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The New Era of 30-Day Fitness Challenges

Options to help people spend a month focusing on running, yoga, exercises for abs and more are proliferating



Bikram Yoga NYC offers a 30-day challenge. If participants complete a class every day for a month, they get guest passes and discounts. *PHOTO: KEVIN GREGOR*

By **RACHEL BACHMAN**

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Lauren Laitin kept up her pledge to do some form of exercise every day for a month—even when a Jan. 23 blizzard dumped snow on the Washington, D.C., area, where she

lives. Her gym was closed, so she tugged on a pair of boots and forced herself out the door for a short run.

“I might not have made it 2 miles, because it was slippery and snowing,” recalls Ms. Laitin, principal of executive coaching firm Parachute Coaching. “But I was so proud of myself that I did it.”

The 30-day exercise challenge is increasingly popular, especially as an alternative to New Year’s resolutions, which often fail this time of year. The pitch is to stick with a commitment for a month, whether to reach a specific benchmark, mix up a routine or try to establish an exercise habit.

Thirty-day challenges push people to chase goals big and small, from cutting out soda to writing a novel. More than 200 smartphone apps for Apple’s iOS operating system have “30 day challenge” in the title, 10 times the number available in 2014, according to App Annie, an analytics and market-data company. Internet searches for “30 day challenge” have climbed 140% since 2013, according to Google. Gyms and yoga studios offer them as a way to win customers, hoping that a 30-day stint will turn into a habit.

Several people who have tried or designed 30-day exercise challenges say they were inspired by a 2011 TED Talk by Google software engineer Matt Cutts called “Try something new for 30 days.” It has been viewed more than 7 million times.

Some of Mr. Cutts’s 30-day challenges were one-off experiments, including not watching TV and cutting out sugar. But he says a few of the physical challenges helped transform him from mostly sedentary to a regular exerciser.

In 2009, Mr. Cutts challenged himself to 30 days of bicycling to his job in Mountain View, Calif., even though he “hated biking to work,” he says. “And by the end of the month, I pretty much loved biking to work and switched to biking to work most of the time.”

Most days, he also takes 10,000 steps as counted by a fitness tracker, another 30-day challenge from 2009.

Chris Alldredge, a 33-year-old former high-school football player in Weaver, Ala., was overweight and unhappy five years ago when he found a 30-day yoga challenge online featuring instructor Dashama Gordon.

Mr. Alldredge, a chemical lab technician, says following along at home with the

challenge's short videos helped him establish a daily practice in a place with few yoga studios at the time. "No guys around here would ever dare admit to doing yoga," he says.

Ms. Gordon posted her first 30-day challenge on YouTube in 2008, spawning a flood of other online versions. She trademarked "30 day yoga challenge" in January.

Interest in exercise surges around New Year's Day, but 30-day challenges are typically more manageable than annual resolutions and can start any time.

People who participate in a challenge to complete a class every day for 30 days at Bikram Yoga NYC, with four locations in Manhattan, can start whenever they want, co-owners Donna Rubin and Jennifer Lobo say. Those who finish a challenge receive two guest passes, discounts on future classes and, sometimes, a round of applause from classmates. The challenge costs \$39 for Bikram Yoga NYC newcomers and \$145 for members.

The owners estimate that a few thousand people have completed the challenge since they launched it in 2002.

The popularity of 30-day challenges might be driven partly by people's attraction to markers such as a new week or a holiday for a fresh start. People are 14% more likely to visit a gym at the start of a new month, according to a 2014 paper published in the journal *Management Science*.

Such markers "make people feel disconnected from their past imperfections," and spur them to take a big-picture view and pursue aspirations, the paper says. Its lead author was Hengchen Dai, then a doctoral student at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School.

In Australia, Sydney-based app developer Davor Jozic has noticed that pattern among users of the eight 30-day challenge smartphone apps he designed for his company, Jozic Productions. He says people often download one of the apps, such as his 30-day push-up challenge, then wait for the first day of a month to start it.

About 6.5 million people have downloaded the apps in the past two years, Mr. Jozic says, with downloads surging in January and just before summer in the northern hemisphere. The apps have six levels for different fitness starting points. They ping a reminder at a user's selected time each day, and each exercise session takes a few minutes, he says. The apps have up to seven rest days built into the month.

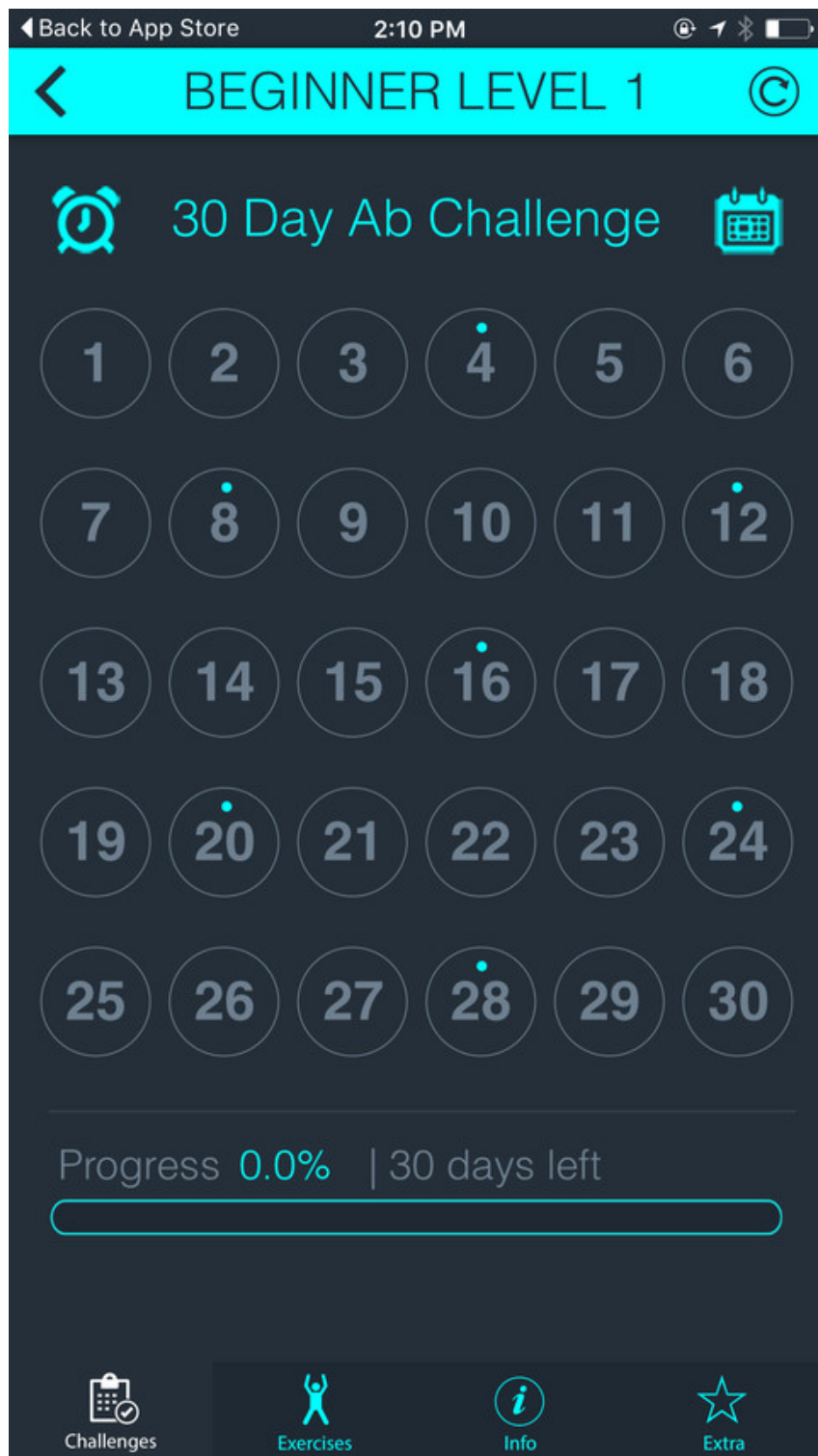


The Jan. 23 blizzard in the Washington, D.C. area didn't keep Lauren Laitin from completing her challenge to exercise every day that month. *PHOTO: LAUREN LAITIN*

One of his most popular apps, the 30-day ab challenge, draws many repeat users from month to month, Mr. Jozic says. But it has a relatively low completion rate: Less than 17% of people who start the challenge make it to Day 30, he says.

Scott Dunaway, owner of the ChiroStrength chiropractic and fitness clinic in Clarksville, Tenn., wrote a critical blog post about a 30-day ab challenge he saw a friend join on Facebook last summer. A similar challenge went viral on Facebook in 2014. Dr. Dunaway especially criticized the challenge's sit-ups and curl-ups, which some experts believe can hurt the spine.

Challenges that start aggressively and ramp up quickly also can cause problems, says Jacque Crockford, an exercise physiologist and education specialist with the San Diego-based American Council on Exercise.



There are now more than 200 smartphone apps with “30 day challenge” in the name. This one, by Jozig Productions, features abdominal exercises. *PHOTO: JOZIG PRODUCTIONS*

One 30-day squat challenge floating around the Internet starts with 50 squats and ends with 250. That escalation would be a “shock to the system” of someone who didn’t regularly exercise, Ms. Crockford says. “If you’re starting from nothing, chances are in those first seven days you’re going to be very sore.”

Only about 20% of American adults meet government recommendations of 2½ hours a

week of moderate-intensity aerobic activity such as walking, plus muscle-strengthening activities two or more days a week, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

It takes people an average of four visits a week for six weeks to become regulars at a gym, according to a study of 111 new gym members published in August in the Journal of Behavioral Medicine.

The keys to establishing an exercise habit, lead author Navin Kaushal says, were exercising at the same time every day, choosing something enjoyable, doing it in a comfortable environment and keeping the plan simple.

Mr. Kaushal a doctoral candidate in behavioral medicine at the University of Victoria in British Columbia, says a monthlong program might not be enough to change habits, but that something like a 30-day plank challenge could make for a good start. “You can’t get any more simple than that.”

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