

FITTER, FASTER, STRONGER

What does it mean to be strong? Three powerful women reveal the secrets behind their strength and how they're paving the way for future generations

WORDS: Joanna Ebsworth



‘Being strong means having confidence in yourself’



Sam Briggs (@bicepslikebriggs) has represented the UK nine times at the CrossFit Games, and won the Games in 2013.

I took up CrossFit in 2009 to help me become stronger for my job as a firefighter. I never wanted to be the token woman – I wanted to lift all the equipment and do everything the guys could do, if not do it better. Twelve years later, my proudest achievement has been winning the CrossFit games in 2013 after leaving the fire brigade following 10 years of service. I was 30 at the time, coming back from a broken kneecap, and everyone was telling me I was past it. Being crowned “the fittest woman in the world” made all the pain and sacrifice worth it.

‘When I first started doing CrossFit, people said things to me like “aren’t you worried you’ll get too big?” or “aren’t you scared you’ll end up looking like a man?”. Thankfully, attitudes are changing and you’re more likely to hear people say “wow, did you see that woman lifting 100kg?”. These days, you’ll also find that women are outshining the men in certain events – I have managed to come third overall out of the men and women on trail runs and

endurance events, while Tia-Clair Toomey (the current “fittest woman in the world”) has come first overall many times.

‘For me, being strong isn’t just about lifting heavy things. Mentally, it’s about pushing past barriers that other people set upon you. It means having confidence in yourself and not having to rely on others. In order to compete at this level for so long, you have to have mental strength. I’ve now set the goal of trying to make it back to the CrossFit Games this year and the next, and if I do make it to 2022 when I turn 40, I’ll apparently be officially crowned as “the fittest 40-year-old in history”.

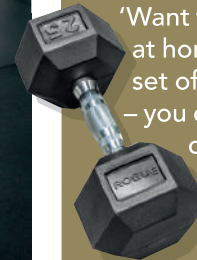
‘After that, I plan to retire gracefully, because while I still love competing and pushing myself, recovery gets a lot harder the older you get. I’m not a naturally strong person and the

SAM’S TOP TRAINING KIT



‘Taking a good-quality collagen supplement has been essential for me as I’ve

gotten older, as it’s amazing for tendons and ligaments. I take Momentous Collagen Peptides.’ (\$44 for 507g; livementous.com)



‘Want to get stronger at home? Invest in a set of dumbbells – you can do so many different exercises with them and get a full-body workout. Mine are from Rogue Fitness.’ (rogueeurope.eu)



‘With a good pair of running shoes, you can do a workout wherever you are in the world, no matter whether gyms are open or not. Try the new Asics Metaspeed Edge shoes.’ (£225; asics.com)

amount of lifting I’ve had to do in order to have a chance of qualifying has taken a big toll on my body, so I’m looking forward to taking on different endurance challenges in the future to raise money and awareness for charities – that would be a nice turn in my career, as well as continuing to inspire the younger generation of strong women coming through.’

'I want to show people that women are strong'

Emma Ashley (@eashley10) works as a farmer and personal trainer. She won the title of Britain's Fittest Farmer in 2020.

I've lived on my family-run farm in Hertford all my life and always helped out. Over the years, our farm has diversified – the animals have gone, the chicken sheds have been turned into houses, and we've moved into hay crops and wildlife conservations areas – but seasonal changes meant I didn't always have a full-time job. So, having a passion for fitness, I trained to become a personal trainer seven years ago and quickly discovered that I really enjoy helping people mentally through exercise.

Farmers are often miles away from civilisation, without the internet or a phone signal, so they can regularly feel lonely and isolated. In training farmers, I've been able to give them the physical strength and endurance they need to do their jobs, while also helping them to boost their endorphin levels and to de-stress. My training sessions give people an opportunity to talk. I often feel like I'm a counsellor but I'm always happy to listen and, hopefully, help them to feel better afterwards.

Thankfully, my farm won a grant to have fibre optic broadband installed (which is incredibly rare in the countryside), so I managed to continue teaching some clients over Zoom during lockdown. And I also introduced a wellbeing policy on the farm, so tenants know I'm always there if they need someone to talk to. But my proudest achievement so far has been winning the Britain's Fittest Farmer competition last year – a yearly event run by *Farmers Weekly* that champions physical and mental health in UK agriculture (fwi.co.uk/bff). I'd never competed in anything before, so my boyfriend helped me train, and my dad (who is my biggest inspiration) supported me every step of the way. The final was incredibly gruelling, but I wanted to show people that women are strong.

Personally, I've been through a lot, but fitness has always helped me survive. I think I've come out a much stronger person, physically and mentally, and I'm better able to pass on what I've learnt to others. My favourite type of training is CrossFit, mixing cardio and strength together, and I love



lifting weights – the heavier, the better! I love that my four-year-old daughter, Eloise, sees me being strong, confident and capable, and I hope it rubs off on her.'

EMMA'S TOP STRENGTH TRAINING MOVES

1. 'Deadlifts work practically every area of your body, including your legs, core and bum. The most I've lifted is 110kg, but my goal is to lift 120kg – double my bodyweight.'

2. 'Burpees challenge every muscle while raising your heart rate. My clients hate them to start with but, when the burpees get easier, they end up feeling proud of themselves.'

3. 'I've been practising handstand walking for a year, and I was so proud of myself when I managed to do it for the first time. I love being upside down, learning a new skill and challenging my balance.'

'Being fit gave me a strong sense of who I was'

Nesrine Dally (@nez_healthhub) is a Nike trainer and coach. She made history as Britain's first hijab-wearing Muay Thai fighter to compete in Thailand.

I grew up with a burning passion for all sports, and I swam for my borough – always pushing myself physically to see how far or fast I could go. In my teenage years, being fit gave me confidence, an outlet and a strong sense of who I was, and I'm just as passionate about exercise now as little eight-year-old Nez was. I still want to race, run, compete and regularly test my physical and mental limits.

'Fitness as a career was the only choice for me. I started personal training 14 years ago while studying for my sports science degree at university, and I still love helping others to find confidence, pick up new skills and love their bodies for the amazing things they can achieve – it's the best part of what I do!

'I took up Muay Thai over a decade ago when none of my university clubs interested me. I immediately fell in love with the sport's culture, traditions, respect and discipline, not to mention how physically demanding it is – and I haven't stopped since. I didn't face any barriers back then, despite being one of the only women in the gym; they came later when I started wearing a hijab.

'Finding my feet as a Muslim woman in the world of sport took a long time. The fitness industry has long lacked diversity and the lack of representation is damaging. I've always felt confident in my ability as a coach, but I haven't always felt included or represented. The truth is, there aren't many women who look like me on the front of fitness magazines and that means young women give up or don't even try because they don't see themselves being represented in certain spaces. As the saying goes, you can't be what you can't see. My mission now is to use my platform to pave the way for all women to pursue sport.

'Getting back in the ring as Britain's first hijab-wearing fighter after five years off from competing represented so much to me. I was trying to find my path, and it took so much courage, self-belief and determination to return. But I also knew that I was opening a door for many women to follow in my footsteps and fight for their dreams. We need to challenge society's preconceived ideas about women (and Muslim women) in sport. We belong in sport and we can, and will, be anything we want to be.'

GET MOVING!

Q. Tell us about the TRX Let's Move campaign...

A. 'TRX's campaign represents everything I am about – inclusive fitness. It's a message that inspires and includes everyone. Fitness means something different to everyone and we all choose to express that differently with how we choose to move. That's why I love the fact that TRX says "there are no rules to how you move, so long as it moves you", regardless of your age, gender, size or any other factors. It's a powerful message because health and fitness is for everybody.' For more information, visit trxtraining.co.uk 📍

