



ON THE FLY

Celebrating the fitness achievements of women of colour, the Fly Girl Collective has been a soaring success

→ **MATILDA EGERE-COOPER** likes to imagine a world in which the Fly Girl Collective, the running club she founded in 2015, isn't needed any more. While running in the UK is taking steps towards embracing diversity, it remains a largely white and middle class activity. That's where the Fly Girl Collective comes in. 'It's a fitness community that I created to, firstly, encourage more black and BAME [Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic] women to be inspired and motivated to pursue fitness lifestyles,' says Egere-Cooper, 'but also to address the lack of diversity and representation in the mainstream fitness industry.'

She is adamant that the way runners are shown in the media and in marketing campaigns has a large influence on the types of people who end up

running. 'The marketing around [running] doesn't exactly show black women doing half marathons, or full marathons for that matter. If we see a wider scope of representation, then I think something like Fly Girl Collective wouldn't have to exist,' she explains.

Egere-Cooper has been running long-distance for eight years, and credits her involvement with running group Run Dem Crew with helping her complete 10 half marathons, two marathons and an ultramarathon. 'Through being involved in a community, I've been able to achieve things I would

Matilda Egere-Cooper (second from left) started the Fly Girl Collective to encourage more BAME women to get physically active

'I'VE FOUND A SPACE WHERE I CAN CONNECT WITH OTHER BLACK WOMEN ON THE SAME WAVELENGTH AND FOCUS ON GIVING AND RECEIVING SUPPORT'

KEMI MAFE, joined March 2019



'FLY GIRL COLLECTIVE HAS PROVIDED ME WITH AN AVENUE WHERE I CAN FORM A SISTERHOOD WITH WOMEN THAT KEEP ME ACCOUNTABLE ON MY FITNESS JOURNEY. I'M WEEKS AWAY FROM MY SECOND HALF MARATHON.'

BERNITA BOXILL, joined April 2018

never have been able to do by myself,' she says.

Community is at the heart of Fly Girl Collective's runs. The group meets for at least three runs a month, and Egere-Cooper wants to dispel the myth that competition is necessary in running. 'Presentation of winners and losers is what tends to put people off,' she says, 'and no one wants to be a loser.'

A noncompetitive approach has the benefit of being good for runners' mental as well as physical health – and this is key for the Fly Girl Collective. 'We make sure that everyone leaves feeling better about themselves and feeling better for having taken part in the session,' says Egere-Cooper. 'If we're communicating that the participation is the thing that matters most, I think people will be a lot more open to it.'

However, the option to try to grab a PB is also available. Fly Girls are

encouraged to try a parkrun once a month, which Egere-Cooper calls a 'level-up session'. 'People go to their parkrun, just to see that they can achieve it and to get into the habit of monitoring their progress and, hopefully, improving their PB every month,' she says. Another monthly activity is Fly Girl On Tour, where the group tries a different way of keeping fit, such as boxing or Ministry of Sound Fitness. 'As much as running is our core activity, I encourage people to check out other things,' says Egere-Cooper.

Event organisers also have a role to play in fostering a more diverse running field. This year, London's Vitality Big Half offered £10 entry to members of the local community, and such ventures are useful. 'Any sort of fitness that is shown to be accessible and has diversity at the heart of it, is going to appeal to people,' says Egere-Cooper.

To find out more about the Fly Girl Collective, visit flygirlcollective.co

