

Wake Up!

Dealing with the Physical Aspects of Middle-age

It was October 30, 1979. My father had passed away a month before and, frankly, I was pretty impressed with myself. I had been the pillar of strength and the source of comfort for my family that I had hoped would be the case. I had taken it all in stride without any apparent negative effects...until I stepped on the scales. I had gained ten pounds in 30 days. So much for taking it all in stride.

I was 34 at the time and had already been fighting the "battle of the bulge" for some years. I knew I could gain a couple pounds in days, but it took me weeks of diet to get rid of them. The thought of having to lose ten pounds floored me. I knew diet alone would not work, I had to exercise, but I **hated** exercise! I had had a poor body image all my life. I never participated in sports as a youth, I was too ashamed of my thick glasses and my soft body. Every phys ed class was an ordeal to be lived through, never enjoyed. I wouldn't have admitted it, but just the thought of stepping into a gym or a health club intimidated me. But my choice that day in 1979 was obvious: I would either exercise to lose the weight or accept it and add to it. The next day, I forced myself to join a health club. I felt like an idiot, but I was determined to hang on as long as I could.

Since then, I have made a lot of progress. I became a distance runner and worked my way from 5 mile races to marathons. I never finished any better than in the "middle of the pack", but I finished. I started lifting weights and put myself through the agony of what I thought was public humiliation all over again. It was a long time before I realized that no one was looking At 46, I walked into a gymnastics center with my heart in my hand and did the first forward roll of my life.

At 52, I competed in my first sanctioned competition as a full-fledged gymnast. Because there was no age group for me, I was forced to compete at the "open elite" level, meaning I was scored in the same way as in any international competition, the Olympics included. I've never gotten past a 5.0, but at the peak of my youth I would have been fortunate to get a 1.0. I remain the oldest competitive gymnast in the US, but you'll never see me at the Olympics. I lost that extra ten pounds of fat, plus some more, a long time ago and that's the "gold medal" that means most to me.

If there's a moral to this story, it has nothing to do with marathons or gymnastics. It has everything to do with that day more than two decades ago. I woke up. I woke up to the real truth. I was never going to be a world-class athlete; I would never be model for Gentlemen's Quarterly. All I had was myself and it was time to take care of me. It was time to stop worrying about what others thought. It was time to break out of the cocoon of shame and humiliation in which I had wrapped myself like some protective shell all my life.

It wasn't a question of "looks", it was a question of fitness. I decided I would be fit and if nothing else about me changed, that was okay. But everything changed and I'll never go back. It can change for you too, if you want it to. If I can do it, you can do it. Sleep-walking through life is safe, but it's boring. Waking up is tough, but it's never boring and, if you stick with it long enough, the pay-off will blow you away!