

If it feels good...

CHUCK out those trainers, take a deep breath and prepare to sink in to the floor, letting your body melt like candle wax over your bones in to the earth. You are now experiencing NIA, the latest unisex workout from the States, incorporating martial arts, Tai Chi, Tae Kwon do, Aikido and visualisation. Those in search of a six-pack stomach need not apply.

"People don't just want to pump up muscle anymore," says Jane Steichman at Cannons Club, in the City, which is soon to host sessions of the technique with a guest instructor from Texas. "We are starting to appreciate the benefits of mind-body toning." NIA takes this further than most: "When I first tried it, I was overcome with emotion," says Steichman. "It allows you to let yourself go. The visualisation techniques are very powerful."

NIA stands for Non Impact Aerobics — as well as Neuro-muscular Integrative Action (in Swahili, apparently, it also means "with purpose"). It is performed in bare feet, with all repetitive jogging eliminated,

The latest American workout will have you playing air bongos and behaving like an animal. **ANGIE NEWSON** gets to grips with NIA

and following the NIA "pleasure principle" — if it feels good, do it, if it hurts, don't. It was devised by Debbie and Carlos Rosas, and inspired by observing a Japanese entertainer leading women in a movement class. "He eloquently used his Flashdance entertainment, energy and poise," as the Rosas put it.

A typical one-hour class begins with lots of flowing movement to an Enya soundtrack, through which participants concentrate on how to breathe, then bodies flow with dance and movement incorporating NIA's eastern influences.

Once warmed up and breathing it is on to a bit of reggae, air bongos, then floorplay: floor-based exercise with a difference. Not traditional press-

ups, but animal visualising: "Coming up from the floor like a cat..." that sort of thing.

The NIA approach caters to the widest possible number of people, according to instructor Helen Terry, who will be hosting the Cannons sessions. "In the same class I have a 14-year-old cheerleader and a 76-year-old man who's had a triple bypass."

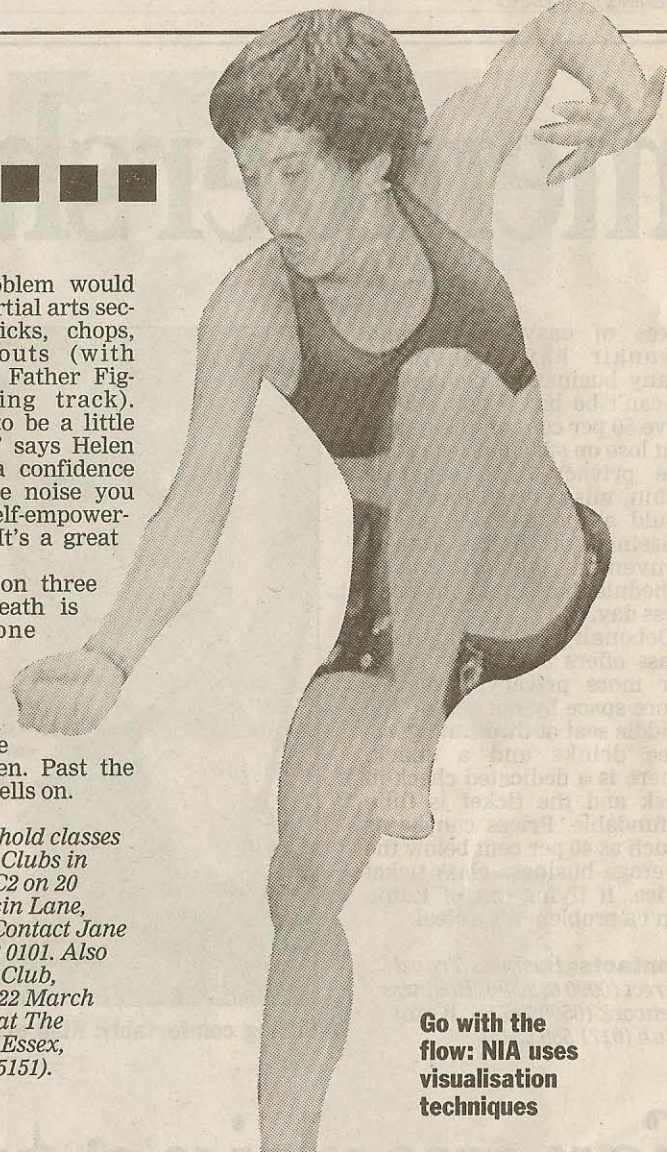
Indeed, NIA has been widely used in America in hospitals and drug and alcohol rehab centres. According to Dr James G Garrick, director at the Centre for Sports Medicine at St Francis Memorial Hospital in San Francisco: "NIA integrates aerobic conditioning, balance and flexibility, and although high in energy, appears both safe and adaptable to virtually any fitness level."

I'm not sure how someone

with a heart problem would respond to the martial arts section: punches, kicks, chops, grunts and shouts (with George Michael's Father Figure as a backing track). "Beginners tend to be a little reserved at first," says Helen Terry, "but it's a confidence thing — the more noise you make, the more self-empowering you become. It's a great stress-reliever."

The class ends on three breaths. "One breath is for the past, one breath for the present and on the third we take two steps forward and walk in to the future," says Helen. Past the rack with the barbells on.

● *Helen Terry will hold classes at Cannons Sports Clubs in Covent Garden, WC2 on 20 March and at Cousin Lane, EC4 on 23 March. Contact Jane Steichman: 0171 283 0101. Also at Dragons Health Club, Brentwood, Essex, 22 March (01277 202088) and at The Brentwood Centre, Essex, 24 March (01277 215151). On the Internet at www.nia-nia.com.*



Go with the flow: NIA uses visualisation techniques