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RAISING THE BAR

BUFF BABY BOOMERS HIT THE GYM TO MAINTAIN THEIR FITNESS, REACH NEW GOALS AND CULTIVATE A SENSE OF COMMUNITY

BY JENNIFER LIU | PHOTOS BY ANTHONY JINSON

The February snowstorms weren't enough to keep a group of women from hitting the gym for their weekly training sessions. As the likes of Frank Sinatra, Nat King Cole and Billie Holiday crooned from the sound system, the ladies of Optimus: The Center for Health were creating a musical rhythm of their own.

The clanking of weights echoes throughout the gym alongside chatter of work, vacation plans and upcoming birthdays. Linda Struckhoff, face contorted with focus and determination, pushes a bar weighing 93 kilograms, or nearly 205 pounds, upward away from her chest. She roars and thrusts with every ounce of energy. Nearby, Sharon Millikan claps and shouts cheers of encouragement.

"You can do it, Linda. You've got this!"

With a last burst of vigor, Linda finishes her lift and pushes the bar back into the waiting hands of her trainer, Jordan Kroell. Several women nearby erupt into cheers and congratulate Linda on her feat.



ABOVE: Members of Older Women on Weights, from left: Jackie Miller, Sharon Millikan and Shelly Frazier. Photo by Anthony Jinson. RIGHT TOP: Barbara Semmons and trainer Maggy Danley at Wilson's Fitness. RIGHT BOTTOM: Ron Kent at Anytime Fitness. Photos By Jake Hamilton.

She sits up, wipes her forehead and stands. "That was heavy," she says with winded breath.

Linda, 62, and Sharon, 65, are new to the powerlifting world, but they're making a name for themselves as part of the Older Women on Weights group at Optimus. And they're not alone. Behind them is a team of 24 other women ranging in age from 42 to upward of 70, along with a group of experienced trainers, who join and support their fitness endeavors. Larger still is a growing community of retired Columbians taking to the gym to maintain their fitness and health — and maybe make a friend or two along the way.

Wowing with OWOW

Older Women on Weights, or OWOW, began with the single thought: "Well, we could do that." In February 2012, Linda LaFontaine and Louise Miller were at a weightlifting competition hosted on the University of Missouri campus to cheer on their friends.

As they sat in the crowd observing the participants, Linda and Louise were struck by the lack of women in the tournament, not to mention older women their age. The duo decided then and there that they were going to get a group together to start weight training. They originally began with a group of 14 women, and many entered the pow-

erlifting event at the annual Show-Me State Games by July.

A year later, 26 women now call themselves part of the OWOW team. They compete nationwide with the American Drug-Free Powerlifting Federation, and a few have even competed internationally at the annual world championships.

This year, a handful have qualified for the world championships in the squats, dead lift and bench press events and will be boarding a plane to show off their skills in Belgium this June. But winning medals and getting fit doesn't begin to cover the benefits the women have seen in powerlifting.

Making the team

Jackie and Lynn Miller are a power couple in more ways than one. The pair joined Optimus Fitness and Center for Health when it opened in April 2007. When the opportunity to train in powerlifting arose, they jumped at the chance. Jackie was part of the OWOW group from the very beginning, and soon after Lynn would help form its counterpart, Older Men on Weights, or OMOW.

"He was the one who said we should do something like it," Jackie, 64, says of her husband's encouragement to try the new sport. "I wish I had started sooner. It's taught me that I can do more than I

thought. I've had an exceptional experience because of it."

At just around 5 feet tall, Jackie doesn't exactly look like a powerlifting world champion qualifier. She says that in addition to her increased strength and balance, she hopes to improve her bone density through powerlifting.

Tom LaFontaine, OWOW coach, agrees that there are many benefits from lifting weights. With the right coaching, powerlifting can increase bone mineral density and decrease the onset of osteoporosis. The muscular-skeletal effects can also lead to more endurance to sustain work, along with lowering diabetes, blood pressure and cholesterol. What amazes him most, he says, is some of the psychological benefits.

"The most fun I'm having is coaching the OWOWs," Tom says. "They're so hungry to learn and get better."

Betsy Vicente, 65, is a newer member to the powerlifting world despite her recent trips in and out of the hospital. From a broken back to a hip replacement all within five years, she's made a comeback into the fitness world in the past three. When she began working with Optimus trainer Celsi Cowan, she wouldn't have thought that she would be lifting heavy weights to aid in her recovery.

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"She was my inspiration," Betsy says of Celsi's persistence in coaching. "She kept telling me before my surgery that, when I got better, she was going to have me start bench pressing. I thought she was being funny." But sure enough, Betsy began bench pressing after her most recent surgery in January 2012, and the results from powerlifting have affected her beyond the gym.

An avid dancer, Betsy found that regular lifting helped her regain the ability to ballroom dance with her husband. "It's made a whole difference in my life," she says. "I've danced since I was 4, so not being able to dance was very hard emotionally. It's given me my dancing legs back."

When it comes down to it, many of the women find that powerlifting helps them in their overall strength and ability to do everyday tasks. Kim Morgan, 56, and Shelly Frazier, 42, aren't new to the gym but have found a niche for the sport.

With the right coaching, powerlifting can increase bone mineral density and decrease the onset of osteoporosis. The muscular-skeletal effects can also lead to more endurance to sustain work, along with lowering diabetes, blood pressure and cholesterol.

"I feel better and stronger than I've been in 16 years," Kim says. She was previously a group exercise instructor for 12 years but had never focused on powerlifting until the formation of the OWOW team.

Shelly, on the other hand, is a bit younger than some of her teammates. The world record-holder in bench press uses the discipline to help with joint issues. She sees the sport as a preventive measure for future health problems and enjoys being on a supportive team. "I never would have dreamt of breaking a world record," she says. "You don't realize your potential until you get out there and have great coaches. It's really amazing."

Getting FIT at any age

Sometimes the encouragement to get moving comes from the most serendipitous of

places. One afternoon when Barbara Semmons was getting her hair done, another salon patron asked if she had heard about the Wilson's Total Fitness Females in Training program, or FIT. The 75-year-old's curiosity piqued, and she now visits with FIT trainer Maggy Danley twice a week for various flexibility and strength training.

Barbara, who has always been active in recreational sports and activities, enjoys working with a trainer at her age. "When I first started, I would have pains in my arms and legs, and I don't have that anymore," she says. "So that tells me that something is working and is working right."

For older people in the community looking into fitness, Barbara has simple advice. "Don't think about it; just do it," she says. "Exercising is good at any age, not just as you get older like I am."

Cindy Suich agrees. A former college physical and recreation instructor, she has had a long history with personal fitness that transformed from an interest into a career and, overall, a way of life. "I really fell in love with it and just continued doing it myself," she says.

She does rigorous training with FIT and oftentimes spends 10 hours a week at the gym. "I'm not your normal 61-year-old," Cindy says. "It's never too late to start."

Richard Ross, 58, got an early start by playing baseball at age 6. He is one of Wilson's earliest and longest club members and recently marked his 30th year. "At any age, if you don't have good health, it's hard to do much of anything," he says. "It's a process. It's not something you can jump back into and in a month be back to where you were when you were 20 years old. You just have to stay with it and be consistent."

"When you feel like you can't do it, that's when you need to do it the most," he continues. "And then you'll find that you can and it's not that bad."

Fitness for anybody, anytime

Last March, Ron Kent was ready to get back into the gym routine. The 71-year-old had just moved to Columbia and wanted to use the location change as motivation for getting back into healthy living. He had just visited his doctor and received news that a fitness change was in order.

"My glucose level was creeping up in my lab results, and she told me that it's something that I needed to work on," Ron says. "She

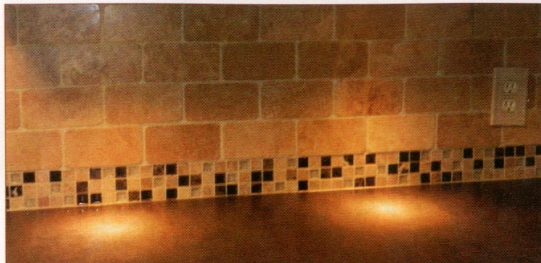
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suggested that instead of medication, I could probably control it with diet and exercise."

Ron channeled his active past working on a farm and doing moving for his family's funeral home and furniture store. He found Anytime Fitness right around the corner from his southwest Columbia home and signed up for a new membership. "I started watching what I was eating and cutting back on calories and going to the gym five days a week," he says. "I'm not trying to build muscle at my age, but I am just trying to keep some muscle tone."

A year later, Ron's blood sugar levels have stabilized, and he's lost 35 pounds. He doesn't work with a trainer, but his first-ever gym membership has kept him motivated to better his personal health. "I've learned to make myself do it, and I feel better now that I have," Ron says.

"I wish I had started [powerlifting] sooner. It's taught me that I can do more than I thought."
— Jackie Miller, OWOW member

He also has advice to others going through similar situations. "Don't overdo it," he says. "It's normal to want to jump in and do too much too fast and find out that your body's not what it used to be."

Building brawn and community

Back at the Optimus center, Linda and Sharon have gained more than just muscle.

"We've been working together for about a year," Sharon says while turning toward Linda with a smile. "And she's made tons of progress."

Linda is quick to return the encouragement. "She has, too!" she says of her training partner.

For them, being a part of OWOW has given them the chance to earn their first medals and become part of a team.

"One of the best things I've ever done was to join Optimus," Sharon says. "And then to do this [OWOW] was just icing on the cake. It's so fun cheering everybody on and watching everybody make PRs [personal records] is really exciting. Where else in life do you go to watch people get better and better at something like this? I love it." CH

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