

PRIDE OF PLACE



PT Mark Hughes has channelled personal experiences as a gay man into creating a fitness community with a social purpose. Not only is he encouraging the LGBT+ community to get fit, he has also developed a unique business ethos the wider fitness world could benefit from »»

From as early as he can remember, Mark Hughes was made to feel different because of his sexuality. At school, being attracted to boys rather than girls became an invisible barrier between him and many of his classmates, especially in PE where old-fashioned gendered thinking meant football was the only sport on offer.

Hughes hated football, so therefore he loathed PE. But unfortunately, it couldn't just be left behind on the pitch. Playing for the school football team also dictated social hierarchy, making you one of the popular kids, and things were made even worse by uncomfortable situations in the changing rooms. So, Hughes simply decided the best course of action was to actively remove himself from this negative environment.

"It became easier to beg my mum for a sick note rather than go through the pain of attending PE," he says – and after sharing his experience with others in later life, it turns out he wasn't alone. "A lot of people of my generation in the LGBT+ community went

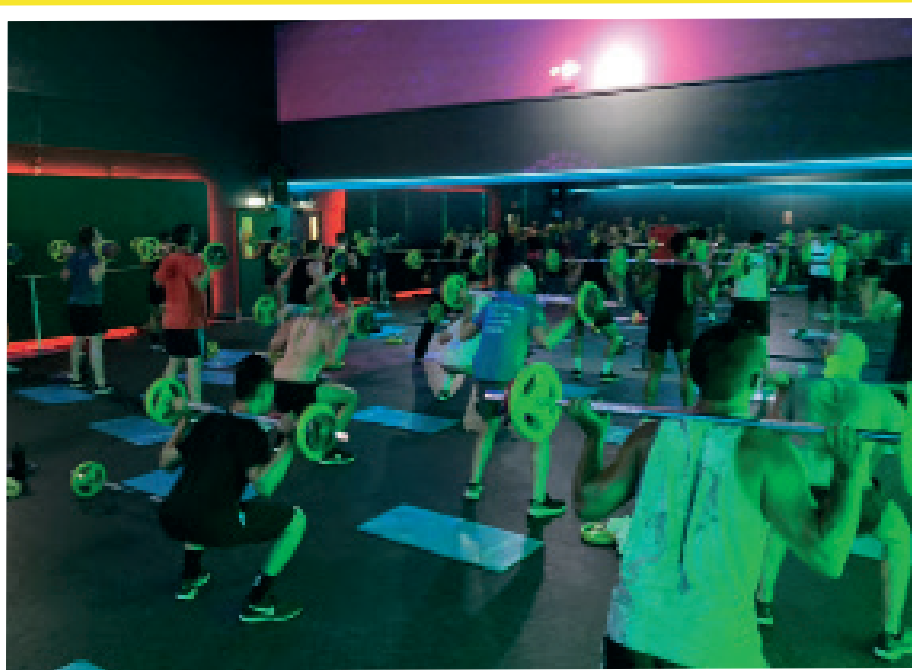
through similar problems. Traditional sport and fitness are very masculine environments. It often seems like there's no space for others to be part of this world, but that's rubbish. I love sports, just not football. Luckily, I had other opportunities to pursue my passion outside of school: first with competitive swimming, and then gym and weight training."

Active issue

Many others in the LGBT+ community aren't so fortunate to have alternative outlets. As a result, they often drop out of sports completely, which then has a negative impact on the rest of their lives. A UK study by the National LGB&T Partnership, published in February 2016, raised concern about levels of physical activity among the LGBT community: 55% of LGBT men, 56% of LGBT women and 64% who identified as something other than male or female were not active enough to maintain good health, compared to 33% of men and 45% of women in the general population.

"Gyms can often be intimidating spaces for newcomers, especially those carrying deep-rooted negative emotions towards fitness," explains Hughes. "Speaking to

"Speaking to others in the queer community highlighted how insecure many people felt in gyms"



others in the queer community highlighted how insecure many people felt in gyms, so I set about creating a class that would cater for these people. I wanted to create a space where people could come and let down their barriers, meet people, do some partner exercises, learn some fundamental moves and build up their confidence when on their own at the gym."

The result is Workout with PRIDE: inclusive group fitness classes open to all, no matter your level of fitness, age, gender, heritage or sexual orientation. In a period where many gyms are being forced to close and are struggling for members, the

CIRCUIT SESSIONS

Tackle these fat-fighting circuits from Workout with PRIDE

4 rounds, for time

- Barbell clean x 10
- Barbell front squat x 10
- Barbell thruster x 10
- Burpee over bar x 5

4 rounds, for time

- Jumping lunge x 24
- Burpee x 10
- Mountain climber x 30
- Press-up x 10



organisation has been bucking the trend and going from strength to strength. It now boasts more than 500 members and delivers classes in locations across London, each offering five classes per week.

Form and function

The programme Workout with PRIDE delivers is based on functional training, with an emphasis on form and good body alignment. Workouts are structured by weekly cycles, with functional training on Mondays, yoga on Tuesdays, strength circuits on Wednesdays, cycling on Thursdays, and functional strength and small group classes

on Saturdays. However, a keystone of the programme is taking time to explain exactly what the objectives are at the beginning of each workout and making sure everyone understands what they're doing. With such a diverse membership, Hughes also stresses that members always work at their own pace. If they can't do a particular exercise, it's not a problem – keeping moving is more important than anything else.

“I also pair or ‘thruple’ everyone up at the start of each class,” he explains. “There’s nothing worse than feeling alone or like you’re the only one who doesn’t know what they’re supposed to be doing in a fitness class. So, I put first-timers with regulars, and focus on partnership exercises based on ‘YGIG’ (You go, I go). It’s like having your own cheer squad as people naturally support and challenge each other. There’s

always way more energy in a session when there’s lots of noise.”

Having more accessible and inclusive environments where people feel they belong also encourages members to take more risks with their fitness and achieve better results.

“It’s hard to punch outside of your

comfort zone on your own,” Hughes adds. “As a group, we’ve been lucky to welcome regular members for six years and the progress they have made is incredible. My friend Rob said he always wanted to do pull-ups but couldn’t, and every time he was in the gym he was afraid that people were

watching and judging him for doing it wrong. I reiterated that it’s normal to make mistakes and it takes time to get things right, but that’s not a problem. So, he felt comfortable to work on it and now we can’t stop him from doing them!”

Social circle

Such positive results are key for retaining members, but Hughes thinks the social aspect is what keeps most of his members coming back.

It’s something that he has made a conscious effort to nurture right from the beginning. At the end of each class there is always an organised social gathering. Most often that involves simply a coffee or a meal, but it has also extended to weekend meet-ups, as well as outings to bigger events, including concerts, Pride



WELCOME ALL
Check out these four ways to make your gym more inclusive

- 1. Pronouns**
Name badges with pronouns help members tell others how they would like to be addressed.
- 2. Social elements**
Add social events after classes. These help to bring different groups together, foster a wider conversation and develop a community.
- 3. Visual diversity**
All images and promotional material used by a gym or fitness classes should include diversity of race, gender, age, physicality etc.
- 4. Respect**
No one knows what a gym goer is going through. Learn to respect rather than judge. Offer support – you’d be surprised how far a general hello and welcome can take things.

marches and even holidays abroad. “Making new friends after a certain age can be really difficult, especially without alcohol,” he explains. “Historically, the LGBT+ community has been closely associated with the world of the night: bars, clubbing and that kind of thing. I don’t know if this was as a backlash to repression or a way of numbing the pain people had experienced growing up, but going out drinking, partying and doing drugs was a big part of being gay. Now I’m noticing a big shift, where people are taking ownership of their mental health. LGBT+ sports teams are popping up all over the place, changing the landscape of how to meet new people, without having to use apps or go to clubs and bars.”

For Hughes, that doesn’t only apply to the LGBT+ community either, and he thinks that gyms in general are missing a trick when it comes to how they are presenting themselves to their customers. “Regular gyms are missing a beat,” he says. “Other trainers are shocked that I’m pulling in 30+ people per class, whereas they’re only pulling in five or six people, and gyms are quieter. I think it’s because they’re missing a special connection with their members. Gyms need to develop their social communities. It’s easy if you look at recent success stories, such as CrossFit and 1Rebel. They do it really well – they are communities with ethos and purpose. Places where people come together to say something about themselves, rather than simply burn calories.”

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