

By **DIANE HERBST**

A TRAINER friend of mine recently told me about a gym where she'd experienced the hardest workout she'd ever had. Perhaps as a sign of my masochistic tendencies, I immediately wanted to try it.

The class in question is at Epic Hybrid Training, a gym in Manhattan dubbed by a fitness writer as having "the toughest workout in New York City." Its focus is on high-intensity interval training (HIIT, see right) which means it consists of short spurts of intense exercise interspersed with short recovery times.

The gym has become a hub for those looking to compete in the grueling world of Spartan racing — an adventure race named for the famously fit and tough ancient Greeks. This exploding sport was developed in Vermont in 2012 and is expected to attract a million participants this year. Courses vary in length and difficulty, from three miles to marathon length and more, but

all include grueling obstacles, wall climbs and mud-crawling.

Epic co-founder Alex Nicholas, a professional Spartan racer who has competed all over the world, has created an award-winning Spartan racing team based at Epic. "This," says Nicholas, "is where people come to train for a Spartan race."

With this in mind, I sign up for the Grynd class. Fear and shame overwhelm me as students roll in. Most are toned and muscled, while one resembles the Olympic gymnast Mary Lou Retton, with a taut, fit body and chiseled legs. What have I gotten myself into?

I soon find out: Something pretty awesome.

The high-intensity workout hits all the right places. After a warm-up heavy on burpees (squat thrusts), for the next 45 minutes, class consists of three rounds of circuit-type training at eight different stations. We do a cornucopia of movements, including kettlebell swings, swings on monkey bars and squats, spending 90

TARGET: ULTIMATE FITNESS

**Want an intense workout regimen?
Try training for the rigorous
Spartan races**

Epic Hybrid gym offers Manhattan's only spear-throwing facility — landing a bale of hay is one of the Spartan race obstacles.

seconds at each station, and during a brief, 20-second rest between stations, we do burpees.

There's a reason why Nicholas structures the workouts this way.

"We focus on stability, agility, strength, flexibility, range of motion, and we develop it in a high-intensity workout," he says. "I haven't seen anyone in New York incorporate all the fitness concepts we do. We put everything together in one workout that fits all

the needs of fitness."

As part of the Spartan race preparation, Nicholas also provides spear-throwing instruction on the gym's rooftop. Nailing a spear into a bale of hay is one of the race requirements; a miss means a penalty of a punishing amount of burpees.

The Mary Lou Retton look-a-like, Ippolita di Paola, 28, of Manhattan, competed in her first Spartan Sprint race (about four miles with 15 obstacles) last April despite

joining her first class less than a year ago as what she calls a "fat drunk" and almost lifelong heavy smoker who had never participated in sports in her life.

For proof she pulls out her phone and shows me a "before" shot of an unrecognizable, heavy-set woman with 153 pounds on her 5-ft. frame. A second picture shows a bikini-clad di Paola with a swimsuit-model body after shedding 45 pounds. (She is now a size 00.)

When di Paola did her first class, "I was intimidated for sure," she says. "The coaches here make such a difference, and they motivated me to push as hard as I could. I think they made me realize that just because I never was an athlete doesn't mean I couldn't be an athlete. And realizing that was a potential down the road was a big deal for me."

Di Paola now races in the competitively elite division.

"It's an amazing accomplishment," she says. "I never in a million years thought it was possible."

Epic Hybrid Training has locations at 38 W. 38th St. and at 230 E. 53rd St. For more information, visit epichybridtraining.com or call 646-450-2405.

EXERCISE THAT'S A BIG HIIT

February is American Heart Month — and a good time to reiterate that exercise is proven to help prevent heart disease.

High-intensity interval training (HIIT) is even more effective than aerobic exercise, says Jordan Metzl, M.D., a sports medicine physician at New York City's Hospital for Special Surgery and author of "The Exercise Cure."

"It used to be [thought that] just doing a half hour of exercise is good enough," says Metzl. "And while that is much better than sitting on the couch, recent studies indicate how you do it makes a big difference."

HIIT enables blood vessels to better expand, which in turn improves the cardiovascular system's ability to function. The key is to get the heart rate elevated to 90-plus percent of its maximum. According to the American Heart Association, an individual's maximum heart rate is 220 minus age.

Researchers have found that HIIT is more effective than continuous moderate exercise in improving overall health, including the heart, respiratory system, metabolism and mechanical functions. Another benefit? HIIT is more effective at reducing body fat, and has been shown to be more enjoyable than continuous aerobic exercise.

— Diane Herbst