

Health

FIT FACTOR

When two university profs started a blog about their resolution to get in shape by the age of 50, it sparked a conversation about what it means to be fit—and who gets to claim the title.

BY LISA MESBUR



PHOTOGRAPHY, GETTY IMAGES

GOOD START

Fitness bloggers Samantha Brennan and Tracy Isaacs share three tips to help you kick off your health journey.



Samantha Brennan (left) and Tracy Isaacs.

FOR MANY OF US, milestone birthdays can be a source of anxiety. But for Samantha Brennan and Tracy Isaacs, the approach of the big “five-oh” presented both a target and an opportunity. In fall 2012, the longtime friends and fellow professors at Western University in London, Ont., then 48, set themselves a challenge: They would get into the best physical shape of their lives by their 50th birthdays—and they would blog about it along the way.

Fast-forward five years, and Samantha and Tracy’s *Fit Is a Feminist Issue* blog is still going strong, reaching thousands of monthly readers with its refreshing mix of personal stories and thoughtful posts on what it means to be fit (and how to get there). Our takeaway? If you’ve ever worried that it’s too late for you to get in shape, take heart: Samantha and Tracy are living proof that it’s not.

What motivated you to begin this journey toward fitness in your late 40s?

SAMANTHA: I wanted to take charge of how I aged physically, to think about what kind of life I wanted to live as an older person and what would make that possible. When I was younger, my fitness concerns were often based on looking a certain way and my goals were often tied to weight loss. Now, I think about my friend’s mom who came on a recent canoeing trip. I want to be portaging in my 70s, too!

TRACY: When I first started the challenge, I had a covert hope that [weight loss] would be the byproduct, that I would have this lean, mean body by the time I turned 50. But over the course of the first few months, I made a conscious effort to get away from using weight loss as a measure of fitness. My goal became an Olympic-distance triathlon before my 50th birthday. I also had the goal of shifting my attitude, focusing on performance and getting the endurance needed to be able to complete that race.

What challenges have you faced along the way?

TRACY: My first triathlon [the Kincardine Women’s Triathlon in Kincardine, Ont.] was a big deal, but the Olympic-distance triathlon was a whole other thing. It was a 1500m swim, a 40K bike and a 10K run—more than three times longer than Kincardine! I’d never ran or biked those distances, even individually. The time management involved in training was also hard; I have a full-time job! But my biggest challenges were probably mental: trying to think of myself as an athlete who had a right to be there. When I finally completed the Olympic-distance triathlon, I finished in the bottom 10,

but I did it, and that felt pretty great.

SAMANTHA: For me, it’s about the balance of fitting it all in. During our Fittest by 50 Challenge, I was doing CrossFit in the mornings and aikido at night, and I’d arrive at my aikido class sore and tired. Interestingly, [doing] CrossFit helped my aikido, because I couldn’t rely on strength or energy to do it—I had no choice but to go slow and focus on the technique. I was also dealing with my partner’s parents both passing away. His mother had developed ALS [a disease that attacks the nervous system] and moved to London so we could care for her. I was rowing at the time, and I couldn’t keep up with it and be the caregiver I needed to be. Some sports, like rowing, require you to be there at a specific time with a group of people; it’s a real commitment. Running was easier for me; I could go out and do it—morning, evening, whenever.

What have you learned about yourselves throughout this process?

SAMANTHA: I need to be in a social activity that will get me out the door to people who expect to see me or that I’m committed to. The social part really matters.

TRACY: I’ve learned that it feels better to achieve something meaningful than to focus on weight loss as a metric. If you’re already strong and fit, what does it matter if you’re carrying around a few extra pounds?

The fitness industry can be intimidating. What’s your advice for pushing through that feeling?

TRACY: Have people to do activities with. For me, going to running clinics was so important because I realized that there are people of all shapes, sizes, speeds and experience levels doing these activities. It’s also important to seek out a place that promotes inclusivity and diversity; the YMCA I joined is great because it’s a diverse community with a diverse esthetic, and it doesn’t emphasize weight loss as a goal.

SAMANTHA: Find something you think is really fun. Try lots of things—maybe something completely weird. Just do your thing! And remember, you don’t have to be good at the thing you love doing. Having fun is more important than being good.

Samantha and Tracy’s book, *Fit Is a Feminist Issue: Our Journey to Fitness at Midlife* (Greystone Books) will be released next year.

1

Don’t make it about weight.

“If you make weight loss your goal and then quit if you don’t lose weight, you miss out on all the other health benefits of exercise,” says Samantha.

2

Set a scary (but not impossible) goal.

“Set your sights high,” advises Samantha. “[Goal-setting] commits you and focuses your attention and energy. Pick something a year away and train for it!”

3

Begin with baby steps.

“We always want to start big, but starting small and building is more likely to lead to established habits because it’s realistic and doable,” says Tracy.



We want to see your fit pics! Tag us on Twitter or Instagram and include the hashtag #CLThisIsFit.

CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE

The most important part of starting a new fitness journey? Finding a workout you'll actually stick to.



Getting fit isn't just a matter of picking and committing to an activity; "it's about tailoring your fitness plan and goals to your individual circumstances, fitness history and personality," says Kathleen Trotter, a Toronto-based personal trainer and fitness columnist. "That sets you up for success." Trotter gives her best advice for five fitness types.

IF YOU LIKE GROUP CLASSES...

Try something new, such as a cardio weight-training class or an interval-rowing class, says Trotter. For even greater variety, test-drive a ClassPass or Fitset membership and explore the fitness studios in your neighbourhood.

IF COMPETITION GETS YOUR HEART RACING...

Try a workout that includes the option for live tracking and encourages friendly rivalry. CrossFit, boot camps and many Spinning classes foster a supportive but competitive dynamic, says Trotter.

IF YOU'RE TIME-CRUNCHED...

Tack on physical activity to your non-negotiable routines. Make daily dog walking an interval workout by alternating three minutes of fast walking with three minutes of walking at your regular pace for half an hour. Or if you have kids, jog home after walking them to school, suggests Trotter.

IF YOU LOVE SOLO WORKOUTS...

Avoid falling into a rut by setting both long- and short-term goals. "Set the goal of a 5K or 10K race or being able to do a certain number of pushups, pull-ups or squats, or try a new piece of equipment every month," says Trotter. "You're not going to stick with your workout if you're bored."

IF YOU ENJOY TEAM SPORTS...

Join a community-based or online social network to connect with teams, leagues and regularly scheduled activities in your region.

GET MORE INFO ON FINDING YOUR FIT AT canadianliving.com/thisisfit.

STAY ON TRACK

Is your resolve flagging? Maintain your motivation with these expert tips.



FIND YOUR BLISS

"If you hate an activity, there's no point in doing it," says James Fell, a Calgary-based fitness columnist. So don't feel bad if you just aren't a runner. "Try different things until your passion bites," he says.



TRACK YOUR PROGRESS

Research indicates you're more likely to stick to a program if you see improvement over time. Fell's advice: Use any tracking tool that feels manageable and sustainable for you.



GET SOCIAL

Enlist workout buddies or join a fitness-minded community to keep yourself accountable instead of relying on one person for motivation. If she falls off, you're likely to start slacking, too, notes Fell.