

Smile when it hurts

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Several weeks ago Billy and I began attending Body Pumpclasses at Gold's Gym. A couple of our teachers mentioned that they enjoyed having me in class because I smiled all the time. One of the teachers even noted that I seemed to smile more during the harder parts of the workout.

After hearing these observations, I began thinking about why I smiled during Body Pump classes. The most obvious reason is that I enjoy the class, which has upbeat pop music and movements matched to the beat of the songs. There is a large group of people participating, and an instructor shouting instructions and motivation throughout. All of the above are things that make my workout experience more convivial. But it occurred to me that there is another reason I smile when my workout gets tough.

I swam competitively throughout much of my growing up, including my first two years of high school. During the first few weeks of school each year, we did not swim during our workouts - we had what we called dry land training. Running, pull-ups, bear-crawling up the stadium steps, sit-ups, push-ups, any crazy exercise you can imagine that doesn't involve water... basically torture.

The coach who oversaw these parent and school sanctioned torture sessions was a man named Bill Thomas. I am smiling as I type his name. Coach Thomas loved to have us go through an obstacle course which we alternately called the Tour de Force, Tour de Torture, or Tour de Thomas. I actually cannot recollect if it had any official name, or maybe those were the official names! At any rate, Coach Thomas relished making us swing from the monkey bars, do pull-ups, inverted push-ups, and probably a lot of other exercises that I have blocked from my mind.

Here is the thing. We complained at the time, and I am complaining now, but the truth is, it was excellent training, and I am absolutely certain that it made me stronger and ultimately a better swimmer. Frankly if Coach Thomas had continued to be in charge of my exercise regimen beyond high school, I would not need Weight Watchers or Body Pump now, because I would be completely fit already!

So back to the smiling. Coach Thomas would assign additional exercises if you looked too pained while you completed any task he had set for you. I actually trained myself to smile when he looked my way, so he would not get the idea that I needed anymore sit-ups with the medicine ball, or whatever. Basically, I taught myself to smile when I had exercised to the point of hurting. It seems that I learned the lesson so well that I am still smiling when it hurts twenty years later.

Coach Thomas, thank you for teaching me the value of grinning through the pain, and pushing myself to accomplish more than I thought I could. This lesson has served me well in the gym and in life.

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