



FANCY A CHALLENGE?

A physical fitness challenge can provide more than physical health benefits — they can boost mental health too

January: the month of short-lived gym memberships, when it's cold, dark and miserable (in the UK at least). It may not be the perfect time to start all physical challenges, but it can be a perfect opportunity to plan one. If you're looking to spark some motivation, setting yourself a challenge can help. Running a 5k, finally learning to swim or gaining strength in the gym are equally as valid as marvellous feats such as running against a horse or cycling hundreds of miles. If you're moving, and you're pushing yourself out of your comfort zone, it counts. So why not take on a fitness challenge this New Year? We've got some examples if you're in need of inspiration. Remember to tell us about it on social media with the hashtag #iongoals. Go on, get moving — you can do it!

ELAINA – GYM COACHING FOR STRENGTH, FITNESS AND MUSCLE MASS

Why did you decide to do it? “I wanted to feel stronger and more empowered in myself and my body. I also knew that it would have a positive impact on my physical and mental health, including body image.”

How did you do it? “I started online coaching, and paying more attention to my diet and style of training, e.g. focusing more on quality versus quantity when it came to the way I worked out. Part of this challenge also included hitting personal numerical goals on certain lifts. For example, I hit a new PB [personal best] of 60kg on Romanian deadlifts. Prior to starting my new training regime, the highest I could lift was 40kg!”

What has been great? “My increase in confidence has been great. Seeing numerical values on lifts increase is a very satisfying way to measure progress.”

What has not been so great? “The extra attention I am having to pay towards my body (taking measurements and progress photos and tracking my diet), on some days, can feel overwhelming. I also feel I am having to be mindful that I do not become obsessive with it!”

What would you say to someone considering this kind of challenge? “To anyone else considering starting coaching, switching up their training regime and/or taking on a new fitness challenge, I'd say you can do it! Believe in yourself — it's all about the small changes that happen over a longer period of time, as this makes for sustainable long-term change. So, just take one day at a time; slow and steady definitely wins the race! You just have to make sure you are wanting to make those changes for yourself and not for anyone else.”

HATTY – COUCH TO 5K

Couch to 5k is an NHS app designed to help beginners start running. Over nine weeks, runs get increasingly challenging until they're 30 mins non-stop (approximately 5km).

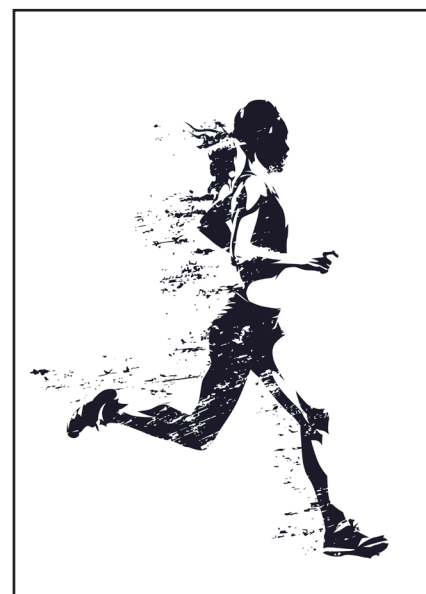
Why did you do it? “It was during lockdown, and the days were all rolling into one amorphous mush of sitting on the sofa, watching telly, and eating cake. I wanted to get out of that rut, and my friend suggested Couch to 5k.”

How did you do it? “I downloaded the app, bought some leggings and made a running playlist. Then it was just a case of doing what the app told me to do: getting out the door three times a week, walking when Sarah Millican's voice told me to walk, and running when she told me to run.”

What was great? “I made measurable progress each week. It gave me week some sort of structure. I was outside and moving regularly, which immediately lifted my mood. I stuck to the nine-week programme religiously, and felt challenged, empowered, and so proud of myself.”

What was not so great? “It was really tough to keep running at times; I became quite practiced at internal motivational self-talk! The weather was also very changeable, and some days I got soaked with rain.”

What would you say to someone considering this kind of challenge? “Give it a go — why not? It's built for real beginners, so anyone can do it!”



BRONIA – TOUGH MUDDER

Tough Mudder is a series of obstacle courses, typically involving a lot of mud. Teamwork is encouraged to overcome obstacles based on common human fears such as fire and heights, on courses ranging from 5-15km long.

Why did you do it? “[My partner] was doing Tough Mudder with his clients and asked me if I wanted to take part. I needed to start exercising again and wanted a challenge. I thought this would be a great goal to work towards.”

How did you do it? “I started training gradually, building up my cardio fitness and then adding in strength and endurance training. I was nervous, thinking I wouldn’t be fit enough, or would hold the rest of our group back, but I needn’t have worried! You can do it all at your pace and you have a chance to stop for breath at each obstacle.”

What was great? “Doing it together as a team felt great. There was no pressure to do any of the obstacles if you didn’t want to or couldn’t for health reasons; you could run around them. The camaraderie felt amazing, whether it was a member of your group pulling you up and over an obstacle, or a complete stranger. We were all in it together. The snack stations were also great!”

What was not so great? “The last obstacle on the course we did was the electrocution one, which meant I couldn’t do it due to having ectopic heartbeats (anyone with any kind of heart issues was advised against this one). It made it feel slightly like an anti-climax at the end as I had to walk around the obstacle. I wrote to Tough Mudder to ask if they could make the final challenge inclusive, and they said they would take it into account, so fingers crossed next year it’s different!”

What would you say to someone considering this kind of challenge? “Go for it! Do some training, make sure you do some upper body strength work, and don’t forget warm clean clothes to change into afterwards!”

NATALIE – MAN VS. HORSE

Man vs. Horse is an annual marathon of 35km (22 miles) in which runners compete against riders on horseback, through the roads, trails and mountains of Llanwrtyd Wells, Wales, each June. Although an experienced equestrian at Park Lane Stables, Teddington, Natalie chose to be on two legs rather than four.

Why did you do it? “I always wanted to do it — it is one of running’s holy grails! For me, as a runner and a rider, it was the dream combination. I have done it twice! The first time there was a team of us riding and running — not all finished as it is so difficult. The second time, nobody wanted to join me — funnily enough! But my goal is to go again when I am 50.”

How did you do it? “Logistically, you have to be committed because you cannot even get a place unless you are sitting by your PC at the date and time the places are released. [These events] are sought after like golden tickets and require a lot of planning to even get them. For me, as a brummie living in London, hills were not part of my training, so the drive there was daunting as the hills got larger and closer together. There were hardcore ultra-runners with £300 coats and there was me with an anorak and a smile. It was wet, muddy, hilly, and I spent a lot of time on my knees and arse but I loved it, made friends for life and even beat one horse!”

What was great? “It’s not you vs. a clock, it’s you vs. mother nature and a horse! Also, camaraderie; the cakes and cup of tea served at the end by a lady who reminds you of your nana; the views; the walnut whip hill; the sound of the horses; the tiny village.”

What was not so great? “Nothing about the day — I cannot think of anything negative!”

What would you say to someone considering this kind of challenge? “Do it, it’s amazing. It will change you for the better.”



MAGGIE – LEARNING TO SWIM

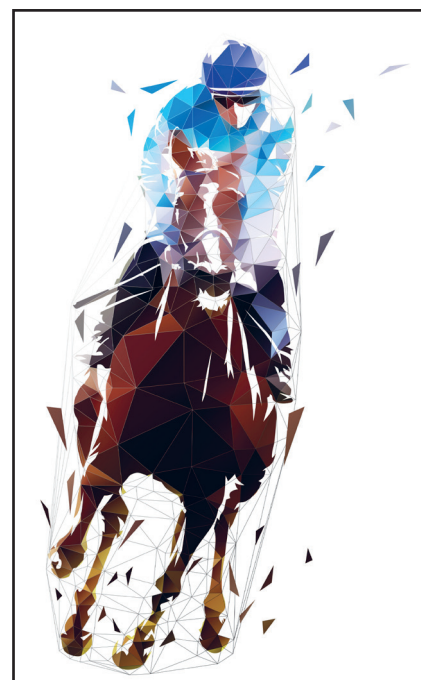
Why did you do it? “I nearly drowned when I was five and subsequently had a fear of water, but throughout my life felt I missed out on so much because of this.”

How did you do it? “I signed up to adult lessons at my local pool. I also made sure I found a cozzie that I was really comfortable in!”

What was great? “Against my own expectations, I learnt to be really good at doing breaststroke and learnt to swim underwater with my eyes open — not bad for someone who would panic when they got splashed in the face!”

What was not so great? “That initial bit of getting into the water — it always feels colder than it really is!”

What would you say to someone considering this kind of challenge? “I would say do it — it’s wonderful being in the water, and there is always the shallow end if need be!”





ELIZA – POWERLIFTING

Why did you do it? “I decided to do the powerlifting programme because I really wanted to push myself back into training after the lockdowns and challenge myself to a new deadlift PB [personal best] despite not having trained in a gym for a while due to the pandemic.”

How did you do it? “I spoke to my coach who devised the programme for me. Prior to this in the lockdowns I had just been training for aesthetics, so I explained to him my goal of getting stronger and especially my desire to get a new deadlift PB. As a result he created the powerlifting programme.”

What was great? “I had so much discipline and motivation because I was so desperate to get back to training in a gym. It felt like I had been doing home workouts for forever so to get back in a gym with an actual barbell and start lifting heavy weight just felt amazing.”

What was not so great? “The worst thing was trying to balance the programme with my university course. As I was studying nursing at the time, I did find it stressful trying to balance it all. I would sometimes push myself to train even if I felt really exhausted; I did not value rest and recovery as much as I should have.”

What would you say to someone considering this kind of challenge? “I would say to just go for it. Try to not get too [fixed] in your head about lifting a specific number, especially if it is your first time going for a PB. Try to enjoy even the smallest improvements, whether that is even lifting 1kg more or your form improving slightly! Also, remember to prioritise your rest and sleep. Your efforts in the gym will be wasted unless you are prioritising recovery!”

KIRSTYN – 200 MILE BIKE RIDE IN THE BRECON BEACONS

Why did you do it? “When you’re heavily pregnant with your second child, most people would be looking forward to the arrival and all that comes with a newborn. Don’t get me wrong, I was...but I also couldn’t help thinking further forward. When the opportunity of doing a charity bike ride with a group of friends came up, raising money for MND Association, MIND, Wooden Spoon and Macmillan, I said ‘yes’ and signed up before I really thought about it. I didn’t have a road bike, let alone ridden a road bike before! But I had said ‘yes’ now and the thought of letting people down, for me, was not an option. Actually, deep down, I think I had something to prove to myself, and believed I had to prove to others, that just because I’ve had children, doesn’t mean I can stop doing things for me.”

How did you do it? “The birth of my son came and went and I was ready to get back into the gym. Ooh my body hurt! But I stuck at it and got into a regular gym schedule. May came and we had our first group training ride (I borrowed my neighbour’s bike). I went from feeling confident to ‘OMG, what have I done?’ in the space of a few hours. Yes, the ride was fun, but it was hard (and my bum hurt) and all I could think about was, I would be the one slowing the group down — resulting in me going into panic mode.

“Enter my husband with words of belief I was lacking but needed, and boosted my confidence, along with my mother-in-law who gave me the number of a personal trainer who could help me get more prepared for the ride. The next week (barely eight weeks before the big ride) I started having two sessions a week with her whilst still attending my regular gym sessions. Alongside this, I invested in my own road bike and went out for rides once or twice a week. Very quickly my strength, stamina, endurance and self-belief were on the up.”

What was great? “On the next group ride out, I flew up (some of) those hills and could really feel all my training coming together. Better still, my group of friends could see the improvement and were quick to comment. There’s nothing like an ego boost to keep you going!”

What was not so great? “A mere week before the big ride, I got hit with a back injury. I could easily have given up, but I’d come too far to not go through with it. Friends, family, trainer and therapists rallied round to get me on the mend...and it worked! Never have I realised until then how much faith and love people have for me.

“The big ride day came and we pedalled off from Camberley rugby club at 6.30am. Over the next two days, we cycled 200 miles to Crynant, encountering lots of laughs, expletives, mental and physical strength being pushed to the limit, and one crash (of course that was me). On completion, not only did that pint of cider taste amazing, but I have never felt so proud of myself, and accomplished. I thought I was looking to prove something; this ride taught me I don’t need to seek others’ approval. I’ve come out the other side so much stronger physically, but most importantly mentally. I will always have this experience to fall back on when I am having self-doubt. The only downfall...was the ‘mum guilt’ I had every time I went out to train, then leaving them for two days whilst I completed the challenge. It was all worth it when they surprised me at the finish line.”

What would you say to someone considering this kind of challenge? “To anyone looking to push themselves or try something different, I’d always say ‘do it’. Obstacles are meant to test you, not stop you from doing anything. You’d be amazed what your body and mind can do!”

