

Movin' and Groovin'  
The Quest for Fitness at Every Size

By Sally E. Smith

Being an Olympics fanatic, I felt mixed emotions as the flame in Beijing was extinguished on Sunday. While I'm sorry to see the games end, I don't mind forgoing the sleep deprivation and the roller coaster of sentiments that have accompanied "the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat" over the past two weeks. As always, watching the athletes perform triggered thoughts of the role that plus-size women play in the world of sports, and the overarching issue of the obstacles that we as a community face in our quest to achieve fitness.

Although they didn't get primetime coverage, I was rooting for our plus-size sisters in Beijing. Cheryl Haworth, the 315-pound U.S. bronze medalist in weightlifting during the 2000 games, finished a disappointing sixth this year, having undergone reconstructive elbow surgery. But South Korea's Jang Mi-Ran, at 247 pounds, smashed three world records on her way to weightlifting gold. The silver medalist in the event, 368-pound Olha Korobka of the Ukraine, was later quoted by the Associated Press as saying, "If there is a disco in the Olympic Village, now I have the time so I'll go and dance." You go, girlfriend!

But the plus-size community was represented by other athletes as well. Our medal-winning water polo team was graced by Kami Craig and Brenda Villa, while Crystl Bustos - called "the Babe Ruth of softball" - saved the day in a match with Japan, slugging a three-run homer in the ninth inning and pushing the U.S. team into gold medal contention. Despite the grueling training schedule and the bruising punishment that every Olympic athlete endures, I couldn't help but think that these women had to overcome an additional hurdle: societal prejudice. After all, we live in a society where fitness and fatness are viewed as mutually exclusive, and where even large women who are at their physical peak are still perceived as unhealthy. Where, then, does that leave the rest of us?

I think that Haworth, Craig, Villa, Bustos, and the other plus-size women who competed in Beijing have passed the torch to each of us. We may not have the aspirations or abilities to compete in the next Olympic games, but we can reclaim the joy that comes from moving our bodies and achieving our individual fitness goals.

Of course, that's often easier said than done. Memories of childhood taunts, of exercise thrust upon us as punishment for taking up too much space in this world, and of failure at not being able to keep up with our peers can keep us

stuck. Finding a location to exercise that's emotionally safe can prevent us from taking the first step. An internalized belief that exercise should result in weight loss can cause us to abandon our goals when weight loss doesn't materialize. But we can find our inspiration through the prism of the sacrifices that plus-size Olympians made to get to Beijing.

If you're ready to make the leap and incorporate more movement into your life, here are some tips to get you started.

1. All movement counts. You don't have to play water polo, softball, or become a gym rat in order to increase your level of fitness. Working in the garden or strolling around the neighborhood is a great place to start.
2. Find an activity you like. Exercise doesn't have to be a punishment; it can be a joy. Sign up for that salsa class you've been eyeing, or learn tai chi. Love what you're doing, and fitness will be a happy consequence.
3. Move in style. Why look frumpy when you can look fabulous? MiB has activewear that is both comfy and stylish.
4. The more the merrier. Find other plus-size women who have fitness goals. They'll add to the fun and provide invaluable support.
5. Set realistic goals. Forget the all-or-nothing mentality, and instead set goals that are realistic for your current fitness level. One woman's walk to the mailbox is no less of an achievement than another woman's five-mile bike ride. As your fitness level increases, you can set more challenging goals.
6. Love yourself. When you learn to love yourself, you'll be better able to nurture your mind, body, and spirit - all of which are essential for health and well-being.