

“Youth, large, lusty, loving—youth, full of grace, force,
fascination. Do you know
that Old Age may come after you with
equal grace, force, fascination?”

—From *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman

C h a p t e r O n e

Healthy, Vital, Active, Joyful . . . You

Healthy, vital, active, joyful. These are not adjectives generally ascribed to aging, yet today, new generations of mature athletes and adult onset exercisers (AOEs) are changing the very paradigm of becoming older. They are not satisfied with a superficial, plastic veneer of youth but are remaining youthful on the inside—as

well as the outside—by living actively. In fact, those who push themselves to the next level through competition report that they are more mentally and physically healthy than their sedentary counterparts. Mature athletes and AOE's are a remarkable and growing group of people. These vital sports enthusiasts exhibit persistently high levels of functional capacity as well as a good quality of life. They are not waiting for age to overtake them; they are proactively taking the steps toward maturing to perfection.

It never occurred to me that I was meant to slow down as one birthday passed after another. Even though I am now over 40, I still feel that thrill of competition and rush of adrenaline when I stand on the infield during a masters track meet and watch powerful athletes surge by, their faces being the only indication of their age. When I was nearing my 40s, I trained harder and became faster than ever—which may be one of the reasons I know firsthand that no arbitrary stage of life destines us to be on the sidelines.

Real-Life Inspirations

Since I began to work with mature athletes and watch the National Summer Senior Games, also known as the Senior Olympics—a biannual competition of a cross-section of ordinary and elite senior athletes (age 50 to 100 years) who compete in 18 different sports—it has been a privilege and inspiration to know athletes such as 71-year-old Cliff Eggink, the original “Irongeezzer.” Irongeezzers range from baby boomers to ultraseniors, some of whom are in their 80s and 90s. Far from being cranky couch potatoes, these people have a passion for physical activity and involvement in a healthy lifestyle. They have a dash of “iron” for strength of mind and body to maintain hale and hardy lifestyles amid an ever increasing, slothful, unfit population.

“At 61 years,” Cliff says, “I started trying to be healthy. I stayed off the medication and got out of the couch-potato syndrome. Then everything just evolved. I had to push myself.”

Cliff did push himself. In 2005, at age 68, he was the oldest participant in the Ironman Arizona Triathlon competition. An Ironman Triathlon is 2.4 miles of swimming, followed by 112 miles of biking, followed by 26.2 miles of running.

Cliff is inspiring as a competitive athlete, but so is my father, who just wants to be the best he can be for his physical and emotional health. My father, Gene Wright, a former high school principal and now an entrepreneur, says:

With the exception of a ten-year hiatus, I have always run. It is a part of who I am. I'm like the rest of the crazy runners out there: rain, shine, knee pain, feeling strong—I'm out there, adding up the miles. I run because I enjoy it, because of the camaraderie of the people I meet at races, and because I love the results I get from being fit.

I was starting a new business around my 40th birthday and I stopped running. Of course, I started to get plump (59100, 195 pounds), was short of breath (a brisk walk wore me out), had a steadily rising blood pressure and heart rate, and generally felt sluggish. I didn't want to do anything. I had to get back in shape.

Boy, was it hard to start running again: It was slow—I mean, jog and walk, with the emphasis on walk. It hurt, and I mean all over. It was frustrating. I felt panic and anger that I might not get it back. This was a far cry from my college experience of enjoyment of flying down the road and being exhilarated.

Eventually—it seemed like forever—I became conditioned with two- to three-mile workouts possible. I became encouraged. I told myself, "keep at it, guy, it is possible." I began to lose weight and got down to 170 pounds. I felt better. My heart rate became lower (now at resting it is in the 50s). Again, I felt alive and ready to tackle the world.

Now I run a lot of road races, about 20 per year, from 5K through the marathon distance, and thrive on the competition, the feeling, and the people involved. I average 30 miles of running per week, with strength training twice a week.

Today, I'm 69 years old. I am in shape. I feel

great.

I am healthy and happy. I continue to run consistently, stay conditioned, set personal goals, enter races, and enjoy the road.¹

My father is just one of the many athletes over 40 years of age whom I know who is in great shape. Liz is an example of a woman who got in the game at the age of 50. Growing up, Liz was never an athlete. Although she loved sports and participated in gym class in school, like so many other young women in her generation, she was discouraged from participating in heavy physical activity because “ladies do not sweat” and “all that movement was harmful for childbearing.” She did try to earn a degree in physical education, but nine credits and three children later, her formal physical education ended. While raising an active family, she earned her Red Cross Life Saving certificate and taught swimming for many years.

One day, Liz was attending a senior sports classic, when they needed more swimmers to compete. On the spur of the moment, she decided to enter the 50-yard freestyle. As she pulled herself through the water, she thought to herself, “What an insane idea it is to jump into competition. I may die from the exhaustion.” When she found out that she had won, she was surprised and delighted. Her spontaneous decision to jump in and swim the 50-yard freestyle led Liz to swim longer races. She won local and state senior swimming competitions and placed second and third at the 2005 National Summer Senior Games. She is no longer a slave to her aging process but has become the master of it.

Cliff, Gene, and Liz are not just exceptions but can be the rule for maintaining strength and improving performance through exercise. Today’s mature athletes and adult onset exercisers have the potential to change the face and perception of aging in the United States. They are not bound to elderly behaviors in the same way as their parents. Today’s athletes are unique; they are not merely sequels to their 20-year-old selves. They are highly active and motivated to stay young.

The Fitness After 40 Promise

If you are an elite athlete more than 40 years old, I can help you improve your performance. If you are a recreational athlete, I can encourage you to be your best and avoid injuries. If you are a couch potato, it is never too late to become fit.

In Chapter 2, you will learn exactly how your body becomes different and unique after you reach 40. The central section of this guide instructs you about all you need to know about the four components of fitness you must include in your daily regimen. You will learn about the easy-to-remember steps to fitness I call F.A.C.E.-ing your future. F.A.C.E. is an acronym I use to help my patients remember these four components of fitness after 40: flexibility, aerobics, carrying a load (resistance training), and equilibrium/balance. You will learn exercises that you can do at home, in the gym, and on the go to reshape your body, prevent injury, and become fit.

We will also examine the common barriers to your ability to stay moving, such as wear and tear and injuries that sidetrack us. We will discuss nutrition basics, how to set realistic goals, and strategies for establishing the critical mental edge you need for success. We wrap up with sources of information about fun and competitive athletic groups, good equipment, and organizations that offer access to specialized health professionals and resources.

Continue with me. Take the time to invest in your physical future by reading along with me and making a plan. You too can be inspiring—to yourself, to your family, to your friends, and even to those strangers who will wonder how you can be so fit after 40.

H o m e w o r k

1. Now that you have read about several inspiring masters athletes, think about yourself. What do you want your future to look like?

2. Close your eyes and picture yourself strong and buff.
3. Write down what you are going to look like and how you are going to feel. Be very descriptive. This will help you put feet to the direction we are about to go. Fitness after 40 is within your grasp. Just believe it and take action.

Note

1. Adapted from “Profile: Gene Wright—Fit and Fantastic,”
www.seniorsportsandfitness.com/genewright.html.

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