

# FIT AND FABULOUS

Forget celebrities who take it to an extreme, Zoë McDonald finds three women who have reaped huge benefits by becoming fitness fanatics later in life

**C**ast your eye around any yoga studio, upmarket gym, or park on a Saturday morning and you're likely to see a huge mixture of shapes, sizes and ages. Fitness, once the concern of muscle-obsessed men and treadmill-hogging 25-year-olds, is now accessible to all. Exercise in the over-45s has significantly increased in recent years, according to Sport England, whose Active People Survey found that last year almost 200,000 more 45-64 year-olds were taking regular exercise than in 2007 and, according to a spokesperson, "We expect a further uplift in the 2009 figures, released this December".

## HOOKED ON EXERCISE

Exercise is something grown-up women are now proud to discuss – there's no embarrassment attached to being seen in your kit, whether it's running tights, jodhpurs, or a Gore-Tex hiking jacket and boots. Role models like Madonna and Trudie Styler might take it to an extreme, but they've also created an expectation for women over the age of 45 to stay in great shape. There's another benefit to this new-found love of exercise, too. Past their 20s, "women are more holistic in their approach", says fitness and weight-loss guru Joanne Reid Rodrigues (author of *The Life Transformation Diet*, Findhorn £9.99), who herself discovered exercise in her 30s. "Working out becomes less about

body-obsession and more about the wider benefits," she explains, "from the post-workout endorphin rush to the anti-depressant and health-boosting effects. All this means you're more likely to stick with a fitness programme and reap the rewards." Rodrigues, 47, is an example herself – she power-walks every day, followed by at least 20 minutes of yoga. "The most important thing with exercise is finding something you love that doesn't feel like hard work," she says.

For many of us, though, it still feels like a chore. NHS figures tell us that four in 10 over 50s do no exercise at all, and there is a drive for GPs to recommend "exercise on prescription", as well as new and expensive initiatives, such as free swimming, to inspire more people to get moving. Motivational coach, Pete Cohen, whose online diet and exercise programme has thousands of users, mostly over 35, thinks he knows why there's still apathy from many: "For those who are overweight and have tried different dieting and exercise programmes with disappointing results, there's a certain battle-scarred scepticism, but the flipside is that once those people do decide to embark on an exercise programme, they are likely to do it in a sustainable, healthy way, so the chances are they'll see results quickly, which will inspire them to keep going!"

We talked to three women who got hooked on exercise later in life, and now can't imagine their lives without it.

*"Through the gym and dieting, I lost a total of six stone and began running two years ago. I'm currently training for a half-marathon and love the way exercise clears my head and leaves me feeling so energised"*



**LISA JACKSON, 42**  
a hypnotherapist from Surrey, discovered running in her 30s and has never looked back.

"Talk to anybody who knew me at school in South Africa, where I grew up, and they wouldn't believe you if you told them I was a runner now. Throughout my childhood, teens and early 20s, I associated sport with humiliation and embarrassment. I come from a sporty family, so they would sometimes try to get me along for fun runs, but even though I enjoyed crossing the finish line, I accepted the fact that it wasn't my forte. By the time I reached 30, I was



overweight, and living a really unhealthy lifestyle. I knew I needed to do something, and my aunt, a keen runner in her early 60s, suggested I sign up for Race For Life locally – a women's-only fun run in aid of Cancer Research UK. I loved the atmosphere, and applied to do the Great North Run half-marathon with my aunt shortly afterwards. It was tough, but on the way back from the race, I felt so proud of myself. I'd got the bug, and since then have

run at least one marathon every year (15 in total), and last year, ran the Comrades Marathon, a 56-mile race in South Africa. I'm in better shape than I've ever been, and people say I look better than I did at 20. It's transformed my life and made me far more proactive in every area of my life. I even wrote a book about running: *Running Made Easy* (Collins & Brown, £9.99), and I've met so many interesting people through the sport."

*"I'm in better shape than I've ever been, and people who see me now say that as a 40-something, I look better than I did at 20. It's transformed my life and made me far more proactive"*



**ANNIE GARCIA, 41**  
a personal chef from Sussex,  
learnt to love the gym at 35,  
and is fitter now than she's  
ever been.

"In my 20s, I put on a lot of weight. Exercise was something I regarded as a huge drag. I had no motivation to do it and although I knew it was unhealthy, I chose to ignore the problem. But after a holiday with my new partner, I saw a picture he had taken of me on the beach, and it inspired me to take action. At first, this took the form of a variety of diets, as I still felt too self-conscious to exercise, but once I'd dropped two stone, I joined a gym, and went on and off ▶

*“Working out becomes less about body-obsession and more about the wider benefits, from the post-workout endorphin rush to the antidepressant and health-boosting benefits”*



– I’d get disheartened periodically when my unrealistic expectations weren’t met. Eventually I abandoned it: life got so busy, as I was retraining as a chef. But at 35, I joined a new gym and started training with an instructor. I began to enjoy it, especially the post-exercise endorphin rush.

“After a couple of years, I discovered Pete Cohen’s website, signed up and began blogging about my exercise and diet experiences, which I found hugely motivating, especially as other members encouraged me to keep going. Through the gym and dieting I lost six stone, and began running two years ago. I’m currently training for a half-marathon and love the way exercise, whether it’s a tough weights session at the gym, or a six-mile run, clears my head and leaves me feeling so energised. I’d never give it up now.”



**MARGARET PARRISH, 65**

**from Northampton, is retired. A keen cyclist (she does 20 miles every day), she discovered the sport in her 40s.**

“I played netball at school and carried it on in my early 20s, but once I got married and had my two children, that stopped. I’d always had a bike, which I used for local journeys, but never considered cycling for fitness. When my son was 12 he got interested in cycling and joined a local club. My husband went with him, and before long had joined himself, and suggested I should go, too. I went on a club ride, and although I felt self-conscious (I was older than the other women in the club, and it was hard work because I wasn’t used to cycling for more than a few minutes), I enjoyed it. I signed up for my first cycling race after that, a 10-miler. It was tough, but I knew I’d found something I enjoyed. Even when my lungs were burning and my legs were straining, I loved the sense of satisfaction cycling gave me.

“The following year, I did a 25-mile race, then a 50-miler, and the distances got longer and longer from then on. Now, I ride 20 miles every day. It gives me space to think and clear my head. I get a really positive reaction from other cyclists on the road, and friends and family are impressed. I’m fitter now than ever, and have so much energy. I had an accident some years ago, where I came off my bike and was seriously injured (I had a hip replacement as a result of it) but within months, I was training again. I can’t imagine my life without cycling. It’s a real pleasure for me.”

■ Visit motivational coach Pete Cohen’s website at [www.petecohen.tv](http://www.petecohen.tv).