

Does my butt look big in this?

It's not only women who want to get in shape. Ivan Smith swallowed his pride and headed to a Pilates class. Well, if it's good enough for Madonna...



“Men have body image issues too. And yes, his bum can look big in jeans.”

I have an embarrassing admission: I went to a Pilates class. Like Obelix from the *Asterix* comics, my chest has “slipped a bit”. My stomach is flat, but only if I really concentrate, and a vein stands out in my head. I used to have a six-pack (nearly), but now it's at the bottom of the fridge, under the shelf of lard.

Going to Pilates is not seen as a manly thing to do. I'd always thought it was something my Aunt did, and involved gentle movements for middle-aged bridge players. Lean over, extend the leg for three – and rest. That kind of thing.

Now I learn it involves a woman with iron muscles shouting impossible instructions at me. I can't stretch, I can't reach and I can't lift. My only consolation is that she says, “well done” even when I've failed. Which is often.

Why did I put myself through this? Because men have body image issues, too (stop laughing). A bloke doesn't have to be a metrosexual (God help us) to be bothered about how he looks or feels. And yes, his bum can look big in jeans, too.

A friend once took a holiday photo of me when I was off-guard and unable to

firm up my stomach muscles in time. It was like one of those shots of Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones on the beach, where everyone wonders what the hell she's doing with him.

Michael might not care, but I did. Weightlifters have a term for the average unfit bloke: “skinny fat” – the way your dad looks after his footie days are over, all scrawny shoulders, with a bit of a tummy. This is not the shape of today's alpha male.

The male body used to be like his bank account – as long as it was healthy, he didn't think about it. Getting fit involved cutting back on cigarettes, walking the long way to work and turning down the extra helping of cake. If that failed, we had to buy a more comfortable suit, that's all.

Now, men are nearly as intimidated by body fascists as women. Underwear adverts tell us we've failed unless we've got a six-pack, never mind what's in the undies. Movie heroes are invulnerable if they're buff and stripped to the waist.

One body-image study recently said well over 50 per cent of women were dissatisfied with their physique – but men were catching up fast on 45 per cent. You

can be sure that of the male population in the average gym, most are not there for their health – they are there to look good. It's not necessarily the women in our lives who make us go – it's Calvin Klein and Vin Diesel. Mark Wahlberg has got a lot to answer for (for many reasons).

And so, right now, does summer. The big trouble with summer is that you have to be outside half-naked. It's months of beach-lazing, ice-cream-eating, photograph-taking nightmare. If he doesn't watch it a guy gets a general feeling of “unfitness”. He puffs when he walks upstairs and grunts when he sits down. His big T-shirt covers things he doesn't want to think about.

We may not say in so many words, but we know we've got a problem. And women think it's funny! We are fair game for “fatty” jokes. Love handles get playfully pinched. My girlfriend actually took the trouble to work out my body mass index, just to scientifically prove I was overweight. If I did the same to her, I'd be banished to the sofa for about three years.

What I'm trying to say is that if you ever see a struggling red-faced bloke in a Pilates class, try not to laugh too loud. ■