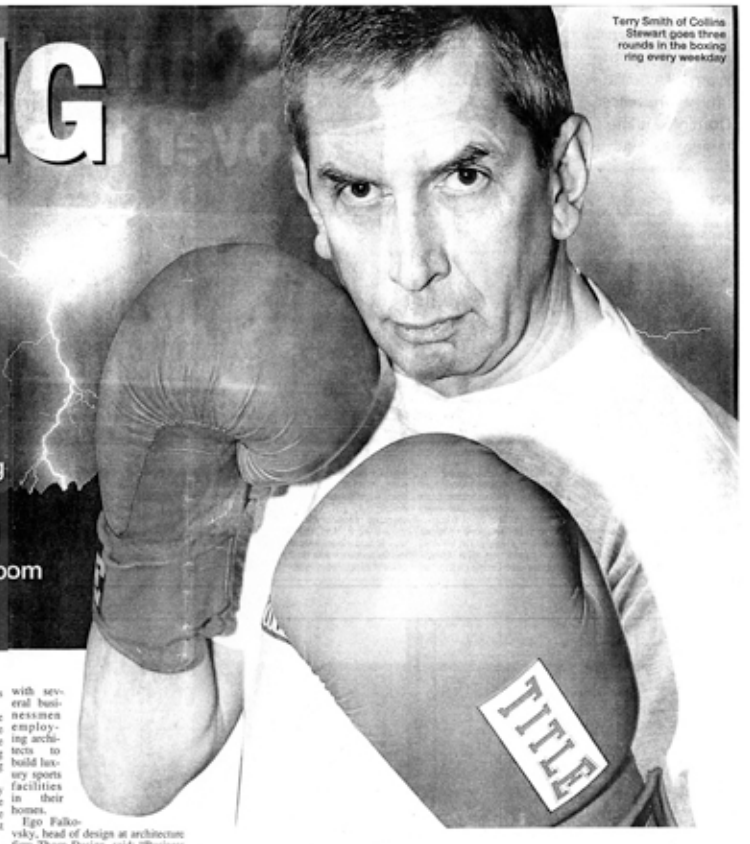
FIGHTING FIT



Terry Smith of Collins Stewart goes three rounds in the boxing ring every weekday

Britain's top bosses are increasingly turning to fitness experts to help them survive their gruelling schedules. Boxing, swimming and running all play their part in the latest boardroom obsession. By Dan Box and John Waples

At 6am, Sir Digby Jones opens the door to his flat, shivers in the early-morning cold and sets off on his dawn run around Regent's Park in London.

Within a few minutes the face beneath his greying hair begins to turn red, his breathing becomes laboured and sweat starts running down his face.

But for Jones, director-general of the Confederation of British Industry, the pain is worth it. On April 17, he will run in the London Marathon, where he hopes to raise money for Cancer Research and Unicef. To achieve this, he has stopped drinking and eating puddings and has taken up early-morning running. To his surprise, he is enjoying it. "I've lost three stone in weight. I feel more confident, more alert and I've got more stamina," he said.

Half an hour later, Jones is back at the flat, where he showers and dresses for work. Since starting the training, he has had the waistband of his trousers taken in, new holes cut in his belts and even had his watch strap shortened. By 8am he is in Downing Street for the first meeting of the day.

Jones said his new exercise regime had made him better able to meet the demands of his job. He is not alone. The increasing pressure of running a business means that the average tenure of a chief executive is now less than four years. To help give them the edge to survive, more and more business leaders are turning to exercise and dieticians.

Terry Smith, chief executive of Collins Stewart, the stockbroker, is one. "When you are fit you can absorb more," he said. "I run a business that operates in 43 offices in 26 countries. Sometimes you spend 15 hours on a plane, halfway round the world in time difference, and you have to get out, have a shower and go straight to work. You can do that better when you are fit."

Every weekday, Smith spends an hour in the Gym Box boxing gym in Holborn, near the offices of Collins Stewart. There he pays his trainers to push him as hard as they can. One is a former cruiserweight boxer and the other is a former paratrooper, and they earn their money: a typical session involves a two-mile run followed by three rounds in the ring. Between rounds Smith does circuits in the gym, followed by weight training.

"Sometimes they have nasty surprises for you, like running up and down staircases carrying weights, or shoulder presses with a 5kg medicine ball. If it looks like you are doing well they will lob something in," he said. Smith believes it is the same desire to push himself through this punishing regime that also drives him in business.

He said: "I've spent 30 years or more now in the City and I've observed a lot of people. If I had to choose a single common denominator, it certainly isn't education. It's not even intelligence. It's something like energy or determination.

"The really successful people say 'I will do whatever it takes to get it done'. It's the same thing in boxing. You are facing someone who is very fit and very tough, so you'll do whatever it takes to get it done."

ALLAN LEIGHTON, the Royal Mail chairman, packs his trainers whenever he goes abroad. He runs five times a week, taking in a six-mile circuit. He said: "Doing a top job is harder than it has ever been. Anybody who thinks it is not 24/7 every day is kidding themselves."

Jogging, said Leighton, is a good way of keeping fit, but equally important is the fact that it helps to "combat stress".

Philip Mountford, chief executive of men's fashion retailer Moss Bros, said his exercise regime gave him the energy to get through his day.

Mountford arrives at the Moss Bros offices in Clapham, south London, at 6am each morning. Once there, he goes through his in-tray, then leaves to run 10km around Clapham Common before heading back into the office for 7.30am.

"It's the beginning of my day and if I don't do it I feel quite unmotivated. It is the thing that kicks me off in the morning," he said.

Running also gives him a perspective on his work that is lost if he spends a whole day at his desk.

"In the morning when I'm running, that's the time I've got to think about the day ahead — what I've got to do, who I've got to see, how I'll plan my day — and that is the time I think laterally about ideas," he said.

Moss Bros's finance director, Roddy Murray, also runs. "A lot of people who work for me run," Mountford said. "One of the guys I brought with me from Gianni Versace runs marathons with me. Two of my senior buyers are keen runners. It's not a criterion for working for me. Not yet."

John Caudwell, a self-made millionaire whose Caudwell Group owns the Phones4U retail chain, said: "I'm competitive in everything I do. I apply that to my fitness and it's the same sentiments in business. The love of wanting to work, the love of wanting to be the best — they are exactly the same drivers in my head," he said.

Caudwell also believes his fitness regime has bought him more time at the top. He works out in the gym daily, on top of which he cycles to and from the group's offices in Stoke-on-Trent, a journey of 14 miles each way.

Driven by this sense of competition with himself, he always rides flat out, looking to beat his personal best.

"As a result, I've got massive energy to do what I want to do," he said. "I'm 52. I could potentially be sitting here with chest pains taking angina tablets or I could be sitting here like a coiled spring."

Figures from the Fitness Industry Association show that others share this view. Membership of private health clubs and gyms has almost doubled since 2000, to 3,570,500.

Technogym, Europe's largest supplier of gym equipment, has seen turnover at Wellness at Home, its UK division that installs private gyms in the homes of the super-rich, increase by 45% in the past year.

Wellness at Home works with interior designers and architects to create gyms that suit the demands of its clients, who include Sir Richard Branson and Sir Rocco Forte, the hotelier. The company also supplied the corporate gyms at Goldman Sachs, Merrill Lynch and Deutsche Bank.

At Goldman Sachs, staff are provided with shorts, T-shirts, socks and a towel every time they visit. One bond dealer said: "It makes the facilities of even the top private clubs look ragged."

Simon Whitmarsh-Knight, manager of Wellness at Home, said: "More and more homes now are being built with a gym. Fifteen years ago, the ensuite bathroom was the thing everyone had to have, but now architects are telling us that by 2010, at the top end of the market, all houses above £1m will be built with a multigym."

He said business executives typically spent up to £50,000 on a personal gym. Some cost more, with several businessmen employing architects to build luxury sports facilities in their homes.

Igo Falkovsky, head of design at architecture firm Thorp Design, said: "Business people tend to use their sports facilities in quite an intensive way. They also like to use them for parties where they want to impress people, so they sometimes want very spectacular things."

Falkovsky is working on a sports complex in the house of the chief executive of one of the City's leading financial institutions, although he refuses to reveal the name. "It is on split levels, with a swimming pool, gym, jacuzzi, sauna and massage room. It is a very minimalist design, and is costing £9m," he said.

Alan Bird, head chef at The Ivy, one of London's most fashionable restaurants, said executives' desire to stay trim had forced him to adapt his menu.

"Their awareness has changed dramatically," he said. "They are more health-conscious, especially in the business community.

"Meetings are now held at lunchtime, instead of in the evening. Even then, they tend to have light lunches, and won't take starters or dessert," he said.

CHIEF EXECUTIVES are also beginning to share the benefits of fitness with their staff. K2 Performance Systems is a Reading-based company that works with elite athletes, including Lennox Lewis, the boxer, and Manchester United footballer Rio Ferdinand, to apply the principles of their coaching regimes to the world of business.

In the past year, the company has seen its business from corporate clients, which include Toshiba and EDS, more than double.

K2's chief executive, Keith Hatter, said: "The key thing here is that the arena in which the top people in business operate and the arena within which leading sports people operate have some similarities. They are: extremely tough competition; intense pressure; tiny margins for error; and a very high cost of failure.

"Our programme is about having a look at whether they are fit for the purpose. Often it's not about turning people into gym rats or marathon runners. It can be about making the smallest changes."

Those who have worked at the top in both worlds also stress the lessons that business can learn from sport.

George Cox is a former chairman of the Institute of Directors and currently sits on the supervisory board of Euronext, the pan-European stock exchange that is expected to bid for the London Stock Exchange.

Cox, a former coach to the British rowing team, believes the principles of coaching can be applied to business.

He said: "Training is about discipline, which is what you have to apply to business. In sports coaching, you're really working out what you are trying to achieve and you gear all your training up to that."

Keeping fit also has benefits for a business's bottom line, say company bosses. Insurers are now taking a keen interest in the health of those employed at the highest level of Britain's companies.

In practical terms, this means tougher health checks on those employed to take up these roles and higher premiums for those who fail them.

Tony Reeves, chief executive of Hotgroup, an AIM-quoted specialist recruitment company, has run six London marathons.

He said: "We are talking to insurance companies about providing health insurance for members of staff, and the more innovative schemes make it attractive for companies to encourage health-club membership. The insurance companies said to me that in a fitter workforce, there are fewer claims on their insurance policies."

Norwich Union, which writes health-insurance policies for senior executives, now uses health screening as its primary tool. The screening includes questions on lifestyle, stress and exercise, as well as a test to detect nicotine. In the past, companies would instead have used a medical test, which looked for evidence of major illnesses only.

Ultimately, however, the desire to stay fit has to be a personal choice. Ian Rosenblatt, a top London lawyer, is in his local gym at 5am. He later introduced his trainer to Terry Smith, an act he occasionally regrets, particularly when he is doing stomach crunches and his trainer whispers in his ear that Smith "can do it a bit quicker".

Fred Turok, chief executive of the LA Fitness chain of gyms, said: "Executives have always focused on building their personal wealth. People now have an eye on their health, so, at some point in the future when they turn the work tap off, they can enjoy it.

"When I retire, I want to climb the Himalayas or sail round the world and I want to make sure I am in good shape to do so."

Keith Miller, founder of the Miller Group, Britain's biggest private-property group, agrees.

"The older you get, the more time you want to buy at the other end," he said.

Miller, a keen mountaineer, wakes at six every morning and is in the gym at half-past. Last month, after his company's annual results revealed its 11th year of continuous growth, Miller, 55, celebrated with a week's high-altitude ski-touring in the Alps.

Perhaps the most celebrated example of this is Sir Rocco Forte. Now 60, Forte is a marathon runner and triathlete who still wakes each morning at dawn to train for an hour and a half before work.

On July 3, Forte will be in Klagenfurt, Austria, to compete in the annual CEO Ironman Challenge. The Ironman, arguably the world's hardest one-day endurance event, is a triathlon whose competitors first swim 2.4 miles, then cycle 111 miles before running a full marathon.

To date, 13 people have signed up, from a range of companies across Europe. British entrants include Toby Baxendale, chairman and chief executive of Seafood Holdings, a food supplier based in St Albans, and Paul Ellis of London-based Credit Trade. The winner will claim the title of Europe's Fittest CEO.

"It's a pretty gruelling and demanding event," said Forte. "Why do it? The Ironman is all about the physical endeavour. It is about the challenge."

Judging by other fitness enthusiasts like Smith and Caudwell it is a view increasingly shared by many others.

Additional reporting by Francesca Lombardo

‘Training is about discipline, which is what you have to apply to business’

John Caudwell goes to the gym daily, and Sir Digby Jones, right, is training for the marathon

BUT SOME BOSSES JUST WANT TO HAVE FUN

WHENEVER Imperial Tobacco reports its results, they are usually accompanied by a picture of Gareth Davis, its chief executive, smoking one of the group's cigarettes.

Davis, who sells almost half the cigarettes smoked in Britain, has never been shy of promoting his own products. He manages to get through 40 a day and on that basis he must rank among Britain's unhealthiest bosses — not that it worries him. He once said in an interview: 'I do believe that I was put on this earth to enjoy myself.' And he does.

Imperial's board meetings, held at its Bristol headquarters, are one of the few where directors are allowed to smoke, and only recently has air-conditioning been introduced. The meeting typically follows a late night where Davis was the last to leave and the first up. But at 54 he is still going strong and for his exercise he takes a keen interest in golf.

Those over 50 years of age in the FTSE 100 now tend to pursue less vigorous pastimes. Some have a passion for big-boat racing and pay a crew to do the hard work. Others, such as Sir Christopher Gent, the former chairman of Vodafone, and Brian McGowan, chairman of Rentokil Initial, the support-services group, have a passion for watching cricket.

When McGowan found himself taking over as stand-in chief executive at Rentokil I[illegible] a target (which he hit) [illegible] found a new chief exe[illegible] Ashes series against A[illegible] summer.

Then there is fishing [illegible] conversation among Br[illegible] elite, and they will pay [illegible] to exotic places to fish [illegible] the last year he set [illegible] to ensure that he [illegible] utive before the [illegible] Australia started this [illegible] a favourite topic of [illegible] Britain's business [illegible] big money to travel [illegible] A week's deep-sea fishing off the coast of Oman, with first-class flights, limousine transfers from the airport and a suite at the Al Bustan Palace in the capital, Muscat, can cost about £7,000 per person.

Gareth Davis: promoting his products

Among the enthusiasts are David Mayhew, who has just sold Cazenove to JP Morgan, and Alan Parker, the founding partner of Brunswick, the financial public-relations firm.

Golf is typically the sport in which ageing businessmen vent their competitive instincts. Among the enthusiasts are Rod Aldridge, chairman of Capita, Eric Nicoli, chief executive of EMI, Mervyn Davies, chief executive of Standard Chartered, and Sir Peter Burt, chairman of ITV.

The old image of businessmen with top hats, huge round bellies and smoking big cigars is out of date, although we still have a fair share of chubby bosses.

Those that fit into this category are Sir Peter Davis, former chief executive and chairman of J Sainsbury, and Tony Isaac, chief executive of BOC, the industrial-gas giant. Isaac also holds non-executive positions with International Power and the oil-services firm Schlumberger.

A recent survey carried out by Avenance, the catering firm, revealed that 47% of 500 bosses who were interviewed admitted to being overweight, while 55% also confessed to not doing enough exercise.

Avenance brackets these bosses as FTSE Fluctuators. They may have a gym card in their wallet, but it rarely sees the light of day.

Avenance's chief executive, Mike Audis, said: 'If business leaders are fatigued, under-exercised and even malnourished, they are not in the best position to make business decisions.'