

Reporter Megan French faces a gruelling workout at Essex boot camp

● **PRESSING AHEAD** – Instructor Jack Stabler leads out of the cargo net. Inset left: Sam James warming up before the real fun starts. **INSET:** Megan gets in a tangle



■ **KNEESY DOES IT:** Sam James takes a breather

Welcome to the 7 stages of pain

ESSEX Boot Camp is not for the faint-hearted.

With motivational phrases such as "I don't care if you break a nail", and "What do you think this is? You're at boot camp", slacking is not an option.

But the group banter and team spirit as we dragged ourselves from under the cargo net to assume the press-up position makes this most gruelling of workouts bearable.

At one point, I didn't think I would survive the warm-up, but there is literally nowhere to hide at Notley

Green, Great Notley, and I doubt the instructors would understand the word "can't".

I joined in the 9.30am Thursday class, known as the school run session, as most of the participants from Braintree and Witham are mothers.

Clare Hopkins, who led the way, said she used to struggle with the warm-up, but now goes to boot camp five times a week, in addition to running.

We started with a jog, nicknamed the stone circle run, and continued on to press-ups, pull-ups, side jumps, and crawling under your partner while they held a press-up position. That

was just the warm-up.

The two teams then lined up to crawl under the cargo net, and begin the seven-stage circuit, involving weights, mini hurdles and lots of repetitions. The jog at the end of each set came as a welcome respite.

As we moved through the three sets, the number of reps decreased, and, surprisingly, I felt better as the sense of achievement started to kick in.

But it was not over yet. We were only half way through the hour-long session and carrying a two-stone backpack was next on the list.

In a caterpillar-style exercise, the teams faced each other

in a race to carry the bag up the field.

The catch was we had to do this while holding a sit-up position, and the last person could only move up the line when the rucksack was held above the leader's head.

We then progressed to abdomen exercises and dragging our partners along the grass, racing back to then give them a piggy-back up and down the course – no mean feat when your legs already feel like jelly.

And last, but not least, was the minute and a half plank, or isometric press-up. It would have been easy to try to cheat on this last test of strength, but we were warned if our knees touched the ground the clock

would restart, and so with a few wobbles and much muscle shaking we finished the session.

Afterwards, the instructor, James Sweeney, who started the company five years ago with Glynn Roberts, 29, said no two sessions are the same, and their aim is to offer something completely different to the gym.

The 28-year-old, of

Braintree, who has a degree in sport science, said: "It's military workouts mixed with specific accepted training methods, making our product very appealing to the public."

"I still get a buzz from instructing at Essex Boot Camp, it's as fresh for me as it was back in 2006."

He has to tone down some of his partner's more ambitious training regimes to make them suitable for public consumption, as Glynn had been a Royal Marine for five years and is used to far more strenuous exercises.

Many of the instructors are ex-military, and the focus on hard outdoor training underlies each of the exercises.

The boot camps are run all over the county and the first session is free.



● **PUSHING ON** – Clare Hopkins and Sally Everett warming up. Left: Sam James, Clare Hunt and Megan French building up those muscles with the bell weights.

Pictures: ADRIAN RUSHTON