



Fighting fit

There is more to Devrath Vijay aka Ninja Dev than just being one of the two Animal Flow Master Instructors in India

BY BINDU GOPAL RAO

It was a cold winter morning, when I first saw Devrath Vijay at the Academy of Strength in Indiranagar, Bengaluru. Looking at his well-toned physique and his agility, it is not hard to be motivated to get into fitness action. He co-founded a chain of functional training gyms in Bengaluru called The Outfitin in 2014. Almost five years and four facilities later he decided to exit from that business and start his own brand of gyms and online fitness as he believed in bringing a more wholesome and holistic approach to his clients. He then co-founded SweatyNinjas® along with Swetha Devraj and Academy of Strength—a functional-training and movement facility— along with Mohammad Suhail. He is also a certified strength and conditioning specialist (NSCA-CSCS), IFAA (International Fitness and Aerobics Academy) master trainer, Incrato Level 1 trainer (strength and conditioning) and accredited rehab trainer.

He talks about his journey in an exclusive interview:

Tell us something of your early years and if fitness was something you were always interested in?

By qualification, I am a computer science graduate. I started my professional journey as a software engineer with IBM but I was always passionate about fitness from a very early age. I was a part-time dancer and kickboxing instructor and that is where a desire to leave a mark in the world of functional fitness was born. So, I quit my job and decided to pursue a journey in fitness. I spent the last decade educating myself in various fitness methodologies, setting up my gym and online business and coaching other trainers as a master trainer. Currently, I am traveling the world to spread my fitness philosophy and learn from some of the finest international coaches.

You are one of the two Animal Flow Master Instructors in India. Take us through how you achieved this?

We always tend to associate training and fitness with lifting weights and building a big, muscular body frame (especially men). I soon realised that just lifting weights and building big muscles is not going to help in the long run. I tried that for a while and I definitely got stronger, but lost a lot of the mobility and fluidity I had as a dancer and martial-arts practitioner.

That is when I started researching bodyweight training disciplines and one that caught my eye with its seamless movement was Animal Flow. I trained under Richard Scrivener (an Animal Flow Master Instructor from the UK) to obtain my Level 1 and Level 2 certification. Around the same time, I came across a week-long mentorship programme hosted in Italy by the creator of Animal Flow, Mike Fitch, who has always been one of my biggest inspirations. I trained under Mike and that is when he offered me a chance to join his team and become a Master Trainer in Animal Flow. Till date, I (along with Swetha, who is the other Master Trainer from India) have conducted Animal Flow certifications in around 10 cities across India.

Why did you start the Academy of Strength (AoS)?

I have studied multiple forms of training such as body-building, CrossFit, calisthenics, martial arts, dance and yoga and spent an enormous amount of time educating and certifying myself. I believe in bringing a more wholesome and holistic approach to fitness rather than just making people sweat. I founded the Academy of Strength

with my childhood friend Mohammed Suhail. We both share the same value-systems and have a common mission for the company—to create a facility that would empower people through world-class coaching, hosting workshops and seminars by experts in their respective fields and building a community that makes fitness and wellness a lifestyle. The Academy of Strength is a functional-training and movement facility, conceptualised to cater to the human body and mind with the three pillars of training, nutrition and recovery. Unlike a traditional gym, we do not rely on machines and equipment (that you would see at most other fitness spaces). The training sessions involve free-weight and bodyweight exercises designed to improve performance, scaled according to your fitness level. We are the only fitness facility in Bengaluru to have a dedicated Animal Flow training programme, and an American Ninja Warrior style obstacle course (warped wall, peg board, monkey bar, finger traverse board). We also have services like deep tissue massage for efficient recovery and healthy smoothies for the right nutrition. We also provide strength and conditioning training for athletes and sportspersons to help better their game. Personal training sessions help enthusiasts achieve personal goals such as weight management, building muscle, training for marathons, postural correction etc. We help our clients meet their fitness goals with nutrition and training plans, continuously monitor their progress and offer community support.

How challenging is it to do functional fitness workouts?

Honestly, it is not difficult for anyone to take up functional fitness. As children, our bodies are built to perform functional activities such as freehand squats, lunges and lifts. But over time, our bodies lose the ability to perform these activities fluidly. These things come easily to people in rural areas because they have an active lifestyle. However, in our urban culture, staying



fit becomes difficult because of our sedentary lifestyle. Pushing your car, lifting a box and placing it on an overhead shelf, carrying a grocery bag, or lifting a suitcase are all activities that require one to be functionally fit. The core premise of functional fitness is to train the body to perform daily functions efficiently with more awareness and this comes with structured training and this is the gap we are trying to bridge in the urban lifestyle.

Tell us more about Animal Flow workouts?

Animal Flow combines animal and ground-based movement with bodyweight-training elements from gymnastics, yoga, martial arts to create a fun yet challenging workout. These sessions improve your mobility, strength, endurance and power and are for anyone who wants to get into their

peak physical condition and have fun while doing it. It features animal-style movements without any fitness equipment. The workout features a structured series of animal-style movements linked together to form a ‘flow’ and consist of the following - wrist mobilisations (simple exercises to increase the flexibility and strength of your wrists), activations (static holds performed to connect the body before starting practice), form specific stretches (full body stretches that start in an animal form and then move through a wide range of motion), travelling forms (exercises that mimic the movements of animals), switches (the dynamic movements that create the “flow”) and flow (everything is combined into a fluid sequence).

Why is it important to build strength and how does it help in fitness?

In India, most people still have this notion that being fit equals having a muscular body and a six-pack. What they do not understand is that those are just consequences of working towards being fit in the day-to-day functions of life. Almost all of the injuries and general aches and pains that people experience are born out of lack of strength. What is important is building core strength and joint mobility with the right form. This is the right way to stay healthy and fit.

What role does diet play in fitness and how can one make the most of fitness with the right diet?

Exercising and nutrition go hand in hand. The right kind of nutrition will not only help you achieve your desired aesthetic goals but also keep you healthy and disease-free in the long run. It is important to pay attention to

the kind of food that you eat and the time at which you consume this. Your diet should be sustainable and rich in all the essential nutrients. If you fall into the trap of following a drastic diet that promises drastic results in a short span of time it will always have negative repercussions on your health.

Who can do strength training exercises? Is it age specific? Should anyone avoid them?

Functional fitness and strength training is for anyone, at any age and it is never too late to start. I have had numerous clients who have started strength training at the age of 60 and seen tremendous improvement in their quality of life. If somebody does have certain health issues or injuries, they must consult with a physician so that they’re cleared to exercise. They must then train with a qualified trainer who

understands just how much to push the client to get the desired results without injuring them.

What is the American Ninja Warrior style obstacle course all about?

The obstacle course that we have built at the Academy of Strength is inspired by the reality show ‘American Ninja Warrior’ where athletes are tested on their skill and strength in varied disciplines like climbing, grip strength, agility, power, endurance and balance. The idea is to complete the full course, and not necessarily keep it time based. The obstacle course consists of numerous hanging elements and the athlete who goes the farthest without letting go wins. The elements in the gym have been made keeping in mind beginners as well as professionals. Every Saturday our coaches teach the clients how to make their way through the course. The idea is to make fitness a fun experience and get people motivated to workout.

What are some typical pitfalls one must avoid when exercising?

The number one cause for people discontinuing or getting demotivated from exercising is having unrealistic expectations. Fitness must not be looked at as a short term activity or a crash course. It has to become a lifestyle and only then will favourable results materialise. Also, most people have this false notion that they have to kill themselves in the gym every workout which is far from the truth. Only when you make exercising fun and enjoyable, will you be consistent with it.

What are your future plans?

The future plan is to expand Academy of Strength and introduce functional and holistic fitness throughout India. The idea behind me travelling and meeting with renowned trainers around the world is to stay current with fitness industry, learn, explore and bring back all of that knowledge to India. □