



Making fitness fun

With the right motivation and technique, exercise can be safe, effective and enjoyable – at any age. **David Hughes** reports

IF YOU'VE had five heart attacks and two bypass operations, you might be forgiven for thinking that exercise classes are a thing of the past.

Not so for Alan, 82, from south Manchester. Attending a local class for a few months with Manchester United Foundation trainer Steve Hoy, he is no longer overweight, can walk up to five times as far, has gained muscle strength and stamina, and is passing on some of what he has learned to friends at his residential home.

"I'm really pleased," he smiles. "I'm still here, and I'm doing well!"

Alan, along with others in the class, are living – and basketballing – proof that with the right instruction and motivation, it's never too late to stay fit, gain strength, improve balance, and make new friends.

Alice, 88, was on her second class when I visited. "It's great," she reports. "I heard about it from a friend, who said you don't need to bend or anything, so I thought I'd give it a go. You've got to keep yourself

going while you can – my father always used to say 'keep your legs going!'"

The classes, at the Lifestyle Centre in Wythenshawe, are the result of a partnership between the Wythenshawe Community Housing Group and the Manchester United Foundation to improve quality of life for local residents. Steve's approach to exercise has made the twice-weekly, two-hour sessions very popular – so much so that most of the class trudged through four inches of snow to attend on one occasion last winter, in contrast to less than a quarter of the over-18s men's health group.

For Steve, a former professional wrestler and a qualified gym instructor, taking the over-50s class has been an education. "I've never taken a group like this before, and it's been a marvel," he admits of his class, where the average age is 70 and the oldest is 90. "You're definitely not too old, at any stage, to make improvements to your quality of life."

Improving that quality, he adds, doesn't

mean you have to run a marathon or lift 500lb weights. It means being able to climb stairs without effort, lift a pan off the stove easily, or walk down to the shops without being out of breath. When going through the exercises with his class, Steve is careful to explain which muscles are being strengthened, and what they are useful for in daily life.

All too often, he says, people in older age groups are put off from exercising by poor instruction. Maybe you tentatively attend a local gym, and nobody takes any notice of you or makes you welcome. Or you get no proper advice about how to exercise safely.

"If you injure yourself or get hurt, the first thing you think is 'It's that training, I'm not going back there.'"

Mindset

Family or peer pressure can also be an obstacle.

"You're too old for that now, mam.' 'Dad, you shouldn't be doing that at your age,' can be demotivating," says Steve. "I



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can understand family or friends being worried, or thinking they might have an accident, but there are different ways of saying that. 'Don't forget you're not as young as you were, take your time.' 'If you feel any aches and pains, have a rest.' But if you're constantly told 'You're too old for that, you're too old for that,' then, all of a sudden, in your head, you believe 'I'm too old.'"

With the right approach, however, things can be very different. One woman attending Steve's class rang him proudly. "You'll never guess what I did the other day," she reported. "I ran for a bus! And I caught it! I never, ever, would have contemplated doing that before coming to the classes."

Another attendee, who had had a double hip operation, was "very unsure on his legs," says Steve. "He was a bowler, and I told him if he got his balance back, and the strength in his legs, it would help his bowling. After ten weeks, he said, this is a load of rubbish, but he kept on coming. Then he became a member of the bowling team, and a few weeks ago he brought a picture in to the class – he was the individual bowls champion! And he put it down to the training."

Positive habits

Steve's approach to training has certain fundamentals. First and foremost, he motivates people to make positive lifestyle changes.

"We all have habits," he explains. "Some of them may come from what our parents may have done, or our brothers and sisters. Some of those habits become ingrained over a long period, and you can't just change those to fresh habits at



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the snap of the fingers. You have to set the basis for that."

One way of doing that is to understand why those changes are important, and what impact even small changes can have on life.

Another is to make sure that an exercise routine is effective, and enjoyable.

Being careful not to strain or feel uncomfortable is important – and that often comes down to technique, says Steve.

"Most people train wrong," he explains. "I've been around gyms all my life, and I've seen everything. There's no point in putting in 100 per cent effort and getting 60 per cent results with poor technique, when you could be putting in 80 per cent effort and getting 70 per cent results with right technique."

Slow and sure

One of the strategies Steve employs to show correct technique is to use very slow exercises. "You can make everything more difficult by slowing it down," he says. "So if we're doing arm raises, I will take maybe two minutes to where the arms are raised to the top, and then down to the bottom again. If they do that, they think they're working the arms, but they're not. It's the shoulders."

The class begins with gentle warm-up

exercises, usually throwing a basketball into a hoop.

"And then we have quite intensive sessions where we start with the feet, through the ankles, the calves, the thighs, the torso, neck, shoulders, and work up and down the body. So we don't miss parts of the body, and I've got different ways of doing it. Eventually you're going to know some of the exercises, but I try to introduce different levels. Because I've worked with them from the beginning, I know which level they're at."

So finding an instructor who can teach effective technique, and who is aware what level people are comfortable with, is important. So is actually enjoying the class.

"The main thing is enjoyment," emphasises Steve. "If they're enjoying it, like these do, they're having a laugh. They don't even know they're exercising."

Explore...

What's more, the social side of an exercise class can lead to new friendships, and new interests.

"When they're in here now, they're introduced to other things, because they're talking to each other," says Steve. "So they're starting to go to other exercise groups. And I always say to them, 'Don't stop here, explore other things.'"

"Start looking at local ramblers, and other things that you didn't think about before but are now thinking about because you have the ability to do it.

"Nothing's impossible. And this group will show you that."

Find out more

■ To find out more about the work of the Manchester United Foundation, tel: 0161 868 8600, website: (www.mufoundation.org)

■ To find an exercise class for the over-50s in your area, contact Classfinder.org.uk, a website owned and operated by the Exercise Movement & Dance Partnership. It is the national governing body for dance fitness and group exercise and acts as a voice for dance fitness and group exercise instructors, organisations and participants. Tel: 01403 266000, website: (www.classfinder.org.uk/fitness-class/listing/50-classes).