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## Why I Went AWOL From Exercise Boot Camp

When you can't do what you used to, do what you can

posted by John Stark, June 6, 2012 [More by this author](#)



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On the brink of turning 63 last fall, I was determined to prove that I had outfoxed the aging process. So I signed up for boot camp class at my neighborhood health club. I figured I could still do an hour of classic military exercises: squats, thrusts, jumping jacks, planks, sprints and more. I was a boomer whose body hadn't gone boom. Or so I thought.

I registered for a six-week class that met four evenings a week. The instructor, a former pro-football player named Walker, was built like a Hummer on steroids. The 10 other people who enlisted in boot camp were in their 20s and 30s. Still, I was

determined to show Walker, my fellow recruits and myself, that time hadn't diminished my strength and stamina. I remembered watching from shore, many years ago, as the late Jack LaLanne celebrated his 60th birthday by swimming partway across the San Francisco Bay handcuffed — while pulling a boat filled with reporters behind him. If he could do that, I could certainly handle boot camp.

Although the intensity of the class left me shell-shocked, I did get through the first week, not too much worse for wear. "The first week's the toughest," Walker told us, "so just hang in there." Already I felt I was experiencing a thorough workout, one that would have me lean and toned in no time. I loved going home drenched in sweat, having burned enough calories to eat anything I wanted for dinner. If only I could muster the strength to open the refrigerator door, or push the start button on the microwave.

But come week two, my body began to protest. Instead of getting more limber, I was getting sorer and stiffer. Getting in and out of my car took effort. I felt as if I was wearing a fully stocked tactical vest. Instead of making me feel healthy, all of that exercise was starting to take a serious toll. I could barely sleep through the night — I was so full of adrenalin that my heart wouldn't stop racing. I'd wake up panting, afraid I was having a heart attack.

On week three I was still stubbornly hanging in there, refusing to admit to my younger classmates that I couldn't keep up with them. I was definitely channeling my inner-Clint Eastwood. One evening as Walker was chasing me across the gym floor, barking commands ("*Go Johnny go!*"), I felt something snap in my left leg. I let out a yell and limped to the side of the classroom.

"Are you OK?" Walker asked me.

"I dunno," I replied. "I can barely walk."

"Looks like you pulled a hammy," he said.

A hammy?

Seeing as I pulled my hamstring on a Thursday night, I figured there was time to recover: I'd have Friday and the weekend to let it heal. But when Monday came, my ability to walk was up there with that of James Caan after Kathy Bates hobbled him in *Misery*. Not only did my body not have the strength and stamina it had a few decades ago, it didn't have the ability to quickly heal.

And so, I had to admit I was no Jack LaLanne. I didn't possess superpowers. Although I was of the generation that vowed to stay forever young, I had to be honest with myself. I wasn't the young man who could once jog the entire perimeter of Central Park before going to work, or stay up all night disco dancing. I had to give boot camp the boot.

It took me a month before I could even think of exercising again. Although my hammy no longer gave me pain, I was afraid I was going to re-injure it.

Since I wasn't ready to go the shuffleboard route, I made a compromise: I signed up for a 30-minute kettlebell class that took place two nights a week. As I swung 20-pound iron balls in a forward, pendulum motion, I could feel the muscles in my arms, legs and core get stronger. Doing kettlebells certainly got my heart rate up, but not frighteningly so. When I got home at night, I still had enough energy to open the freezer door, take out a pizza and nuke it.

Don't be shocked, though, if I give boot camp another go. By checking the web the other day, I found another fitness trend that's starting to take off. It's called "The Over-50 Boot Camp" or "Boot Camp for Zoomers" — zoomers being active boomers. These classes feature modified, military-style exercises.

If I can find one in my area, I'm going to re-enlist.