

RAISING

the bar

BY CHARIS TORRANCE

You've got the power! Lifting weights can play a big role in living a healthier, happier, longer, stronger life. And, no, it's not too late to start.

Durban-based Lil Bianchi is a strength and performance coach and four-time World Champion Powerlifter.

AT

78, Joan MacDonald is the poster girl for

fitness transformations. Seven years ago, she was carrying about 90 kg and popping pills for blood pressure, cholesterol and acid reflux. Fast-forward to today and Joan is proudly showing off her strong abs and toned arms in a sports bra, gracing magazine covers and inspiring 1.9 million fans on Instagram (@trainwithjoan). She leads workout challenges, can easily bench-press 45 kg and has authored a memoir/self-help book titled *Flex Your Age: Defy Stereotypes and Reclaim Empowerment*.

Joan's transformation began with her daughter and personal trainer Michelle. 'Michelle just told me point-blank, "You don't have to get old like everyone else does,"' she says. And Joan knew she didn't want to get old like her own mother had. 'I had watched my mom go through the same thing, taking medication after medication, and I didn't want that life for myself.'

She began with lifting weights and gradually increased the load, finding strength and confidence she never knew she had. 'I was surprised at how much I enjoyed it... I felt like I was getting stronger, and that was a great feeling.' Within six months Joan had shed about 20 kg and gained new-found vitality. One year later, she was off her medications and had joined a gym.

WHY WEIGHT-LIFTING?

'Typically, muscle mass and strength increase steadily from birth until 30–35 years of age. We don't have to think about it much,' says Kelly

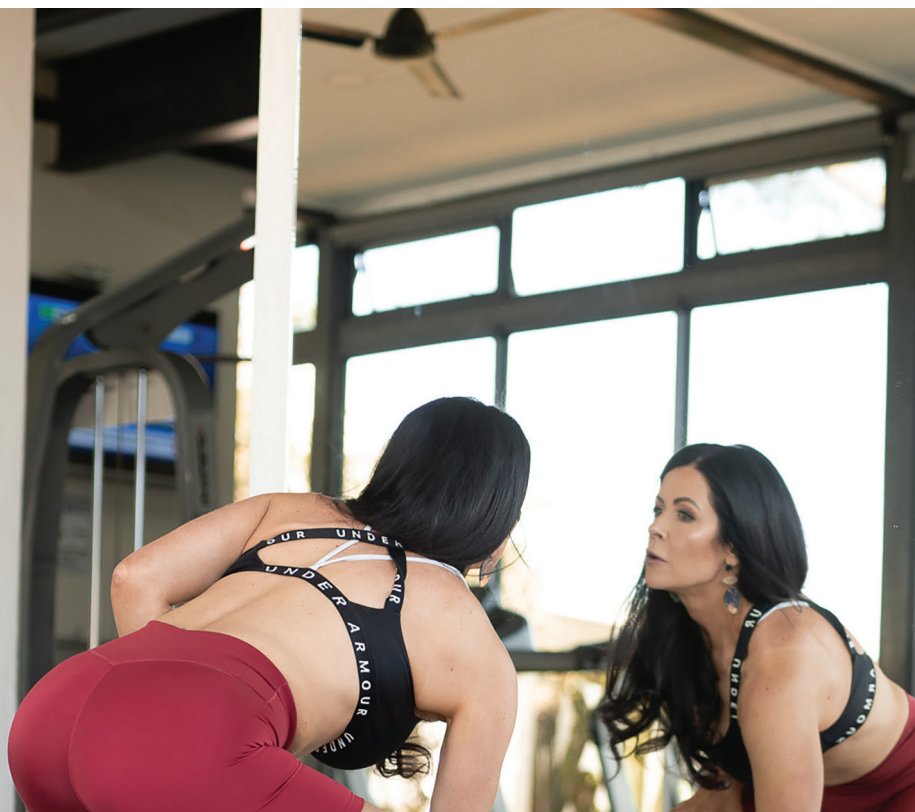
Joan MacDonald started weightlifting at 71. It transformed her life and she's now a social media sensation, author and inspiration to millions worldwide.



Stegen, an international lifestyle, diet and fitness coach. 'After that – without regular use – our muscles weaken and lose mass. This age-related loss of muscle mass and strength is called sarcopenia. After age 35, we lose 3–8% of our muscle every decade.'

Regular strength training protects your body from the effects of sarcopenia, ensuring you stay strong, independent and vibrant as you age.

'Weightlifting can change your life. The more muscle you have, the more longevity you will have. Muscle is the new longevity!'



Weightlifting is safe and beneficial for all ages when done correctly.

Inspired by a bodybuilder to start doing weight training, international lifestyle, diet and fitness coach Kelly Stegen transformed her physique in 12 weeks.

Introduced to weight training by a bodybuilder, Kelly transformed her physique in 12 weeks and felt so great that she started competing in fitness bikini competitions. She has since taken part in 14 competitions and placed third at the International Federation of Bodybuilding and Fitness SA National Championships. It changed her life, she says.

'Weight training is my life and my psychologist. It truly is my happy place. I've stopped competing now and strive to show women in their 40s that you can weight-train, eat healthily and still have a life.

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the more longevity you will have. Muscle is the new longevity!’

SA Women’s Hockey veteran and personal trainer Natasha Gorrie started weightlifting to prevent injuries from playing hockey and football. ‘I realised that I needed to incorporate strength training to increase my muscle strength and mobility, and reduce the risk of future injuries,’ she says. Since she started weightlifting, Natasha has seen better recovery, enhanced performance and increased confidence. ‘And I have not suffered any injuries.’

There are many misconceptions about weightlifting, especially for those in midlife. ‘Some people think they’re too old to start, or that weightlifting is dangerous at their age. Others believe it’s only for athletes or the younger generation,’ Natasha says.

THE BENEFITS

Weightlifting is safe and beneficial for all ages when done correctly, playing a vital role in maintaining health and preventing age-related physical complaints. Here are just some of the benefits.

1 Strengthens the body and combats ageing

Natasha emphasises that weightlifting is crucial for strengthening the body, which helps to prevent injuries and mitigate health risks associated with ageing. ‘As we age, our muscle mass naturally decreases, which can lead to a loss of strength and functionality. Weightlifting helps counteract this process, making daily activities easier and safer.’

One of the most impactful ways to safeguard yourself from the effects of ageing, Kelly says, is to prioritise the health and maintenance of your

skeletal muscles. Combining aerobic exercise with strength training supports your muscles and can significantly enhance your overall health and longevity, she says. ‘Aerobic

exercise in isolation reduces your all-cause mortality by 16%, and strength training reduces it by 21%. If you do both, you reduce your all-cause mortality by 29%.’



Natasha Gorrie, SA Women’s Hockey veteran and a Virgin Active personal trainer, turned to weightlifting to prevent injuries, boosting her performance and staying injury-free ever since.

Weightlifting is crucial for strengthening the body.



2 Preserves muscle mass and bone density

Women over 40 experience hormonal changes that accelerate bone-density loss and muscle-mass reduction.

Engaging in regular strength training helps mitigate these effects, reducing the risk of fractures and improving overall mobility and quality of life.

‘This is particularly important as bone density decreases with age, leading to conditions like osteoporosis,’ Natasha says. ‘Strength training helps to strengthen bones, reducing the risk of fractures and other injuries.’

‘Muscle loss is reversible, and resistance exercise is effective for increasing muscle mass at all ages,’ Kelly points out. ‘It is essential for men and women over 50 to engage in regular resistance exercise, because the rate of muscle loss nearly doubles after the fifth decade of life.’

3 Enhances daily life

Incorporating strength training into your routine not only enhances physical strength but also improves your ability to perform everyday tasks and remain mobile as you get older. Natasha says this is particularly important in later life. ‘Weightlifting helps individuals maintain their independence and enjoy life to the full as they age.’

And feeling strong and capable – no matter your age – boosts confidence. Research indicates strength training can significantly enhance self-esteem and body image in older adults.

4 Boosts metabolism

After 40, your metabolic rate naturally declines, making it easier to gain weight. Building muscle boosts your metabolism, helping you burn more calories, even at rest. This can help you maintain a healthy weight and reduce the risk

of obesity. ‘As muscle mass increases, the body burns more calories at rest, making it easier to manage weight and prevent obesity-related health issues,’ Natasha says.

Aerobic exercise – such as running and cycling – typically burns more calories in real time than strength training does. ‘But people who weight-train can get a boost in calorie burning over the long term,’ Kelly says. This is illustrated by a study in the *Journal of Applied Physiology* demonstrating that resistance training increases resting metabolic rate and fat oxidation in older adults.

5 Assists in cardiovascular function

Weightlifting isn’t just about building muscles – it also has a positive impact on cardiovascular health. ‘Regular strength training can help reduce the risk of chronic diseases, such as heart disease, diabetes and certain cancers, by improving key health markers like cholesterol levels and blood pressure,’ Natasha says.

A study published in *The Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research* found that resistance training can lower systolic blood pressure by up to 8% and diastolic blood pressure by up to 6%. Additionally, research has shown that resistance training can significantly reduce the risk of heart disease, stroke and high blood pressure.

6 Improves mental health and sleep

Women over 40 may face increased stress and risk of mood disorders due to hormonal changes and life transitions. Strength training offers a natural way to manage this, enhancing overall quality of life. Natasha says weightlifting can boost self-esteem, reduce stress levels and improve overall mental wellbeing.

Weightlifting has been shown to reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression, according to the American Psychological Association. The endorphins released during exercise contribute to better mental health and a sense of wellbeing, and improves sleep quality, which is often disrupted as we age. Research supports this, showing that strength training can enhance sleep efficiency and duration, particularly in older adults, which further aids in improved sleep patterns. This creates a positive cycle in which better sleep enhances mental health, and vice versa.

7 Supports joints

With age, women are more prone to joint issues and arthritis. ‘When properly done as part of a larger exercise programme, strength training helps support and protect joints – not to mention ease pain, stiffness and, possibly, swelling,’ Kelly says.

A study published in *Arthritis Care & Research* found that strength training significantly reduced pain and improved function in individuals with osteoarthritis.

GET LIFTING

Feeling inspired? Starting out with weightlifting after midlife can seem daunting, but Natasha and Kelly offer foolproof tips to get you started on your journey.

1 Start slowly and focus on form

If you’re new to weightlifting, begin with body-weight exercises such as squats, lunges, push-ups, dead lifts and planks. ‘Once your technique and form are correct,’ Natasha says, ‘you can slowly start introducing light weights with a TheraBand or dumbbell.’

‘You don’t need to go heavy to



start,' Kelly agrees. 'You just need to get your form right, first and foremost. And build weights from there on.'

2 Consult a professional

Speak to your doctor before you begin a weightlifting routine – especially if you have any pre-existing health conditions or injuries. 'The gym can be very intimidating,' Kelly says. 'If you hire a personal trainer or online coach like myself, we can teach you the right exercises for your body.'

A trainer ensures safety and effectiveness, helping you to avoid common mistakes, such as starting too heavy or neglecting proper technique, Natasha says.

3 Keep variety and consistency key

Incorporate a variety of exercises aimed at targeting different muscle groups, and use dumbbells, kettlebells and resistance bands for versatility. Kelly recommends aiming 'for three to four weightlifting sessions per week, gradually increasing the weights as you get stronger.' Remember, rest days are crucial for muscle recovery, so no matter how keen you are, it's important to avoid training every day.

4 Push yourself, but listen to your body

'There is no point in going to the gym and using the same weights each week

without progressive overload,' Kelly says. Natasha agrees, emphasising the importance of consistency and monitoring your progress. However, you need to make sure you always listen to your body. Adjust the intensity of your workout based on how you feel, and rest when necessary to recover adequately.

'Mindset is something you really have to work at.'

5 Prioritise nutrition

What you eat plays a crucial role in supporting your weightlifting regimen, Natasha says. 'Nutrition fuels performance and assists with muscle repair.' Ensure that you're getting enough protein, healthy fats and low-GI carbs to fuel your workouts and aid in recovery.

'The latest science recommends eating at least 1.2 g/kg of protein per day,' Kelly says. She also suggests supplementing with glutamine or branched-chain amino acids for muscle recovery and repair.

6 Warm up, stretch and focus on mindset

Before every workout, make sure to warm up and stretch to prevent injuries. 'Skipping warm-up and cool-down exercises is another mistake that can lead to injury,' Natasha warns.

You also need to maintain a positive mindset. Joan emphasises the importance of a positive inner dialogue: 'Mindset is something you really have to work at.' Both she and her daughter recommend journalling in the morning to set intentions and start the day with a clear head. ♦