

Zumba fans are dancing into shape to a Latin beat

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Are you ready to Zumba?

Zumba may be spelled similarly to rumba, but this dance fitness craze actually has people doing cha-cha, merengue, salsa and mambo moves -- even people whose closest connection to Latin dance was doing the Macarena in 1996.

At gyms and recreation centers in Northeast Ohio and around the country, people are shaking and shimmying to an infectious Latin beat, with dances choreographed by a Miami man known by all as Beto, aka Alberto "Beto" Perez.

Zumba, pronounced zoom-bah, has women -- and a few men -- toning up, trimming down, and whittling their waists.

While Zumba is aerobic, to call it exercise would be missing the point. Its avid fans -- and most need only one class to become one -- say doing Zumba is like being at a dance party.

If you don't have a natural sense of rhythm, you soon will. Or you'll just shake your hips and fake it till you feel it. The music makes you feel it pretty fast.

This week, Zumba, which started taking hold in these parts over the past six months, reached a kind of critical mass: The "Today" show featured it on Monday, with novices dancing with Beto at Rockefeller Center.

Certainly, the rise of Latin culture and familiarity with Latin pop music by stars like J.Lo and Ricky Martin make the timing ripe for a trend such as Zumba.

But what did "Today" host Ann Curry ask Beto? Whether Zumba is as big elsewhere as it is in Ohio.

Ohio! That's right, US, not Miami, home of Beto and the perpetually toned and tan, but Ohio, the state often cited for its out-of-shape population

This is the state where the Zumba beat really started to pound, thanks to a Dayton couple named Joan and Doug Jones.

They were featured on Monday's "Today" show, as were some of their students who'd lost a lot of weight; the couple are responsible for training most of the Zumba instructors in this area. (They'll be doing a daylong workshop for instructors and those who want to become instructors Sunday at Gold's Gym in Westlake.)

What makes Zumba different? It's more like dancing than exercise, and that's something that's been missing in large part from fitness classes since the 1980s, says Kim Gottlieb, director of fitness classes at the Mandel Jewish Community Center in Beachwood.

Back then, aerobic dancing was huge, and choreographed dance fitness classes were most popular - the best known being Jazzercise and Jackie Sorenson Aerobic Dancing. (Jazzercise is still around, but not as big as it once was.)

That trend gave way to step classes, which relied on rigorous but largely repetitive motions. The next big thing was spinning, an intense workout but, again, repetitive.

While both still have their followers, and plenty of people use ellipticals and treadmills, most people say they don't exercise because they find it boring.

That's how Zumba converts them to dedicated fans/dancers.

Gottlieb said lots of JCC members started asking for Zumba because they'd encountered it in Florida, where a number of them spend winter months. So, like other fitness centers in the area, she began offering Zumba classes a few months ago.

"They've gotten so popular, and it's all word of mouth," she said. "People have so much fun, and they tell their friends, 'You've got to try this class.'"

"It's a real shot in the arm for anyone bored with their exercise program."

Zumba has a sexy feel to it, but it can be overwhelming, at least during the first few minutes of your first class. Instructors just start dancing, and they don't give verbal cues; the class follows by mimicking the instructor's moves as best they can. One might easily think, "What is she doing? And how the heck do you merengue?"

But you watch, and move, and keep watching, and move some more, and you go back for another class. And before you know it, your feet and arms and hips are moving to the beat. (Some instructors, it must be said, are easier to follow than others, so try a few.)

At the JCC, the Monday morning class is filled with bodies ranging in age from 19 to seventy-something, from firm to not-so-firm. The superfit women bounce a little harder, thrust their hips a little farther, but

everyone's dancing and smiling and getting their heart rates up. Laurie Forbush, 51, of Westlake, took her first Zumba class at the Bally's in Westlake on a recent Sunday, and she was hooked.

"I'm sweating, but it's so much fun and I love the music," she said of the class, ably taught by instructor Yolanda Albergottie, who also teaches at Gold's. "It makes you appreciate how hard people on 'Dancing With the Stars' work."

Susan O'Sullivan of North Olmsted, 26, was taking her seventh Zumba lesson. She does cardio workouts and classes like Turbo Kick, but wanted to add a different kind of fitness class. "I like the variety in Zumba," she says.

Albergottie has been teaching Zumba since July; some of her classes have grown to 40-plus people. "What I love about Zumba is it's not restrictive," she says. "You get the music, but then you can add some of your own dance moves. I try to keep it simple, so people feel successful: I tell them 'When in doubt, just shake it.'" Albergottie, 43, is proof that it's never too late to reshape your body. She started working out two years ago, and has gone from a size 14 to an 8; she credits her dance-fitness classes.

Of Zumba, she notes, "This music appeals to every culture. You hear it, and you want to dance."

Joan Jones says the phone at her and Doug's Studio Zumba has been ringing off the hook this week. Lots more novices will soon be learning Zumba all around Ohio.

"I tell the beginners, if you think too much, it might be hard. But one day soon it will just click."

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