

The Gym and I

By Neil Sligar



No-one should start vigorous exercise without being told by a medical practitioner that it's safe to do so. If something hurts while exercising, stop immediately. Find out why it hurts. If a muscle or other soft tissue is sore, don't continue exercises that make it sore. Rest it.

At the Parkinson's Australia conference last year John Ball inspired us when describing his life with Parkinson's disease. John took up marathon running after diagnosis and at the time of the conference had completed nineteen marathons. Through Team Parkinson's he encourages others living with Parkinson's to participate in long distance running.

Who in Australia lives with PD and exercises intensely? I've been invited to describe my own vigorous exercise activity.

Health was the greatest threat identified in my 2000 business strategic plan. I'd been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in 1998. Developing Parkinson's disease had been beyond my control. Potentially worse conditions such as heart attack and stroke were largely within my control through changing a sedentary lifestyle.

I was lucky in my choice of gym. Its manager, an Australian representative athlete, asked for hard work from the outset. Parkinson's disease didn't come into it. Michelle formulated a program aimed at improving flexibility, pushing heart and lungs (endurance), and increasing strength. These three ...flexibility, aerobic capacity, strength... remain the basis of each of my training sessions.

In 2000, my physical capacity probably differed little from that of many other 54 year old men. Now, at 63 years of age, my physical performance is ahead of what it was in 2000.

I attend a gym three or four times a week. A typical session comprises:

- 5-10 minutes of stretching and loosening;
- 10-15 minutes aerobic activity, e.g. cycling, alternating between slow and fast speed or light resistance and high resistance;
- 35-40 minutes weightlifting, with various lifts focussed on different parts of my body.

On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is little effort and 10 is exhaustion, I aim to finish gym sessions near 8. As a generalisation, the harder my session the more relaxed and relieved of Parkinson's I feel for the next few hours. My tremor sometimes increases immediately following exertion but soon subsides.

I prepare and regularly amend six distinct training programs, one per session. A weightlifting exercise is not repeated at the next gym outing, helping prevent muscle strain from overuse. Targets are set and increased when attained. Lots of tiny improvements lead to surprising gains. Old program charts are retained so progress can be assessed.

In February 2008 I competed in Aquafit Gym's Summer Iron Man Challenge.



In February this year I bench pressed 110kgs (242.5lbs) at a body weight around 86kgs. In the same month I momentarily achieved a pedal speed of 140 revs per minute on a gym bike. This April I came third out of seven competitors in the Men's 55 - 64 years age category in Aquafit Gym's Birthday 500 metres Rowing Challenge, timing 1 minute 46.5 seconds. Rowing had never been part of my training routine but has now been included and a targeted time set for rowing 500m.

How has Parkinson's disease impacted training? Very little. My treadmill running is poor due to dragging of my right leg and increasing rigidity in my right arm as fatigue sets in. On the bike I feel unhindered by PD. In weightlifting, my "explosive" capability is diminished. For example, snapping weights on a bar to my shoulders is significantly impeded. Whatever detrimental impact Parkinson's may have had on bike speed and strength has been more than overcome through hard training.

The importance of a little puffing for those of us with Parkinson's disease is recognised by an increasing number of professionals. This has been described by Dr Michael Okun in the National Parkinson's Foundation website's *What's Hot in Parkinson's Disease?* (February 2009)

<http://www.parkinson.org/NETCOMMUNITY/Document.Doc?id=393>

My training routine is not tailored as Parkinson's therapy. It's undertaken for general health, because I enjoy it, and because setting targets provides a continuing challenge.

Outside the gym... in the office, supermarket, post office... my tremor and awkwardness are obvious as the effect of medication wanes. People are kind and understanding although when they offer to carry my brief case or shopping bags I politely decline.

I absorb advice from people whose wisdom I respect. My progress has immensely benefitted from the generosity of those who've guided me. Michelle Haage set high standards when we met in 2000. Krista Scott-Dixon, a Canadian personal trainer, sends me tips and encouragement. Many fitness instructors have gone out of their way to help, especially those at Aquafit gym in Campbelltown. Their kindness has been beyond what I should expect.

I continue to work full time as a financial planner.

Tell me what you do for vigorous physical activity.

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