



MARK BERGIN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Kerri Hollywood leads a NIA class at Canadian Forces Base Kingston.

FITNESS

Fit for duty

LEAH McLAREN tries NIA, the exercise program that helped get some of Canada's soldiers in Afghanistan in shape

The theme of this class is "space," announces instructor Martha Randall, a tiny, sinewy woman with a purple lycra skull cap pulled over her curiously shaved head. The baldness gives her a certain New Age authority, and the class responds.

"Now look at your right hand, let it go where it wants, and follow it with your eyes. Explore the space inside your skin and out, let your hand be the guide. Don't be afraid to change levels, and move your feet as well."

Ms. Randall collapses to the floor like a disused marionette and writhes there in Martha Graham-esque form. All around me women are following their hands. They circle and crumple and reach with no discernible form while the sound of Ben Harper hums from the front of the room.

It's 9:15 on a sunny Wednesday morning and 18 women are gathered in an airless church banquet hall in Toronto's east end, engaged in an activity that can be reasonably described as hippy dancing. In fact they are practising NIA, a kinesthetic dance/movement exercise that is taking the city — and at least one Canadian military base — by storm.

We've come a long way from the step classes of yesteryear. NIA,

which stands for Neuromuscular Integrative Action, is the most talked-about exercise hybrid since Billy Blanks's infomercial-phenom, Taibo. Followers of the technique report a myriad of benefits — everything from flexibility and endurance to heightened joy in everyday life and increased libido.

Toronto has officially been named the NIA "hot spot" of the world, with the highest number of NIA instructors and classes anywhere (more than 50 locations in the GTA). This weekend the creators of the technique are holding a 20th-anniversary celebration in the city to celebrate an exercise form that started in California as an alternative to Jane Fonda-style "no pain, no gain" regimens and has grown into an internationally recognized exercise form.

A buffet sampler of every exercise trend out there, NIA combines the movements of tai chi, modern dance, aerobics, calisthenics and kick boxing (to name a few). But this list makes NIA sound far more intimidating and technical than it actually is. In practice, it feels more like aerobically rigorous interpretive dance. If it sounds like a loosey-goosey form of relativism-in-action, you might be surprised to learn that in Swahili, the word "nia" means "with purpose."

Even more surprising is the fact

that NIA is currently one of the most popular fitness courses on offer at the Canadian Armed Forces Base in Kingston, Ont. Long gone, it seems, are the days when soldiers cut their teeth running up muddy hills with heavy packs. Instead, many of the soldiers currently on the ground in Afghanistan got their physical training, in part, by following their hands to the beat of Enya.

Kerri Hollywood is the NIA instructor responsible for bringing the hybrid exercise to the base. After holding a couple of introductory classes just over a year ago, Hollywood was amazed by the positive response. She now holds booked-out classes, sometimes twice a day.

"Historically, the military encourages a very traditional form of fitness, and NIA is the complete opposite," says Ms. Hollywood. "Soldiers used to have to run in combat boots, but that was banned in the past year due to injury. NIA is done in bare feet, so it's really come full circle."

Most of the participants are men, she says, and at first, they were somewhat resistant to the freeform aspect of NIA, which promotes a holistic mind-body connection. "It wasn't that they weren't open-minded," she says, "just that they weren't used to moving in that way."

"They had a hard time with the freedom of it. In every NIA class there is a creative portion in which you make up your own movement, and [the soldiers] were unclear on how to approach it. Now the

classes are being requested. They want NIA classes as often as I can hold them."

Don't scoff until you've tried it. Despite its flaky appearance, NIA offers a fairly challenging cardiovascular workout that helps improve agility and co-ordination — key elements in a military fitness regime.

"Change in a workout is really important for me," says Leading Seaman Norbert Breuvert. As the fitness co-ordinator for his section on the base, he often fields requests for NIA classes. "The music is really good. You follow along instinctively, and without knowing it you're working much harder than you normally would."

The idea of working the body by indulging its whims (commonly known as dancing) is key to the NIA philosophy. Created in 1983 by a California-based husband-wife duo, Debbie and Carlos Rosas, it's a workout for people more interested in getting in touch with their bodies than getting perfect abs.

"It definitely hits a market that is not your typical gym-goer," says Ms. Randall. "The challenge is the improvisation of exploring your own body in your own way. NIA teaches you to access sensation in your own body, so it's a bit of a body laboratory."

For information on NIA, call 416-925-3182 or visit www.niac-on.ca

Leah McLaren is a feature writer for The Globe and Mail.