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Parking lots evolve into active sites during pandemic

By Sophie Braccini



Hip-hop dance class outside at Joy in Motion in Moraga. Photo Sophie Braccini

Public health restrictions on indoor gyms have hurt many local big and small fitness businesses. Several have migrated to Zoom to deliver classes over the internet to compensate for the revenue loss and make sure clients stayed active. Some are taking to the streets, or to parking lots, to deliver live classes outdoors. Feeling each others' energy, getting active with the group and the instructors, some believe that there is no better way to fight the pandemic.

Joy In Motion in Moraga has a very large parking lot adjacent to its studio that is quite convenient to conduct outside classes. Justin Cole, the company co-founder with Linda Craig, started at the end of August to offer dance classes for children and adults after polling his 500 family clients on their level of comfort with such activities. On a typical weekday evening, a maximum of 16 children or adults come, masked, to the back area.

There, large squares have been delineated on the floor to maintain separation. Each participant stands in a square, while on the stage - what used to be an unloading bay for a post office - Cole and Justin Madfes lead a hip-hop class to the sound of upbeat music.

A group of young dancers observed at the beginning of September seemed to be having a blast; one could almost feel that pent-up energy was being released. Jennifer Winn, mother of one of the participants, explained that her 10-year-old daughter was not interested in doing a dance class on Zoom, but jumped at the opportunity to come and dance again with friends.

Lamorinda CrossFit in Lafayette was founded 11 years ago by Anni Guzman and the energetic business owner was not going to be taken down by a virus. Like many, she moved classes online, and went a step further by starting a landing program for her community of clients. Dumbbells, ab mats, kettle bells, boxes for jumping could be borrowed. In July it looked like the activity might start again, but with the frustration created by county orders that closed the space, Guzman and her trainers decided that they would move the classes outside to avoid another shut down.

Tom Westernoff at The Karate Fitness Place in Lafayette had the same reaction and, after "Zooming" classes, felt that the students who wanted live instructions should be indulged. His facility shares a large parking lot with other tenants and he reached out to be able to use it for classes.

Modifications had to be made: no dojo means no barefoot practice on asphalt, so the classes are led in kimono and wearing sport shoes. There is no close contact, of course, but still plenty of exercises to boost participants' fitness.

Guzman also had to make some accommodations to abide by the health regulations. First, she bought stall mats, the thick rubber mats that can be used for horses and are installed in gyms. Each participant in Lafayette is asked to stay on their mat, so there is no contact. One at a time they get the individual equipment that will be used that day, and that will be disinfected after the practice. Brittany Haas who is part of that CrossFit community with her husband says that the extra precautions make her feel safe and she could not wait to come back to train live. She says that being there with the trainer and others in the class that she knows make a big difference, and it is a nice break from a work-day at home.

Westernoff says that about a third of his clients come to the live classes. Cole who recently started has seen only about 10% of his regular following in the outdoor classes, but he has big plans for the coming months, including hopefully a Halloween outdoor party. If restrictive measures stay in place, everyone is thinking about rain protection with umbrellas or sails, because stopping is not an option.

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