Alumni

Columbia Fit Club

These four streaming platforms from alumni entrepreneurs are helping people stay active and sane.

By
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|
Fall 2020



Clockwise from top-left: LIVEexercise, Physique 57, Ballet Beautiful, Wanderlust (Pete Longworth).

Physique 57

Physique 57 has been sharing the secrets to beach-ready buns, abs, arms, and thighs since the company opened its first boutique studio on 57th Street in Manhattan. The international brand, which launched in 2006, is known for its signature style of barre — an aerobic fitness method that combines elements of

dance, strength, cardio, and flexibility.

“We use a proprietary system called Interval Overload, which works each muscle group to exhaustion in eight to ten minutes,” explains cofounder and CEO Jennifer Vaughan Maanavi ’00BUS, a former Wall Street professional with a background in dance. “You burn calories and tone the body very quickly.”



Jennifer Maanavi.

Physique 57 has studios in New York City and franchises in the United States and overseas. Since 2012 the company has also offered online classes. Subscribers to its platform gain access to hundreds of workouts, including ab blasts, dance-cardio sessions, and restorative stretches, often with no equipment necessary.

Looking ahead to when the world recovers from COVID-19, Maanavi sees the fitness industry continuing to invest in online instruction even as it revives in-person workouts. That’s a good thing, she says — a combination of in-person and on-demand classes allows for more scheduling flexibility and, importantly, more opportunities for exercise. “A lot of people strive to work out at least three or four times a week, but going to the gym or a studio can be time-consuming,” says Maanavi. “With twenty-minute videos available online, there are fewer excuses. I’m a firm believer that your fitness routine powers your self-image and emotional

stability. It’s not all about biceps and triceps; it’s your whole outlook. So my hope for the world is that people exercise more, wherever they are.”



Physique 57 teachers lead a dance-cardio class.

Where to stream: ondemand.physique57.com, Android, iOS, Amazon Fire TV, Android TV, Apple TV, Instagram TV, Roku

Monthly cost: $24.99



Blake Kassel. (Courtesy of LIVEexercise)

LIVEexercise

Based in the fitness hub of South Florida, LIVEexercise is dedicated to helping sweat junkies around the world shape up from their homes. “We were one of the first companies to do live online workouts and then have those workouts available for on-demand replay,” says Blake Kassel ’93GSAPP, the company’s founder and CEO.

Kassel, a former competitive bodybuilder who studied real-estate development at Columbia, began making online exercise videos in 2009 to accompany the resistance bands he sold under the brand name Bodylastics.

The first series, called “Chiseled,” a set of classes that Kassel still leads from his Boca Raton studio, is a strenuous muscle-building program that, as he puts it, “will smoke you in thirty-five minutes.” Since “Chiseled” premiered, Kassel’s streaming platform — now under the name LIVEexercise — has expanded to include more than 6,300 work-outs focused on resistance training, weight training, cardio, kickboxing, yoga, and Pilates.

Exercises are filmed by a professional videographer in a handheld, documentary style to “bring the viewer into the action,” Kassel says. “We want to make people

feel like they have a workout partner, so no one ever has to exercise alone," he explains. "It's like when I trained as a bodybuilder and had a partner for free weights. We would meet up at the gym, talk about stuff, work out hard, and have an incredible bonding experience. That's the effect we're trying to achieve here. We have an amazing community of people and an amazing platform."

Kassel's audience has grown over the past few months. "Previously, we mostly served busy people like moms and dads who didn't have time to go to the gym," he says. But as many fitness facilities have closed and coronavirus has made more people rethink their exercise routines, Kassel says he's struggled to keep his Bodylastics bands in stock. He acknowledges that people are wary of putting their hands on communal equipment next to panting strangers in crowded indoor spaces, and as a result, "we've never seen demand like this, ever."



A LIVEexercise strength workout uses Bodylastics resistance bands. (Courtesy of LIVEexercise)

Where to stream: liveexercise.com, Android, iOS, Apple TV, Amazon Fire TV, Roku

Monthly cost: $9.95



Mary Helen Bowers. (Courtesy of Ballet Beautiful)

Ballet Beautiful

Founded by ballerina Mary Helen Bowers ’08GS, Ballet Beautiful blends the elegance of classical dance with the muscle-toning workout of a body boot camp. With more than three hundred videos and thousands of subscribers, the streaming service was an early pioneer of online fitness classes when it first launched in 2009.

The company took off after Bowers, who was working as a personal trainer after having retired from a ten-year career at the New York City Ballet, received a life-changing opportunity. Natalie Portman was preparing to play a dancer in the upcoming movie *Black Swan*, and she needed a trainer who could help her sculpt a convincing ballerina body. Bowers got the job through a personal connection, and for the next year she accompanied the actress around the world to help her maintain an intense workout regimen.

It was during that time that Bowers turned to online teaching as a way to connect with her New York–based clients. Leading up to the December 2010 release of *Black Swan*, she began producing videos for a wider audience, and by 2013, her business, Ballet Beautiful, had introduced a subscription service. “By bringing workouts online,

we were able to build a powerful global community in a very short time," says Bowers, who, in addition to training Portman, has also worked with celebrities such as Tracee Ellis Ross and Liv Tyler, as well as former Victoria's Secret models, including Doutzen Kroes and Miranda Kerr.

Bowers's ballet-inspired exercises, which require no previous dance experience, target the leg, core, hip, and arm muscles that are essential to the ballet physique. They emphasize posture, control, and graceful movement. "So much of dance is about elongation — stretching the limbs and extending the body through space," she says. "We help build the strength that lets you carry yourself in a way that communicates confidence and power."

Since the start of the pandemic, Ballet Beautiful has created more content focused on relieving stress through physical activity. "A lot of people are looking at fitness in a different way now," says Bowers. "It's less about how you look or how you fit into your jeans and more about how exercise makes you feel happier and stronger. We're so fortunate to be in a position where we can offer something positive and healthy for people to do every day from home."



Stretching is key to a dancer body. (Courtesy of Ballet Beautiful)

Where to stream: balletbeautiful.com

Monthly cost: $39.99



Jeff Krasno, Schuyler Grant, and Sean Hoess. (Pete Longworth)

Wanderlust

For those seeking relaxation and mindfulness in addition to full-body workouts, Wanderlust offers a variety of yoga classes, meditation sessions, and inspirational lectures through its online video library.

The Brooklyn-based company, which has yoga studios in California, Austin, and Montreal, is the brainchild of three Columbia alumni who met at the College: indie-music executive Sean Hoess ’92CC, ’97LAW, ’98SIPA; his friend and longtime business partner Jeff Krasno ’93CC, who leads the wellness-education startup Commune Media; and Krasno’s wife, Schuyler Grant ’93CC, a former television actress, renowned yoga teacher, and the founder of New York City’s Kula Yoga Project.

The trio began Wanderlust in 2009 as a series of festivals celebrating conscious living and community. “Think of it as a cross between a music festival and a very large yoga retreat,” explains Hoess, the CEO. Hosted in countries around the world,

events have cumulatively drawn hundreds of thousands of attendees and have featured performers including Moby and Andrew Bird and notable speakers such as Marianne Williamson. But since COVID-19 forced the cancellation of festivals and the shuttering of yoga studios, the company has shifted focus to its streaming arm, Wanderlust TV, which launched in 2017 and tripled its subscribers this year.

Whether in person or online, Wanderlust offers what Hoess calls “conscious fitness.” “We’re here to help people live healthy and inspired lives,” he says. “Yoga is not about toned abs or being ‘fit,’ though those are positive side effects. There’s a mental component, and for many a spiritual component as well. Current scientific evidence supports that having a meditative practice makes for calmer and more tolerant humans.”

A steady yoga practice can also help people take deep breaths and stay grounded as they navigate the uncertainties of our current era. “Our motto is ‘Find your true north,’” explains Hoess. “We’re all seeking our best selves. It isn’t a destination; it’s a journey. The name ‘Wanderlust’ refers to an innate desire to travel or roam. We mean that literally, since our events involve destination travel around the world, but also metaphorically — we are all exploring our own consciousness.” Pandemic or not, there are no lockdowns or public-health risks when taking a vacation of the mind.



Schuyler Grant leads a yoga class.

Where to stream: tv.wanderlust.com, Android, iOS, Apple TV, Roku

Monthly cost: $17.99

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