Defining Fitness

- by Bob Budai

I find it very interesting to go someplace and people-watch with a bunch of people who are “fit”. Gyms and health clubs across America are some of the best places to observe human nature. But before I digress, let me get back to the subject at hand. How does one define “fit” or being “in shape”. I can say personally that my own ideas of being in shape have changed a lot from the time I was a teenager until now. Back then, being in shape meant that you could bench press a lot, and a lot then meant anything over 225 lbs (having 2 45 lb. plates on each end of a bar defined life you know). So basically, high school weight rooms were filled with “in shape” boys who looked like lightbulbs – big upper body from benching and doing curls every day, and no legs. Then as I got older, workouts started becoming more well-rounded, we would also work our upper backs and legs once a week (maybe once every 2 weeks). As an athlete all my life, I never really had to worry about my cardiovascular conditioning, because sports took care of that. I wasn’t until I stopped playing the same competitive sports that I actually had to start working on cardio. This seems to be a common story for many males who work out. Females are a bit different, they usually focused on legs a lot more than the guys, and a bit more on cardio. But in all these cases, we are mainly talking about strength training to define fitness. You mean there are other areas of fitness?

First let’s look at some examples of being “in shape”:

1) Bench Press World Record of 1050 lbs. set by Ryan Kennelly

So that’s a strong upper body, but let’s go a step further

2) Power lifting World Record of 2850 lbs (that’s combined bench press, squat, and deadlift) by Donnie Thompson

Strong throughout the whole body, but not as strong with just upper body (I think he only benched like 900 lbs). So who is in better shape?

3) World’s Strongest Man Mariusz Pudzianowski who lifts stone balls weighing over 300 lbs, throws kegs over a high bar, carries anvils around, flips huge tires, and other crazy things!

This is an example of being strong throughout the whole body, and strong in many different ways (not just 3). So who is in the best shape so far? All these guys have “strength” but chances are their cardio isn’t as world class as their strength (although their sports do require a certain of cardio as well). So how about this:

4) Marathon world record (in official competition) of 2 hours, 4 minutes, 26 seconds (that is less than a 5 minute mile for 26.2 miles!) by Haile Gebrselassie

But just like the bench presser, how are they with multiple forms of cardio?

5) World record for the Hawaii Ironman Triathlon (2.4 mile ocean swim, 112 mile bike, 26.2 mile run) of 8 hours, 4 minutes, 8 seconds by Luc Van Lierde

And again, to make a similar comparison as the strength athletes:

6) Adventure Racing’s most successful racer of all time: Ian Adamson has dominated the sport which involves racers doing things like mountain biking, canoeing/kayaking, trekking, rapelling, climbing, swimming, and whatever else can be thought of in harsh environments while finding their way with map and compass. The big races can take over a week and cover hundreds of miles!

So there is strength and cardio, but do most regular people need that kind of fitness, most of the people I see as patients as well as training clients are severely lacking in muscular endurance. How about this feat:

7) Girevoy (Kettlebell) Sport Champion Valery Fedoronko can perform over 200 snatches (swinging the kettlebell between the legs and then overhead with 1 arm) without stopping for 10 minutes with a 70 lb. bell – only being allowed to switch arms once.

As we get older, very few people could not benefit from improved flexibility:

8) Dick Hartsell, owner and developer of Jump Stretch, Inc. can hang in the full splits with his legs in 2 resistance bands hanging from a bar overhead. (By the way, he is 67 years old)

How about balance:

9) Ashrita Furman broke the record for balancing on a Swiss ball at 2 hours, 16 minutes, 2 seconds

Or control/awareness of one’s body

10) Yogi Masters have demonstrated often unexplainable feats, including sitting completely motionless for hours or even days, and being able to control heart, brain, and muscle function through meditation.

Most people define fitness by what they can see, and so now we get into the people who are the masters of looking good, although looks can be very deceiving.

11) Bodybuilding champs are often the symbols of fitness by demonstrating incredibly low body fat levels, combined with large and well defined muscles.

An area that usually gets forgotten is speed, agility, and quickness. Although these are 3 different things, they often get grouped together. For this, we may look at different sports and try to decide who is the fittest. So which sport is it: basketball, gymnastics, swimming, track and field, football, soccer, how about any of the sports mentioned above, or the hundreds of sports we have not mentioned? It really depends on each sport and what is required, and now we are back at square one deciding who is most fit.

Probably the best example of all around fitness is this:

12) Joe Decker – “World’s Fittest Man”, in 24 hours completed the following feats: run 10 miles, bike 100 miles, powerwalk 5 miles, kayak 6 miles, row 10 miles, swim 2 miles, ski 10 miles on an NordicTrack, do 3,000 consecutive abdominal crunches, 1,100 jumping jacks, 1,000 leg lifts, 1,100 pushups, and lift a cumulative 278,540 lbs!

Here are some other interesting fitness records from our friends at Guinness (the record book, not the beer):

Pushups: nonstop = 10,507, 1 arm in 10 minutes = 546, 1 finger = 124

Wall sit: 11 hours, 5 minutes

Pullups: in 1 minute = 46, in 1 hour = 825

Punching bag marathon: 36 hours, 3 minutes

Heaviest weight lifted using only the ear: 61.7 kg (136 lbs) – I don’t think anyone considers this to be fitness, I just found it amusing.

Having competed myself in a variety of sports including soccer, basketball, volleyball, martial arts, endurance sports (marathon, triathlon, adventure racing), kettlebell/Girevoy sport, powerlifting, and others; I can say that at various points I have had to change the focus of my training greatly. Does this make me more or less in shape from one to the next? Can I bench press as much as I could when I was 17 years old? Who knows to the first question, and yes – quite a bit more actually, to the second. The point is, everyone’s idea of fitness is relative and you just need to discover what is most important to you and work at it. Figure out what your natural physical abilities are and try to develop them, while working on your weaknesses. The biggest thing is: try not to compare yourself to someone else, because as I said before, looks can be deceiving and does not necessarily indicate true fitness.

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