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TOWN & COUNTRY

JUNE/JULY 2017

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The FRONT ROW

A SIMPLER APPROACH
TO EXERCISE STARTS
WITH SETTING FOOT
OUTDOORS.

By Marcia DeSanctis

Occasionally I hanker for a new workout. The spin studio starts to seem awfully dark and dank; at the gym my headphones fail to block out the chatter and chaos; yoga bores me senseless. And last year new research began to reveal the many benefits of outdoor, rather than indoor, exercise, for both our physical and mental health. Four recent studies have shown that getting out of the gym and into the wild—so-called “green exercise”—may improve sleep, energy, and mood and reduce stress, anxiety, and depression. This move back to nature follows other trends, such as the paleo diet and the rise of the gentleman farmer, that urge us to make like our ancestors and simplify.

I live in a gorgeous swath of rural New England. There's no Drybar, but we do have thousands of pristine acres of freshwater. For years I played chauffeur and spectator as my daughter learned to row on the Housatonic River. With each passing race I was more soothed by the sight of shells gliding across the horizon until, suddenly, I felt a need to be on one myself.

Rowing, however, is far more difficult than it appears from the shore; it involves many fraction-of-a-second moves that ➤

GREEN DAY
Yes, it's a full-body workout, but rowing on open water also yields benefits that can't be measured by a Fitbit.

LOOKING GLASS

FITNESS



must be timed perfectly. When I first showed up at the Litchfield Hills Rowing Club, on Bantam Lake in Connecticut, for Learn to Row class, I ran into some women I hadn't seen for years. They had changed almost beyond recognition into crew jocks, hoisting eight-person Vespoli shells onto ultra-buff shoulders. I had some catching up to do.

I was far from alone. According to US Rowing, the sport's primary governing body, the number of rowing associations in this country has more than tripled (from 380 to 1,350) over the last two decades. One reason is the bump from *The Boys in the Boat*, Daniel James Brown's best-seller about the University of Washington's magnificent victory over the Germans in the 1936 Berlin Olympics.

Rowing is also in some ways the perfect exercise, one you can begin at any age and never have to stop. Because the motion is not fully weight-bearing, crew is great for people with knee or shoulder problems—even ones who, like me, have had joint replacement surgery. "I've rowed in races with men and women in their eighties, so it's a sport you can do for the rest of your life," says Gevvie Stone, a physician and former Princeton oarswoman who was a silver medalist in single sculls at the 2016 Summer Olympics. "It's great for your heart, your lungs, your endurance, and, I think, for your brain as well."

First I had to master the basics. The club's coach, Kynan Reelick, a former Syracuse rower, met me at ungodly hours and, weather permitting (rain is okay, choppy water is not), I'd push off. I was once pretty slick with a canoe at sleep-away camp—how hard could it be? Ha. One day, in 90-degree August swelter, I

tipped over my scull twice in 20 minutes and tumbled into the drink, which made me red with both heat and shame. (Miraculously, my Prada sunglasses stayed on my nose.)

It wasn't just my body that needed training. Often my face was distorted by a grimace while I rowed, revealing pain from blisters or from simply trying to keep the boat stable. "Smile!"

Kynan exhorted. "Concentration, not strength." To my surprise I learned that when done correctly the sport uses about 70 percent legs, 20 to 25 percent core, and only about 10 percent arms, according to Stone. Even on the ergometer (the rowing machine) you must learn proper technique straightaway to avoid a lower back injury.

Once you do, rowing has a meditative effect, with its rhythmic motion and surreal quiet, apart from breathing, faint splashes, and the whir of the seat rolling back and forth. "You're moving through space, with nature and the elements all around you," says Jo Hannafin, an orthopedic surgeon at New York's Hospital for Special Surgery and onetime varsity rower at Brown. "The water can be spectacularly calming."

In time my limbs felt leaner, and my posture improved from the attention I paid to my core. I love rowing solo, but camaraderie out on the water is nice too. At present my team is intimate—just my husband Mark, a stone sculptor of brute strength who weighs 80 pounds more than I. Our nest is now empty, but being together in a double scull makes it feel full. He's a skilled and much stronger rower, but we share this pursuit. My stroke sets the pace, his power propels us, and throughout he ups my game.

In November the thermometer flirted with freezing as we pushed off for our last row of the season. I felt fitter than when we met, 30 years ago. Every fiber in every muscle was firing for one unified purpose: to sync our oars and pull the boat across the water. My green regime had strengthened me physically beyond my expectations, but my soaring sense of vigor came also from how close and connected I felt to the outdoors. Now the lake was not simply something I drove past four times a day. It was mine. «

WATER BOARD
The writer and her husband, sculptor Mark Mennin, steering a double on Bantam Lake in Litchfield, Connecticut.

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