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KELLY HOLMES

*'I want to be the best
person I can be'*

The former Olympian shares
how she stays so fit and
healthy in midlife



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MY LIFE IN HEALTH

‘I’M NOT SCARED OF WHAT OTHER PEOPLE THINK ANYMORE’

Former Olympic athlete Dame Kelly Holmes, 54, talks about being unprepared for perimenopause, celebrating the 20th anniversary of winning double gold at Athens 2004, and why it’s important to know your own body.

Someone recently said to me it’s a privilege to age but I disagree! While it *is* a privilege to get older – there are a lot of people who don’t get to enjoy that privilege – I don’t think it’s a privilege to age. I don’t need new wrinkles and I don’t want to slow down because I’m getting older! So, of course I’m going to fight the ageing process – that’s my premise for staying active! We all need to think about what we can do today to make a difference later, because we’re alive and kicking now, right? I don’t want to be bending down and groaning as I get out of my seat. And that’s why it’s so important to me that I keep on moving.

I’ve had an up-and-down history with staying active since retiring from international sport. I’ve always tried to keep myself going, but I never really had the motivation to push myself harder. Whereas

‘I’m 39 plus 15 years, rather than 54 years old, and I’m not prepared for people to say I’m past it’

now, I’ve got to a point in life where I want to prove I can still do anything I put my mind to. To me, I’m 39 plus 15, rather than 54 years old, and I’m not prepared for people to say I’m past it. I do think you get to a point in your 40s or 50s when you think, “Oh Gosh, I’d better start exercising”, because you hear about people passing away or being less mobile or suffering from injuries and health issues, and that motivates you to try harder because you don’t want to suffer needlessly.

I got really fit during lockdown doing online classes. But then I had some injuries and operations on my Achilles tendon, and it all went a bit downhill from there. My mental health was already suffering for other reasons, so between my physical and mental health, I wasn’t training that much and felt really low, unfit and lethargic – and that’s when I suddenly started to get body pains from perimenopause!



WORDS: JOANNA EBSWORTH. IMAGES: BETH STEDDON.

I definitely wasn't prepared for perimenopause. I didn't have a clue what it was, and I didn't know you had to be off your period for a year to be officially in menopause. I remember hearing that fact at a time when I hadn't had a period for about six months, and I'd been thinking "this is a breeze", because all my friends were talking about hot sweats and I hadn't had any. I was pretty pi**ed off when I got my period again! I thought I'd done the journey, but little did I know.

I didn't know that body pains could be a symptom of perimenopause. I'd been suffering from mobility issues for months, but it was only when I went to the gym for a little HIIT session and I couldn't even do one press up that I thought, "this isn't right!". The pains going through my wrists and the rest of my body were just awful and, being someone that has always done fitness, that was a real issue for me.

The biggest impact of not being able to exercise was on my mental health. I'd always been very strong for my age, so not being able to train at the gym felt ridiculous. As a former international athlete, I've always been in tune with my body, and I've also suffered from many injuries: stress fractures, ruptured calves, torn ligaments, the lot! So I knew the difference between feeling injured or fatigued from overworking my muscles in training and not feeling right in my body. That's when I realised I needed to look into things a bit more.

I should also mention that my mum passed away from myeloma. It's a blood cancer, with symptoms including back ache, body pains and osteoporosis, and while it's not hereditary, I was obviously more aware of it. My mum was constantly getting back aches and body pains, and, as a sportsperson, I was always offering to give her a massage, thinking it was muscular or to do with an injury. That's why I think it's so important for us to know our bodies, so we can understand the difference between an injury and not feeling right, and work out what our bodies are trying to tell us.

I was advised to try HRT after speaking to my doctor and having some blood tests. But it didn't help to alleviate my body pains. I just thought, why am I putting something into my body when it's not actually helping the thing I want help with?

'It's important for us to know our bodies, so we can work out what they're trying to tell us'





I came off the HRT, but that was my choice, and I'm not saying I shouldn't be back on it. But my priority was to deal with my joint pain so I could get back to doing the things I loved that benefited me physically and mentally.

I came across the collagen brand

Ancient + Brave while looking for HRT alternatives. I didn't know much about collagen other than its benefits for skin, hair and nails. While I'm into my skincare, I only became interested in finding out more when I heard that collagen could help my ligaments, tendons, joints and bone health. I looked into some of the people already taking Ancient + Brave supplements, including Davina McCall, whom I know, and that helped me to trust the brand more, but I also liked the name: "Ancient" reminded me of the ancient Olympic games, and "Brave" was about me taking control of my health.

My cupboards used to be full of supplements I'd forget to take.

But the Ancient + Brave jars are so beautiful, I keep them out where I can see them and that reminds me to take them. Taking collagen has made a huge difference to how I feel – I'm training loads more in the gym and I can do press ups again – and it's become a part of my daily ritual. I'll have a scoop of the True Collagen Powder (£29 for 40 servings) in my hot water and lemon first thing in the morning, and I'll have the Cacao + Collagen Powder (£24 for 25 servings) when I go training because I love the chocolatey taste. It's fair to say I've become a bit obsessed because I can have up to four drinks a day!

I didn't know that different types of collagen play different roles in the body.

Obviously, I noticed the difference after taking type 1 collagen supplements, which are great for the whole body and your skin, hair and nails but when I heard about Ancient + Brave's new Noble Collagen Capsules (£39 for 30), specifically formulated with type 2 collagen for joint health, it made sense for me to give them a go. About 95 per cent of your cartilage is made from type 2 collagen, and I can honestly say the supplement really works. In fact, I swear by it! If I can take something to help protect my knees and back and help me run further, faster and longer, then I will! Even I'm quite surprised by the way I run these days! Just 10 years ago, I wasn't doing that much. I was keeping myself ticking over,

'I have the mindset to keep my body going. I want to feel happy and in control, and I want to be the best person I can be'

but I wasn't challenging myself by entering races and events. Now, when I turn up to an event, such as a parkrun, I have the mindset that I'm not letting any woman of my age or in my age category beat me. At 54, I'm at the end of one age category (50-54), but I'm still smashing it! I'm on a roll this year, and I've been first in my age category, man or woman, in every single 5k I've done. In fact, I recently came 7th overall out of 500 people across all the age categories, and that makes me feel bloody brilliant!

I'm never going to be an elite athlete again, and I don't want to be one either! But I do have the mindset to keep my body going. Yes, I'm feeding into my competitiveness, but I think I'm doing it in a different way, and for positive reasons. I want to feel happy and in control, and I want to be the best person I can be because it's all about me now. That said, I also want to inspire other women along the way to move more, because it's known that women move less, and I think they need to be encouraged to take control and put themselves and their health first.

To make positive changes in your life, you need to tell yourself that you matter. I think many women are guilty of putting their work, family and friends first and making excuses to not do things for themselves. So, the first thing you need to ask yourself is: who are you? Who do you want to be, and what do you want to do as you go forward? Do you want to make yourself happy? Or do something you've never done before? Do you want to take control? We never give ourselves permission to do that, but at some stage of your life, it should unapologetically be about you. Once you answer those questions and potentially realise you're not where you want to be, you'll be in a position to do something about it, and get the support or education you need from others to set some personal goals just for you and take the next step.

I've come into 2024 completely owning who I am. I'm not scared of what other people think about me anymore. That's

allowing me to go, "Right, what do I want to do? Who do I want to be? How do I want to do it?". It took me 20 years to achieve my dream of winning double gold at the Athens Olympics at the age of 34 [in 2004], and I felt like I achieved something that wasn't even possible. Now that I'm celebrating that 20-year anniversary, it's obviously a time of remembrance for a major milestone, but it's also inspiring me to do something in a different sector of my life.

My goal is to inspire women to be better than they think they can be, whether they've had an active lifestyle or not. That's why I recently launched my women empowerment events called The Athena Effect [[instagram.com/athenaeffectevents](https://www.instagram.com/athenaeffectevents)], to bring women from all backgrounds, races, religions, cultures and sexual orientation together to promote women supporting women. My biggest message right now is that women supporting women has to be the most powerful thing we can do in our human race to move forward. I've won awards for leadership and philanthropy and my writing, and I hope to continue that with this new mission. I've never felt more empowered in my life. I feel as if I've got my golden glow back!



Kelly with Dr Jenna Macciocchi (left), head of innovation at Ancient + Brave, and Jo Woodhurst (right), head of nutrition.



Learn more about Ancient + Brave collagen supplements at [ancientandbrave.com](https://www.ancientandbrave.com).