

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Art Museum workout, Rocky style

By Melissa Dribben

March 12, 2008

How to describe the phenomenon that occurs at the top of the Art Museum steps at 6 a.m. every Monday through Friday - regardless of sun, snow or a summon-Noah downpour?

Is this courage? Masochism? Pathological disregard for the basic human instinct to seek shelter in a storm?

"A strange group of people who work out like crazy," says Juan Norris.

Close enough.

Norris, a 29-year-old boxer from West Philadelphia, has noticed this group in passing before during his morning run past Eakins Oval. But late last week, recovering from bruised ribs from a recent match, he slows to a walk and has a chance to get a better look.

What he sees are seven people, ages 23 to 60, doing old-fashioned calisthenics, in obeisance to a guy with his hands parked in the pockets of his camouflage pants.

The group - which can range from two to more than 30, depending on the weather - belong to an exercise club called Platoon. The Main Line company promises those who sign up for the \$80-a-month privilege a spectacular view, fresh air and unrelenting motivation for an hour nearly every (mercilessly early) morning.

As the gray sky, like a wet mitten, pats the city's head, they gather at the top of the fabled steps.

"On your butts!" barks Joe Petrusky, a 27-year-old personal trainer and last week's platoon leader. Down his minions go onto the cold pavement to stretch their hamstrings. "One leg out! Now the other."

Playing an almost convincing drill sergeant, he surveys his troops, looking as though he might, at the slightest provocation, pop his neck veins bellowing into any slacker's ear. His commands smack the air, shattering into steam. But he's really a sweetie. Kneeling beside a semi-folded bald man, he asks, tenderly, "How are you doing, Lou? OK?"

Nodding, Lou Rossman, an endodontist from Bala Cynwyd with a practice at 16th and Walnut, reaches a little farther toward his toes.

Two years ago, Rossman was working out in his gym when he realized he had lost his motivation. A former runner, now 60 and with bad knees, he said he missed being outdoors. Through the wife of a friend of his son's, he heard about Platoon and joined.

"Look at this," he says, looking out over the Parkway lined with hazy-haloed streetlights. "The city is in the palm of your hand."

Two weeks earlier, he was one of only two regulars who showed up to be put through the motions in three inches of snow. The other was Maggie Hochberg, a 29-year-old assistant manager at DiBruno's. Since the Monday after Thanksgiving, Hochberg has been regularly making the 40-minute run from her home in South Philly to the museum to start her day with Platoon.

"I thought it looked interesting and exciting," she explains. "Now, I get annoyed when I don't work out."

"And on the days when the weather is lousy and you're really annoyed," says Rossman, "the satisfaction is twice as great."

Enough jawboning, says Petrusky. "Meet me at the bottom of the steps. Get there! Get there!!" The troops scramble off and get into push-up position. "Ten, are you ready? Count!"

Pat McCrystal, 42, an insurance salesman from Center City, is one of Platoon's most loyal members. For 71/2 years, he's been reporting for his morning beating.

In winter, says McCrystal, "sometimes it's like being a 10-year-old kid, playing in the snow." And icy rain?

"Not so much," he says. "A couple of weeks ago, I showed up when it was 10-below with the windchill. They sent us home."

Platoon was started in the 1990s by a personal trainer. Todd Scott, 42, a former radio ad salesman, bought it in 1998 and ran it out of his basement in Villanova, equipped, he says, with only an old pink princess phone and an ancient computer.

In his sales pitch, Scott spins about group loyalty. Tales of dedicated team members calling no-shows to find out why they're wussing out. Or delivering boxes of doughnuts to the doorstep to shame the weak-willed back into action. He also claims that the worst weather draws the biggest crowds because of the high yield in bragging rights.

At the Art Museum last week, a few stalwarts said that somehow, they manage to resist that temptation.

"I do one day outside and two indoors," said Chris Costello, 50, a physical therapist in the Lower Merion School District.

Out on the muddy lawn beside the Eakins Oval fountain, Petrusky has the group crabwalk. Run back. Crawl on their bellies. Do more push-ups. The image of Frida Kahlo looks down from the 20-story high banner on the museum's facade. She looks as if she appreciates the weirdness.

"Back to the Rocky Statue!" Petrusky orders. Rossman walks as fast as he can. They wait for him to catch up before starting abs.

"On your backs!" They fall to the earth, curl up, and wheel their legs like Raid-stunned cockroaches.

"Bring those legs up, big guy," Petrusky says, leaning over a man in an Eagles hat and mud-splashed jacket. He is Stephen Levin, 40, who runs a senior home-care business and has been doing Platoon for

seven years. His teammates this morning include a school nurse from Bryant Elementary School, a waitress from TGI Friday's who coaches lacrosse and track at Nazareth Academy, and a social worker from Lankenau Hospital.

They all huff through crunches, five sprints up and down the steps, some tricep burning on a stone ledge, and a final stretch back where they started.

It's nearly 7 a.m. Rossman has to drive home to Bala Cynwyd to shower and then back into town to see patients. The shlep, he says, is worth it.

He gets up off the pavement with some effort, says his goodbyes, and is about to leave when he stops.

"Thank you, sir!" he says, snapping a salute.

Petrusky shakes his head and laughs. As if the mock military respect is what makes this guy crazy.

"See ya, Lou."