

Fit for Life

Deep in thought during a walk in the woods one glorious fall day, a rhythmic mechanical sound startled me; it was as if someone was thrashing the ground with thin metallic contraptions. Turning around, I saw a couple dressed in colorful, tight-fitting sports clothes, propelling themselves forward with ski poles, marching as fast as possible without breaking into gallops.

They overtook me with their gazes fixed into the future, self-possessed, silent, and determined to make the most of their time.

I continued my stroll, which now seemed laggard and lacking in resolve.

Maybe, I thought, something was amiss with this well-equipped duo, and then I do not mean using ski poles when there was no snow. Somehow, their idea of how to exercise seemed off the target. “But, what can you offer in its place?” was the immediate interior response.

To meet this challenge, I began on my way home to formulate the principles and details of an alternative training regime, even as I heard fast approaching again the faint sound of ski poles whipping the ground.

Like many of you, I spend most of my time in front of a computer screen pushing buttons, sometimes rising to drink coffee. However, when working at home, which in a good week happens on two days at least, I take a longer break around lunch for “exercise.”

I first put on the outdoor clothes fitting for the season, or those closest at hand, though never tight-fitting superhero outfits as those of the efficient couple.

After leaving our untamed, spacious garden, and crossing the railroad, I amble over a wide field, in the middle of which a large transformer station, all wires and metallic parts, broods while emitting a faint electric humming sound. It is out of place in the natural scenery but imposing in its brute mechanical force.

I pass a group of cows and a farm on the right side, cross the large road while trying not being run over by one of the juggernaut timber trucks. This is good training for coordination and sprinting.

To my left, on a hilltop, I see a modest, white medieval church and on my right a tiny lake.

Finally, after one thousand five hundred meters of thoughtful promenade, I reach my destination, the school, where I wait. Rest is essential for successful exercise, on this all competent authorities agree.

After some minutes, a short, bespectacled girl, dressed in a bulky jacket kept in place by a pink backpack, comes onto the path. When she sees me, she starts to run toward me even if she is thirty meters away. I take some steps in her direction, and she throws herself into my arms. The hug, however, does not last the thirty seconds necessary for daily well-being, as she is an energetic creature. One of her legs is somewhat shorter, which is not visible as she bounces more than walks. And her mood is like the weather in spring: quick, fresh, and happy.

She puts her left hand in my right one, and we begin the walk home. I ask what she did in school, to which she answers Math and gymnastics. After some minutes, when we pass the church, I offer to carry her heavy backpack, and she agrees. In this way, I combine endurance exercise with weight training.

We wander in silence on the long gravel road past the cows, turn right at the transformer station, and after a few more meters enter the village. There a former truck driver greets us with a smile and the latest local news. He keeps his car shining and the lawn immaculate, ready to defend them from all attacks, both animal and human.

When back in our garden, my training partner scampers away to the family rabbit eagerly waiting in her outdoor hutch for the afternoon dose of water and pellets, while I return to my computer screen with a mug of coffee, ready for strenuous work.

This, in short, is the daily exercise I recommend; it requires a small bouncy girl and a pink backpack full of books and sports clothes. You may exchange the cows and transformer station for something functionally equivalent, but a medieval church is essential for the spiritual part of the program, as OM in yoga so to speak.

When retiring in old age, I will buy a strong ash stick with a brass nob, put on my overcoat and a broad-brimmed hat and go for my daily exercise. Maybe there will then be a grandchild with a heavy backpack helping me making the most of this superior training method.