

‘We overcame our fitness fears’

Trying new things can be challenging, but finding the courage to step out of your comfort zone can work wonders for your confidence

‘I wanted to go on long rides with my triathlon mates’

Helen Croydon, 37
from Limehouse, London



A year ago I joined a running and triathlon club. I'd just gone through a break-up at the same time that two of my closest friends

moved abroad, and all the rest were having babies. I needed something new, and triathlons filled that gap.

There was just one problem. Triathlons involve cycling and I was petrified of traffic. I would have loved to join my clubmates on training rides but my fear held me back. As soon as we hit a busy junction I would get off and wheel my bike across the road.

I decided to try a one-on-one road safety course in a bid to alleviate my fear. The two-hour lessons with Cycle Confident are free in London as they're part of the government's Bikeability scheme to provide cycle safety skills.

On the day, I felt nervous. The instructor Anna asked about my fears and objectives, which were learning where to position myself at junctions and roundabouts and how to overtake parked vehicles without being hit.

Starting on quiet roads, Anna watched as I turned left and right, and

pointed out that I made the classic error of tucking myself too far into the left. When waiting to turn left at a T-junction, for instance, I should be in the centre of the lane, not the far left, where I risk being squashed by another left-turning vehicle. Likewise, when turning right, I need to be bolder and take the centre of the road far in advance of the turn, signalling to cars behind so they have to slow down and wait as they would for another car.

This was the single most valuable piece of information. Until now I had felt like a second-class road user on a bike. After an hour of practising bolder positioning, my mindset was beginning to change.

I finished on a high, sailing through a right turn at a tricky junction after overtaking the line of cars to position myself at the front. I had to do it three times because during the first two I ended up stuck in the yellow box, trembling, with cars whizzing by. The third time, I told myself to take the lane like a car would, and I was amazed how easy it was.

I've acquired more confidence than I imagined a two-hour class could give and I can't wait to join the next long Sunday cycle ride with my triathlon club mates.

Free Bikeability courses are offered through local authorities in the UK. To find a course near you visit bikeability.dft.gov.uk

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Until now I had felt like a second-class road user



‘I didn't want to look back on my life and realise I hadn't danced’



Kim Willis, 32
from Heddington, Wiltshire



It's 1989 and I'm at a seventh birthday party. I'm busting out my best moves to Cyndi Lauper's

A Night To Remember, dancing with joyful abandon, as a seven-year-old should. Then the queen bee takes one look at me and sneers, 'WHAT are you doing?' Her minions giggle, and in one fell swoop my enjoyment is destroyed.

I was so crushed I've never danced freely again, and didn't even have a first dance at my wedding. However, at the age of 32 I decided it was time to confront the fear. I didn't want to look back on my life and realise I hadn't danced, so I took a deep breath and signed up for a salsa class.

I arrived at The Tramshed, Bath, for their beginners' class run by

Matt and Adele. They led our group of 30 through basic steps, and I tried to copy Adele's footwork and the graceful way she moved her hips. But while she danced like poetry in motion, I felt I was bumbling around like a dad at a wedding.

Yet midway through the evening, things started to click, and the less I worried about what people were thinking, the more fun I had.

By the end of the night I'd learned some valuable lessons. How to go from standing face-to-face with your partner to standing beside them for a shoulder shimmy. Dancing is fun. No one cares how good you are.

Once the class got going it really was a cardio workout. I didn't walk back to the car park after the session – I salsa'd. ➔

Check out bathsalsa.co.uk



figure-of-eight running, throwing and catching routine. After a few false starts in which I clumsily misjudge the timings, sending the ball flying, I find my rhythm and even manage a few nifty catches. My confidence is up, along with my heart rate.

But then Amy tells us we're going to play a match. Handing me a 'GS' bib, she says I'm goal shooter, responsible for scoring. No pressure then.

My fear rises as the players move into position. The whistle blows, there's a blur of passes and, before I know it, the ball's in my hands. Then something surreal happens. I look up to the net, take aim and shoot a perfect goal.

The court erupts into cheers and, despite my astonishment, I can't help joining in. Buoyed by my success, I actively encourage the ball my way, laughing off a couple of clumsy stumbles and netting a second goal before the final whistle. Unbelievable!

If it had been a serious tournament rather than a good-natured friendly, I might have crumbled, schoolgirl-style. But by the end of the hour I felt positive, boosted by the camaraderie, and that I'd had a proper workout.

'You did really well,' Amy says on the way out. Where's Jenny from 4B when you need her? ♦



For more information about England Netball's Back To Netball scheme, and to find your nearest session, go to englandnetball.co.uk/my-game/back-to-netball

'I resolved to rise to the challenge and exorcise my netball-shaped demons'

Rachel Toal, 35
from Manchester



Forget clowns and spiders. There's one mental image guaranteed to bring me out in a cold sweat, and that's my school

netball court. After the inevitable shame of being picked last for a team, I'd hover as far from the action as possible, praying the ball didn't fly my way. When it did, I panicked. I'll never forget the look of disbelief on Jenny from 4B when I balled up the easiest goal opportunity in sporting history.

Fast-forward 20 years and the mental scars are still raw. I'll take solitary pursuits over team sports any day – but where's the camaraderie in road running or solo swimming? Lately, after hours of quiet writing at home, I've found myself wanting more sociable workouts.

So, on the basis that what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, I resolved to quit being such a sporting wuss, rise to the challenge and exorcise my netball-shaped demons for good.

A few days later, I'm standing

outside a local college sports hall, plucking up the courage to approach Amy, a community coach for England Netball's Back To Netball scheme.

She listens patiently to my admissions of ineptitude. 'Don't worry, just enjoy it,' she smiles. It's a far cry from the 'go hard or go home' pep talks I remember from school.

Luckily, my fellow players are welcoming, relaxed and a reassuring mix of ages and abilities. Most meet weekly, while others are novices here for a commitment-free 'pay and play' session. Pleasingly, there's not a pleated mini-skirt in sight.

I start to relax as one player tells me she's only been coming for five weeks and still hasn't fully grasped the rules, but it's fun nonetheless. And when Amy's colleague Jess explains how she hated netball at school but went on to ditch an accountancy career for coaching, I'm almost sold.

After a warm-up game similar to the terrifying 'bleep test' from school, Amy instructs us to triple up and practise 'interception' – stealing the ball, in layman's terms.

She demonstrates a complex