

A BETTER BODY AFTER 40: CHECK IT OUT, P. 154

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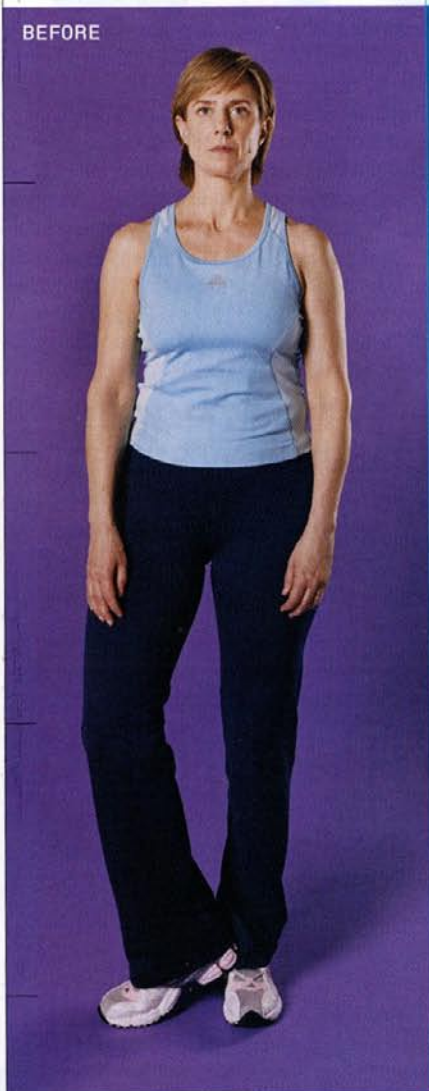
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How Much Can Your Shape Change?

Can a two-week military-style boot camp give a 49-year-old woman a killer body? It can, it did, and I'm all set to sign up again

By Stephanie Young



T **ADMIT I'M PROMISCUOUS**—at least when it comes to exercise. Part of it is professional. I've been covering fitness for over 20 years, so looking for the next new thing is just what I do. But part of it is personal: No matter how much I'm loving my workouts, I always wonder, "Is there something I could love more?" I was full-on into Pilates when I started cheating with power yoga classes because I loved the look of a friend's shoulders. At one time, I was devoted to weight training, but then I began to fantasize about the body Thai boxing would give me. So it's really not surprising

that word of the Original SEAL Physical Training Course (sealpt.com) turned my head. Led by Jack Walston, a Navy SEAL veteran, it's a 10-day, two-hours-a-day boot camp that uses Central Park in New York—with its stairs, hills, sand, trees, benches, grass—as a training ground. (Walston is technically based in Texas but he will give classes to interested groups anywhere.) I read testimonials from participants ranging from "utter, utter hell" to "great, insane fun" to "the most amazing way to kick-start your body into shape in two short weeks." I signed up on the spot. →

PHOTO: LAUREN FLEISHMAN; HAIR AND MAKEUP: NIKOO WANG

DAY ONE: MONDAY

I meet my fellow boot-campers just outside the park at 4:45 AM. There are 25 of us. Some look as though they've pulled all-nighters and just showed up; some, like they've mainlined coffee; others, asleep but mobile. Then there's me, an extreme morning person. I'd be up at this hour anyway, probably exercising.

Those who've taken the course before tell the rest of us how to proceed: Form two lines, jog into the park to the asphalt volleyball courts right next to the sand volleyball pit. Get into formation (five lines of five people across), face forward and wait. There are two ways to address Jack, we're told: "Yes/No/Good morning, Instructor Walston"



Above: Ground patrol—after three days (and about a thousand miles), I master the art of the low crawl. (PS: It is a great shoulder and arm shaper.) Right: Me in the leaning rest position, with 20 pounds of sand strapped to my back.



or "Hoo-yah!" the SEAL version of an enthusiastic affirmative. Later, when I slip and say the civilian version, "Oh yeah!" to Jack, he informs me in no uncertain terms which one he prefers.

Apparently, as Jack comes into sight from a nearby grove of trees, we don't shout out our greeting in unison. "Into the pit, now. Low crawls!" he barks. We stampede into the sandpit and throw ourselves to our stomachs. It's dark, and I'm surrounded by flailing arms and legs. I have no idea what low crawls are, but I'm smart enough not to stop

and ask. I just copy what the guy next to me is doing. It's torture—basically pulling your body along the sand, keeping your belly in full-frontal contact with the ground at all times. We keep on doing this until we get it right. This takes awhile. After that, we do endless calisthenics in the sand: jumping jacks, crunches, leg lifts, squats, lunges and more. Through it all, Jack lays down the law: "I'm not here to make you quit. If you do, it's because you've decided to quit." Me? Quit exercise? Never. Or at least, not yet.

DAY TWO: TUESDAY

Again, class starts off brutally, as Jack orders us to "bear crawl" (an ungainly all-fours semi-crouching position on your palms and the balls of your feet) to a far-off statue. Then someone pisses him off, and we have to do low crawling to the sandpit. Tree roots, dirt, gravel and rocks are no excuse to lift our bodies off the ground. My muscles, already sore from yesterday, burn. Next, we do countless ab exercises—but at least we're not crawling. I leave class with my elbows rubbed raw. (I wear elbow pads the rest of the course.) Later, in the shower, I watch as bruises bloom up and down my thighs and hips. If I'm doing this for a better body, it sure is a work in progress.

DAY THREE: WEDNESDAY

Today turns out to be long-run day. We're ordered into the sandpit and told to fill our packs with 20 pounds of sand. We line up single file. We have to run the big loop of the park (six miles), doing "Indian runs" (as you run along, the last person in line sprints to the front, and so on). We pass the time by talking about ourselves. Most are Wall Street-type traders, some are entrepreneurs, and all are way younger than me—about 12 years younger. Some have taken the week off to do this course. One woman has never run a mile before, but another just ran the Boston Marathon. A couple of people are just hoping to lose some weight and gain some fitness. But we all have one thing in common: It's us against Jack, and we have to help one another.

DAY FOUR: THURSDAY

Packs on, we're ordered into the "leaning rest" position. It sounds nice, but it's actually the push-up position held for endless lengths of time. We attempt some calisthenics, but we fail to count together, so we're sent to the sandpit for punishment and exercises. Then, Jack sends each of us off, one at a time, to run Sheep Meadow. The rest of us wait in a one-armed push-up position. Running feels like a relief. The grand finale: "three-person buddy carries"—two

Body+MIND

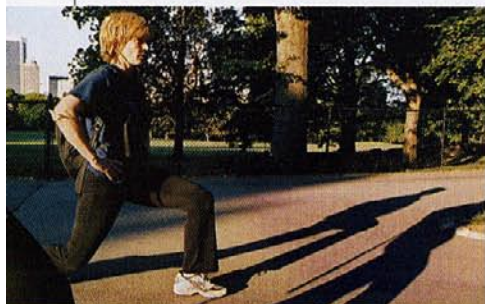
people link arms to form a basket, and the third gets carried on top. When you've carried as long as you can, you switch places. After class, I walk back to my apartment building. The doorman, noting my sweat-soaked hair, remarks, "I didn't know you'd taken up swimming."

DAY FIVE: FRIDAY

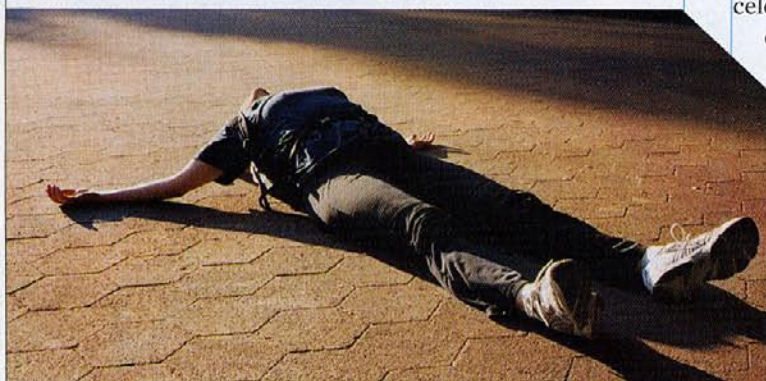
More running. Along the route, Jack pulls us over to the grass to do calisthenics. (Doing sit-ups while panting is tough.) We've started to become protective of one another. I share my water with Carin, who has forgotten hers. We may be a bunch of type As, but we need each other to get through this. Megan and I agree that the best way to deal with Jack is to think of him as a solar eclipse—if you don't look him directly in the eye, you won't get hurt.

DAY SIX: MONDAY

We line up after a weekend off. First, three-person buddy carries. Despite doing nothing active all weekend, my abs and shoulders feel stronger than the last time we did this. Then, we hustle into the sandpit for calisthenics. In sets of 100. (That is why Navy SEALs are ripped, I'm convinced: Repetition gives your muscles a better size and shape.) Finally, he sends us off to run. Later, at work, my cleaning lady calls. "Well, I threw out that sack of dirt," she says. It takes me a minute to realize that she has emptied my backpack of sand! I can't show up to class with an empty



Left: I think Jack is calling these "standing lunges," until I hear him correctly: "Satan lunges," in which you lunge and jump to switch leg position in midair—devilishly painful. Below: Taking a break between countless ab repetitions.



knapsack—the whole group would be punished with calisthenics. I'll have to get to class early so I can refill my pack.

DAY SEVEN: TUESDAY

In my rush to get to class for the stealth sand refill, I forget my elbow pads. I have a moment of cold-sweat dread: My scabs are going to get ripped off. Instead, I get lucky. Nothing we do today involves elbow-to-ground contact. Lots of calisthenics, then a two-mile run. I find this day almost easy. At work, the waistband of my skirt is looser. I'm also a walking bundle of positivity, good spirits and energy—maybe that's why people sign up for this class more than once.

DAY EIGHT: WEDNESDAY

Rich, who has taken this class 12 (!) times, told me there's an old SEAL saying: "The only easy day was yesterday." True. We hustle down to the baseball fields about a quarter mile away, line up and low-crawl (thank god I remembered my elbow pads today!) for endless yards. Then bear crawls to finish it off. We're about to sprint back to the start, but someone interrupts Jack, so we have to do low crawls again. Then, someone else gets Jack even angrier, and we have to do somersaults (with backpacks on). I get so dizzy I start dry heaving. Lovely. But my abs feel surprisingly strong.

DAY NINE: THURSDAY

Calisthenics on blacktop and in the sand. Then Jack deploys us in pairs to do the loop. I have a nice slowish run with Jeff. He signed up for the course because he's 20 pounds overweight, has high cholesterol, high blood sugar and a family history of diabetes. Oh. Some people do this for health reasons, not just superficial, what-the-heck ones like mine....

DAY 10: FRIDAY

The usual drill: push-ups, lunges, squats and so on. Then we get to dump our sand back in the pit. We break into a celebratory round of jumping jacks. Class ends with each of us running up to Jack, looking him in the eye and shaking his hand. And thanking him.

Once I get home, I tally up the vital statistics. I'm four pounds lighter and have lost an inch around my waist, a half inch in the hips and a half inch in each thigh. Even I am impressed with results like these in just two weeks, with no calorie restriction. It makes me want to sign up again. I want to see how much more I can improve from here. *Hoo-yah!* **M**

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