

# 'THERE'S NOTHING BETTER THAN BEING A WOMAN AND FEELING STRONG'

We caught up with fitness extraordinaire **Sarah Jayne Dunn**, 43, to discuss the benefits of weight training and hear why she's never felt fitter

**Words:** Joanna Ebsworth **Photography:** Ultimate Performance

**W**hen *Women's Fitness* last interviewed Sarah Jayne Dunn back in 2019, it was to catch up on the results of her strength training journey with Ultimate Performance (UP; [ultimateperformance.com](http://ultimateperformance.com)). Using UP's LiveUP online coaching platform, she'd just completed one of the personal training specialist's famous 12-week Transformation Programmes – a second for Dunn, since she had also finished one of the programmes in 2018 to get in shape for her nuptials after the birth of her son Stanley 18 months earlier – and she was feeling stronger, healthier and happier than ever.

Much has changed for the actress in the five years since we last spoke, including a well-publicised career shift that sparked a media frenzy after her

*Hollyoaks* bosses issued her an ultimatum in 2021: to delete her newly launched OnlyFans account or leave the TV soap she had appeared on since the age of 14. The rest is history, but if there's one thing that has remained a constant for Dunn throughout this turbulent time, it's her dedication to her fitness and strength training, which she credits with helping her to survive, thrive, and become the strong, powerful, multi-faceted woman she is today.

Now, at the age of 43, the recently qualified pole fitness instructor and Intuitive Psychology coach has finished a new 16-week strength training programme under the guidance of PT Adam Newton at Ultimate Performance Cheshire, which she says she took on to futureproof her body and mind against the onset



of perimenopause and gain the upper body strength she so desperately craved to further her pole fitness ability. With this in mind, and with International Women's Day around the corner, we asked Dunn to tell us about her incredible gains, the value of strength training for women and why she's never felt more empowered.

## 'I was never the sporty kid at school.

And once I started working on *Hollyoaks* in my teens, I didn't get to explore sport any further. Later on, I knew that if I exercised, I'd be physically and mentally healthier, and that the payoff would be that my physique would change, which is why I started training with personal trainers; I was forever doing photoshoots for *Hollyoaks*, and wanted to feel my best. At the time, I don't think I felt the pressure to exercise or look and feel a certain way, but now I reflect upon it, I realise I never really enjoyed training. I never went to the gym and thought "this is amazing". It was always, "I've got to do this because I've got to do that".

## 'These days, I leave the gym feeling

strong, hyped up and really positive. The pivotal moment for that change came when my husband Jon and I both trained to become Level 3 personal trainers between acting jobs in 2014. Studying for my pre- and postnatal qualification as well gave me





*'The reasons  
I train now are  
very different  
to the reasons  
I did before'*





*'I really don't care what people think of me anymore, and that has given me so much freedom'*

a much deeper understanding of the female body and helped me to understand what physical fitness could do for me as a woman as I got older, rather than exercising to tick a box or look a certain way. The reasons I train now are very different to the reasons I did before, because they're backed by knowledge.

**'Having accountability is so important.'** When I first started training with UP, the main thing I noticed is that they're as on board with you for your transformation as you are. When you have a PT that is 100 per cent with you on the journey and you have photo check-ins and measurement check-ins every two

weeks, and they're messaging to see how you're doing and hold you up and say, "you can do this!", it makes a huge difference. That doesn't mean they're going, "what did you eat today?". It's more about them asking, "how are you feeling? Have you had any wobbles? Is there anything we need to address?". And that is vital because our menstrual cycle plays a big part in how we feel across a month. I never felt like I was spending two or three hours in the gym and then the rest was solely on me.

**'I respond really well to having a goal.'** Even though I didn't have any issues with my body before embarking on my most recent body

transformation, I wanted to take on another challenge because my strength had dropped off and that was hindering my progress in my pole sessions. Around the same time, there was this audio going round on Instagram of these two guys saying, "do you know what the average number of pull-ups a woman can do is? Zero". And that really riled me. So, that was another of my motivations: to get really strong, so I could do pull-ups to that audio and prove them wrong.

**'So far, my 40s have been amazing:** my best decade yet! I feel great because I really don't care what people think of me anymore, and





that has given me so much freedom. However, while I've not hit perimenopause yet, I'm aware that it will be imminent at some point over the next few years, so that was another reason for wanting to get stronger: to almost be ahead of the game because the benefits of weight training for women are brilliant, particularly when we hit menopause. And being a happier person benefits not only me but also everyone around me.

**'I started my most recent strength training transformation in August 2024.** This time, I trained with Adam Newton at UP Cheshire, just twice a week on Tuesdays and

Thursdays, because he took my pole sessions into account. Had I not been pole training as well, I probably would have had a third strength session, but you have to rest and recover, and Adam didn't want to burn me out. He always pushed me to my limits, noticed when I was about to hit failure and got me to push one more rep out without pushing me too far.

**'We trained in phases, and each phase was different to keep things fresh.** Sometimes, we did full-body workouts, and on other days he would focus on the legs or the upper-body only. The toughest days were when I had an upper-body session followed by a pole session a few hours later, but the payoff came when I was finally able to perform my first pull-up. By the end of the 16-weeks, I could do 10 press-ups and six pull-ups with good form, which really complemented my pole training. Now, pole moves that were more difficult, like the handspring, are much easier because I'm stronger, leaner and lighter, so I'm able to lift my bodyweight with more ease.

**'I used the Ultimate Performance Transform app to support me with my nutrition.** In the beginning, Adam helped me make a list of go-to foods to assist with my meal planning, including three protein sources – salmon, chicken and minced beef – and non-starch carbs like sweet potatoes and oats to mix and match them in the app to fit my macros. It sounds a bit daunting if you've never done it before, and I still weigh my food sometimes, but I'm getting to the point where I know what my portion of chicken or beef looks like. I'll often have eggs for breakfast, and if I'm training, I'll also have overnight oats with yoghurt and fruit. I never feel hungry because there's always substance in my meals.

**'It's so important to fuel your body properly when you're active.** There's just no point in going to the gym and working hard for an hour to then spend the rest of the week putting rubbish into your body, and the idea that you've got to starve yourself to lose weight is such a common misconception, as well. I didn't want to lose muscle, I wanted to build it, and



*'It's so empowering  
to know your  
body can handle  
whatever is  
thrown at it'*







Sarah has the upper-body strength for pole training

Photography: The Image Cella

# DUNN'S SAMPLE WORKOUTS

## UPPER-BODY SESSION

### SET 1

- 45-degree incline dumbbell press (10-12 reps x 3 / 60 secs rest / 3,1,1,1 tempo)
- Bodyweight pull-ups (5-8 reps x 3 / 60 secs rest / 3,1,1,1 tempo)

### SET 2

- Push-ups (10-12 reps x 3 / 60 secs rest / 3,1,1,1 tempo)
- V-bar cable row (10-12 reps x 3 / 60 secs rest / 3,1,1,1 tempo)

### SET 3

- Incline bench-supported cable lateral raises (12-15 reps x 3 / 60 secs rest / 2,1,1,1 tempo)
- Incline bench dumbbell biceps curls (12-15 reps x 3 / 60 secs rest / 2,1,1,1 tempo)
- Cable rope triceps extension (12-15 reps x 3 / 60 secs rest / 2,1,1,1 tempo)

### FINISHER

- Reverse bench-supported crunches (12-15 reps x 3 / 60 secs rest / 2,1,1,1 tempo)

## LOWER-BODY SESSION

### SET 1

- Dumbbell split-squats (10-12 reps each leg x 3 / 60 secs rest / 3,1,1,1 tempo)
- Incline hip extensions (10-12 reps x 3 / 60 secs rest / 3,1,1,1 tempo)

### SET 2

- Pendulum (10-12 reps x 3 / 60 secs rest / 3,1,1,1 tempo)
- Romanian deadlift with dumbbell (10-12 reps x 3 / 60 secs rest / 3,1,1,1 tempo)

### SET 3

- Walking lunges (20 reps x 3 / 60 secs rest / 2,1,1,1 tempo)
- Leg curl (12-15 reps x 3 / 60 secs rest / 2,1,1,1 tempo)
- Abduction (12-15 reps x 3 / 60 secs rest / 2,1,1,1 tempo)

### FINISHER

- Prowler sprints (50m as fast as possible x 3 / 90 secs rest)

protein is essential for that. That's why I always had a protein shake with creatine after training, to give me the energy and power to train for longer and lift heavier weights.

### **'I think there's nothing better than being a woman and feeling strong.'**

It's so empowering to know your body can handle whatever is thrown at it, or you are at least giving it the best chance to handle these things. Aside from knowing that I'm physically more powerful, I think the fact that I have set myself these challenges and committed to them and completed them makes me feel powerful mentally. And that has a knock-on effect for day-to-day things. If something comes up that I find challenging, I know the only thing stopping me from doing it is me. It just proves what you are capable of, and I think that's where the sense of empowerment comes from. You feel limitless, and that feels amazing.

### **'When it comes to fitness, it's crucial that you find your thing, so you can commit to it.'**

People are always going to judge you no matter what, so you might as well do something that will benefit you, because exercise makes you feel better. That has a ripple effect on your relationships and how you go about your day because you feel unstoppable. It's about taking baby steps, building them up, being proud of yourself and giving yourself credit for what you've achieved. If getting out of the house and walking for five

minutes is a huge deal for you and you do it, that is amazing. Next time, do it twice, and remember that everyone must start somewhere.

### **'Taking up pole fitness two years ago has really helped me embrace my body.'**

It gives you permission to celebrate who you are, connect to your body, let your inhibitions go and express yourself through shape, movement, dance and strength. Plus, it's really physically challenging! Taking back control over my body has been a massive thing for me and given me added confidence since leaving *Hollyoaks*. I'm no longer a child. I'm in my 40s and this is my body. This is my skin, and how I put it out there is up to me for once. I'm a big believer that everything happens for a reason, and I love being able to share that empowerment and messaging with other women to inspire them.

### **'I think being physically strong goes hand-in-hand with being mentally strong.'**

Going to the gym can feel intimidating, but you don't have to go to the gym – just walking or doing yoga or signing up for a Couch to 5K can help you feel more control, stand taller and feel bigger in the room. As women, we one hundred per cent need to take up more space. It's about going, "I'm allowed to be here. I've earned this. I deserve this. I'm as capable as you and I am worthy of being in this space". If I could bottle that feeling up and give it to every single woman, I would.' 🍷