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The Ripped and the Righteous

By **FRANK BRUNI**

It is Jack LaLanne you can thank, or curse, for all the gyms: in exurban strip malls, suburban manses, downtown hotels. The health club he opened in Oakland, Calif., in 1936 was one of their seeds and templates, an endorphin emporium that pointed the way.

With “The Jack LaLanne Show,” he also had a hand in the spread — a contagion, really — of television programs exhorting viewers to rise up from their La-Z-Boys and of infomercials hawking workout equipment. An army of spandex missionaries was unleashed.

But that’s not the whole of his legacy, or the most interesting (some might say insidious) part.

That sense of failure you feel when you haven’t exercised in days? That conviction that if you could pull off better push-ups, you’d be a better person through and through? These, too, are his doing, at least in part. What he left behind when he died last week, at the toned old age of 96, was not only a sweaty culture of relentless crunching and spinning but also the notion that fitness equals character, and that self-actualization begins with the self-discipline to get and stay in shape. In the post-LaLanne landscape, it’s not the eyes but the abdominals that are windows to the soul.

“There seems to be a whole substitute morality, where your obligation is to go to the gym and not ask why,” says Mark Greif, a founding editor of the literary journal *n+1* and the author of a widely discussed 2004 essay, “Against Exercise.” “If you don’t, you become a sort of villain of the culture.”

The message that perspiration is a gateway to, and reflection of, higher virtues is captured in health club slogans like ones used by the Equinox chain over recent years: “Results aren’t always measured in pounds and inches.” “My body. My biography.” “It’s not fitness. It’s life.” The same idea is encoded in the language of personal improvement. A “new you” usually means a trimmer, tauter version, not someone who has learned to speak Mandarin or picked up woodworking skills.

And the pectoral is political. The current president and his predecessor have made ostentatious points of their commitments to fitness routines. Whatever the differences in their ideologies, intellects and work habits, George W. Bush and Barack Obama both let voters know that they carve out time almost daily for cardio or weights or both. And while that devotion could be seen as evidence of distraction (Bush) or vanity (Bush and Obama), each politician safely counted on a sunnier takeaway. In this country, at this time, steadiness of exercise signals sturdiness of temperament, and physical leanness connotes mental toughness.

Bill Clinton worked out less diligently, which was freighted with its own meaning: waistline as weather vane. Americans monitored his fluctuating physique as they wondered how well he was keeping all of his appetites in check.

Some conflation of the physical and the moral spans virtually all of human history. It's present in the writings of the ancient Greeks, for whom athleticism was much more than mere sport. Christians long ago designated sloth one of the seven deadly sins, though they meant a dearth of industry more than a deficit of treadmill time.

And the philosophy that one form of self-control begets another — that careful maintenance of the body yields more than corporal benefits — has countless historical precedents. In the early 19th century, the American preacher [Sylvester Graham](#) advocated sparse, vegetarian-style eating as a hedge against impure thoughts, particularly sexual ones. He was nutritionist and moralist both.

In his own way, Mr. LaLanne was also a moralist, proselytizing about diet and exercise. To go back and look at his language is to be struck by its religious flavor.

He once compared himself to Billy Graham, saying that while Mr. Graham (no relation to Sylvester) was “for the hereafter,” he was “for the here and now.” He called what he was doing a crusade, adding, “To me, this one thing — physical culture and nutrition — is the salvation of America.”

And he admitted that exercise wasn't always pleasurable or diverting. You did it because it was right and good and true — because it would better you. The Protestant work ethic pulsed through every one of his jumping jacks.

For Mr. LaLanne, proper physical stewardship involved not ascetic denial so much as activity, activity, activity. You must run! Or at least pump your fists up and down as you walk fast, preferably on an incline! Don't forgo hammer curls! The true believer has a

self-punishing — and often solitary — regimen. And he or she achieves inner peace only because of it.

Or so his disciples assert. “The physical is just sort of the vehicle to live with more intention, more mindfulness, more focus,” says Amanda Rose Walsh, a personal trainer in Manhattan. She tells her clients as much: “In order to have a healthy mind and soul and spirit, you have to start with the physical. You start with the body to get to deeper levels.”

And if you don’t succeed? To be unfit is to be unfit: a villain of the culture, indeed.

Listen to the way doughy contestants are introduced (and how they talk about themselves) on TV weight-loss shows, which promise redemption through rigorous calisthenics. Saddlebag thighs and love handles are woven together with career frustrations and domestic strife — all of them the wages of sloppy living. Moving past these humiliations and rejoining polite society are contingent on serious gym time.

Look at the title of the best known of these shows, “The Biggest Loser.” Is that mirthful wordplay or a pointed double entendre, referring not just to the eventual champion but also to the poor fatsos still wallowing in shame?

There’s a bullying strain to the modern fitness ethos, a blurred line between cheerleading and hectoring. And it’s hard not to wonder whether that kind of intimidation — in addition to the social and economic realities of diet and exercise — helps explain the paradox that for all the newfangled aerobic machines and reduced-rate January gym memberships, Americans aren’t noticeably haler and healthier.

When exercise comes wrapped in value judgments, does it wind up entangled in an anxiety that threatens the very resolve to get fit? As Mr. LaLanne was siring new methods for shaping up, he was fathering something else, too: a potent, and in some cases immobilizing, strain of contemporary guilt.