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A week at Brealy Bootcamp – a reader's blog

By slhaf | October 10, 2011

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After five days at bootcamp and achieving great results, Sharon Walker has turned into an exercise convert.

The time for action came when the taxi driver, dropping me back to my Manchester hotel, made a big fuss about dropping me outside the door. She didn't want me carrying a heavy suitcase in 'my condition'.

I'd gained more than a stone – about six kilos for you metric types – in a year and apparently all one place. And then when friends started asking after the due date, something really had to be done. There are some advantages to looking six-months pregnant, when you're not – being offered seats on tube for one – but on the whole it is just humiliating.



I needed a kick up the backside. A short, sharp, shock. Bootcamp beckoned. In the end I chose Brealy Bootcamps, in Berkshire, near Henley-on-Thames. Julie Brealy's camp appealed for several reasons. For one, she's a very experienced bootcamp trainer. Second, unlike the dormitory-style accommodation so many bootcamps offer, her courses

are served up in a comfy old manor with private bedrooms. Groups are smaller (usually around ten people) than most, cheaper and finally rather cheerful. No shouty army-style humiliation, I'm promised. I'm in!

DAY ONE – Sunday

I arrive at Parmoor House in the Chiltern Hills, a rather grand old Victorian house with a magnificent, ancient Cedar tree and gorgeous gardens. The programme kicks off at 3pm with a talk from Julie, the weigh-in and body-fat measurements. (I am 33% body fat – officially too fat to be healthy by 3%.) Followed by a fitness test, which involves running (or walking) as fast as you can around a two-and-a-half mile circuit. We'll be tested again on our last day.

Julie is strict, without being scary. 'What we're trying to do is create a controlled environment here,' she tells us, before warning, she can sniff out secret chocolate stashes at one hundred paces.

We'll be eating 1400-1700 calories a day. Which sounds like a lot until you hear we'll be doing seven (!) hours of exercise a day.

Next it's time to harness the power of our minds with the first of the self-hypnosis sessions. We learn a special breathing exercise to use just before we eat. To change the energy and help us focus on our food, instead wolfing it down when we're stressed. At dinner we all practice 'conscious eating', by putting down our knife and fork between every mouthful. Something I never do. It must slow me down by at least fifty percent.

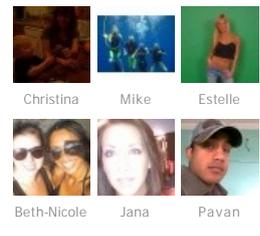


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Dinner is eerily silent. We have yet to master the trick of conscious eating and conversation. But the food is divine. Vegetables plucked straight from the organic gardens. Flavourful and fresh. All menus are set, but if there's something you don't eat, Julie will request something else.

After circuits and yoga I can feel every muscle in my body. I go to bed early on the basis that the sooner I can sleep, the sooner I'll be up and eating again.

DAY 2 – Monday

The day begins with a quarter of a glass of apple juice. Just enough to give us the energy to get through the mile walk (or mile-and-a-half run).

What's amazing is how Julie manages to adapt the programme so that it challenges everyone, pushing them to achieve new goals, without actually finishing them completely.



This is even more impressive because we're such a mixed bunch: aged between nineteen and sixty. With massively varied goals. Most of Julie's camps are women only, but this week is a mixed His n' Hers five-day retreat. One man needs to lose weight, due to diabetes. This is his last chance to avoid taking insulin. Another client is back for the second

time in a month, because she wants to lose another half-stone and look great at a wedding. Another, who has been on two of Julie's camps before has just signed up for his second triathlon. Amazing when before he first came here, he hadn't exercised in twenty years and could barely walk a mile.

Every morning the day's activities are written up in the hall. But it's the list in the dining room that really interests me. We get to eat six times a day: three main meals and three snacks.

The portions aren't huge: just enough to keep you going. The right size portion for a meal is a small soup dish (which Julie encourages us to continue at home). About half of what I'd usually eat. And Julie has banned all white carbs. So no white bread, pasta or rice (which has zero nutrients apparently). Carbohydrates (grains, wild rice and quinoa) are weighed at the beginning of the day. Amazingly, despite being low fat, low salt and pretty much sugar-free, the food is very tasty. Tonight for dinner we've got beef chili with mixed veg. For pudding (or snack as Julie calls it) later in the evening, it's fruit salad, yoghurt and seeds.

Today we'll be going on a four-mile hike in a weighted jacket, which weighs a stone. And it feels extremely heavy. It's hard to believe I've been carrying around this much extra weight, without even noticing. 'This is to remind you not to gain it back again,' Julie says before hiking me into weighted purgatory.

DAY THREE – Tuesday

Who knew porridge sprinkled with seeds could be so satisfying? Julie's also a big fan of eggs for breakfast, they keep you fuller for longer, apparently.

Today we are going on an eight-mile 'trot'. Trot as it turns out actually means RUN. I manage to do about five miles before we hit the hills and revert to walking. Not everyone can run and Julie's fine with that. Some do shorter routes, but we all stretch our limits.

Next up: Kettle bell workouts, classic weight training exercises plus swinging the kettle bell weights between our legs, to really get the heart rate going. (For the uninitiated a kettle bell is a classic instrument of torture invented by the Russian military, on which Julie is exceptionally keen, because you can burn 500 calories and tone the whole body in under twenty minutes). 'Look! Someone has scratched something on the floor!' It says: "Help," one bright spark pipes up. For a minute, I actually think he's serious. We might be on our last legs but the Dunkirk spirit is alive and well.

We spend the rest of the afternoon with hypnotherapist and NLP expert Pat, who talks us through a guided visualization, imaging how we would like to be. She also encourages us to visualise throwing all our saboteurs into an incinerator. (I can literally hear the burger fat spitting.)

DAY FOUR – Wednesday

The so-called 'scenic stroll' turns out to be a TEN MILE hike and there's mutiny amongst the troops. Don't forget we've already done a pre-breakfast power-walk/jog.

Circuits. Ab Blast and God knows what else. It's all becoming a sweaty blur.

But Julie doesn't suffer slackers lightly. 'Did you come on this week expecting a bit of a challenge?' she reminds us. And with the route adapted to different abilities, we all make it.

Birds of prey are circling above – they are actually the rare Red Kites that have been reintroduced to the area, but they look ominous all the same. 'The vultures are waiting for one of us to drop,' someone yelps.

Luckily it's time for the nutritional workshop, a rest and berry smoothie.

The nutritional therapist, Kate Delmar-Morgan, joins us for the afternoon with practical tips for a good diet and digestion. One tip that surprises me is not to drink with meals as it dilutes the digestive juices. Tea is even worse apparently as it prevents nutrients being absorbed. She also warns us against eating the same old foods over and over again. Something I'm guilty of, especially when it comes to dairy and wheat. So I make note to stock up on different grains, seeds and pulses back home. Also chewing is vitally important for nutrition. Chew every mouthful twenty or thirty times, so that the digestive enzymes in the mouth can do their job properly, extracting maximum nutritional benefit. Dinner is going to be even quieter tonight!

Next-up team games: a kind of free-for-all netball. Revived by killer competitive instinct, our aches and pains are suddenly forgotten.

DAY FIVE – Thursday

I've found my waist, for the first time in months!

This morning we're hiking to the top of a very steep hill. Except this isn't ordinary walking. Or 'trotting' even. It's Nordic walking. Using two 'ski' poles to propel you along and up the hill, a bit like cross-country skiing without the snow. In fact it's more a cliff-face with a windmill on top, the one that appeared in Chitty-Chitty Bang Bang.

Bev, Julie's comrade and helper is bouncing along at the front with Julie bringing up the rear, making sure nobody is left behind. The thing about Nordic walking is it uses 80 per cent of your muscles. And improves your posture. Even the NHS endorse it.

This afternoon and evening Julie is giving us each a one-to-one session. So that we've got a plan and can keep up the good work at home. It's Julie's firm belief that exercise in the morning is best. That's when we're ready to exercise and our hormones are all geared up, so I've decided to go for a forty-five minute run, every day before the school run. That way, it's out of the way and done for the day.

DAY SIX – Friday

The day of reckoning!

We start as usual at 6.45 am. But this time our run is timed.



I manage to knock thirty seconds off my first day's time. Not a huge difference, but what is really different is how I feel. Not so red faced and wheezing. And much more springy, practically floating!

When I do really start to float is after our health exam. In fact I could literally jump for joy. I've

lost a whole half stone! AND three percent body fat. Two-inches off my waist and another two off my thighs.

I'm not the only one. Every time a new person goes in to see Julie for their assessment after five minutes another cheer goes up. In five days our group has lost between 5lbs and one whole stone each. We are all delighted.

Julie hands out recipe sheets, meal plans and those dreaded circuits I've actually come to love. Back in our civvies, in real shoes and make-up we're unrecognizable. But it's still the old gang of warriors we've grown to know and love. Lots of hugs and fond farewells, then it's back to the real world, armed with new bodies and all Julie's strategies to keep up the good work.

Did I mention that I now have a waist?!

brealbootcamps.co.uk, tel: 07710 760 814. 5 day bootcamps cost from £750. The next one is from Nov 20-25th.

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