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**PLUS HOW GIRLFRIENDS GET YOU THROUGH GRIEF**

## Playing it safe



**Want to stay active in a wide range of sports for many years? Here's how to keep your game and your body intact**

**WHEN MY BELOVED** convertible was stolen and recovered six years ago, I managed to reclaim the treasures in its trunk: my tennis racquet, squash racquet, cleats and baseball glove, and a winch handle for sailboat racing.

Even at 52, a life without sports is unimaginable for me.

I grew up in Toronto, the daughter of a high-energy, athletic dad with whom I spent weekends swimming, downhill skiing or skating, playing squash or badminton. As I grew older, moving to Montreal, rural New Hampshire and suburban New York, involvement in sports has remained my touchstone and identity.

Then, seven and eight years ago, I faced two knee surgeries to remove torn cartilage from each knee, thanks to years of squash, a sport that tends to chew up the

# Body+MIND

cushioning between bones. Months of painful and intense physical therapy restored my strength and flexibility, and today I play tennis and softball, cycle, ski and skate. I'm still hoping to take up hockey.

Like many of you, I want to stay active in a wide range of sports for years to come, but as I get older I don't want that activity to continually translate into injury.

And that gets harder with each passing year: As women age, we lose muscle mass, sometimes estimated as high as six to eight per cent each decade; and as that muscle mass shrinks, our metabolism slows, reducing our need for calories. Meanwhile, weight gain puts additional pressure on thinning cartilage and aging joints.

Yet, alarmingly, a 2005 Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute study found that 52 per cent of women between the ages of 45 and 64 were "inactive." So how do we keep moving safely? *More* talked to five dynamic dames, who participate in myriad sports, and asked a few athletic authorities (see "Our Experts," below) to weigh in on how these women can remain injury-free while enjoying the sports they love for years to come.

## **FARIDA GABBANI | 62 | TRURO, N.S.**

**SHE'S GOT GAME** Gabbani has done and/or taught just about every sport — field hockey, skiing, swimming, cycling, snowshoeing, kayaking, tennis and, most recently, soccer.

**HOW SHE KEEPS IT** "You have to learn how to read your body and treat it with respect while challenging yourself. If something hurts as you're doing it, drop back a level where it doesn't. What are the cues from your body? If you're in a class with people who are younger or stronger, focus on what you need. It's not what someone else can do; it's what your body can do."

Gabbani sits on a huge exercise ball at her office job, preferring it to a chair for the constant, tiny motions it forces her to make. "It keeps my abs in shape because I'm constantly shifting in position," she explains. Gabbani took up soccer four years ago as another way to stay active in a social setting. "It's got to be fun at this age! Soccer is a good place to run and get the intensity that's hard to get anywhere else."

**WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY** Soccer can be tough on the body, regardless of age. "A good pair of soccer cleats, shin

pads and perhaps extra ankle support, such as a lace-up brace, can all help to prevent injury," says Stein. But, he warns, soccer can "be jarring on the lower extremities, particularly the knees and ankles. Proper conditioning is essential: Warm up cold muscles with lots of stretching, and do strengthening exercises, such as seated quad lifts, lunges and those using the ankle balance board, and cycling. Poor field conditions, such as artificial turf and muddy, slippery, potholed grounds, are major obstacles and often the cause of knee or ankle injuries. That said, there is no reason an older woman should not be enjoying this sport."

## **MARY LAIRD | 51 | VANCOUVER**

**SHE'S GOT GAME** Laird walks up to five times a week for one to two hours. "A friend introduced me recently to a hill circuit that I've found to be a great cardio workout. I also take a weight class at a local community centre that targets all areas, including my core and abs. It keeps me strong." During ski season, she adds squats to her routine to strengthen her legs, and goes downhill skiing 10 to 12 times a year.

**HOW SHE KEEPS IT** Laird has been injured a few times. She sprained her knee while skiing 18 years ago, and has also suffered tendonitis in both elbows. "You do become more cautious," she admits. "To avoid hurting myself again, I'm careful not to attempt too heavy a weight when doing barbell or hand-held weight training." Laird also treats herself to a monthly 90-minute massage.

**WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY** "It is important to do aerobic activities that aren't stressful on your joints — such as low impact," says Stein. "Swimming is excellent. I'd also suggest joining an aquafit class where there is jogging in the water."

"For someone with previous injuries," he adds, "it would be a good idea to walk vigorously on flat surfaces, gradually incorporating hill training into your routine."

As for downhill skiing, Stein, formerly the team physician for Canada's freestyle ski team, has this advice: "Mogul skiing is very hard on the body, as it's a fast and jarring sport affecting the lower back and lower extremities. It's especially rough on the knees because they are the main shock absorbers when there is a rapid descent through bumps. If you have persistent localized pain, there could be damage to ligaments, so you're best to avoid the bumps."

Finally, note that skiing when you're fatigued can be dangerous. "Many injuries happen near the end of the day," reminds Stein. "Take the chairlift down rather than ski out."

## **SANDRA KIRBY | 59 | WINNIPEG**

**SHE'S GOT GAME** Kirby is a former Olympic rower who still rows and cross-country skis competitively. A sports scientist and dean of graduate studies at the University of Winnipeg, she continues to be a role model for her family, friends and colleagues.

## OUR EXPERTS

**E. LAURA CRUZ, MD Toronto** Owner and medical director of Pivot Sport Medicine and Orthopaedics

**GARY PODOLSKY, MD Winnipeg** Sports physician and head of the Skylark Medical Clinic

**JEFF STEIN, MD Vancouver** Clinical instructor in the department of medicine at the University of British Columbia and medical director of the Stein Medical Clinic

**HOW SHE KEEPS IT** “A lot of people ask me about fitness. I tell them, ‘It’s never too late!’ Wherever you are now, you can take another step. It can be a walk with a friend, walking to the corner store or just walking the dog. Just put a tick in that box!”

While Kirby typically pushes herself hard as a ski racer, if her arthritic right hip is twinging, she stops. “In the past, pride would have made me continue,” she admits. “But if I get hurt now, I don’t have a lot of years to get it back. I don’t push myself past the injury anymore.”

**WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY** Whether it’s downhill or cross-country skiing, Stein says “proper technique is important, and soft packed snow is much easier to learn on than ice.

“Pre-season conditioning two to three months before winter should include exercises that strengthen the back and lower body. Squats, held knee bends with the back against the wall, side-to-side hops and cycling all help build quadricep strength that will reduce pressure on the knee joints,” he advises. In addition, “balance exercises, such as the wobble board [a flat, circular board balanced on a half-ball], are helpful for ankle strength.”

**LINDA CROFT | 59 | TORONTO**

**SHE’S GOT GAME** Croft has been doing yoga weekly for nine years, and in the winter skis downhill almost every weekend with a local club. She now starts every morning with stretches, “because I sit at a desk all day.”

**HOW SHE KEEPS IT** Lots of legwork and hip stretches done during her yoga classes nurture flexibility. When many of her contemporaries were having hip replacements or suffering from bad knees, Croft took up skiing on a regular basis at age 55.

She began yoga thanks to non-activity-related sciatic nerve pain so severe she couldn’t move for six days. “I needed to get my body in balance. Now if I’m not looking after my body, I’ll notice it,” says Croft. Yoga helps her stay strong.

**WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY** Stein agrees that stretching is helpful. “Great idea. Even the animal kingdom automatically does this after a nap. Graduated movement increases blood flow to muscles and allows them to slowly wake up so they can work to their full potential. And the breathing that goes with yoga is good to open up the chest to reduce stress and help you relax.”

## Be warned: Injuries occur when you try to do too much too fast. “Don’t join a marathon group when you haven’t run in two decades.”



Cruz is also a fan of yoga, but advises those with shoulder or neck problems to be careful of poses requiring weight bearing on the hands and arms. “Yoga is very safe,” agrees Podolsky. “I’ve very rarely seen anyone become injured when following proper instruction.”

**MARZENA ZIMA-SKOKUN | 46 | CALGARY**

**SHE’S GOT GAME** Taking up fencing at age 40 was something Zima-Skokun could never have imagined in her native Poland. “In a new country, you can try something totally new at 40. In Poland, you’re expected to stay home and take care of your family instead.” Inspired by an ad on

a local drugstore bulletin board, she took up the sport. Thanks to her tough Russian coach, Zima-Skokun is now the sixth best épée fencer in her age group in Alberta. (An épée is one of the three different weapons used in fencing.)  
**HOW SHE KEEPS IT** “I was not in very good shape when I started,” she admits. “I was almost fainting and would have to stop for a few minutes.” Thanks to individual coaching, she learned when to push and when to take it easier. Today, she thinks nothing of walking from the seventh floor of her office building back up to her desk — on the 24th floor — when she’s not training. “When we are older, we are wiser. That’s when we can exercise more thoughtfully, not just to achieve medals. Although medals are nice too!”

**WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY** When well considered and carefully chosen, there’s no reason not to take up a new sport in midlife. “Although expectations should be realistic,” affirms Stein, “sports help boost energy, and whether in a gym or on a team, the social aspect should be fun.”

Just be warned, says Cruz, that injuries can occur when you try to do too much, too fast, too often. “Don’t join a marathon group when you have not run in two decades,” she advises. “Self-monitor your effort. If an activity is always really hard, it may not be the best for you — required effort should decrease with time and training.”

Adds Stein: “But it is never a bad idea to be adventurous and take on new challenges.” **M**