



WEEKEND WARRIORS

Four women share their exercise epiphanies

By Cecily-Anna Bennett Photography Jay Harrison

Right across Australia, something's happening. You see them jogging down footpaths, trekking through bushland and crossing finish lines everywhere. They're the new breed of women kicking fitness goals that would impress contenders half their age. In fact, new research by Penn State University has found that women 40+ who enjoyed regular moderate exercise were happier, more confident and twice as likely to feel energetic. Just ask these four inspiring women, who reveal how discovering a late love of fitness has enriched their lives in ways they never thought possible.

THE ADVENTURER

TERESA GRATKOWSKI, 52, never dreamt mountain climbing or trekking would be her thing—until she rekindled an old romance after 18 years.

Once upon a time, I couldn't have imagined being into fitness. I hated working up a sweat and avoided exercise like the plague. At 39, I was a single mother of two boys (Jordan, now 24, and Santino, now 17) and studying a business course at TAFE. I'd get home, sit on the couch and demolish a packet of biscuits without a second thought. I had always been a size 10, but before long I was a 12... then a 14.

When I was 41, my sister Helena left New Zealand to come and live with us after her marriage broke down. Helena is two years older than me and has always been fit. That's an understatement—she used to be a body builder. It was thanks to her sisterly honesty that I finally decided to get off my backside. Helena was the one who pointed out just how unhealthy I'd become and encouraged me to join her at the gym. I stopped eating the biscuits and started getting up at 5am to train with her every day, doing a combination of cardio and weights. As a result, I slimmed down in no time.

My fitness routine stepped up another notch at 49. I was single again after I'd split up with my partner of seven years. My friend Carmen and I had been chatting about the best place to meet fit, healthy men. We thought joining a bushwalking club, rather than hitting the nightclubs, would be the way to go. Rather fortuitously, I decided to give Martin a call. Martin and I had been involved 18 years previously and kept in touch sporadically, but I hadn't seen him in almost two decades. It just so happened that Martin was single now, too, and for the past 15 years he'd been a keen bushwalker. He offered to take me out on a walk and romance blossomed.

Martin's very adventurous. He's 60, super fit and very healthy. In the three years we've been together he's not only introduced me to bushwalking, but to mountain biking, trekking and canyoning, too. There's an element of danger involved in our outdoor activities, which really gets the adrenaline going and makes me feel so alive.

The first time we went canyoning I was excited, but nervous; canyoning can be extremely dangerous—one false move can be deadly. It was a 3km trek to the bottom, then we got into our wetsuits, blew up our li-lo and hit the water. There were native animals everywhere: snakes, dragonflies, giant lizards... It was truly amazing and so magical.

Martin turned 60 last year, so we've decided to book a big trip to celebrate. We're starting at Easter Island, then making our way through the Amazon on an adventure tour before climbing Machu Picchu. We've also started researching climbing Huayna Picchu. Our tour guide doesn't even want to discuss the possibility of it, but we figure, "We're there, so we might as well climb it!" After all, we're both experienced climbers and despite our sometimes dangerous pastime, safety is always Martin's top priority. I tend to be a bit more of a risk-taker, so it's great to know I have someone there to ground me. Our love of adventure keeps us young and also adds an element of excitement to our relationship.

The greatest tool we have for staying young, active and inspired by life is purely psychological. I don't ever allow myself to think negative thoughts about ageing or to let myself believe anything's too hard; I embrace every year completely. I spent my 50th birthday in Bali with four girlfriends and a 70-kilogram snake wrapped around my neck. It was different, for sure, but we had a ball.

When I look at the people I know who aren't ageing quite so well, the thing they all have in common is a negative mindset. Everything we do and everything we achieve stems from our beliefs. I certainly feel better now at 52 than I ever have before. And as far as I'm concerned, there's no reason why I should be in a nursing home in my 80s. I plan to be bushwalking, mountain bike riding, canyoning and hanging off cliffs.

THE TEAM PLAYER

MONIQUE LICARDY, 45, took her teenage love of touch football to the next level when she joined national champions the Sydney Scorpions.

I've been playing touch football on and off since the age of 15, but only started playing for the Sydney Scorpions three years ago. At the time, I was having trouble juggling my job as a business development manager in the IT industry with motherhood, so I gave it up to focus on bringing up my sons, Larkan, 9, and Kai, 6. While being a stay-at-home mum has its challenges, it gave me the opportunity to concentrate on my sport. I'd played in a few touch competitions over the years, representing the suburb where I live, but the National Touch League (NTL) is another level up and now that I had the chance to compete I decided to go for it.

One of the most wonderful things about playing a team sport, besides the obvious health pay-off, is that you can't do it alone. I'm surrounded by inspiring women who support me (and vice versa) as we work towards achieving a common goal every week. Coming together as a cohesive team is an amazing feeling. As a mum, I'm almost always thinking about everyone else: there are other people to consider. Touch football gives me the chance to take a bit of time away from that, to focus on myself and my goals—figuratively and literally. My husband, Jay, has been a wonderful support and my mother, Katherine, really pitches in too. I was away in Coff's Harbour for a week when the NTL championships were on and Jay and Mum looked after the kids the whole time. We won the championship, which was an incredible feeling. It also means a lot that Jay understands why playing a team sport is so important to me.

I train with the other women twice a week for two hours at a time. The sessions are intense: cardio drills, running, practise games. I'm the team manager and we have a coach who trains us. Women come from all over Sydney to train; from Penrith, Manly, Parramatta, Campbelltown... Most of them are mums with a thousand other responsibilities, so for those two hours each week they really make it count. They're serious about the sport, really competitive and they want to win. We play competition games on Monday nights and it's important to me that my boys see me playing. They're often on the sidelines throwing a ball around with the other kids while I'm on the field. The more they see us participating, the more they enjoy their sport as well. The day Larkan and Kai are old enough to play touch footy with me will be a very proud day indeed.

I love the fact that I'm a fit 45-year-old, and it's incredibly inspiring playing sport with women in their 50s and beyond. One of the players who helped us score the equalising try in the recent national championships is 54, and the winning try was set up by an amazing player who is a state representative for NSW at the age of 50. One of our opponents was 57! Playing for the Scorpions has taught me you're never too old to set goals and achieve them, and you're certainly never too old to start something new. As long as you continually strive to push yourself, even if it seems daunting at times, it's good for you. It keeps your body and mind healthy, boosts positivity and keeps you young. Plus, there's nothing quite like sharing the experiences of the game with like-minded women. The camaraderie is unbelievably rewarding. It's often my teammates who inspire me to do more than I ever thought I could.

“Playing for the Scorpions has taught me you're never too old to set goals and achieve them”



“I tackled my first triathlon at age 50 and have never felt this strong or confident”



THE MARATHON ADDICT

NARELLE LEE, 56, used to find walking around the block a struggle. Then a chance encounter got her hooked on long-distance and—despite a serious operation—she now has 18 races under her belt.

I started exercising at 43. Three years later, I completed my first marathon. The funny thing is, I got into running almost by accident. In 1998, I was overweight and fairly inactive. I was the manager at Pacific Fair Shopping Centre in Queensland and was constantly dealing with complaints by a disgruntled group of ‘mall walkers’ who were annoyed because the undercover areas were often being cleaned and the furniture rearranged, which disrupted their usual route. The walkers were an older group; some of them were in their late 50s to early 60s. There was an 80-year-old who did everything from 5km walks to half marathons, and their leader did his first marathon aged 74.

I was growing really tired of the complaints and decided that the best way to appease them could be to join them. I sponsored the group in the Gold Coast Marathon, provided Pacific Fair T-shirts and, somehow, got talked into doing a 10km walk—which was a challenge for someone my size. It felt like it took forever and I’d never walked that far in one go in my life. But by the time I finally crossed the finish line, you’d have thought I’d just won a gold medal. I was hooked.

Over the next few years I worked up to running a half marathon, steadily dropping kilos as I went. In 2003, aged 46, I celebrated reaching my goal weight by running my first marathon. I enlisted a coach to help me get there, so by the time the race rolled around I was mentally ready, which is half the battle. It’s one thing to soak up the excitement at the starting line, but it’s another thing entirely when you’ve done 32km and you’re nowhere near the finish. You need to be psychologically strong to make it to the end.

Unfortunately, I hit a low point four years ago when an operation on my foot put me out of action for 18 months. I’ve dealt with pain in my foot since injuring it as a child,

but as the pain increased—exacerbated by my running—I had no alternative but to take action. It was major reconstructive surgery; my heel bone’s made of titanium now. Afterwards, I was stuck at home in a wheelchair with the fridge just calling out to be raided. It really got me down. I couldn’t walk, couldn’t run and my identity had become very strongly linked to my sport. As I recovered, my doctor and physio advised shaking up my exercise routine to minimise the strain on my foot. I don’t do anything by halves, so I decided to give Ironman Triathlons a go. I completed my first aged 50.

I will never forget the euphoria that swept over me as I reached the finish. It was surreal. By the time I got there it was 10 or 11 at night. I’d been going for 16 hours straight; the music was still pumping, the locals were out in force and the atmosphere was extraordinary. There’s no doubt completing a triathlon—a 3.8km swim, 180km bike ride and 42km run—is a feat of endurance. My trick is to deal with small distances at a time. I break it up into five-minute segments and reward myself after each with a sip of sports drink or bite of an energy bar. I’m a slow cyclist so it usually takes me eight hours to finish the bike ride, but I only ever look at the five minutes in front of me and it gets me over the line.

I can remember watching the Hawaiian Ironman with my husband, Mark, in the mid-90s and saying, “I can’t believe people have the energy to do this.” Yet years later, here I am. If someone had told me I’d be running marathons and triathlons, I’d never have believed it; but in many ways I wish I’d started sooner. I feel stronger and more confident now than ever. All sorts of people run marathons—even those who are blind, deaf or disabled. It’s incredibly empowering to realise that as long as you believe you can achieve something, you really can.

THE FUN RUNNER

LYNNE TESTONI, 50, had always been fit, thanks to a long-held love of Body Balance, Pilates and yoga. But when a family tragedy struck, the restorative powers of running helped her through it.

I started running with my younger sister, Wendy, soon after our father was diagnosed with prostate cancer. The first run we did together was a 5km Father's Day run to raise money for the disease. It meant a lot to both of us. I was reasonably fit at the time, having done yoga and Body Balance for about 10 years, but I'd never run before. Even after training for a couple of weeks I could only manage about 2km of running. The following year, our father was even more unwell when we did the Father's Day run again. The whole family came, including my mum, dad, nieces and nephews. This time, I managed to run the whole 5km and it felt like a wonderful achievement. It wasn't just about fitness.

As Dad got sicker, we spent a lot of time with him in the Blue Mountains where he lived, helping Mum take care of him. I have three sisters and we all took shifts. It was an immensely stressful time for all of us and running became a type of therapy for me.


The day Dad died, almost four years ago now, I took myself for a long run around the mountains. The first few kilometres are really hard, but once you get through it, it becomes incredibly therapeutic. I didn't know where I was going, I just had to run. As the eldest sibling, I knew that I should be the one to deliver the eulogy and, by the time I got back, I'd processed my thoughts, worked it all out in my head and knew that I could do it.

That same year, Wendy and I decided to run our first City2Surf. It had always been on our bucket list and, to be honest, it was completely inspiring. The atmosphere was incredible; you're surrounded by ordinary people of varying fitness levels, all running together—it's instantly uniting. Then you get overtaken by a 70-year-old and you can't help but think, 'I hope that's me in 20 years'. Wendy and I ran together the whole way. I think she beat me by a small amount of time, but I'm nine

years older than her, so I figured it was okay!

Since then, running together has become our regular thing. Every Sunday, I drive to Wendy's place and we do a 7km run, sometimes 9km if we're training for a race. We set goals throughout the year to keep us going. In 2012, we completed four big runs: the 14km City2Surf, the 13km Nike She Runs The Night, the 9km Bridge Run and the 10km Mini-Mos in Mosman—a real killer because there are so many steep hills, but it's great training.

During the week I do Body Balance, Pilates and yoga classes at lunchtime. I work Monday to Friday as a chief sub-editor for a food magazine, then around the clock and on weekends I manage my online wallpaper business, Moore & Moore (moorewallpaper.com.au). I don't have a lot of downtime, but when you love what you do, you don't really need it as much. It certainly helps to be active, not only for my body but for my mind, too. There must be something in it: I've noticed a lot more women my age exercising regularly lately. Once upon a time, gym instructors were all in their 20s, but not any more—my fabulous Body Balance teacher is 53!

I thoroughly enjoy being fit and feeling good, and when work's hectic or I need to clear my head, running really invigorates me. You definitely have so much more energy when you're fit. But my main incentive, besides the obvious mental and physical benefits, is that I absolutely love catching up with my sister every week. Wendy and I often laugh that we really must be fit, because from the very first kilometre to the very last, we run—and talk—the whole way. 



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“When Dad got sick, running became a type of therapy. Now my sister and I run every Sunday”



HAIR & MAKE-UP: RACHEL MONTGOMERY; TERESA; SIMONA TOP; WITCHERY; JEANS; SUSSAN BANGLES; MONIQUE; NICHOLAS DRESS; SUSSAN NECKLACE; NARELLE; SUSSAN TOP AND PANTS; SEED FLATS; LYNNE: DVF WRAP DRESS FROM DAVID JONES