



The actress pulls no punches. "I'm not a waif, and I like that," she says.

## Total knockout

How *Miss Congeniality 2*'s Elisabeth Röhm went from gymphobe to strong, sexy and serious about fitness

When I met Jay Wright last year, I said, "I'm sure this won't work out, but let's give it a shot." Soon, I began seeing him three times a week. And now my life will never be the same. You see, he's my trainer, and I'm in love. Not with him, but with my new, strong body and all that I now know it is able to do.

Until I met Jay, I hated the gym. I was raised by a hippie mother who prided herself on being *au naturel*. While I did play sports and rode horses at age 5 (in Bedford, New York, where I grew up, they put you on a horse right after they put the silver spoon in your mouth), I somehow believed that a gym membership went along with being vain. And if you were vain, you were probably the type to judge people and not much fun to be around.

Instead of going to the gym for exercise when I started acting, I studied dressage—it's like ballet on horseback. Producers didn't like me show jumping because they didn't want me to get hurt, even though I'd done it as a kid without injury. I loved

riding so much, I switched to dressage to calm their concerns. Otherwise I stayed healthy by walking for miles, most recently in New York City, where I lived while filming *Law & Order*.

But no gyms. Even when I was offered memberships to great clubs that gleamed like the Emerald City, I'd get through the door, work out once and never return. I felt totally awkward

“I know that whatever your adventure in life, being strong prepares you for it.”

and uncomfortable: guys checking out dainty girls in Lycra who were...checking out guys. If you weren't being ogled you felt like, What's wrong with me? And if you were, you thought, Oh, I look like crap. I loved being athletic with friends, and I hated sweating in front of strangers.

Nevertheless, I decided to give the gym one more try. My girlfriends who were entering their 30s kept telling me if you don't work out, getting older will catch up to you. At 31, I

ROBERT ASCROFT; STYLING: LAURIE FISHERBERG; TOP: H. J. BENNETT; REPRESENTS: HAIR: KRYON WOOD FOR WOOD; MAKEUP: SANDRINE VAN SLEE FOR CHRISTIAN DIOR; SEX: BETTAY DORRIS

>>> knew I hoped to be a mother at some point and to be able to bounce back quickly from pregnancy. I also wanted to age well, and to become a better rider. I was really getting into dressage and I was thinking about competing. So, with trepidation, I went to Jay's Peak Performance gym in New York City's Chelsea neighborhood. This time, however, there was a difference: I didn't enter the gym simply to look good as I had in the past. If that had been my only motivation, I probably wouldn't have lasted there either.

"Everyone's body has a blueprint of her physiological potential," Jay told me during our first session. "And it's my job to help you tap into that potential." What a relief to hear that he wouldn't be trying to make me into Hollywood's shape du jour.

His place was different, too. Most gyms have 1,400 treadmills. This one had only four, and the men and women using them were sprinting. Everyone there seemed to be competing—with themselves and with each other—not for attention but to see how much they could do physically. When you walk into a small gym that has almost no cardio machines but a lot of free weights, you know you're going to have to actually lift one of them, legs spread in a squat. Never mind dainty: There's nothing even remotely ladylike about a squat. I looked at myself in the mirror and there was a guy right

next to me heaving a barbell off the ground. So I did it, and it felt amazing that I could.

Surrounded by weights, I lost my self-consciousness. I wasn't supposed to be feminine, so I stopped worrying about how I looked. And I found that lifting more and more weight and having great endurance is strong, sexy and, yes, even feminine. It made me focus: If I want to do this, I can.

I surprised myself by becoming competitive and trying to push myself further. I began going twice during the week and on Saturdays. I felt so much like one of the guys, I wanted to high-five them all every time I finished.

The exercises I do now at the gym look almost barbaric. No biceps curls with cute little hand weights. I carry

these 40-pound metal vessels called farmer's cans in each hand. Holding them steady as I walk is a full-body workout. I do Olympic lifts, overhead, like those beefy Russian power lifters. I box. To build legs and abs of steel (something I never knew I wanted, but I do) I pull around this awful thing called the sled, a metal slab with a pole in the middle where you pile on weight plates. All I can think as I'm walking across the room—dragging it behind me with ropes, sticking my chest and butt out—is that I look like a duck. Not to mention the pinched expression on my face. So embarrassing. But I don't care.

**“I don't go to the gym simply to look good anymore. If I did, I probably wouldn't have lasted.”**



Everything about this place is fabulous

And that's the difference. Instead of going to the gym and showing off, I go there, strip it down to the most basic "Can I do this?" and I am humbled. I'm just a student trying to improve myself.

I'm in better shape than ever these days. My hips are narrower, and I weigh a little less. It turns out my build is really athletic—the blueprint that Jay promised I'd reveal after all those reps. I'm not a waiflike girl, and I like that. I put in tons of hoisting, hauling and pressing to get here. Our goal as women should be to discover who we are and not who we think we should be or who the world wants us to be. It's not our responsibility to be arm candy!

Going to the gym has turned into something inspiring. Everything I do there has helped me discover my potential. If life is about having experiences, then the stronger you are, the more the world is open to you. I sought out more competitive slopes during a ski trip last Christmas. Next, I might consider trekking in Alaska or



Röhm walks the talk, putting in five hours at the gym per week.

riding horses in Ireland. I wouldn't hesitate to walk in a marathon for charity and maybe even run it. I realize that whatever your greatest adventure in life is—to act, to travel, to have a baby—getting in shape and being strong prepares you for it.

Leaving a long run on *Law & Order* in December was an emotional risk for me, and I'm glad to feel so confident and empowered right when my life is really changing. Playing an FBI agent in *Miss Congeniality 2* was a terrific experience, and I would love to someday star as the heroine in an action movie. The fitter I get, the more I think about playing superheroes!

I recently started living part-time in Los Angeles for my career, and while dressage is harder to do here, I manage to go horseback riding four days a week. I keep up the workouts Jay taught me, no matter what city I'm in. Going to the gym this time around is about being able to say, "I did this, didn't I?" Now I feel I can do anything. ■

...especially the bar scene.



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