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Loren Bidner demonstrates some of his exercise techniques at a class in the East Village. "It's just a lot of fun," he says.

Grass Skirt, Meet the Sweatsuit

New Routine Draws on a Childhood Favorite, the Hula-Hoop

By JENNIFER MEDINA

With the eagerness of young children, the 18 women peeled off their coats, traded their high heels for sneakers and grabbed one of the brightly colored hula hoops resting against a wall.

Following their teacher's instructions, they held the hoops at the top of their hips, gave the hoops a solid push and began to twirl, their bodies gyrating to the pop music blasting from the stereo.

This was not an act of kindergarten regression, even though the women -some regulars, some rookies - were breaking a sweat doing something most of them had not tried since they were children.

While the Hula-Hoop's time as a must-have childhood toy may be long gone, it is very much alive and doing quite well amid fans of "hooping," one of the newest forms of aerobic exercising in the ever-changing world of fitness.

It has nowhere near the popularity of spinning or Pilates, for example, but whether hooping catches on or not, the women inside the classroom in the East Village say working out with a hoop is the only exercise they can tolerate doing regularly.

The class is part aerobics, part yoga, part dance and, at least according to the students, all fun and painless. The workout consists mostly of hip and arm movements, with a focus on breathing techniques, using hoops made by the teacher,



A class participant stretching. Most say they are anything but fitness buffs.

Loren Bidner, that are bigger and weigh more than the ones typically sold in stores.

"It's all these things that we know workouts are supposed to be," said Mr. Bidner, who called himself the "master hooper."

"But it's just a lot of fun and there's no way around that. That's why people come back."

Indeed, most of the students say they are anything but fitness buffs, using words like hate, despise and phobic to describe their relationships with gyms. "I can't even remember the last time I worked out," said Janna Tubman, a 25-year-old financial analyst.

Still, trying to stay in shape with a hoop

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Grass Skirt Meets the Sweatsuit in a New Exercise Routine

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is not entirely easy. There is the challenge of generating enough momentum with the hips to keep the hoop going for more than just a few seconds. Of the dozen or so women who show up regularly for Mr. Bidner's one-hour class, many fear that they will not be able to keep their hoop from spending more time on the floor than in the air. "I was terrible," said Marina Groysman, 30, laughing as she recalled playing with a HulaHoop as a girl. "I could never keep it up.."

On one recent evening, a first-time hooper, Amanda Chu, 28, pursed her lips, bent her knees and, following Mr. Bidner's directions, pressed her hoop to the lower part of her back. After a bit of prompting and encouragement, she began to twirl, trying with all the might she could muster.

"Come on, let's see a little more hip," Mr. Bidner said.

After a few seconds, the hoop clattered to the ground, the disappointment visible on Ms. Chu's face.

"We'll find it," Mr. Bidner said in an assuring tone and referring to Ms. Chu's rhythm. "It's in there. Just roll with it."

Mr. Bidner dismisses any notion that it takes sophisticated coordination to master the hoop.

"That's all in your head," he said. "If you come in with the attitude that there is no way you are going to be able to do this, you'll have trouble. Just loosen up."

While hooping classes might not be found at most health clubs, there are signs that Mr. Bidner is tapping into a larger network. According to hooping.org, a Web site for people interested in Hula-Hooping, there are classes like Mr. Bidner's in nearly a dozen cities across the country, and a handful of companies have begun to market hoops specifically designed for adults.

Donna Cyrus, the national group fitness director for Crunch, a health club chain, said she could see the physical benefits of exercising with a Hula-Hoop even though the calorie burning potential was greater with high-impact exercises like step aerobics. "You're going to get some flexibility and enhance hand-eye coordination, and balance by using major muscle groups," said Ms. Cyrus, adding that Crunch did not offer hooping classes.

Promoting exercise was precisely what prompted Arthur Melin and Richard Knerr to introduce the toy in the United States in 1958, after they visited a friend in Australia who twirled with a bamboo hoop. In the first year, Wham-O, the company that Mr. Melin and Mr. Knerr owned at the time, sold more than 100 million Hula-Hoops, said Peter Sgromo, senior marketing director for the company.



Megan Leff, in braids, exercises in a class in the East Village.

"Obviously, it's less than that now," said Mr. Sgromo, who declined to provide a specific figure. "But we're seeing this huge resurgence. Part of it is nostalgic, part of it is that people are looking for something new."

Mr. Bidner first picked up a HulaHoop about five years ago while going to concerts by the String Cheese Incident, a popular bluegrass rock band that performs with Hula-Hoops.

An aspiring actor, Mr. Bidner added hooping to his repertory in the hope that it would give him an edge in auditions by showing directors a talent to remember him by. He started teaching classes last year after people started asking him about Hula-Hooping as he practiced with a hoop in Central Park.

Mr. Bidner makes all the hoops he uses in his class, spreading out yards of PVC pipe and brightly colored tape all over his apartment in the East Village.

He sells the hoops on his Web site, hoopclass.com, for \$30 to \$35, and Mr. Bidner said he was negotiating with a company to mass-produce them.

The classes are held in a brightly lit room with floor-to-ceiling mirrors at the Children's Aid Society in the East Village.

Like any demanding aerobics instructor, Mr. Bidner shouts out high-pitched instructions like "breathe through your nose!" "bend your knees!" and "let me see you move!"

Then there are the more peculiar directives, like "start to really connect to the pelvis," and "tell the hoop where you want it to go."

Halfway through class the other day, Ms. Chu, a lawyer, was able to keep her hoop going for 17 seconds a personal best. Still, the other students can keep their hoops spinning for several minutes. Cocking her hip to the right, she kept trying, as the more experienced students move on to more complicated exercises involving stomach crunches and slowing the hoop down.

Mr. Bidner, who often walks around class while twirling three hoops, went over to offer a little pep talk. By the end of class, Ms. Chu had her hoop up for 32 seconds.

"I can't believe how much you sweat," she said after class, wiping her face.

"But I just had to come and try it tonight, or I thought I never would."

As they left the class, the tired students put their coats on and exchanged hooping tips.

"I'm getting better," one said. "I think I can do it next week."

Lennifer Altman for The New York Times