

RAISING THE BAR

A first timer's experience of pumping iron. BY VINEETHA EPHGRAVE

I've never lifted weights before... unless you count six-packs of Masafi. It's got nothing to do with fitness levels either because, for that, you'd need to actually classify in the range of 'fit'.

I've always avoided exercise, with the mere thought of cardio classes and running filling me with dread. Don't get me wrong, I've tried harder now that I'm in my 30s and enrolled in all manner of classes, from military bootcamp (tough love) to bounce-burn cardiolates (crazy love). They've all left my trainers unimpressed and me breathless, in a not so nice way.

Having suffered from asthma for most of my life, with attacks ranging from mild to severe, getting my heart rate up is more scary than exciting. There's always that worry in the back of my mind, wondering if I'd have enough time to grab my trusty inhaler – just in case. If I told instructors about my condition, they'd insist on me carrying my inhaler, and we'd both be conscious of it for the entire session. If I didn't, well, I'd still worry. It was hardly debilitating but it was, for me, frustrating.

In the end, I'd resigned myself to more mindful, slower-paced activities such as yoga and reformer pilates. While improving my focus and flexibility over time, I never really saw the impact I wanted on muscle strength and overall fitness. I persevered but, looking back now, I realized I never really gave it my 100 percent.

Friends talk about finding that 'spirit sport'. It's the one that they have an innate, joyful connection with. A love-hate-love feeling that makes them excited to keep exploring and pushing forward. I thought I found mine in yoga, but I was wrong. The best was yet to come.

WEIGHT, WHAT?

A casual remark one afternoon took me

on a whole new path to fitness. A friend remarked how effective weight training was for women. Being naïve, I quickly voiced that great, big misconception: that women who lift weights bulk up. A disapproving stare and a quick search on Instagram proved just how wrong I was. Yes, there was bulk on some but there was so much more.

Always keen to try everything (at least once), I signed up for an introductory session with Dubai personal trainer Domia Economides. With sessions taking place at the swish 6P gym in Al Quoz, I was more than ready.

I've always found gyms to be quite intimidating but the first class went off without a hitch. It involved a brief rundown of the routine, proper form and explanations of basic gym equipment. I threw down my first ever mebdall and learnt to squat properly for the first time in my life. Domia was patient, carefully correcting me with every posture and offering words of gentle encouragement, like a worldly wise big sister would talk to her sibling.

After reps of deadlifts, cable back rows, TRX lunges and planks, we both agreed my first session went very well and I went home with a smile on my face – relieved that it was over but also not quite sure of what just happened. The next day brought a whole lot of pain, as Domia warned it might. I couldn't turn without wincing and walking seemed like a superhuman task.

RUN, DON'T WALK

The key to success really is routine. I needed to work out at least three times a week, so I met with Domia once a week and tried to do set sessions on my own other times. The latter was the hardest because I have the memory of a goldfish and found myself on Google trying to match images of machines with the names of exercises I'd just done... while also avoiding the amused stares from other gym-goers. It was a whole new world just

waiting to be explored.

After just six sessions with Domia, I felt stronger and saw a definite improvement in my breathing while training. There wasn't a significant loss in inches though which, while discouraging, highlighted my poor nutrition habits. I started researching the impact of diet online, and it made a difference in how I think about food. In the past, I'd mindlessly pick up a packet of crisps while at work but now I stop and ask myself if I really want it, and regularly fill out a food diary to keep to a calorie limit of 1,200. Yes, there have been days I'd go over but now I feel guilty about my fall from grace – a huge change considering I've never met a brunch I didn't like.

Domia has me doing everything from hex bar deadlifts, goblet squats to TVA toe taps, battle ropes and more with relative ease. When training on my own, I try to increase my speed and resistance to keep things challenging, while Domia makes sure to amp up the intensity and throw in more than a few surprises on the days I train with her.

I still have a long way to go but I've noticed that my clothes are not as snug as before, which is quite an achievement after nearly two months. But beyond the inches, I'm surprised at just how much I enjoy working out now. And how strong, capable and immense I can feel.

LESSONS LEARNT

- Don't expect miracles in the first month!
- Your body isn't going to respond the way you want it to for the first few sessions. Let it adjust and follow its own pace.
- Eat to complement your training – make sure you get enough protein.
- Strength training hurts but it's so worth it.