



‘I discovered sport – and found myself’

Helen Croydon, 40, escaped an unhealthy lifestyle rut by launching headlong into serious sports training

In 2013, at the age of 36, I was living a pretty typical urban professional lifestyle while working as a writer and TV news producer. I loved nice clothes, shoes and handbags, but one day I realised something was lacking in my life. I was no longer enjoying the way my social life revolved around drinking, and I was sick of the hangovers. Even my relationship with my boyfriend seemed to be based on drinking. My friends were moving out of London and many had kids. My freelance work was quiet and I was bored and frustrated and ready for a change.

‘I’d been going to the gym and would do a run or a swim once a week, mainly to maintain my looks, but I found it a chore. Then one day, shortly after I’d ended my relationship with my boyfriend, I saw a group of cyclists on the towpath near my home who were having fun, and I decided to look into exercise groups with a social side to them. I wanted some group banter, but not always in the pub.’

IN AT THE DEEP END

‘I found a local running club that had its own bar and decided that was a good place to start! I went along and they were splitting into three groups: those running four miles, six miles and 10 miles. I decided to join the group that was running 10 miles, even though I’d never run that far in my life – I think I wanted an extreme push to kick-start the new me.’

‘That first long run was a *huge* shock to the system, but I then found myself entering a winter-season cross-country race that weekend, hoping for a social buzz. I had a huge amount to learn – as much about the practicalities of what kit to pack and what to wear before and after races (not my designer gold coat, apparently!) as the running itself. And I soon got used to being caked in mud.’

‘That sense of adventure, quest for camaraderie and strangely rewarding

sense of getting out of my comfort zone but surviving drove me to keep going, and, come the spring, my steep learning curve continued. I went on a triathlon training camp in France and entered half marathons and a long trail race. I was continually amazed at what my body could do when I pushed it, and was loving the tougher new, outdoorsy me.’

GETTING SERIOUS

‘Work took a back burner as I stepped up my training to twice a day, inspired by how my fitness was increasing, six months into my new regime. During that summer, I tried different events most weekends, and, late summer, I did the London tri in 2 hours 29 and was elated. I decided to focus on triathlon after that

as it seemed to suit me best. As cycling was my weakest discipline of the three, I made it my mission that

winter to improve it. I learnt the hard way during a tough ride in the Peak District (as I ran out of fuel and nearly collapsed) that I needed to up my endurance – and my carbohydrate intake – bread was back on the menu big-time!

‘When spring came round again, I was quicker and



more experienced and amazingly, by that June, I’d managed to qualify (by coming in the top four in a race that counted as a qualifier) to race for GB at the triathlon World Championships in my age-group category. That meant I was heading to Chicago that September! With little time

to prepare, I upped things another notch that summer so I could give it my best shot. But once I got to Chicago and did the race (I did OK), I still felt lonely and down in the serious atmosphere, and it dawned on me that sporting success wasn’t what I’d set out to achieve. I wanted close friendships, fun and lots of adventure.

‘So I decided to only enter races with my club from then on. A couple of years on, and I’m in a relationship – we enjoy sporting adventures together, as well as the odd party! I’ve just written a book about my experiences [*This Girl Ran* by Helen Croydon (Summersdale, £9.99) is out now] and I’d like to write fiction books with a sports setting next.’

HELEN’S TOP TIPS

INVEST IN THERMALS

‘Pack a dry version of everything to make sure you stay warm after any outdoor event. Take off anything damp (including pants).’

COUNT FRACTIONS

‘To keep me going during a tough challenge, I do fractions. So, 10k into a 100k ride, I’ll think “that’s 10 per cent done already”.’

ALLOW LUXURIES

‘I pack a big comb, mini dry shampoo, E45 cream, mascara and lip gloss, so I’m ready for the pub after an event!’