

Weight training leads to healthier living, reduces stress and risk of disease

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Nearly everyone that lives in Vernon knows that a number of local men, some retired, some not, meet at various restaurants every morning for coffee and chit chat. What Vernon may not know is that a select group of women get together early every Monday, Wednesday and Friday morning at Gym Bob's on South Main Street.

Known as "The Gym Cuties", the current group includes Sherry Fuqua, Kathryn Harris, Mary Sue Gunn, Joanie Rogers, Becky Oglesby, Sunny Hawkins, Chris Fritze and Ruth Streit.

The gym was the first fitness club to open in Vernon nearly 22 years ago and Kathryn, Mary Sue and Joanie have been there from the start. Joanie said "I would arrive carrying my infant twins, John and Ann, one on each hip, and drop them off in the supervised nursery while I worked out".

At that time, the focus was on aerobics and jazzercise. Today, under the supervision of their personal trainer, Randy Gaines, the ladies focus on strength training and finish each session with a cardio workout on one of the many machines in the gym.

Ruth Streit, 96, always said she would workout with her long-time friend, Sherry Fuqua, if she ever moved to town. Three years ago, after moving within the city limits, Sherry invited her to join and they have been workout partners since, driving together to the gym three times a week.

The two matriarchs even have a designated parking spot. Sherry said that everyone was concerned about her parking in front of the gym and how, in their opinion, she always backed out the wrong way onto Main Street after their session was over. There had been talk of placing a sign on the side of the building with her name on it for her safety, but since that never materialized, she continues to park in her spot in front of the building. "It's not a labeled spot but everyone in the early morning group knows it is where we park", Sherry said. On the Friday morning that I met with the group for this interview, her spot had already been taken when she arrived. Imagine her shock when she discovered the parking spot culprit was none other than her son James, who had shown up to take their annual group Christmas photo.

About a year ago, Ruth stopped taking her prescribed blood thinner medication, a surgical requirement for her eye surgery. This, unfortunately, led to a heart attack about a week after the procedure. Trainer Randy Gaines said "Ruth called me while still in Rehabilitation after her heart attack and told me to save her spot because she would be back. And she was back two months later!" She said she had two goals. One was to be able to get in and out of the bathtub and the other was to get in and out of her son's pickup, both unassisted. She has reached that goal.

Mary Sue Gunn moved to Vernon in 1987 and joined the Vernon Middle School as the Physical Education teacher. A national running champion in college, Gunn still shares her love of fitness every Wednesday at the after-school program at United Methodist, playing kickball and other fitness games with the school children.

Fitness has been a big part of her life. She stated "when I was teaching, I learned that the habits we have as young people don't necessarily make that big a difference in our early years. It's the latter part of your life where these habits with exercise and what you eat play a big part in being healthy as you get older". She went on to say "It makes you stronger. It's neat to see some of my former students here in the gym, knowing we exercised together when they were kids in my P.E. class.

Kathryn Harris said her goal had always been to "just stay in good shape, be healthy and fit and keep up with her kids". Sports and fitness have long been a part of her family life. Her son, John, has been a sports commentator for Texas Tech University football games, known as the voice of Texas Tech.

After moving her five years ago, Becky Oglesby joined the group about four years ago. She competes

in barrel racing nearly every weekend, a rodeo event in which a horse and rider attempt to complete a cloverleaf pattern around preset barrels in the fastest time. On why she joined the early morning group she stated "my goal was weight loss, increased leg strength for riding and also, I just wanted to be a good example for my girls". She has two daughters, 16 and 7. The youngest joins her at the gym during the summer and even has her own set of weights she uses when with her mom.

"When I started coming to the gym, I didn't attend regularly. I just showed up from time to time. That really didn't help me at all". Once she got committed to a workout schedule three times a week, she started seeing results. "Barrel racing requires a lot of leg strength to ride and I'm so much stronger now. I have also lost over twenty pounds. It has really made a difference."

The ladies all agreed that the strength training helps them lose inches and strengthen their bones and muscles while the cardio workout helps them lose weight. Joanie said "some women may be worried that they are going to get big and bulky if they lift weights but you don't. Muscle is smaller than fat". Mary Sue agreed saying "we don't have the hormones, the testosterone like men so bulking up is not a concern for women".

When asked what wish they could tell the 25-30 year old version of themselves, a common theme was to "watch what you eat". Nutrition matters as much as exercise.

Becky said "take better care of your body because you only have one". She worked for a nutritionist years ago and he told her "the smartest way to go to the grocery store is to stay on the outer aisles. That's where the real food is. The vegetables, the meats. It's the processed foods in the middle you want to stay away from".

Joanie said she wishes she had made better choices on what she ate when younger. She is a firm believer that what you eat is as important, if not more important than exercise. While she doesn't track her food intake daily, she makes good choices every day. "If you exercise and then just eat what you want, you can gain weight. You really have to watch what you eat. Junk food tastes so good but if you start eating healthy and eliminate all junk food, you'll find that healthy food also tastes good. Don't try to mix junk food and healthy food. It doesn't work. Betty Crocker is not good for you. Pillsbury is not good for you. You have to eat real food- vegetables and protein."

Trainer Randy Gaines is in agreement, stating his meal choices were a problem when he was younger. He has Type 2 diabetes and said that it runs in his family. "I wish I had eaten better back then. I was working out but didn't make wise eating decisions." He now knows a lot more about eating well which helps him avoid the temptation of old favorites, like the freshly made donuts sometimes offered in the breakroom at North Texas State Hospital where he works the night shift. "Our shift ends at 7:00 a.m. and those donuts are ready at about 4:00 a.m. each morning. On occasion, someone will make an early morning run to pick some up and bring them back to share with the rest of us. I am always offered a donut or two but can't eat them. I might want one, but I know that it will spike my blood sugars so I just have to say no".

Studies have shown that an active lifestyle is an important part of healthy aging. Exercise and physical activity can improve your overall health, and help you maintain your independence as you age. It's also been shown to reduce disease risk factors, manage stress and improve mood. Enjoy every day to the fullest. This merry band of women seem to be enjoying the health and wellness journey and each other's company.

Committed to fitness, these ladies have made a decision to age strengthfully. They said anyone interested in increasing their fitness lifestyle is welcome to join them even if you haven't ever been to a gym. They meet at 8:00 a.m. every Monday, Wednesday and Friday at Gym Bob's. The gym offers month to month membership fees requiring no long-term contract.



Pictured are
(top row from left to right) Joanie Rogers and Randy Gaines, Ruth Streit,
(middle row from left to right) Sherry Fuqua, Mary Sue Gunn,
(bottom row from left to right) Kathryn Harris, Becky Oglesby.

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