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Prison-Influenced Workouts Break Out of Jail

(April 21) — The nation's newest fitness craze doesn't require fancy equipment, costly gym memberships or even personal freedom.

Former convicts are teaching exercises they learned while behind bars, bringing jail-influenced workouts to men and women who don't mind shaping up like they were locked down.

"You don't need a gym," said Paul "Coach" Wade, the author of "Convict Conditioning," a training guide detailing popular prison workouts. "You don't need weights. You don't need expensive equipment. You just need your body and your mind. I think that's liberating, refreshing for people. It certainly saves time and money."

Convict Conditioning

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An athlete shows off a complicated half one-arm handstand push-up — an exercise included in Paul "Coach" Wade's guide to prison workouts, titled "Convict Conditioning."

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Long before prison yards were stocked with barbells and weight benches, inmates trained in their cells using body-weight exercises like push-ups. According to Wade — who says he served 19 years on drug charges in prisons, including San Quentin State Prison in California and Angola in Louisiana — those workouts have been passed down over the years from detainee to detainee.

And now they're gaining popularity on the other side of the fence.

"Over the last few years, there's been a huge explosion of interest in the kind of

training that guys behind bars do to get into such great shape,” Wade told AOL News in an e-mail interview. “There’s something exotic and cool about prison training, especially if you haven’t been inside.”

Wade is a leading practitioner of prison-influenced training. Bucking the classic prison yard tableau of bench presses and curls, Wade’s workouts are based on calisthenics, like push-ups, pull-ups and squats. Over time, Wade says those who train using his techniques gain strength and stamina, allowing them to execute more complicated workouts like one-armed pull-ups and inverted one-armed push-ups.

Though those variations might wow gym rats, Wade says the workouts originated to help prisoners defend themselves.

“Prison is a very mean place,” he said. “You can’t just be ‘all show and no go.’”

While most people will do anything they can to stay out of prison, Wade says there shouldn’t be a stigma surrounding prison-influenced workouts.

“It’s not right that only hardened convicts have access to the most productive prison methods,” said Wade, who says he has trained Navy SEALs, Marines and corrections officers. “Decent, law-abiding folk should have the right to benefit from them, too.”

Wade isn’t the only man who wants to share his prison-influenced workouts with

the masses.

Other convicts-turned-trainers — like Brian Wolf, who runs BuiltBehindBars.com — are trying to teach the workouts they learned in prison to people who aren’t incarcerated. Fans of prison-influenced workouts regularly post videos of their routines on websites like YouTube, and sites like HoodWorkout.com often upload the impressive regimens.

Prison-themed workouts haven’t made it to most major gyms, but clubs have noticed a spike in members who train without using fitness machines.

“We’ve been seeing a lot more non-equipment based workouts being more popular,” said Kelsey Kyro, a spokeswoman for Crunch, a gym with branches in New York, California and Florida. “People want to get in, get out, and have a simple workout that’s effective wherever they are — even if they don’t have a lot of space or a lot of time.”

Exercising without a machine is just one of the perks of prison-influenced workouts, according to Wade.

“It’s primitive, brutal, painful and incredibly rewarding,” he said. “Modern workouts are so centered around machines that we are in danger of losing this basic athletic connection with our own bodies.”

But Wade says the main reason his workouts are growing more popular is because they work.

“I’m not about glamorizing jail in any way. I can understand why some people would feel tentative about exploring workouts originally used by violent criminals. But if it works, it works!”

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