, I responded to Dad, "Right now I'm more focussed on my technique than mere numbers. In fact, the trainers at my new gym have expressly mentioned my form."

I had bought myself some time, but it wasn't going to be enough, as Dad continued his pursuit of the sexagenarian six-pack. My unwanted competitive streak had been provoked. First thing tomorrow, I was going back to the gym to seek out Majorie. I needed her to stand over me and shout "Gain Muscle, Gain Life".