

A woman in a dark, long-sleeved top and leggings is performing a handstand against a solid pink background. She is balanced on her hands, with her legs raised and feet together. The text is overlaid on the image.

# Let's Get Physical

PUTNAM  
Book Club  
Kit

How Women Discovered  
Exercise and Reshaped  
the World

**Danielle Friedman**

# A Conversation with Danielle Friedman

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## What inspired you to write *Let's Get Physical*?

Five years ago, a few months before my wedding, I stepped inside my first boutique fitness studio: a Pure Barre on Manhattan's Upper East Side. I was struck by how physically strong the barre classes made me feel, but as a feminist journalist, I also became curious about the origins of the workout, which I found to be surprisingly sexual. I wondered: *Where did barre come from?* The answer turned out to be much richer and more fascinating than I anticipated, and I wrote about the workout's "secret sexual history" in a feature story for *The Cut*, which I was delighted to see go viral.

But researching that piece opened my eyes to more than just the barre workout's wild origins. I felt as though I had unlocked a portal to a hidden feminist history. It was a history rich with cinematic characters, many of them forgotten pioneers of what we now call self-care. It was also a story about how, over the past seventy years, women have harnessed movement to change their lives in subtle but incredibly meaningful ways. And amazingly, it was a story that had never been told. From there, I set out to write the cultural history of women and exercise that I wanted to read.

## Describe any research you did while writing the book. What is one thing you were most fascinated to learn? Was there anything that shocked you?

*Let's Get Physical* represents the culmination of four years of intensive research into the history of women's fitness from the 1950s to today—research that included interviewing dozens of fitness pioneers and their loved ones; interviewing everyday women who lived the fitness movements chronicled in this book; and a review of more than fifty years of archival fitness books, vinyl records, videocassette tapes, and magazine and newspaper coverage. (Since I started this project, my apartment has gradually transformed into a vintage fitness museum—Great Shape Barbie in one corner, *Buns of Steel* tapes in another.)

I found this research endlessly fascinating. When you ask women to talk openly about how they've moved their bodies throughout the arc of their lives, conversations can become intimate fast and lead to surprisingly profound places. I also discovered that revisiting women's fitness guides from past decades made me feel a real kinship with the generations of women who had come before me and sought the books' advice in each era. (It helped that many of the vintage guides I consulted had handwritten notes from previous owners scribbled in the margins.) It was fascinating to watch the language around women's bodies evolve in a kind of literary time lapse, right before my eyes.

More than anything, I was shocked by how relatively recently working out became an acceptable activity for women. So many of the Baby Boomer (and older) women I interviewed stressed to me how little the women in their lives *moved* when they were growing up, and how exercise felt like a revelation when they “discovered” it in the 1970s or 1980s. I think a lot of young women today take for granted that they are encouraged to regularly break a sweat and push their bodies—for beauty or health or both—but just a generation or two ago, this was not the case.

**The fitness industry, as your book shows, is one that is fraught with contradictions in that it depends on both the promise of physical empowerment and the guise that our bodies need to be improved. In what ways has this tension shaped both the modern-day fitness industry and the way women’s bodies continue to be perceived?**

When the contemporary fitness industry was first taking root in the 1960s, women’s fitness evangelists pitched exercise as a beauty tool because pitching it as a path to strength for strength’s sake would have been dead on arrival. At mid-century, women’s magazines and other popular media continually reinforced the idea that masculinity meant strength and thus femininity meant weakness.

In the 1970s, the women’s liberation movement helped to expand these cultural beliefs about strength, and yet, the fitness industry continued to sell exercise primarily as a path to aesthetic transformation. Then, in the 1980s, a cultural mindset took hold that took this pitch a step further, linking working out with virtue—and *not* working out with laziness and a lack of discipline. Fit-looking bodies were deemed worthy bodies; unfit-looking bodies were deemed unworthy. This messaging really shaped the way women thought about exercise: For many, breaking a sweat wasn’t about

taking pride in what their bodies could do but about working hard enough to change how their bodies looked. As a result, working out became tinged with feelings of guilt and shame.

Today, while a growing number of fitness professionals are working to encourage physical acceptance, the promise of physical transformation still courses through workout culture. The fitness industry’s focus on the aesthetic—and in particular, its celebration of a narrow, heteronormative ideal of beauty—means that too often, women whose bodies veer from this ideal (which is to say: most women) feel uncomfortable in conventional gyms and studios. It should go without saying that limiting fitness to people who are already thin or fit is not only unjust but also very shortsighted from a public health perspective. We all deserve access to the mental, emotional, and physical benefits exercise can bring.

***Let’s Get Physical* also sheds an important light on the ways the modern fitness industry has historically enabled cultural appropriation and exclusionary definitions of beauty. How did you ensure your book did justice to the women of color who helped popularize the various exercise movements, and in what ways can the fitness industry help create more equitable opportunities for exercise?**

While researching this book, I learned how fortunate I am to be living in an era when women are encouraged to move. But I also gained deeper insight into the reality that, because of systemic inequality and discrimination, exercise is not a right but a privilege in this country. The fitness industry

has a history of exclusion, catering to middle-and upper-class white people with disposable income. The costs associated with working out make it inaccessible to millions. Exercise also requires time and a safe space to move around in—luxuries millions more don't have. Just as the rich get richer, the fit often get fitter, while the poor get sicker. And then there's the problematic fact that exercising has been linked to virtue, creating stigmas against people who can't or don't want to or even don't *look like* they work out. I was guided by the idea that examining how and why these injustices came to be—and spreading awareness—can help to make fitness more inclusive of and accessible to all women.

Given how relatively little has been written about women's fitness history in general, it's not surprising that even less has been documented about the history of women of color in fitness. But, of course, just because a history hasn't been officially documented doesn't mean it doesn't exist.

Despite the fact that fitness as a form of leisure has historically been marketed to white communities, women of color have found ways of participating and succeeding in the industry from the beginning. I felt it was my responsibility to track down and speak with Black fitness trailblazers and amplify their voices and experiences. I was particularly moved by the story of Janice Darling, a Black instructor at Jane Fonda's Workout studio in Beverly Hills, who went on to open her own aerobics studio in Culver City in the mid-1980s and became one of a very few nonwhite fitness studio owners at the time. I also loved speaking with Carla Dunlap, women's bodybuilding's first major Black champion and celebrity.

Beyond these interviews, I was grateful to connect with the handful of academics who are doing scholarly research into Black women's relationship with exercise throughout history. And I found archival

issues of *Essence* and other magazines intended for Black women to be a vital resource.

The path to making fitness more inclusive and equitable is a long and complex one, but as with so many other areas of our society, representation matters. When a fitness brand elevates women representing a spectrum of sizes, shapes, and backgrounds into leadership roles, the brand sends a message that it values these women—that it cares about cultivating a space where all women can feel welcome. This is, if nothing else, a good place to start.

**You had the opportunity to speak with many of the fitness pioneers mentioned in your book. Is there an interview that stood out to you most? Who do you wish you had had the opportunity to speak to, and what would you ask her?**

So many of them stood out! It's tough to choose, but I will say that I loved the experience of visiting Esther Fairfax, the daughter of Lotte Berk and one of the creators of the barre workout. Two years ago, I took a train from London to her home studio in the Hungerford, Berkshire, countryside and joined her longtime regulars for a class, which she told me had not changed much since she began teaching it during the Swinging Sixties. The barre workout origin story helped to inspire this entire book, so it was very special for me to go right to the source. I felt like I was living history.

I would have loved to interview the late actress Debbie Reynolds about her 1983 workout video, *Do It Debbie's Way*, which has become

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something of a cult hit. I would ask her how she managed to convince Hollywood legends Shelly Winters, Teri Garr, and Florence Henderson to slip into Lycra and sweatpants and appear as backup exercisers—and how the video fits into her legacy as an icon of Old Hollywood.

### **Has the experience of writing this book changed your relationship to exercise, and, if so, how?**

It absolutely has. More than anything, it's made me think very deeply about my motivations for exercising. Despite what I know intellectually about the influence of the patriarchy and the beauty industry on women's desire for physical transformation, I *of course* exercise in part because I want to change certain aspects of how I look, and I still get a thrill from thinking about the promise of a "whole new me." I'm human. But through my research, I am now able to view these motivations with more of a clear-eyed understanding of what's fueling them and to consciously shift my focus away from the aesthetic and toward the more profound impact exercise has on my overall sense of strength and well-being. My hope is that readers will walk away with the same sense of clarity and understanding, and as a result, experience exercise with new feelings of joy.

### **For better or worse, the coronavirus pandemic has once again provided an occasion for a paradigmatic shift in the way we perceive our bodies and our physical health. What has been the most profound effect of this change, and what does this mean for the future of women's fitness?**

While the lasting effects of the pandemic on our self-image remain to be seen, I can share from anecdotal evidence that many, many women have emerged from the past few years with a deeper appreciation for the role of movement in their lives—for the freedom of being able to step out of the house and

take deep breaths and enjoy the physical release exercise can provide.

But there have been subtler shifts, too. I heard from some young women who, confined to their homes, went from exercising for other people (sometimes consciously, sometimes not) to exercising for themselves in ways that simply felt good. The shift to virtual and home exercise also allowed women to take more risks and try classes they might have been too intimidated to try in person. Exercising in the privacy of one's living room allowed some to feel freer to learn, to fall down, and to move their bodies in a totally unselfconscious way. (This trend harkens back to the home video craze of the 1980s.) And still for others, particularly older women, the pandemic underscored the importance of fitness friends and communities in their lives—and what a loss they felt when deprived of those social circles. My hope is that, going forward, women will be more aware of the fact that they have options—that there isn't one way to participate in fitness.

### **What is next for you?**

I am currently exploring other overlooked chapters of women's history for my next book! We are in the middle of a renaissance for reexamining and reconsidering women's lived experiences and contributions, and I am so grateful to be a part of this wave.

# The Ultimate Let's Get Physical Playlist

1. THE DIPSY DOODLE  
Ella Fitzgerald, Chick Webb
2. CHINA DOLL • Bert Weedon
3. WARMUP • Bonnie Prudden
4. ZOU BISOU BISOU • Gillian Hills
5. I SAW HER STANDING THERE  
The Beatles
6. (I CAN'T GET NO) SATISFACTION  
(Mono Version)  
The Rolling Stones
7. TRY (JUST A LITTLE BIT HARDER)  
Janis Joplin
8. ATALANTA • Alan Alda, Marlo Thomas
9. RIGHT BACK WHERE WE  
STARTED FROM  
Maxine Nightingale
10. MORE THAN A WOMAN (From the  
*Saturday Night Fever* Soundtrack)  
Bee Gees
11. GOT TO BE REAL • Cheryl Lynn
12. ONE  
Marvin Hamlisch, A Chorus Line  
Ensemble, Don Pippin
13. HOT STUFF (12" VERSION)  
Donna Summer
14. 9 TO 5 • Dolly Parton
15. PHYSICAL • Olivia Newton-John
16. FLASHDANCE...WHAT A FEELING  
(From the *Flashdance* soundtrack)  
Irene Cara
17. WORK THAT BODY • Diana Ross
18. I'M SO EXCITED  
The Pointer Sisters
19. SHE WORKS HARD FOR THE MONEY  
Donna Summer
20. AEROBICS 1 • Jane Fonda
21. I WANNA DANCE WITH SOMEBODY  
(WHO LOVES ME)  
Whitney Houston
22. SISTERS ARE DOIN' IT FOR  
THEMSELVES  
The Eurythmics, Aretha Franklin
23. STRONG ENOUGH • Cher
24. RAY OF LIGHT • Madonna
25. RUN THE WORLD (GIRLS)  
Beyoncé
26. CONFIDENT • Demi Lovato
27. GOOD AS HELL • Lizzo

# Let's Get Physical

## Fun Facts

In the 1950s, **America's still-new fitness industry was spurred by a fear of domination by the Soviets.** Many worried the nation was becoming "soft."

**For many decades, girls believed exercise would "turn them into men,"** make them grow mustaches and causing their uterus to "fall out."

During the Swinging Sixties, **the rise of the miniskirt helped to jumpstart the women's fitness industry** as more women wanted to shape their now-exposed legs.

**Tampons were invented in the 1930s but weren't widely used until the 1960s—** a shift that contributed to women's willingness (and ability) to work out.

**Women weren't officially allowed to run marathons until the early 1970s** over fears for their safety—and the Olympics didn't sanction a women's marathon until 1984.

**The sports bra wasn't invented until 1977.**

**Lycra was originally invented to create girdles,** but when women started ditching their girdles in the name of liberation, it came to define the aerobics movement.

**Did you know? "Spandex" is an anagram of "expands"!**

**Jane Fonda didn't get into the fitness business until she was 42 years old,** and she opened her original Workout studio to fund her husband's political career.

**The leotard was originally invented by a French acrobat** and trapeze pioneer named Jules Léotard.

Before Tamilee Webb starred in *Buns of Steel*, she'd been self-conscious about her powerful derriere: Her brothers teased her about it growing up!

**When we move in sync with other people, our bodies release chemicals that** contribute to feelings of hope, connection, and a sense of purpose in life.