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Zumba Taking Hold As Aerobics Workout

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DAYTON, Ohio (AP) -- The security guards at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base were more than a little curious. A package-delivery truck sitting on the edge of a base parking lot was shaking violently. Warily approaching, the MPs found 35-year-old driver Doug Jones inside - shirtless, sweating and exercising to Latin music pulsing through the vehicle. Jones, on his lunch hour, was practicing Zumba - a brassy, high-octane, Colombian-born dance-aerobics workout that he teaches.

"It's a party," Jones said in trying to describe Zumba (pronounced ZOOM-buh), which is Colombian slang for "fast." "It emulates being in a nightclub without the drinking, the smoking, the bad pickup lines."

The exercise gained a toehold in Miami in 1999 and has spread its international rhythms and flamenco footwork around the country. Studios devoted to the craze are now opening.

In Charlotte, N.C., the classes have become so popular that people are turned away. They have to arrive early and get their hands stamped to assure themselves a spot.

Jessica Thompson taught Zumba in a studio attached to her apartment in Kansas City, Mo.

"I had to actually open the doors and move people into my kitchen so they could dance in there," she said. "It just absolutely exploded."

Nearly 1 million Americans have taken Zumba classes, following the moves of 3,500 instructors, according to Zumba Fitness LLC, which owns the trademark.

Some think cities such as Kansas City and Dayton are embracing Zumba because it is a novelty in areas with less exposure to the Latin culture. Others credit zealous instructors.

Until now, Zumba has been taught at dance studios, health clubs and YMCAs. But Zumba Fitness says its first U.S. center was opened Jan. 15 in the Dayton suburb of Vandalia by Jones and his wife, Joan. Studio Zumbas also are scheduled to open in North Miami and Malabar, Fla., in February.

Zumba Fitness, based in North Miami, plans to take the exercise to England, Taiwan and Japan and to sailors stationed with the U.S. Navy in Japan. Los Angeles-based Mark

Burnett Productions, which has created reality TV shows such as "Survivor," is teaming up with the company on some undisclosed projects.

Roy Bank, head of corporate operations for Burnett, said the company is interested in Zumba because it appeals to both English- and Spanish-speaking audiences.

Zumba may be benefiting from slightly increased interest in hard exercise. Fifty-one percent of adult Americans polled in a Gallup survey in November said they exercise vigorously at least once a week. That compares with 47 percent the previous year.

Enthusiasts say Zumba is popular because people get lost in the music and the dancing, making exercising fun. TV dance shows such as "Dancing with the Stars" are also fueling interest.

"You can just get out there and move and be silly and not have to worry about it," said Rick Carpenter, 50, a television repairman from Brookville, who took up Zumba with his wife after seeing a poster for it. "It's a good stress-reliever. You can be having the worst day ... and after you've done an hour of Zumba you just feel great."

The 60-minute program incorporates footwork and body movements from flamenco, salsa and other dances. Participants pump their legs, windmill their arms, gyrate their hips, clap their hands, dip, slide and spin - all to a frenzied beat that leaves them with flushed cheeks and dripping in sweat.

"You don't have to torture yourself to be fit," said Alberto Perlman, chief executive of Zumba Fitness. "It's almost like hiding medicine inside a piece of candy."

Prices vary among instructors. The Joneses charge \$8 a session for drop-in students and offer sign-up packages of 10 sessions for \$50.

Exercise experts say Zumba can offer a good cardio workout.

Cedric Bryant, chief science officer for the American Council on Exercise, which trains fitness professionals, said Zumba is relatively easy on the joints.

"For the middle-aged exerciser, it's going to be a more comfortable way to challenge the body," Bryant said.

Some dancers say they can burn up to 700 calories or more in one session - an amount that will shed about one-fifth of a pound.