



Fit Revolution

Gone are the days of sporting events being reserved solely for professional athletes—taking part in one of the burgeoning celebrations of fitness that have become so popular around the globe, from races and workout camps to obstacle courses, danceathons and more, can be a sisterhood that will help propel you into your strongest, fastest, and best self...

By Yi-Hwa Hanna

It's 8pm on a Friday night and the crowd is heaving. There's so much energy that the air is practically crackling with electricity, and around 1,000 women are getting their groove on to some killer tunes. No, it's not a hot new bar—it's the Dubai edition of the NTC Tour.

A now-global event run by Nike Women—the 2015 edition travelled from cities across the USA to places as far-flung from the brand's home in Oregon as Stockholm and Tokyo—the Nike Training Club first started as a humble training app, before morphing into a worldwide phenomenon incorporating events that bring it to life. Just a quick click on their website already sucks you in to the irresistible energy that has made it such a success: "Nike Training Club has no borders," it says, continuing: "Its members train in all corners of the globe," explaining that the goal is to bring together thousands of female athletes to ignite their love for fitness.

It's a clever set of wording, no doubt, but it's precisely this sort of truly inspirational language that has enabled Nike to galvanise women around the world into realising that they, too, can be a part of it, previous stereotypes and barriers be damned. As a brand that boldly claims: "If you have a body, you are an athlete," particularly at a time when health, fitness and wellness are all the rage, it reminds any woman, anywhere, that she, too can be a part of the movement—even if she didn't think she could have in the past. It may be a club, but it isn't snobbishly elite. Rather, it's practically a cult of positivity, embracing anyone who wants to be a part of it with open arms—be that a

Best Body

pro athlete or the average girl—promising nothing but a stronger, happier, and generally better lifestyle as a result, and it's here that lies the key to their success.

A Widespread Reach

"It's [for] the fitness girl who is training for life, and also the athlete who is training for sport. NTC is rooted in functional training, which is good for everything: If you want to be a better runner, if you want to look lean, if you want to be faster, or jump higher, or be more flexible, or whatever the case is for you, the training philosophy really accommodates everything," says NTC Master Trainer Marie Purvis. And she should know, as one of the driving forces behind it all. "As a high-performance coach, I used to run the speed and agility programmes for a football team, for a whole competitive league, in Oregon. Nike was on the brink of wanting to bring sport, training and fitness to more women—and they were wondering what women want. I was the only female trainer where I was that was doing this, so they came to me. Coming from personal experience, I played sport all through high school and growing up, but when I went to university, I stopped. I was among the 80 or so percent of women who play sport, then go to college and just don't anymore. The only way I knew how to train was for a sport—I didn't know how to train for life. That's kind of where my vision for what I wanted the NTC to be, and with Nike coming in with their athletes and being so rooted in sport,

• *Yep, it looks like #TheFitLife is here to stay!*



I think this combination is what became NTC and why it's so successful today. It's a hybrid of the two—'normal' girls who want to keep fit and healthy, and the athletes."

While the NTC Tour does charge a fee for an entrance pass in each city it comes to, the amount is nominal, and the Nike Training Club also offers classes in various cities internationally that women can take part in entirely for free. The app, where it all started, is also free of charge, and boasts more than 100 full-body workouts that you can do anytime, anywhere. So what's in it for the brand, you might wonder? "I think the

reason why Nike does it is because we're really empowering women," Marie says. "We never wanted it to be exclusive," she continues, explaining: "We didn't want the girls to be intimidated because I know how it can be when you're going into a training session or weight room, and there's all these guys working out... and you know you're paying for it, not knowing if you'll like it or not, and it can be really awkward. We just wanted to empower and motivate women to be fit, and just try something new and get outside their comfort zone, because you're never going to make a change unless you do so. With my philosophy and the way Nike thinks, that's why we don't charge for classes. We wanted everyone to feel like they're super welcome, and that you can do it—as soon as you try it, you're going to

love it, and be like, "I'm hooked!" Consider it social responsibility. And so the app—designed to be a personal trainer in your pocket, if you will—was born. As for that tour? Yep, Nike's keen eyes recognised the skyrocketing growth of the wellness industry here in the Middle East, and answered by bringing it to Dubai, putting serious smiles—and a lot of sweat—onto the faces of the yearning masses. "Dubai was amazing—it was my biggest surprise," Marie says. "It was so inspiring, to see all these girls [from all walks of life] who just want this: You could see a covered girl next to one wearing a tank top... It was my first time there and I loved it. The girls were so excited. I loved that there already seems to be a community—I think because it is fairly new [in the region], everyone is experiencing this for the first

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time. You feel like you're at the start of something, and all in it together," Marie adds.

Hangin' with the boys

It's not just with the girls that this sense of belonging has created an ultra-strong community of women wanting to take part in sporting events—even in races typically dominated by men, more women than ever are showing up en masse. "There's no doubt that women's involvement in sport and fitness in general is rapidly growing throughout the world, and Dubai is no exception to that," says Troy Gillham, Director of the Desert Warrior Challenge, one of the region's most popular and challenging obstacle courses. Indeed, one of the event's partners is Lorna Jane, a brand known for its dedication to female empowerment in sport.

"We are consistently seeing an increase in the amount of women that enter our events (our last event was 41% women), and in particular the amount of women who are entering a mass-participation fitness event for the first time. For us this is extremely encouraging, showing that more and more women are choosing to become active and live healthy lifestyles. We predict women's involvement in fitness is going to keep growing rapidly, with most large sporting companies focusing a huge part of their marketing budget on women; there's no doubt of the way the trend is heading. At DWC, we are very conscious of our women Warriors, and therefore ensure that our courses have that military feel, while still staying female-friendly and not over-masculine. We have also introduced the women-only category to help promote women to really challenge themselves to 'Release Your Inner Warrior', as we like to say. We will continue to encourage everyone in the

community to try something different and enter a DWC event, get involved in the training programmes and make a lifestyle change for the better," Troy says.

Another event typically perceived as so gritty that it's "one for the boys" is the Spartan Race—and they, too, are seeing a strong female presence, especially here in the Middle East. "Our mission is, through the sport of Spartan Obstacle Racing, to inspire people to get off the couch and redefine their sedentary lives. We embrace being uncomfortable to get comfortable. Globally, our male to female ratio is 65% to 35%—however, Dubai's first Spartan Race had an almost equal ratio of 55% to 45% male to female ratio," says Rayyan Agha, Managing Director for Spartan Race MENA. Perhaps it's the event's connection to Reebok, a brand whose relationship with CrossFit has also seen increasing amounts of women join the laborious sport prove themselves to be just as tough as the guys—that made it feel so natural for women to take part in this type of race too. "By all measure, our female Spartans redefined 'fit' as mums, teenagers and grandmothers all raced side by side, with the oldest female Spartan being almost 60 years old! We're continually inspired by our female Spartans, and look forward to seeing them in our next race, sending them a massive AROO!" Rayyan adds.

Even the region's first-ever Urbanathlon, the flagship event run by our brother brand Men's Health Middle East in October last year, saw a higher-than-anticipated number of women take part. "The Men's Health Urbanathlon wasn't, as it sounded, all about the boys—women came out in force, either as individuals or in teams, to take part in a series of gruelling challenges around the Yas Marina Circuit.



Although the event was a Men's Health initiative, suggesting a masculine feel to it, over 20% of participants were female, whether individually or as part of a team. And this year, we expect this figure to double—talk about girl power! With events like the Urbanathlon, you can really see how strong is becoming the new skinny, and seeing women storming ahead of the men in these challenges is so empowering," says Laura Holmes, Men's Health Middle East's Marketing and Events Manager.

There's no doubt about it—the heat surrounding a fitter, healthier lifestyle is here to stay, and has fired us up so much that it's propelled an entire generation of women into taking up a seemingly endless scope of incredible new sport-related challenges. The only question is—what are you waiting for? We'll see you at the next one!

TOP TIPS

No matter what you're training for, it's important to make sure that you keep things fun so you never lose your spark. Here, NTC Master Trainer Marie Purvis shares her top three tips for that:

- 1. Maintain variation:** Always change up your training, to keep your mind, body and your motivation consistently challenged.
- 2. Train with a friend:** We are all a little competitive, whether we admit it or not, and you'll push each other in a positive way.
- 3. Change your environment regularly:** Don't get bored of your surroundings, and don't get overstimulated. It'll help keep things fun!