

GAME CHANGERS

FROM CRICKET TO THE FOOTY, WOMEN'S SPORT HAS HIT THE BIG TIME. WE RECKON IT'S TIME TO JOIN IN.
— By Jayne D'Arcy.

There's a lot to be inspired by in women's sport right now: the second season of the AFLW is under way; the second Super Netball league begins in April; and the Australian cricket team won the Ashes... again.

If it's got you thinking about switching the gym for the playing field, the first thing to think about is what kind of workout you're after. Sports physiotherapist Phill Danzi, from Evolutio Physio in Richmond, says that tennis, netball, cricket, AFL, volleyball, rowing and softball all have cardiovascular benefits. It just "depends what role you play", he says.

"With sports like AFL, tennis, and rowing, it's more that ongoing endurance where you don't have a lot of rest during play. Cricket, softball and volleyball are more intermittent, so it's not necessarily a full-on cardiovascular activity. During cricket or softball, there are parts of the game where you're not actually doing anything at all," he says.

Consider how physical you want to get with other players. It's hard to watch a game of AFLW — the first season of which premiered in 2017 — on TV without imagining the pain. "It relies on a fair bit of courage to play football," says AFLW expert commentator Chylloe Kurdas. "You get tackled, you've got to tackle other people. You've got to bump, and block, you've got to run a lot further than you ever have before on a netball court, or basketball court; you might be running 10 kilometres a game instead of two."

If you were a sporting champion back in the day and thinking of a comeback, start slowly. "Ease back into it," suggests Danzi. "Train at the level you are. You wouldn't be advised to go from nil exercise, to three-four weeks of intense training as you probably did when you

were younger."

TENNIS

Tamatha Harding, female participation project leader for Tennis Victoria, says tennis stands out because it's a sport for life. "We have people aged from five to 95 that can play the sport," she says. "You can be any age, any level of ability." With women making up 45 per cent of tennis players, it's also one of the more gender-equal sports.

If you're a little lacking on the skills side, you can still get the whole body workout through Cardio Tennis. "Cardio Tennis focuses on keeping players active and moving, rather than on the skill side of things," says Harding. "The aim is to raise a 'happy sweat' getting out, moving, and hitting lots of balls."

BE INSPIRED BY Danish tennis player Carolyn Wozniacki, who won her first Grand Slam title at the Australian Open this year, having previously been the world No. 1 women's seed from 2010 to 2012. Locally, Ashleigh Barty is making an amazing comeback after a year-long break from tennis to play cricket.

INTERESTED? Find a club and coach or Cardio Tennis provider at tennis.com.au/vic

CRICKET

Sonya Thompson, head of female cricket at Cricket Victoria, says the game is unique because it is an individual and team sport rolled into one. "It allows individual competitiveness and teamwork to shine," she says. "The team needs to work together and develop game strategies, so it's great to enhance social skills and team work." Thompson says women playing cricket challenges gender stereotypes; you can imagine the family's surprise at the next game of Christmas backyard cricket

"I've had dolphins swim along next to my boat, and saw a seal on its back, eating an eel!"

Carolyn Manning
Rower

when you hit a six over the neighbour's fence.

BE INSPIRED BY The Australian women's cricket team, in particular Meg Lanning (the team captain and, according to Thompson, the best batter in the world).

INTERESTED? Cricket Victoria offers a new program called social sixes. Do a session or enrol in a six-week program. See socialsixes.com.au or cricketvictoria.com.au

ROWING

You may think of rowing as a solitary sport, but it's not. "In rowing, boat classes cater for combinations of two, four and eight athletes, besides the single scull," says single sculler (and psychologist Carolyn Manning). "This gives a lot of flexibility to form crews with similar training goals and availability."

If you've been along the Yarra River at dawn, you'll know



We have people aged from five to 95 that can play tennis."

Tamatha Harding
Tennis Victoria



that rowers are up early, but not always. "Training times are typically early morning and early evening through the week, which allows women to juggle the sport with work, family or study commitments," says Manning. She says rowing also gives you the opportunity to connect with nature. "I've had dolphins swim along next to my boat one morning, and had a Dr Seuss moment when I saw a seal on its back, eating an eel!"

BE INSPIRED

Melbourne-born Kim Brennan, who took up rowing after a leg injury ended her hurdling career. At the Rio Olympics in 2016 she won gold in the women's single scull.

INTERESTED? Most clubs offer learn-to-row programs and have development squads to teach you the basics. See rowingvictoria.asn.au

"Softball is not just an aerobic game. It's a mix of power and fitness."

Nick Frayne
Softball Victoria

AFL

AFLW is booming, says Chylloe Kurdas. "Last year we had 392 new female teams in Victoria," she says. "The increase the year before was 100 teams in one year, and we thought that was pretty fantastic!" If you're keen on footy, but don't want to go home with bruises, try AFL nines. "You can learn some skills, there's no contact involved and there are mixed-sex competitions so you can play with your boyfriend or husband, or brother or dad or son, or you can get your girlfriends together and have a kick in a female team as well. It's quite a social way of engaging with the game," says Kurdas.

BE INSPIRED BY Pick any AFLW player. Carlton's Darcy Vescio's often hilarious approach is evident if you follow her on Instagram (@darcyvee). **INTERESTED?** See play.afl to get started.

NETBALL

If you were a whizz on the court back in the day, take it easy on your return, says Danzi. "You've got social netball, but a lot of people will try to go back to competitive team netball and are not used to the demands of that. Given the break they've had, they're at a higher risk of injury."

BE INSPIRED BY Marcia Ella-Duncan, the first indigenous woman to represent Australia in netball. **INTERESTED?** See vic.netball.com.au

SOFTBALL

"Softball caters to women so much because it uses a great array of skills," says Nick Frayne, Softball Victoria's executive officer. "It's not just an aerobic game, and different innings means you get your rest. It's a mix of power and fitness."

BE INSPIRED BY Natalie Titcume, a three-time Olympian. **INTERESTED?** See vic.softball.org.au

BASKETBALL

The Victorian Government's Better Health channel says that while not known as an aerobic sport, an hour of playing basketball can actually burn 630-750 calories.

BE INSPIRED BY Liz Cambage, who has brought glamour and guts to the Australian women's basketball scene. Watch her next playing for the Opals in the 2018 Commonwealth Games.

INTERESTED? See basketballvictoria.com.au

HOW GOOD IS SPORT FOR MENTAL WELLBEING

Psychologist and rower Carolyn Manning says playing sport helps with endurance coordination and balance, and sleep regulation, as well as releasing "feel good" chemicals like endorphins. "With team sports, you also develop skills in teamwork and cooperation, and managing expectations," says Manning.

But it's the social benefits that seem to really make a difference to mental wellbeing. AFL expert Chylloe Kurdas says the social benefits of football, for instance, are "extraordinary". "It's the key thing that we always notice with women's football, as well as the impact it has on people's mental health and wellbeing. Women often say that in football, they find their people. And that's exciting."

Manning says some of the other key benefits of playing sport include developing resilience and mental toughness; learning to push yourself; concentration and focus under pressure; and confidence and pride in achievement. And these don't stop on the sports field: "These skills are readily translatable into your wider life," she says. "I use the same calming technique before public speaking as I use on the start line of a race!"

VOLLEYBALL

"If you're looking for a well-rounded sport, volleyball involves both upper and lower body with full body movements and actions," says Danzi. Bonus: play it indoors or on the beach.

BE INSPIRED BY Kerri Pottharst and Natalie Cook, who won Australia's first Olympic medal for volleyball at Atlanta in 1996, then won gold at Sydney four years later.

INTERESTED? See volleyballvictoria.com.au

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