

Chapter 6

Fitness Marginalises Fun and Friendship



Image 6.1 Couple dancing, Melbourne circa 1940 (Source: State Library of Victoria)

Maybe I'm old-fashioned ... I hope so ... because I still feel that ballroom dancing in all styles is, dollar for dollar and mile for smile, the best exercise and social bargain yet devised (Essex 1968, p. 21).

Three qualities are said to underpin the leisure and sporting activities undertaken by older adults in Western nations: fun, friendship and fitness (Dionigi 2004; Grant 2001). For our Lucky Generation participants, the intertwining of physical activity with sociability is notable. The quote above from Russ Essex, an amateur dancer interviewed by the mass media in the 1960s, sums up the spirit towards physical activity amongst the Lucky Generation.

In this chapter we expand on our view that leisure and sporting activity have become progressively de-coupled from social activity over the last 50 years, with competitive activity and gym-based fitness coming to dominate the public imagination about what it means to be physical. This trend is exemplified by the different generations' descriptions of dancing and by the rise of gym-based activities, which this chapter describes in turn.

6.1 The Antecedents of Social and Competitive Dancing in Australia¹

European forms of social dance arrived in Australia ten generations ago with the First Fleet of ships in 1770. According to Mrs Lilly Grove writing in 1895, "It is said that Captain Cook (who planted the English flag on Terra Australis) thought dancing was most useful to keep his men in good health during a voyage. When it was calm, and the sailors had consequently nothing to do, he made them dance—usually the hornpipe—to the sound of a fiddle, and to this he attributes much freedom from illness on his ship" (Andrews n.d., p. 17). Within two decades, the English royal family's appointed governors were organising balls featuring the waltz and Scottish reels. The following decades were a period of dance innovation, and Andrews reports that European styles were heavily influenced by another genre, folk dances, popular in country Australia. We see in Andrews' descriptions and elsewhere the physical strength and stamina required for dances, such as a "rollicking waltz" (Cannon 1973, p. 259). Not only was fitness required for the dancing which often went on until daybreak, but people's daily activities were physically arduous and some rode long distances to attend. Dance historians claim that the hybrid of European social dancing and folk dancing, newly popular in the cities, contributed to a more egalitarian ethos than in Europe.

Andrews (1997) maintains that after the 1850s Gold Rush, Melbourne became Australia's dancing capital, with numerous public dance halls being established there and throughout country Victoria. Writing in 1862, Clara Aspinall visiting from the

¹ Much of the material for this section comes from archival material located at the National Library, Canberra. Often the sources are personal notes and records kept by key individuals involved in the dance scene in Australia, and they are missing dates and page numbers.

UK noted about her time in Melbourne that “the ladies and gentlemen are the most indefatigable, and I believe the most accomplished, in the world. Dancing is the accomplishment which is most cultivated in the colony” (Andrews 1997, p. 184). In his detailed account of Australian daily life in the nineteenth century, historian Geoffrey Blainey (2003) reported on the importance of dancing to the lives of many urban and rural Australians who were the parents to our Lucky Generation. “Successful ballroom dancing” was seen as a “fast growing social asset” (Chowne n.d.).

By the early twentieth century, modern ballroom dancing had emerged in Europe and North America, and rapidly spread to Australia. In her account of life in Sydney at this time, Matthews (2005) argues that social dancing along with visits to the ‘picture palaces’ signalled a simultaneous embrace of both romance and modernity. She describes modern dance forms as an early manifestation of a flirtation with global culture: “[b]orn in Buenos Aries, developed in Paris, marketed from New York, mechanically produced in Hollywood, embraced in Sydney and danced everywhere, the tango became a sign of cosmopolitan modernity” (Matthews 2005, p. 4). Everywhere dance hall proprietors were assisted by Hollywood cinema, including Rudolph Valentino’s rendition of the tango in the 1922 film ‘The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse’, which garnered thousands of tango devotees.

According to Andrews (1979), World War I soldiers brought back dances they had learned overseas from the Americans, and The Charleston swept Melbourne from the late 1920s. The Grand Leggett’s Ballroom of Melbourne was built in 1920, with nightly dancing continuing at this Melbourne institution until it was destroyed by fire in 1976. After Phil and Beryl Leggett saw a private screening of ‘Flying Down to Rio’ with Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, they copied the dance and introduced it in costume with “eight couples from the staff doing the Argentine Tango in formation ... This made a wonderful spectacle and was filmed by Fox Movietone” (Leggett 1991, p. 52). They introduced new dances, giving annual exhibitions of the latest steps from London, such as the Modern Waltz, Quickstep, Slow Fox Trot and Tango. Teaching staff mingled with dancers while Phil explained the steps over the microphone, and “within 15 min everyone could do the latest steps from overseas” (Leggett 1991, p. 52).

The Leggetts, who taught dance in Melbourne for 50 years, organised dancing competitions, balls, novelty nights, exhibition dancing and floor shows (Leggett 1991). They included circus nights, magicians, a commercial carnival. For World War II troops, they held the Patriotic Ball, June, 1942. At this time they were teaching 50,000 people a year to dance. They held appeals for bushfires, donating all funds because they kept nothing “after expenses”. Phil Leggett reports that he let people in for free or little. “I’d put on a gramophone and boys and girls could dance to that for nothing” (p. 27). During World War II, the ballroom was made free of charge to the Air Force.

Dance halls were present in major country towns too, and Colin Silk remembers that during the 1930s “People who were 70 when I was about eight or ten were excellent waltzers and masters of the Highland Schottisches, Mazurkas” (Silk and Silk n.d., p. 27). Free buses ran in and out of Bendigo town to the country balls two to eight miles out. As prosperity increased, debutante sets grew in appeal, and young people generally became more involved with ballroom dancing.

This condensed history of dancing indicates how accessible dancing was for many young people: physically, through a combination of public transport and the great spread of venues; socially, through the low cost involved and the free on-site tuition; and emotionally, through the cinema legitimising heterosexual romance being negotiated in the public dance hall. These were highly sociable and sensual occasions.

6.2 Dancing: Social or Competitive?

6.2.1 *The Lucky Generation: “I Love It”*

When our Lucky Generation participants recounted their memories of what constituted leisure times for their parents, they nominated dancing as well as movies (described in the previous chapter). They were often introduced to dancing by their parents. Joyce told us:

Mum was a very keen dancer and dad taught me to dance. I wasn't allowed to go to the public dances. I was allowed to go to social dances at dad's lodge and things like that, but I wasn't allowed to go to the Town Hall dances.

Lucky Generation boys and girls started to attend dances as teenagers, which they viewed as both a hobby and leisure time activity. Especially for Catholic and Baptist children, ballroom dancing was something that parents felt was an acceptable form of mixed sex social activity. Edith remembered *Mum was pretty strict. I was only allowed to go to the church dances, not to the public dances. We would do that of a Saturday night or go to the pictures. It was one or the other.*

Private school participants attended dances organised between single sex schools, often on a Friday night. Dances were also put on by service clubs. Barbara described a soldier's camp where:

there was a dance on the Friday night, and of course the soldiers came in and they needed partners, so we would all just go in as a group of girls and never sit out a dance. It was sometime during that time, or just after that I met my husband ... and then we also went to dances and other things, as you do, as a couple.

Barbara was not the only one to describe meeting her spouse at a dance. George remembered that:

... every church, every school had their social activities and they had dances, and we did it. We did a lot of dancing, ballroom dancing, 50/50 it was called, 50% old time, 50% modern, so we thought why not. And I enjoyed it, and [my wife] enjoyed it.

So many of the descriptions were of cinema and dance—*that's what you did then*—echoing Matthews' (2005) argument that a modern citizen danced and went to the movies to participate in a romantic way of life.

Some travelled far and wide to attend dances, and the travel itself required physical exertion. Richard described:

I think I was just fifteen and from then on, yes I used to go off with the boys to dances and we used to probably an hours walk and dance all night and walk back. Then [my friend] and

I used to go dancing twice a week, at least twice a week. We didn't think of the travel: from Preston, jump on a tram and go to St Kilda or Heidelberg. Big bands, very enjoyable.

Edna mentioned catching the bus and train to Leggetts, *or to the Empire Ball, there used to be a little ballroom there and the floor was just beautiful. It was so slippery.*

Social dancing was heavily ritualised at one level, and yet it was multi-layered: with equal focus on the suppers, dress, and highly gendered and mating behaviours. Women were encouraged to display cooking prowess. For example, at Sadie Hawkins' Grove Ballroom in Malvern on Sunday night "the ladies" compete a bit "by bringing along sandwiches, cakes and savories" (Dando n.d.). UK magazine *Danceland* contained useful advice on husband-hunting in dancehalls: "Watch out, for instance, for 'the fellow who takes you home from a dance in his car and flies round corners and tears along streets at a mile a minute ... [he's] often hiding intense hostile, aggressive feelings'" (Patton 1928). It provided insight into dance etiquette: "Good [tango] dancers have mastered their steps. This seems to apply to the man; the woman has simply to let herself be led while looking 'cool as a cucumber'" (Patton 1928, p. 4).

In a development highly pertinent to our Lucky Generation female participants, and one which was to challenge the idea that women should be cool and collected, the Women's League of Health and Beauty entered Australia from England in 1935. Operating for the next 40 years, the League's motto was 'Movement is Life', and it was aimed at business women and busy women with some independent income "to enable them to conserve and improve their physique. It started in the firm belief that pride of body is an essential foundation on which to build life and character" (cited in Matthews 1990, p. 25). Modern social dancing fitted the Women's League of Health and Beauty ethos well—"symmetry of the body was thought to reflect physiological—even spiritual fitness" (Matthews 1990, p. 25)—while still embodying widely accepted views of feminine characteristics: flexibility, grace and co-ordination (Vamplew 1994).

For some, dancing was addictive. Edna said:

I danced a lot. Nearly every night of the week and then the other two nights I went to the movies. [I did] ballroom and then jive and jitterbug and everything like that. I loved it ... In fact I got up at my grandson's 21st and asked him if I could have a dance and he looked at me stunned and I got up and there is this modern dancing going on and they played a rock on and he said 'can you do this nanna' and I said 'oh yeah'. I'm spinning around.

Like Edna, others were proud about mastering the temporal and spatial routines both when young and later in life. While the Lucky Generation often stopped dancing when they had children, for many dancing resumed in their 50s and 60s or they took up new forms of dance. Joy described her current dancing and activity routines:

I go line dancing. I go clogging, which is over-emphasised tapping ... you know, with big taps on your shoes and making a big lot of noise to country music. I love it. And I belong to an entertainment group, so we're doing like movement all the time and we put on displays ... I love the dancing, I really do. And I still walk... I walk everywhere I possibly can ... It's for the exercise, yes. As I say, I haven't been back to tennis, I haven't been back to golf, or bike riding.

For about a dozen, dancing remains important. Widower George told us: "I'll walk into Camberwell and meet Debbie and have lunch and then do dancing for 2 or 3 hours, then I'll go dancing Wednesday night as well. ... take out my ballroom dancing and take out going into the market and the kids, then I've got nothing"

Like the early sports played in Australia, time spent dancing for the parents of the Lucky Generation continued links to Britain. However, 60 years later, there are Lucky Generation devotees for line dancing, swing, the South American salsa, tango and samba, alongside the more European-inspired two-step and fox-trot. Those who attend regularly become knowledgeable about the origins of their particular dance style, and in this sense the pursuit takes on the qualities of a hobby. Participants discussed dance history (both long-past and contemporary), key dance exponents and the best venues and ‘occasions’. For example, George talked at length about

a distinctive difference between ballroom tango and Argentine tango. Tango started in the brothels It's a mixture of the native dance and the African-based. Because it's the pimp showing off the girl... and there's a love-hate relationship between the two of them and ... she wouldn't have any partner if they couldn't do the tango... They weren't interested. ... it was quite common for men to dance with men. ... So when ...the French and the English [discovered it],... they sanitised it because it was too risqué or what have you...

Some noted that they danced when they travelled, and that the practice of well-defined dance styles provides a lingua franca, allowing people to move around (locally or internationally) and to ‘fit-in’ effortlessly with other dancers. The capacity to do the dancing is the only calling card necessary.

The dancers among our interviewees reasoned that dancing confers numerous health promoting advantages beyond physical activity: opportunities to get out of the house and for shared enjoyment; pleasure from being regarded as attractive to the opposite sex, especially in their old age; and a quiet self-confidence from experiencing mastery over activity that not everyone can do. The necessity for body-mind coordination has been described elsewhere by regular dancers. Winnie, 70, and her husband Arthur, 71, went dancing every Tuesday and Sunday night and every other Saturday during the 1980s at Sadies. “Dancing is the one thing Arthur and I both enjoy together. It makes you use the body, but if you take it up properly it also makes you use the brain”. Winnie and Arthur started taking lessons at 45, with Winnie preferring the gracefulness of old-time dancing: “a sequence set to a chorus of music ... You not only use your feet, you use your whole body—the arms, legs, head, everything. If you do it properly, it’s very good for deportment and gracefulness, and you get that lovely feeling that you are part of the music” (Dando n.d.).

Dancing was resumed in part to keep fit, but the social occasion was the major attraction. Lindsey explained:

when I retired my wife decided that I should socialise because I'm not a social animal and we took up dancing. So we now do ballroom dancing. That keeps me occupied at night time. [We go] on an average three times a week regularly. Occasionally we get a fourth session in about twice a month... it's a good three hours to four hours each night... I find if we don't keep dancing I get very stiff.

For our widower respondents, taking up dancing appeared to be the equivalent of internet dating. Helen reflecting on her parents, said:

Well mum doesn't exercise. ... My parents separated probably 15 years ago and since then [dad] has had to make his own social life. So he took up ballroom dancing and golf. And he has given up the golf now but he still does the ballroom dancing. In the last few months he has gotten a bit less energetic but he is super fit. For an 82 year old you just wouldn't believe it.

Within a context of obesity and diabetes prevention, the World Health Organization recommends that adults undertake a mix of moderate and vigorous exercise each day. This is easily achieved by men and women who participate in Modern and Latin American dance sequences (Blanksby and Reidy 1988). Moreover, there are numerous other self-reported health and wellbeing advantages of dancing for the over-60 age group. The conclusions from a UK study are amply supported by our study.

[Social dance] can provide continuity within change. It offers an opportunity to be sociable and have fun in ways that both reflect, and avowedly move beyond, the dancers' teenage years. It promotes a welcome sense of a community spirit. It is a way of becoming visible and aesthetically pleasing, and it bestows a sense of worth and achievement in skills learnt through dancing. Last but not least, dancers can experience the joy of a fit and able body in both real and mythic senses (Cooper and Thomas 2002, p. 689).

To these benefits preventive health experts add bodily balance, flexibility and neuro-plasticity that accompanies having to coordinate multiple tasks. Gerontologists recommend that senior centres investigate the potential of tai chi and social dance as 'promising' to prevent fall-related disabilities (Judge 2003). Lay experts, in the form of dance teachers, are quick to add their views on the health benefits of dance. For example, Nena Pavey who runs a tap dancing school on the Gold Coast, Queensland, says that her 70 year-old pupils are "a lot stronger and healthier than most people their age, or even younger". She also notes that they "come out of their shell" and are less self-conscious about their bodies (Gilltrap 2004, p. 43). Many of her pupils grew up during the Depression and Second World War and had neither opportunity nor money for dance classes. The unofficial mascot of her school was Terri Kirkpatrick, aged 80, who did not begin dancing until "later in life". Now competing round the world, she practices every day: "If I die tomorrow, I'll die a happy woman" (Gilltrap 2004, p. 144).

6.2.2 *The Baby Boomers: "It's a Little Bit Difficult to Fit in"*

One magazine, *Australian Dancing Times (ADT)*, is a particularly rich repository of the influences on social dancing circulating during the 1960s when the Baby Boomers were in their teenage years.

Television began to play the role that cinema had played for their parents. For example, Carlu Carter became a well-known Channel 10 dancer and choreographer whose shows prefigured the current rash of TV dance shows. The reasoning behind TV adopting dance programs was simple: "It is always enjoyable to see ballroom dancing done" (ADT May 1967, p. 5). Watching dancing was more than a voyeuristic undertaking and could function as an inexpensive form of tutelage.

Augmenting the celebrity teacher was a rise in professionalism and a sense that teaching dancing was an industry like other educational domains. It was during the mid-1960s that the Country Ballroom Dancing Federation (Australia) advertised positions for professional dancing teachers to be based in "schools outside an area

of 100 miles from any capital city ... [providing] the opportunity for Professional Examinations and Amateur Medal Tests” (ADT October 1967, p. 30).

Contrary to the idea that dancing could simply be done for enjoyment, there was a new push that people needed recognition and awards, increasing the prominence of competitive dancing: illustrated by the St Kilda Palais de Danse deciding to present an ‘Academy Award’ to the person who had done the most for dancing the previous year (ADT July 1967, p. 6). These Australian developments were following in the wake of the international emergence of Dancesport, a term adopted to describe competitive ballroom dancing first broadcast on English television in 1960. Under the lobbying of the International Dancesport Federation, DanceSport became recognised by the International Olympics Federation in 1997 (see DanceSport Australia. <http://www.dancesport.org.au/> Accessed 26.11.09); and like other Olympic sports it is subject to anti-doping laws.

As with organised physical activity more generally (see previous chapter), the Baby Boomers were introduced into dance as children through school, church and private tuition in after-school activity. Catherine explained:

I was doing ballet and tap dancing... from about age 4 or 5–12, and when I was about 16 I did ballroom dancing”.

As for their parents, church-run dances were important.

Carol described *Once I got to Bendigo I made a ... couple of girlfriends and we played tennis. It wasn't sort of until a bit later that I started going to the Church dances and that sort of thing, because my parents were very strict about socialising with the boys, especially if they weren't a Catholic.*

Unlike many of the dance styles to have emerged in the last 40 years, which allowed individuals to move in unscripted ways without recourse to another person (only one Baby Boomer referred to attending discotheques), the dancing that our generations referred to in this chapter was highly orchestrated.

First shown on television in Australia in 2004, *Dancing with the Stars* was used as a reference point by three Boomers when describing the quality or standard of their dancing skills. It was also mentioned in a context of the competitive dancing that couples were doing. Catherine told us:

I met my husband through ballroom dancing and we started doing dancing together competitively... my husband was doing dancing before we met so he knew a lot of people in the dancing industry. And we used to go to places like a theatre restaurant, something that had entertainment and a meal. And we did lots of championships... Not quite up to Dancing with the Stars. But we won a couple of championships and we did that ... probably for 5 years. And then it was just getting so expensive and we were trying to save for a house and everything like that so we gave it away then.

The Baby Boomers inherited from their parents the phrase, “I loved dancing”. We heard it frequently; and we also heard that as young adults fitness was secondary to the enjoyment. Judith summed up the dancing spirit of her cohort when she said:

when I was a younger adult, particularly with the dances I was involved in, it was more a social event. Dancing, I really enjoy it but it wasn't “I really need to get some exercise, oh let's go and do some dancing!” It was more “Oh I really enjoy dancing” and I just got the exercise.

There were exponents of a large range of dance styles. Tap dancing was popular, and folk dancing and Morris dancing were also mentioned. More often than not, though, the love of dancing was in the past tense. This was the case for ardent devotees, like Judith who described how she had danced:

on and off over the years. I did a year of tap dancing about a decade ago. Mainly for getting fit. But I really enjoyed dancing but I just don't do much these days.

Occasionally, dancing had been displaced by gym-based exercise as is described in the second part of this chapter. However this is not always the case, as Margaret illustrated:

I do Scottish country dancing which is very nice.... No it's not a performance thing. The country dancing is different from highland dancing. It's sort of like community dancing so they have regular socials. The thing I go to on Tuesday night is a class and then they have socials where I guess people are more inclined to dress up and they don't explain the dances, they kind of expect that you already know how to do them so often it's more of a social occasion. ... I go to all the ones that Box Hill run which is three or four times a year but they tend to be on a Saturday night and [my husband's] not involved in it so I tend not to go too many ... But every fourth Tuesday is a social rather than a class and I always go to those.

As with their other activities, the Baby Boomers found it hard to continue dancing given the other demands on their time. Catherine expressed this rather poignantly:

We still love going out dancing socially for my 50th birthday mum ... said "here you go, now that you have turned 50 you can join the seniors tap dancing" and I said "you know what, I would really, really love to". But because it's in the city and the travelling backwards and forwards, and it's only on Saturday morning. So there are things you'd like to go back and do but it's a little bit difficult to go and fit it all in. So may be I'll wait until I am 60.

Baby Boomer mothers showed a keen interest in introducing their daughters to dancing, and wanted them to perform at a high standard. However, for similar reasons given by Gen Y in relation to dropping competitive sports (see previous chapter) they did not always meet the expectations. For example, Carol explained that her daughter:

worked at Safeway and she was an Irish dancer and, you know, her study and so on and so [she gave up]. She did very well. Like with the Irish dancing, she got to the National level and all that.

Other mothers were mindful of the competing pressures in their children's and their own lives. Patricia described how:

they are picked up from school and taken to a dancing lesson. And then they will go from dancing lesson to a quick meal and then they will be off to hockey or what ever. And then they will come home and they have homework. To me ..., once a week doesn't hurt, but everyday is quite strenuous. It's strenuous on the parents too.

Sharon recounted with pride how her children became competition ballroom dancers, but that the gowns were costly. Other Baby Boomers said that the cost of dancing was a deterrent to their own continued involvement, and yet this was not voiced by the Lucky Generation as a constraint for their generation. Certainly the archival material by the dance hall proprietors of the first half of the twentieth century reveals that they were only 'making costs'. They were running quasi- public services

because they too enjoyed the substance of what they were doing. Theirs was a very different ethos to today's 'dance studios' located in large gym facilities, and run by fitness chain franchisees.

6.2.3 *Gen Y: Dance as Televised Sport*

By the time that Gen Y was growing up, what has been called the 'sportisation of pastimes' was well and truly underway (see Table 5.1). According to Forsyth (2005), activities are transformed into sport through acquiring three features: extrinsic rewards/recognition by others; emphasis on winning; and bureaucratic oversight with technologies for enumerating and assessing progress and setting standards regarding drug use. Along with Dancesport, celebrity dancing of the 2000s shared these particular three features. Instead of Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire who became famous for their dancing prowess, film and other celebrity figures could attract huge audiences for allowing themselves to be filmed learning how to dance, being ranked on their performance and subject to elimination.

According to the Australian government-supported AusDance peak body, dance as entertainment is extremely popular (Ausdance n.d.). In 2007, *Dancing with the Stars* Series 6 dominated the 20 Top Ten most watched programs. The popularity of these types of programs is further illustrated by figures showing that the 2008 premiere of *So You Think You Can Dance* was Channel Ten's highest rating summer premiere since rating agency OzTAM began collecting data in 2001. The 2008 finale was watched by over 1.8 million people, making its overall audience ranking that year at number 14. Two sporting events come in at numbers 1 and 2: The Beijing Olympics' Opening Ceremony (where dance was a major feature) and the AFL Grand Final. Perhaps ominously, a year later no dancing program appeared in the Top 20, with Master Chef rated number one.

However, young Australians are not simply watching dance performed by others. In 2005–2006, more than 330,000 children participated in organised dance activities outside of school hours, making dance a more popular activity for children than soccer or AFL (personal correspondence: Julie Dyson of AusDance). Our Gen Y females spoke of dancing, commencing in their school years, learning a mix of styles: Jazz, Latin and Irish, with the latter being the more popular.

In high school, Melissa was doing music, drama and Irish dancing.

I sort of got into it, you know, when Riverdance came out ..., and my dad [has] an Irish heritage and [he] was really keen to ...have some connection with that...He was so encouraging. ... he would take me to all the competitions ... I mean most of the other dancers had their mums there, but my dad was always there. ...So instead of a dancing mum, I had a dancing dad, which was really interesting... I used to... competitively dance, but when I hurt my foot a couple of years ago, I didn't get back into it because it was just, ah, too much pressure actually. Yeah, ... I used to compete in the states, in the nationals; and then we used to have to road trip ... to wherever we were competing, but the lead up to the actual big competitions was really, really intense...

Melissa went onto tell us that when she stopped dancing, she became *really unfit, extremely unfit. When I stopped dancing was when I put on a fair bit of weight.*

Interest in dance has never wavered. The reasons for its popularity adapt themselves to the times, as they have since the 1800s. As has been the case from the early days, social dancers continue to be judged on numerous criteria: personal appearance, clothing, charisma, and knowledge of the routines. And while there has long been a competitive edge, what is new is the prominence of professional dancers who behave like any professional sports person. Thus it may not be sufficient for some parents and young people if dancing is undertaken for purely social and fitness reasons. Today's ballroom dancers have additional status and performance pressures courtesy of televised dance programs, modern dance touring companies and Olympics Games inclusion.

Melissa is the only Gen Y to continue to dance, having found a more relaxed and forgiving setting:

there's a few like mums of the little dancers, they come along just for a laugh and do fun stuff... I've sort of been getting back up to the level that I was at when I was competing and [the new teacher is] trying to keep the balance between pushing you to do more, to do better and not pressuring you...

Her story resonates with the observation that: "the more outcomes take on importance in leisure and recreation, the less the importance of enjoyment" (Forsyth p. 129). This axiom certainly resonates through what has become of social dancing, and also the exercise regimen subscribed to by the Baby Boomers, namely aerobics.

6.3 Commodified Fitness: Gym-Based Aerobics

We have provided ample evidence here and the previous chapter to establish that by the end of the twentieth century, physical activity had become something that people had to schedule into their week in the form of 'exercise', and this had to be conducted in personal leisure time. Due to the disappearance of incidental exercise, what was required were 'labour making devices', often in the form of gyms or health clubs (Glassner 1989). This is the context for the post-1970s evolution of commercial fitness programs in Australia through gymnasiums, aerobics and yoga classes. This is evident in Australia and a range of OECD societies (Frew and McGillivray 2005; Glassner 1989; Sassatelli 2001).

The discourse of fitness is a defining feature of the Baby Boomer activity environment, one which has a hybrid progeny. The 1960s and 1970s were decades in which a host of critical social movements arose to challenge the shibboleths of modernity: the power of technology, the efficacy of modern medicine, the wisdom of modern lifestyles with attendant crises in cardiovascular disease and stress-related conditions. The critique of modern culture had a well documented effect of turning people's attention to self-help (Rader 1991), to individualise and tailor-make solutions, and to adopt what were considered 'alternative' to the mainstream approaches (Sassatelli 2001). At the same time as some fitness discourses could

appeal to those eager to embrace social movement principles, other fitness discourses harkened to associations with long-established political philosophy, of Athenian democracy and personal liberation through demonstrations of moral fibre. These would have appealed to traditional middle-class values of self-control and self-determination (Sassatelli 2001). As Glassner (1989, p. 187) noted, “The consumer of fitness is working towards a ‘mosaic of physical, emotional, economic and aesthetic transformations, a potpourri of ends-and-means’”. This characteristic makes it an ideal market-based commodity because its very ephemeral nature is mainly appreciated by, and affordable to, those with steady incomes. Furthermore, unlike many sports which seem to be located within a natural life stage—vigorous sports when young, gentler team-based sports and activities with age—fitness is a never-ending enterprise, and thus is an ideal commercial venture.

Indeed, industry was quickly responsive to the desire by large numbers of modern consumers to improve physically and grow spiritually (an aspiration that affected the culinary culture too), and the post-Fordist economy aimed its myriad and endless novelties to the ‘worried well’. Pandering to the link between health and fitness at this time, a raft of commercial service providers emerged: health clubs, diet food manufacturers, vitamin shops, and health magazines. Commercial approaches to fitness were legitimised further by large corporations hiring other firms to provide employee fitness programs (Falkenberg 1987).

One of the most popular and enduring commercial activities to have emerged out of these social and economic conditions was aerobics. In the 1970s, the television with its advertisements and broadcasting of fitness programs, along with the rising household ownership of video recorder/players, were critical for popularising the commercial products and services that were springing up to help women in particular gain mastery over their bodies and life.

While aerobics was ‘invented’ by two women in the US, it only became a mass movement through movie celebrity Jane Fonda. By 1986, one-quarter of American participants were involved via aerobics videos, allowing young people and housebound women to implement an aerobic exercise program at home (Kegan and Morse 1988). With her movie persona, Fonda performed a similar duty to Ginger Rogers by entwining glamour with physical activity; further, she appealed to those concerned about ageing. Closer to this part of the world, and broadening the appeal to men, was New Zealand world aerobics champion Les Mills. Such exponents of fitness appeared in the mass consciousness at exactly the time that physical activity from incidental and sports-based activities had become problematic.

According to Brabazon (2000), aerobics is a mass participation activity, exercise and elite sport rolled into one. It had multiple origins—the gymnastic tradition, dance culture, martial arts, yoga and weight training. In the late 1970s and 1980s, it embraced choreography, and gyms installed mirrors leading to women usurping men in participation levels; and by the late 1990s, aerobics was second only to swimming as the most popular general participation sport for women in Australia. Some gendered analyses of aerobics have portrayed it as about narcissism, beauty and youth, but Brabazon argues that aerobics also contains narratives of strength, flexibility and competence, as well as positive social and political

benefits. These include beneficial psychological outcomes from women spending time together in a non-competitive way. All sorts of women can meet, mingle, and talk; a ‘new style women’s club’ (Matthews 1990, p. 102), much akin to the Women’s League of Health and Beauty of the 1930s (introduced in the previous chapter).

The parallels with the League’s philosophy is particularly striking when one considers the pedagogical function performed by aerobics, in that it teaches physical coordination, fitness, and how to combine individual and group goals. As the walls of the Fitness First chain of gyms pronounce, ‘a strong mind starts with a fit body’. Arguably the League’s philosophy also resonates with today’s devotees of social dancing, and there are several nuanced parallels between modern social dancing and aerobics. Numerous commentators have observed, for example, that participating in aerobics and other active forms of exercise under the watchful eye of a teacher/trainer and others has robbed people of mastery over their time: they became ever more conscious of what could be achieved in a minute, an hour, a set of routines. Many who write on the fitness era comment about its many temporal dimensions, from slowing the ageing process (‘stopping the biological clock’) or at least sculpting a desirable ageing body (Kegan and Morse 1988), to paying for time to exercise (Sassatelli 2001), to acquiring physical capital in order to perform for longer periods whether in work or leisure (Frew and McGillivray 2005). For Brabazon (2000, p. 100), aerobics is a speedy way of getting fit: it is “the McDonalds of the fitness industry: fast, ubiquitous and cheap”.

6.4 Baby Boomer and Gen Y Experience the Flexibility of the Gym

A few of The Lucky Generation described involvement in clubs, which ran gym-based exercises. Their participation appears to have taken place at both ends of the lifecourse: as teenagers and young mothers and then again in the senior years. The different phases of involvement carried different meanings: companionship was important at the young life stage while keeping fit became particularly important later on. Nevertheless, ‘social exercising’ was a consistent motivation.

Social exercise appeared as a motivator for young mother Baby Boomers too; and gyms often presented a most supportive opportunity for these women to get exercise beyond the minimal exertion involved in today’s household duties. When taking children to sports, mothers could get involved in parallel activities organised for parents. Denise explained the chain of events: *At one stage when I took them swimming I’d do the aqua aerobics because it was on at the same time and it worked out.* She continued that she also *started pilates ... before [my son] was born and did a prenatal pilates class. And then after he was born everything pretty much went to the dogs.*

Indeed it appears that one appeal of the gym is that it has always allowed Baby Boomers to dip in and out of exercise routines as everyday life circumstances dictate.

For Judith:

the gym is so more accessible because its flexible... I would really like to be doing regular dance classes but I just don’t have the time to fit in. So it’s time and opportunity...I’ve had a

regular membership for a number of years [at the gym]. When I am travelling I will get there on the weekends.... Actually ... going in patches. Like, I've got a really good incentive at the moment. I am going on the holiday of a lifetime in January so I need to get reasonably fit.

A few Baby Boomers mentioned that the absence of social support in the form of child care or a dancing partner could be a barrier to ongoing participation. Gyms, on the other hand, often provide child care and they are venues where the individual is welcome. These combine with long opening hours and the many suburban facilities to make them relatively accessible.

As with team-based sports for the Baby Boomers, gym-based injuries are a recurring issue that interrupts exercise routines. For example, Michelle replaced swimming with the gym because she could not fit both in, but:

I injured my shoulder and so I think I stopped for a couple of years, but I've been back for a couple of years now....Go, three times a week now...do weights and bike. And my husband and I also walk every morning.

Family members had a marked influence on commencing particular activities as young and older adults. *My husband, at the time, was a fitness fanatic. He would nag me (Michelle). And, ... mum retired just before [my daughter] was born and she used to go to a Fabulous 50s class. And a few times I went along with her I thought this is fabulous (Catherine).* Such psychological pressure is possibly supported by the practical fact that many gyms offer family memberships with reduced joining and monthly fees if more than one person signs up.

Sometimes, there was a degree of obsessive behaviour in gym participation, and a few interviewees used the language of addiction to describe their involvement. Stephen elaborated:

Well [aerobics] really started out as necessity. I wanted to ski, if I wanted to ski well and enjoy it, I'm the first bloke on the mountain, I'm the last bloke off the mountain so you had to get fit to do that. If you wanted to go and catch waves and surf all day, we used to go out three to four times a day, you had to be fit so I've always just maintained that. I did it for so long it just gets to be the longest campaign of my life.

And Sharon explained her devotion in this way:

...yes, started with water aerobics and met a girl there, an older lady than me, we became competitive. And then I went to land aerobics and I became, not a gym junky, [but an aerobics junky] And until I got this job I used to go three to four times a week. ...I'd do aerobics and pump. I'd do like a step class and one of my other best friends does that, he was one of the instructors. Certainly became very health conscious when I turned 40. ... I do step 'cause it's contained, It's in an hour and you don't have to look beautiful. And pump 'cause it's all muscle toning work. So I try and do a mixture of pump and step. I think my aerobics instructors are really, really good.

For Sharon getting rid of fat influenced her beliefs about exercise. She had become highly regimented in her approach.

I've been doing pump now for over ten years and I have not really increased my weights and people say well that just silly. But the thing is I maintain my tone and fitness but to increase more I injured my shoulder and that's just silly. So I see people going really big weights and

I just laugh 'cause they are not using technique and they are certainly not doing it right. So you learn that through your instructors. So tomorrow I will do a double class because I haven't done anything for nearly a fortnight so you need to shock the body to start again to get you into that burning body calories.

For Gen Y, the issues are almost identical to their parents. Gym services afford flexible scheduling of exercise: an important attribute even for young people, when competing priorities from school work. A recent study of teenage girls in Melbourne found that time pressure was a major factor in their ceasing sporting involvement (Craike et al. 2009). When Sarah began studying for the High School leaving exam she dropped both her sports, and began at a gym to keep fit:

[it] was more flexible. I could go when ever I wanted to. I could go by myself, I could go with my aunty. It was sort of different. I was getting sick of Tae Kwon Do because I wasn't the best. ... the injuries just not good. And calisthenics I had been doing that for 10 years and I was getting sick of it. So it was something different, my aunty made me go because she is like a health Nazi. ... I joined her gym and started going with her 3-4 times a week.... oh she is horrible, she really is. ... she has always been like "you have to look fantastic. I look fantastic and I am 45".

Once again, we see the influence of a family member encouraging their favourite exercise pastimes. Rather than mass culture being the sole culprit in pushing particular body images, family members may be mediating cultural norms regarding what constitutes an aesthetically-pleasing body. In large epidemiology studies, the role of social networks comprising family members and friends has been associated with smoking and eating behaviours, and this same social contagion may also apply to physical activity. Social networks are considered to be agents of change through inducting members into new social norms which govern behaviours (Christakis and Fowler 2007, p. 370). Contact and friendship or familial ties have been described as important in the case of obesity because they “change...an ego’s general perception of the social norms regarding the acceptability of obesity” (p. 378).

The main reason Jessica goes to the gym is because her friends go: *I don't really like to go by myself... I've got one gym friend in particular and a lot of the time that I go, will depend on her.* However, describing the gym as a space for friendship was exceptional; otherwise it was mainly about the pursuit of fitness, and even for Jessica, fitness was imperative if she was to keep up on physically demanding family holidays.

It is striking the extent to which social dancing and gym-based exercises are beginning to resemble one another. To remain relevant (and it certainly has), social dancing comes in myriad formats these days. Dancers can enter competitions but they can follow them keenly either online through the many dance style websites or they can travel several hundred kilometres to attend a dance congress in a football stadium. On these occasions, they can join a class or simply ‘show-off’ their prowess to thousands of other dancers without officials judging them. Equally, as with the early days of Jane Fonda aerobics videotapes, they can dance at home using the numerous dancing programs as free tutelage.

Likewise, aerobics has been heavily influenced by dance: choreographed movement to music. Routines, time-controlled movements, and exact mimicry are present. However, it departs from dancing in the degree to which social interaction is missing. Other people may be in close proximity but their behaviour has little bearing on the person nearby, except for informal competition trying to do better than the girl on your left. Interpersonal etiquette is not necessary (with the exception of flatulence) and in this respect aerobics might be experienced as more liberating.

Our research has led us to conclude that the rise of fitness regimens from the 1960s onwards means that becoming and staying fit has replaced the beneficial psychosocial and emotional states gained through leisure opportunities, which Mann ([unpub](#)) identifies in her Australian research on young people as being associated with the following qualities:

- the weekend, break-up the monotony of the norm: time for challenge through keeping things interesting and enjoying the end product
- maintain sanity, downtime, having own space, time, freedom
- relaxation, feeling fresh, feeling good
- enjoyment, having fun, happiness, time for social outlet

Generally, gym-based activities do not hold these qualities for our participants. Indeed GenY needed leisure times to recover from, or compensate for, their fitness training.

Gyms certainly do not share many features with the Women's League of Health and Beauty, available to Lucky Generation women. Matthews (1990) asserts that the League's exercise classes were characterised by "moments of escape, of autonomy, of excess, when women took pleasure in themselves, had fun". To be more precise, excess (in terms of workouts) is present in today's gyms, but the elements of autonomy and pleasure are always in the future and elusive (one contemporary gym wall slogan reads 'Go nowhere fast'); and if moments of escape are present, it can be assumed that the gym user is not working hard enough. While the manufacture of desire is omnipresent, it is not aimed at immediate gratification as much as at individual striving for what could be termed success-based health. Social dancing is becoming suffused with an elusive and future orientation too; and perhaps it will come to appeal more to those with a performative rather than a sociability ethos.

6.5 Conclusion

The qualities of fun and friendship, which were so integral to the leisure activities of the Lucky Generation, appear to have become less pronounced for Baby Boomers. For this generation, the flexible scheduling of fitness sandwiched between family and work commitments is becoming increasingly pertinent. Although some

Boomers did enjoy social dancing when younger, and saw the health aspects as secondary to the social benefits, they began to devote more time to individualised workouts in the gym as family and community commitments took over. Gym-based exercise appears from their accounts to be a more efficient and effective means of getting and staying fit.

In contrast to pursuing activities that bring pleasurable sociability (whether in leisure or as volunteers), Gen Y described gym-based exertion, often in order to excel at competitive sports. While their sports were often team-based, they did not provide a key signifier of leisure: time out from other more arduous activities. The material from Gen Y suggests that dance as an enjoyable pastime/leisure time activity has been overtaken by pressures to excel in sport, school and life. Sport is something that one devotes many hours to each week and that often entails significant injuries. Like sport and gym work-outs, dance is considered to be demanding of time, commitment and discipline.

And while a competitive ethos has been present in social dancing since the Depression era, the pressure to be a highly accomplished dancer seems to have escalated perhaps in tandem with televised dancing programs and with “the sportisation of pastimes”. Unlike their grandparents, Gen Y did not learn to dance in a woolshed or dancehall with their more chaotic learn-by-osmosis approach. Often it begins through calisthenics and ballet, both highly structured and assessable activities, with strong parental encouragement and possibly pressure to succeed. They watch the competitive television dance programs and visit the international touring Riverdance shows where fame, high-level skills and extravaganza meet. Success in this environment is extrinsically defined—winning medals and accolades—whereas for the Lucky Generation it was meeting a partner and the intrinsic rewards of having fun and being good enough to have the confidence to keep dancing.

Today, aerobics and modern social dancing share an emphasis on the ideal body. There is little chance of here-and-now satisfaction. Delayed gratification in the pursuit of fitness has sidelined fun and friendship. It prompts us to ask whether the decoupling of fitness from other more sociable qualities might be an obesity risk factor akin to solitary eating (Rozin et al. 2003). Eating alone has been associated with weight gain in part because it is thought to encourage dis-inhibited food consumption, eating large amounts and types of food that are socially disapproved, and eating at a speed which precludes early satiety. Social eating goes hand in hand with more socially acceptable eating, which is a good thing when this is healthy eating, much less undesirable when household members share a taste for energy-dense, nutrient-poor diets. Similarly, solitary exercising could have healthy or unhealthy effects: it could encourage people to use an exercise video at home and to ‘work out’ in a comfortable setting getting exercise they otherwise would not, or it could encourage over-exercise, resulting in unnecessary injuries and exercise fatigue. Putting aside the conjecture, what our Lucky Generation teaches us is that moderate levels of enjoyable exercise, experienced over the lifecourse, predispose people to lead long and contented lives.



Image 6.2 Fitness fanaticism, Melbourne shop, 2012 (Source: J. Dixon)

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