

‘ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE IF YOU PUT YOUR MIND TO IT’

Victoria has put the fun back in cycling by exploring the outdoors



Former Olympian and World Champion cyclist **Victoria Pendleton** talks to Jo Ebsworth about the importance of taking on new challenges for physical and mental fitness, exercising in nature and appreciating the small things in life

As a youngster, I was a **Brownie, Guide, Ranger and Adventure Scout**, so I enjoyed *many* outdoor adventures. But as a professional cyclist, I was banned from doing most sports and outdoor pursuits. I wasn't even allowed to run in case I picked up an injury, so I was very much stuck in the gym, in the lab, on a bike and nothing else. Unsurprisingly, I spent my entire time as an athlete dreaming of being up in the mountains.

These days, I'm enjoying getting back to doing all the things I loved before cycling. After following such a strict training regime for many years, having the freedom to pick and choose what activities I want to do based on how I'm feeling has made a huge difference to me. Finding the fun in fitness again and exploring the outdoors just for the sake of it - without any strict competitive parameters - has become a really enjoyable part of my life as I move into the next stage after retiring from sport. ➔

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I'm still committed to training, but in terms of what I do and when I do it, I'm a little more fluid. Don't get me wrong, I'm still very competitive with myself, but I'm nowhere near as hard on myself as I used to be. When I get involved in something, I do like to give it my best shot because it's almost in my blood to push myself. I just don't necessarily have the same expectations of the outcome. These days, I like to take on challenges to keep fit, feel good about myself and look after my mental health, because when I train, I feel relaxed about the rest of my day. It's more about feeling good than achieving a goal, which is completely different to how I've spent my life since a very small person.

When someone approaches me to do a challenge, I'd usually say yes because I have terrible FOMO (fear of missing out). More recently, I've done a couple of smaller things with some female friends of mine who are a bit older than me and want to push themselves. They thought I wouldn't want to get involved in their challenges because they assumed their goals wouldn't be big enough for me, but helping them with

their training has been a lot of fun. It's nice to support people, and I'd love to do more mentoring in the future.

When you've been a high-level athlete, people can think you're very much involved in yourself, but I probably get way more fun out of supporting others over anything I've achieved professionally. I've been volunteering to help kids from challenging social backgrounds learn to ride horses, and even though I kind of got dropped in at the deep end, it's been so rewarding to help.

I honestly believe that if I can train to become a jump jockey at 34 years old, like I did, anything is possible if you put your mind to it. I think we women can be very quick to say, "oh, I shouldn't do that", or "I'm too old for that", or "I'm not experienced enough to try that". We put up barriers when we really should be saying, "you know what, I really want to do that so I'm just going to do it". That's the attitude I will live with until my dying day. Because life is short, and I think we need to enjoy it as much as possible. So, if there's something niggling at you and you want to try it or you think it looks fun, go



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and do it! You never know where it might lead you.

Somebody recently asked me what I'm scared of but, aside from FOMO, I don't think many things scare me. In fact, I really like standing on the edge and thinking, "can I do it?". I genuinely enjoy that adrenaline rush, and I cultivate it in the things I choose to do, because I think you feel really alive in that moment where you're a bit nervous and unsure, but you know that you are going to do it anyway.

I spent a lot of time on the road during my career. I would travel to new places and meet new people, so being outdoors is really sacred to me. I think many people realised the value of time spent outdoors during the pandemic when it suddenly became restricted - just being able to get some fresh air and see some greenery. Even if I'm cold and wet while I'm out, it's nice to be free and outdoors.

There's definitely a time and a place for being in the gym,



Cycling in the Swiss mountains gives Victoria a great deal of pleasure



Victoria is an ambassador for cycling clothing brand Le Col. Find out more and shop the new range at lecol.cc

ON YER BIKE!

Become a more confident cyclist with these tips from Victoria

- Cycling in a major city can be terrifying. If I lived in a city and was new to cycling, I'd look for places to ride that are cycle-friendly and not used by vehicles. It's all about finding quieter routes to ride while you gain confidence, because having confidence on a bike is everything.
- It's easy to feel hesitant when you're new to cycling. But when you doubt yourself you end up feeling vulnerable. Instead, try to feel dominant and proactive. Own your space on the road! Taking a cycling proficiency course to improve your bike handling skills will help.
- Building confidence on your bike can come from finding quieter places to cycle, joining a cycling club or riding with people who have more experience. Most experienced cyclists will remember what it's like to be a beginner and will support you without allowing things to get competitive.
- Making sure you feel comfortable also involves wearing the right kit. I wouldn't get on my bike for 10 minutes without wearing a pair of padded cycling shorts – it's just not going to happen! I always wear a helmet and gloves as well, because if you fall and graze your hands, you're not cycling anywhere.

Words: Joanna Ebsworth | Photography: Le Col

but if you're struggling to find the motivation to get fit, consider trying to spend more time in the great outdoors. Personally, I always prefer to embrace the fun and muddiness of being outdoors when it's raining by getting on my mountain bike and heading for the trails or going cross-country running. Trust me, it's really not that much fun getting drenched on a road bike on wet tarmac!

For me, a big part of cycling nowadays is about enjoying the environment, and it's the same when I'm running. I think appreciating your surroundings – whether that's taking in a beautiful view, watching the sunrise or seeing really far across the countryside on a clear day – gives you a bit of a reward for your hard work, and that's important because it makes things physically easier when you can enjoy fitness mentally in some way.

I have lots of books on mindfulness, affirmations, religion and mindset. Someone randomly sent me a book about appreciating nature, but when I started to read it, I thought, "I already do that!". For example, if I see a robin in the garden, I'll say hello to it. Is that weird? Or I'll notice that a tree has a

beautiful shape, or I'll smile when the leaves are about to open in springtime. I just find myself acknowledging those very small things that make me happy, and when I'm in that frame of mind, I'm not worrying or stressing about anything. I'm just standing there with my eyes open and appreciating what's around me. I do the same thing with my horses. I'm always telling them how great they look when I see them!

My second collection of cycling clothing with Le Col features snakes again because they're a big part of my life and design perspective. Personally, I think they're slightly misunderstood creatures. In folklore, they have many associations with shedding your skin, moving on, changing and adapting, and I appreciate that symbolism because I don't feel like you have to stay in one place. Many people think that snakes are sinister, but when I was mountaineering in Bolivia, my guide told me that snakes are considered one of the most humble and grounded creatures in Aztec culture. That's because they lie with their belly to the floor, so they can't get any closer to nature, which is something I really value. 🐍