

Ballet, Boxing & Beyond

The Iron Odyssey of Lisa McKeogh

As told to Charles Peeples

When I was twenty, I read an article on "the aging process" which stated that women begin the aging process at twenty-one. With only a few months before my birthday, I realized I'd better get on the stick. So I started with what I knew: from age three to thirteen I'd trained ballet, tap and jazz.



photo by
Ben Hoffman

I'd also become a member of a local winter and summer swim team. Mom was smart; fearful of water, she promised herself her children wouldn't be. She also introduced us to a lifestyle which would promote exercise, team spirit, sibling competition and good health. But in high school when I began working, fitness took a hiatus. Of course I became very unhappy and overweight. By the time I got to college I was 5'1", tipping the scale at 140 lbs. I decided to revisit dance. Ballet was offered as an elective, so I signed up. When I left school I decided the most obvious transition was to enroll in Tae Kwon Do, where high kicks and flexibility tied in well with the ballet conditioning. I went to class five days a week for two hours a day, receiving my black belt in three years. I credit karate training with helping me overcome many obstacles.

I also wanted to know more about weight training. Not many women were seen in the weight room at the gym. They typically hung out on machines or cardio. My philosophy has always been "if he can do it so can I," so I hit the dumbbells and barbells. I did squats. This, combined with the martial arts, was sculpting me into a well-rounded athlete.

Life changed, I got married, began settling down, and my physique started to change. I didn't like the changes, so I investigated dance lessons again, tap specifically. But now I really wasn't interested. Later I found a Tang Soo Do studio and felt more at home there. I learned a new method of karate and joined an aerobics gym that had only one Universal machine for resistance training.

My marriage dissolved three years later, and the next guy I began dating absolutely forbade me to join a gym. For two full years I didn't work out formally. After begging to get back to the gym, finally I just did it, and it felt like home to be back. One of the personal trainers was a former Moy Tai boxer. I begged him to teach me the sport. He didn't take me seriously, not realizing I had a strong martial arts background, but after he saw me spar, he agreed and taught me to box. My first bout was in Norristown, and my trainer informed me when I got there that I was fighting twice that day. Apparently, two women were to engage in a kickboxing match and someone didn't show up. So my second fight would be kickboxing. Both opponents outweighed me by thirty pounds. My first fight was just before intermission. It was tough, and I later learned that no one had expected me to win. But I did. I was assured adequate rest after the fight, but twenty minutes later, I was called to the ring for the kickboxing bout. I was fried, but I kept telling myself that I could not lose. Each kick felt like my leg was a hundred pounds. The rounds were grueling. My legs were burning. Somehow I emerged victorious. It's true, if you have heart there's little you can't achieve. I realized though that if I stayed with boxing I could be seriously injured. It's as dangerous as it looks. Nonetheless, my involvement provided insights that I'd never have gained from the outside.

Weight training had become a part of my routine regardless of the sport I was pursuing. One Sunday while I was squatting, a guy approached me, impressed with the amount of weight I was handling for reps. He asked me if I would ever consider power-

lifting. "No," I said, adding that fatuous female cliché: "I don't want to get too big." He assured me, using himself as an example, that I wouldn't get too big unless I wanted to. So he trained me to powerlift. During this time, we started dating and decided to buy the gym. This was a huge undertaking. Eventually it turned out to be a mess, as the gym was in far worse shape financially than we anticipated, and there were back taxes and liens against the equipment. We struggled to keep it going. During all of this mayhem, we were still full-time employees and training for my first powerlifting competition. In October 2001, I went to Clearfield, Pennsylvania with Michael, my partner and coach. I set an ADAU NATIONAL squat record that day. All-natural, drug-free, unassisted at 115 lbs, I squatted 260 lbs. All of the other things going on seemed trivial at that moment: together, Mike and I had accomplished this record. A month later we had to close the gym, but the tribulations and triumphs were an invaluable life experience.



Two years ago, I made a decision to stop powerlifting. My joints were sore and I wasn't advancing to my expectations. But I needed to compete in something. I went to the Tribeca Center in NY to see my first bodybuilding contest. I wanted to see if this was something I might want to get involved with. It was here I saw a Figure contest. This was for me: athletic-looking women who could be proud to have both make-up and muscles! Once again I began training, working with a sixty-one year-old woman who is in better shape than almost anyone I know. She has transformed my physique and opened my mind to philosophies that I would have never experienced if not for her wisdom. At thirty-nine years old I went onstage in my first Figure Contest, wearing very little, bearing a lot. And at forty, I took first place in over-40 Masters Body Building, and first in Open Figure.

It's easy for a woman of any age to say she doesn't have time to go to a gym. But if you manage time as carefully as you manage money, the investment in your quality of life will grow. You're confident when you enter a room and can extend your hand with a firm handshake. Mentally, you're capable of maintaining executive functions of the brain into the senior years when exercise is part of your daily routine. Side-effects of medications are no longer an issue when you're able to live drug-free, because your blood pressure and cholesterol have been reduced, and diabetes is under control or eliminated. Osteoporosis may be slowed, reduced by increasing bone density. It's never too late to start, as studies constantly show. My goal is to bring a positive message of health and well-being to women. Exercise has gotten me through some difficult times. I want to pass my experience on to as many others as I can. Conquer your fears of training: start with baby steps, even if the baby step is looking in the mirror and saying to yourself privately "I can't go to the gym looking like this." Yes you can... after all, what matters is how you'll eventually come out of that gym!



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