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Boot camp - in sneakers

Workouts in Bow let them remember what it was like to be girls

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They are a group of women in their 40s and 50s: a hair dresser, a government program project manager, a special-education professional, a cancer survivor. On a recent weeknight, the energetic bunch acted like elementary school girls.

As their trainer yelled, "C'mon girls!" the women jumped rope, did jumping jacks, navigated on fours through plastic hoops and sang along with '80s rock music. When they got hot, they ran through the sprinkler to cool off. Most women sported shorts and ponytails, with matching

"Survivor U" military green tank tops.

The workout was part of "Boot Camp," a once-a-week outdoor fitness program run in Bow by personal trainer Vanessa Underwood. About 16 women have signed up for the class so far. With the 90-degree heat last week, only seven showed up - but one said she skipped her son's baseball game for it.

"It felt like I was in grade school, jumping rope," said Diane Riley, 52, a holistic therapist from Bedford. "When I feel old, it's like, 'I can still do this.' Everyone knows how to do jumping jacks."

Underwood, owner of Underwood's Sports and Fitness in Plaistow, has been running boot camps for two years and fitness programs for more than 20. At 52, she is a two-time kidney transplant recipient who has also survived rectal cancer. She left a career in social work and got into fitness after her first transplant.

"I should have been dead a long time ago," Underwood said. "This is what kept me alive."

Underwood trains all ages, from young athletes to senior citizens. "While the younger kids care more about how they look, the more mature are doing it because they want to be healthy and want to stay active," she said.

The Bow group spans a range of fitness levels. Gina Bickford, 40, of Manchester just finished chemotherapy in December for gall bladder cancer,

and she started walking again two to three months later. By last week, she was lifting weights while sitting on an exercise ball and bemoaning her lack of coordination as she tried to jump rope. Although she knows staying active keeps her healthy, she said she "hates to exercise." Boot Camp, she said, is different.

"When I was going through it, it didn't seem like I was exercising," Bickford said. "It was fun."

On the other end of the spectrum is Patricia Lord, 46, Underwood's sister. Lord, who hosts the group on her front lawn, goes to the gym six days a week, where she does cardio and lifts weights.

Before class started, she put her hands down on the driveway and started scuttling around like a crab.

"When's the last time you did this for a quarter mile?" she said. "It's one thing on the StairMaster; it's another on all fours looking like a donkey."

After the last class, Lord said, she couldn't lift herself off the toilet for three days. "Just when you think you're fit because you work out every day, there's Boot Camp," she said.

The hour-long Boot Camp starts with a warm-up. The women march up and down the driveway lifting their knees high, trying not to bump into one another on the turf. They laugh as they twist their bodies, trying to keep their hands on the ground as they step into a series of plastic rings. Lord, the group's unofficial cheerleader, pivots around quickly but keeps moving the rings, while class newcomer Jane Ely 46, steps slowly and cautiously into the center of each one. The women do jump rope jacks and stretches, occasionally running into the sprinkler.

Soon, they move to the "circuit," a circle of mats, weights, a jump rope and plastic exercise balls. Lord immediately plops down on a yellow inflatable ramp and holds two weights to her chest. The others follow more slowly, taking up poses around the circle, as the Electric Light Orchestra's "Don't Bring Me Down" blares from a speaker. One woman lies on her stomach draped over a large ball and tries to raise her upper body while lifting weights. Another woman jumps rope. Every 30 seconds, they switch stations. Amy Hooper, a 40-year-old speech pathologist, jokingly starts singing the school-yard chant "Miss Mary Mack" between exercises.

Underwood keeps time and chimes in with encouragement, instructions and modifications for those who get into trouble.

"If it hurts, don't do it," she says.

After two full circuits, the women debate doing a third. "We're already drenched, tired and hot, so who cares?" Lord says by way of encouragement, and the women do one more go-around.

As they cool down with more stretches, the music starts playing again: "Girls Just Want to Have Fun."

The class, which costs \$15 a week, will resume July 11 for four more Wednesday evenings. For more information, e-mail fitnessa@aol.com.

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This article is: 111 days old.