

RABBIT HOLES

THE INTERNET'S RICHEST FITNESS RESOURCE IS A SITE FROM 1999

Exrx.net is little changed since the days of Yahoo GeoCities and dial-up and saying “www” aloud. Yet beneath its bare-bones interface is a deep physiological compendium.

By Lauren Michele Jackson

March 3, 2023



Illustration by Pablo Delcan

In twelve years of lifting weights, I can't say that I've ever attempted a sissy squat. Yet the name intrigues me, like a tickle in my brain. I know that it is an exercise of some kind, working out some lower portion of the body. I know, too, where I can go to be filled in on every detail of the sissy squat, should I wish to learn more. Not the nearest personal trainer nor her virtual equivalent—not YouTube, not Instagram. Lord only knows what TikTok would proffer. No. Instead, I fire up my browser, ignore my million other open tabs, and type the following: “exrx.net.”

What you'll find if you do the same is a Web site that by all appearances has been forgotten by the wider Internet. Exrx.net, which bills itself as an online “exercise prescription,” launched in 1999, and indeed, were it not for the updated copyright notice at the bottom of

its pages, new visitors would think they've happened upon a site of antiquity, abandoned in the rush toward a brave new Web 2.0. The home page is an anticlimax of a greeting, stale and still except for the bare-bones GIF of a small, perpetually running blue figure that serves as the site's logo. Below it is a most perfunctory choose-your-own-adventure: twenty-four squares denoting twenty-four destinations ("Weight Training," "Injury Management," "Nutrition"), displayed in a thick, nondescript font and accompanied by what look like stock images. The site's hyperlinks glow in the brilliant default shade of blue; there are banner ads. All of it suggests an amateur HTML from the days of Yahoo GeoCities and dial-up and saying "www" aloud. It is my favorite fitness resource on the Internet.

Sign up for the New Yorker Recommends newsletter.

Highlights from the week in culture, every Saturday. Plus: each Wednesday, exclusively for subscribers, the best books of the week.

E-mail address

Your e-mail address

Sign up

By signing up, you agree to our [User Agreement](#) and [Privacy Policy & Cookie Statement](#).

Exrx.net's seeming lack of sophistication belies a physiological compendium that is sourced by professors, physical therapists, physicians, coaches, and military personnel, and endorsed by the American College of Sports Medicine. The site has granted use of its materials to NASA and the N.Y.P.D. Among its listed contributors and editorial-board members are Ph.D.s and M.D.s and M.S.s, including the site's creator and publisher, James Griffing, who received his master's in exercise physiology and psychology from Kansas State University, in 1996, after winning the bodybuilding title Mr. Kansas. ExRx began as a master's thesis, "An Interactive Multimedia Computer Database of 250 Weight Training Exercises and Muscular Analyses," which Griffing started translating to the Web the year that he graduated. ExRx went live "using 10 MB of free webspace provided by a local internet provider," the site explains. At its height, between 2008 and 2018, it received more than a million unique visitors per month. "Nowadays," the About Us page reads, "we maintain

approximately one third our past peak traffic,” which is no small thing, given the many higher-production alternatives that fitness enthusiasts can find online today.

Web sites, at least in their earliest iterations, were mere directories miraculously made virtual, accessible. Transparency was a virtue. Accordingly, ExRx makes its organizational logic plain. Its pages adopt the structure of unordered lists—uniform and sturdy. Sections on weight management or weight-training mistakes unfurl as dispassionately as those on academic journals and aerobic conditioning. The site is primed for spelunking—you might happen upon a page dedicated to, say, cervical lateral flexion—but, unlike elsewhere on the modern Internet, on ExRx you are never lost.

Lack of décor doesn’t equal lack of mediation—I am not so naïve as to think that ExRx is without its own intentions. But the site’s plain face lends it a certain authority. In a fitness ecosystem dominated by new- and old-school flash, from personal trainers on the hard sell to influencers with soft power, exrx.net treats me like an adult. If Instagram Reels and TikTok videos are the solicitous pusher on commission, ExRx is a librarian—or, better yet, the library itself.

Admittedly, in my many years using the site I’ve trawled through only a fraction of what exrx.net has to offer. My infatuation with it began and remains centered upon its holy grail: the exercise directory. It is a bodybuilder/physical-therapist hog heaven, for who else would concern herself not only with chest and back muscles but with the serratus anterior and the upper fibres of the trapezius? Who else needs to know nearly twenty modifications for tricep dips, or that weighted dips “recruit” the biceps brachii as a dynamic stabilizer, which may “assist in joint stabilization by countering the rotator force of an agonist,” whatever that means? I am neither a bodybuilder nor a medical professional, as perhaps goes without saying, but I’ll consult ExRx to fill out new workout regimens, insuring that the movements I’ve chosen are strengthening the intended areas. Mostly, though, I visit exrx.net to know way too much about exercise.

Searching the site for “sissy squat,” for instance, yields a page with info on how it’s classified (utility: auxiliary; mechanics: isolated; force: push), how it’s executed, how to increase or reduce its difficulty, and, of course, the muscles (target, synergists, stabilizers) that it recruits. But I’ll be honest: none of those are the main attraction. One of the more wondrous features

of ExRx is that nearly every exercise in its directory (nearly two thousand and counting, according to the site) comes with a looping GIF demonstration. The GIF for the sissy squat shows something like a standard squat on hard mode: a ponytailed woman stands on the tips of her toes and leans far backward with a stiff upper body while her knees bend toward the floor, then rises and does it again and again. At first glance, the footage appears seamless, but no—we can gather, from a bus that passes by the window behind her, that she does three real-time reps before the loop starts over.

The only thing we don't learn on ExRx's "Sissy Squat" page is why the exercise has that name. Per some old-fashioned Googling, the appellation is said to be a nod to Sisyphus, whose interminable push workout surely earned him a pair of massive yams. But during fact checking for this piece Griffing said that this explanation was absent from his site because it "was not substantiated" with sufficient "academic scrutiny." ExRx may be old, but it remains tough about its standards. Both my inner scholar and my inner meathead genuflect. ♦

NEW YORKER FAVORITES

- In the weeks before John Wayne Gacy's scheduled execution, he was far from reconciled to his fate.
- What HBO's "Chernobyl" got right, and what it got terribly wrong.
- Why does the Bible end that way?
- A new era of strength competitions is testing the limits of the human body.
- How an unemployed blogger confirmed that Syria had used chemical weapons.
- An essay by Toni Morrison: "The Work You Do, the Person You Are."

Sign up for our daily newsletter to receive the best stories from *The New Yorker*.



*Lauren Michele Jackson, a contributing writer at *The New Yorker*, is an assistant professor of English at Northwestern University and the author of “White Negroes.”*

More: [Web Sites](#) [Fitness](#) [Exercise](#) [Strength](#) [Health](#)

THE NEW YORKER RECOMMENDS

Highlights from the week in culture, every Saturday. Plus: each Wednesday, exclusively for subscribers, the best books of the week.

E-mail address

Your e-mail address

Sign up

By signing up, you agree to our [User Agreement](#) and [Privacy Policy & Cookie Statement](#).

Read More

CHATGPT IS A BLURRY JPEG OF THE WEB

OpenAI's chatbot offers paraphrases, whereas Google offers quotes. Which do we prefer?

By Ted Chiang

DAILY SHOUTS

COSMETIC PROCEDURES TRENDING IN 2023

B.B.L. (bucatini-brain linking); nose-hair extension (doubles as a mustache, triples as a broom); and other treatments that are all the rage!

By Olivia de Recat

A PELOTON SUPERSTAR’S SELF-REINVENTION

Robin Arzón considered herself “allergic to exercise” until a traumatic event during her college years set her on a new course. When she works out, she says, “the catharsis that’s happening is very real.”

By Eren Orbey

Ad

Cookies Settings