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## Revenge of the nerds

### Silicon Valley's geeks are trying to turn themselves into jocks

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AS THE new year dawned Mark Zuckerberg informed the world that his resolution for 2016 was to run 365 miles over the coming year—and challenged his legions of Facebook followers to do likewise. Mr Zuckerberg has hit his target, and is now hard at work on his next challenge, competing in a triathlon. This summer he fell off his bike and broke his arm but forges on as best he can.

Gone are the days when geeks wore shapeless T-shirts to prove that they didn't care about physical appearances. Now they wear tight tops designed to show off their arms and torsos. Tim Cook, Apple's CEO, gets on the treadmill by five in the morning. Jack Dorsey, Twitter's boss, is a fan of squats, push-ups and jogging. Brian Chesky, a co-founder of Airbnb, was once a competitive bodybuilder. Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk both reportedly have "pecs to die for".

Why limit yourself to such plebeian gyrations as running, bicycling and weightlifting when you have several billion dollars to burn? Larry Ellison, Oracle's chairman, races his own yachts and plays tennis to a reasonable standard (he picks up tips from watching the Indian Wells tournament, which he owns). Sergey Brin, Google's co-founder, pushes his body to the limits in a variety of sports: skydiving, rollerblading, roller hockey, "ultimate Frisbee" and high-flying trapeze. Mr Brin can be found in some surprising poses, walking around his office on his hands, and in some unexpected places, such as trapeze classes at local circuses.

Vigorous exercise regimes often go hand-in-hand with exotic diets. Mr Zuckerberg once set himself the challenge of eating meat only if he killed it himself, for a year—which, given that he lives in San Francisco and works 60 hours a week, means he was a de facto vegetarian. Mr Dorsey follows a Paleo diet (no gluten, dairy, sugar or alcohol). Nor is the obsession with health confined to a few fanatics at the top. Tech companies expect employees to make full use of amenities such as rock-climbing walls. Even strapped-for-cash startups make sure they have table-tennis tables. The streets of San Francisco are lined, along with the homeless, with gyms offering something called SoulCycle, as well as CrossFit training and Zumba dancing, and restaurants purveying gluten-free this and macrobiotic that.

Predictably, the nerds are trying to "reinvent" fitness much as they are trying to reboot everything else. They talk about how physical fitness is just another code to be hacked, and festoon their bodies with fitness bands and other measuring devices. They surround themselves with ever more exotic gadgets such as self-balancing unicycles (which are like hover boards but have one wheel rather than two) and aquacycles. Alex Debelov, the CEO of Virool, a video advertising platform, has an oxygen-filtering mask to optimise his workouts.

Equally predictably, the nerds are also trying to reinvent the business of fitness. A former boss of Twitter, Dick Costolo, is building a software platform designed to help people work out together and motivate each other to stay fit. Zepp Labs helps golfers and tennis and baseball players to improve their games by collecting data on their swings using 3-D motion sensors. Strava, a mobile app, allows cyclists and joggers to compete with each other even if they live thousands of miles apart.

There are two reasons why the tech titans are obsessed with healthy living. One is that the American elite in general has rediscovered the Victorian adage "mens sana in corpore sano". Being fit sharpens your mind and boosts your energy (though American productivity growth was significantly higher in the days of three-martini lunches and steak dinners). And California has always been at the centre of America's fitness culture: witness the surfers of San Diego and the bodybuilders of Venice Beach. Drop America's most ambitious people into the most body-obsessed of its 50 states and a plague of fitness crazes will inevitably follow.

There is also a more intriguing explanation: the revenge of the nerds. American high schools have always been divided between "jocks" and "nerds". The nerds excel at academic work. But the jocks excel in all the things that teenagers care about—getting on the football team, winning running races and attracting women. In the early stages of the tech revolution the nerds got their revenge by earning more money than

the jocks ever dreamed of. Now they are going further and proving they can beat the jocks at their own game. The athletes can never catch up with the nerds when it comes to algebra or earning power (and indeed many of them run to fat as they get older), but the nerds can become alpha males physically as well as intellectually, particularly when they can afford to hire personal trainers and dieticians.

Yet however hard they exercise they cannot extirpate the memories of their high-school years. Chris Anderson, the CEO of 3D Robotics, a drone company, and former editor-in-chief of *Wired*, argues that would-be alpha nerds are condemned not just to overcompensation but to escalation in their overcompensation. Wind boarding leads to kite surfing which leads to fly boarding. Rollerblading leads to hover boarding which leads to electric unicycling. Unicycling leads to wire walking which leads to trapeze artistry which leads to skydiving. Skydiving leads to flying planes which leads to flying fighter jets which leads to flying spaceships.

The Silicon Valley fitness craze clearly has a long way to go. But the anxieties that drive it are eternal. Tech billionaires may hone their bodies with high-powered exercise machines and scientifically formulated diets. They may blast themselves into outer space. They may even discover the secret of perpetual youth. But as they float around in outer space, their bodies finely toned, their life-force rejuvenated by the blood of 20-year-olds, their bank accounts swollen from three commas to four, they will still be, in their deepest selves, the puny nerd who cowered, sweating and miserable, before some muscle-bound jock.