

"I HAVEN'T HAD THIS MUCH

FUN

**SINCE
I WAS A
KID!"**

**TRULY
BEAMING**

The author hits the balance beam in May 2016, five months after she stepped back into the gym.

Looking to hit Escape on her tired-all-the-time daily grind, **Judi Ketteler** discovered her childhood joy in gymnastics held the key to bringing her adult life back into balance

LAST YEAR, I MADE A RESOLUTION to be a more fun parent. Some time around January 3, I resolved instead to be a more fun *person*. With two little kids, a full-time job (I'm the breadwinner) and a busy volunteer schedule, it didn't seem like an easy resolution to keep. But given my growing sense of resentment over my general load of responsibilities, I knew it was one I needed to make. So here's what I did:

The first Thursday evening in January, I drove to the YMCA. I walked into the gymnastics center and gave a nod to the other moms sitting on the bleachers. But instead of

joining them to watch tiny tots learning to do handsprings, I took off my shoes and stepped onto the mat to start stretching. I pushed into a downward dog and did some gentle wrist circles—the whole time feeling the weight of the moms' eyes on me and guessing at the questions forming in their heads. *Isn't she one of us? Does she think she's a gymnast? Literally?*

Yes, yes and yes. I'm 42 years old, and as of January of last year, I'm in gymnastics again. At 5' 6" and 140 pounds, I am neither tiny nor a tot. I'm a grown woman in an adult gymnastics class, reliving the glory days →

of my childhood sport, and it's brought me back to myself in a way I hadn't known was possible.

I quit gymnastics at 16. I loved it in that deep, uncluttered way you love things as a child. I was decent, talent-wise, but didn't have the drive or the physique to really make it. If I wasn't going to the Olympics or getting a scholarship, it wasn't clear to me why I should continue. Looking back, I wonder why "because it makes me happy" wasn't on my radar as a valid reason to keep at it. You grow up and leave childhood—and fun—behind. But why?

That first night at the gym, I pondered that question as I gingerly began moving. (My husband had begged, "Please, please, don't get injured!" before I left.)

And in fact I was tentative. I saw stars when I went upside down, my wrists felt weak and my back simply wouldn't bend the way it once had. I'd coached gymnastics a bit in my 20s, but aside from some handstands in the backyard, I hadn't done anything like this in a dozen years.

After completing a series of round-offs (similar to cartwheels), I found the courage to try a roundoff into a back handspring. The motion made me dizzy, and my insides felt far too stretched. Not only that, but I peed in my pants a little bit.

I did another one anyway.

Within a few weeks, I added a backflip to the series. I had my friend Jessica take a video of me doing it, which I put up on

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Facebook (naturally). My friends were in awe. They'd had no idea I could flip my body around like that at my age. Honestly, neither had I. By summer, I was tumbling with confidence. By fall, I held handstands on the beam. So much was coming back to me, and yet so little was at stake—which was a beautiful thing.

You might be thinking, *That's fine for you, lady. You spent your childhood flipping.* Yes, I did. But what did you spend yours doing? Something, I bet. Guess what? Your body remembers it. Research from the University of Oslo shows that the nuclei that hold muscle memory inside your cells aren't lost, even when muscles atrophy. As a result, when you work those same muscles in the same way again, the muscles "remember" and can eventually bounce back to perform as they used to. The earlier in life those nuclei form, the more likely you are to retain that muscle memory.

Not only do your muscles remember, but the rest of you does, too. When you reconnect to a physical source of joy from childhood, chances are it will make you happy again.

I've been a runner for 20 years. I go to yoga every week. I'm supposed to do these things as a responsible adult who wants to live a healthy life. I enjoy these activities in the way adults enjoy things.

FAMILY MAT(TERS)

"Max is a total monkey, but not ready for gymnastics yet. Georgia takes a class, but seems to be in it mostly for the leotard."

But I *love* flipping through the air. There is no "supposed to" there. It's pure fun. (Not to mention a stellar core workout.)

Fitness is an intensely adult concept—one we really didn't grasp when we skipped and skated and took ballet and tap and played soccer and softball and hockey and had relay races as kids. You know, when we weren't parents.

What if that joyful place isn't as far away as it seems? What if you had it right way back then and—despite the stretch marks, a few extra pounds and a long list of grown-up to-do's—there's something still there for you after all these years? Are you willing to risk feeling silly and embrace undiluted fun? Can you take what you wish for your children and give it to yourself?

My 8-year-old son builds BMX-style bike ramps in our driveway and flies through the air with glee. "Hold on to that," I always say to him. My 6-year-old daughter splashes and dives like a mermaid in the pool, unaware that there would ever be any reason not to do such a thing. "Don't ever forget you'll always have that freedom," I always say to her.

Now I say these things to myself, too. That's what being a fun person (and a fun parent) gives you the ability to do.

I'll tell you what: It's not for the ego-driven, this game of reconnecting with a childhood sport. The moms on the gym bleachers, tapping on their phones to while away the hours? They don't know what to make of me. I see it in their eyes.

At first I didn't know what to make of me, either—back in the gym after so much time, walking the beam like I owned it, working on drills to remember how to twist in midair again. But when I step on that mat, a time traveler in a leotard, adulthood drops away. My wrists may ache, but my soul feels nothing but relief. It hasn't been such a difficult New Year's resolution to keep after all. ♦