



MISSION: impossible?

A Fitness Boot Camp Diary

By Carol Lawson-Swezey

A recent diagnosis of borderline diabetes scared me healthy, and over the past 1½ years, I've lost 85 pounds following a modified diabetic diet and working up to a six mile walking regimen. But I needed something more. I still wanted to lose another 20 pounds and shock my inert muscles back to life. During my daily walks, I noticed the Fresno Adventure Boot Camp for Women working out at the local park. On a whim, I decided to join them. Was it possible for a 56-year-old woman with marshmallow arms and no regular exercise routine to actually complete the four week, Monday through Friday regimen? That was my mission. *This is my story.*



PHOTO BY: Steve Collins

Week 1: Day 1

4:30 a.m. Couldn't sleep. Swung my wooden legs over the bed and was out the door before 5 a.m. to walk the 1½ miles to the park for my first session. There were over 50 women, ranging in age from 20 to 68 years-old, and ranging in fitness levels from buff to fluffy. Some said they preferred boot camp to the gym because of its variety and interactive instructions given by Kelly Nickel, the instructor, and her husband, Karey.

The minutes of counting during exercises seem infinite, but the hour passed quickly and included stretching exercises, Olympic fashioned relays with 20 pound weights, a short obstacle course and strength building with 5 to 7 pound weights. My silent mantra is that 'I will survive.' Interspersed are Kelly's frequent warnings of "safety is the key." She reminds us to work at our individual pace and modify exercises for weak areas such as knees, back and hips. I gingerly baby my

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knees, which are one pop away from a replacement surgery.

Soon it is over and I roll myself off the exercise mat, only to realize that I still have to walk the 1 ½ miles home and put in an 8 hour work day.

Week 1: Days 2-5

We never know what to expect. Kelly must lay awake at night thinking of different ways to torture us. The week was a blur of activities including multiple relays mixed with stationary strength building. I hold my breath, turn red and

collapse after each one. We utilize all the structures in the park, from the bathroom walls to the picnic tables, to push our reluctant bodies to the limit. A returning boot camper tells me that camp is the best "life insurance," and worth every cent for the stamina and extra energy she now has.

We started working with weights, the activity I dreaded the most. Ever since I was traumatized in high school while doing leg lifts on a ladder and fell, shattering my ankle against a barbell, I've always hated weights.

Other than hurting just while lifting my coffee cup, I'm starting to like boot camp. I even cut my breakfast burrito in half, when normally I would have gobbled the entire thing. The extra calories aren't worth any more weight training.

This week we did "Around the world with the Olympics" where we pulled flags from different countries and did a corresponding workout for each of the ten countries. People were flying. It was

so fun and so exhausting. We jogged, skated (on wobbly legs, not real skates) and skipped from England through Greece. Kelly works so hard to make everything new and creative. I've never been an athlete, always got picked last for the school teams, but today I felt like an Olympian.

At the end of the week, we ran/walked a timed mile. Mine was 11 minutes 12 seconds—not bad for a 55-year-old, but there's definitely room for improvement. I'd be happy if I could do the 10 minute mile I did 30 years ago. I was only able to do 13 feeble attempts at push-ups with my trembling arms.

Week 2:

The spirit is willing but the knees are not. This week, we did a fun activity alternating one minute intervals of aerobic exercise and weight lifting, running

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around the circle of our exercise mats and barbells and just working out wherever we ended up. There was a lot of musical mat maneuvering and sweating on each others mats, but beneath the hard work was fun.

Muscles I don't know the names of are screaming. That must be good. Right? I've heard success stories of 8 to 10 inches of fat lost in just the short 4 weeks, of people reclaiming their lives and their energy and getting back on track. The camp's oldest participant, Sunny, 67, has been a boot camp survivor three times, and has lost a dozen inches.

I just want to be able to wear short sleeves without feeling like the Pillsbury doughboy.

Daily I am inspired by the women and their stories. I can barely keep up with Jean, 58, a college professor, who had double bypass heart surgery last year. Cassie gave up smoking the day she started camp. Kathy, 55, is a two time breast cancer survivor who proves daily that life does not stop with a cancer diagnosis. Stevie, a mother of four, is working through the grief of losing a child, with "guilt free time for herself" while her children are still sleeping.

I'm learning to respect my body but also, through the example of others, to live life out loud.

I'm still waiting for my second wind to kick in, to stop aching all over and to get used to the 4 a.m. wakeup. At the end of the week, we did a 5K (3 mile) exercise/aerobic training around the park. What a sight we must have been, doing the Egyptian walk with barbells held high. I love starting my day with these powerful women.

Week 3:

In small increments, I seem to be getting stronger but it's still not easy. Today, we did partner exercises, strength building, endurance and camaraderie training. My scale doesn't reflect any loss but I attribute that to an excess of wasabi soy almonds.

I actually saw biceps when I carried groceries in this week. The week has been an optimal combo of strength building and cardio. Just when you know you can't do one more arm lift, you welcome the change to a sprint run. The hardest part is pushing your limits, but not to the point of injury.



FITNESS FACTOIDS

A few snippets of information regarding the average American.

Over 50% of American adults do not get the recommended amount of regular physical activity, and 26% of all adults are not active at all.

Inactivity is more common among women than men and increases with age.

Being inactive is one of the greatest risks for obesity and for developing high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, certain types of cancer, and osteoporosis.

Sedentary, or inactive, people who walk briskly for just 30 minutes daily can cut their risk of death in half.

Muscle-strengthening exercises can reduce the risk of older adults falling and fracturing bones and can improve their ability to live independently.

The amount of time spent watching TV is the most powerful behavioral predictor of obesity. Obesity risk increases 25% for every two hours of TV viewed daily. This link is almost as strong as the relationship between smoking and lung cancer, according to Harvard's School of Public Health.

Balance and stretching activities improve flexibility and physical stability to reduce risk of injuries. Stretching increases your flexibility and range of motion around a joint.

Getting 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity on most days will prevent weight gain, while getting up to 90 minutes will lead to weight loss, if you don't consume more calories.

Source: www.hgic.clemson.edu



This week, we also had hike day, where we could choose to jog/run or walk the pedestrian trail. As much as I wanted to soar like a gazelle down that darkened path, my knees whimpered no. On “Amazing Race” day, we zig zagged through the park, following instructions at stations for cardio and strength building. I was paired with Jean, 58. We gave the younger ones a run for their money. I think of us as the middle-aged marvels. This is a remarkable journey, competing not against others but our own self-imposed limitations. I want to do boot camp forever. I’m like an addict, looking for my next fix.

Week 4:

We actually worked out on Labor Day. I did notice that some chose to sleep in. We ran relays and did interactive exercises with watermelons. What a novel use. All I could think about was eating it afterwards. Since I didn’t have to rush to work, I walked another 6 miles after boot camp. Tired all day.

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All week, the park lights were out. We exercised to the lights of Kelly’s company jeep. It gave us an idea what it will be like during winter when it’s cold and our bodies are more reluctant.

Following the Olympic theme, we held closing ceremonies with different climbing and gymnastic exercises. Many of us looked like poster children for an orthopaedic supply company with our braces and wrapped knees and ankles. Our last day of camp was bittersweet, but like high school commencement, this truly feels like a beginning, not an

end. I almost cried when I improved my timed mile by more than a minute, just under 10 minutes, and doubled my number of pushups. It seems a huge payoff for exercising an hour a day for 20 days. For someone who’s signed up for many year-long gym memberships and never followed through, this was a milestone. I am so proud.

I can’t believe I lived to tell this story. I have never been athletic and now, I encourage strangers to feel my muscles. I can’t say I enjoyed every moment of boot camp. Some were definitely a struggle, and although the trip was bumpy, the destination was worth it. In four weeks, I only lost 3.2 pounds, but an impressive 8.25 inches and 2-3% body fat. What I gained was a new outlook on myself and others, and the trip isn’t over. I am strong. I am invincible. I am a boot camp victor. I’ve realigned the family budget and signed up for another 4 week session. Hopefully, after that, I can cut the cord and sprint out on my own. ■