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Your first fitness goal: Find something fun

By Joe Miller, Staff Writer

When Michelle Joshua went off to college, the only thing she knew was that she wanted to be an athlete. She wasn't good enough to compete collegiately in tennis, her high school sport, so she signed on for the Rutgers University crew -- "the only sport you can come into without an iota of experience."

She loved it, but she injured her back her junior year; no more rowing, the doctor told her. That prompted some introspection. She desperately wanted to stay in the boat. To do so, she'd need to change seats -- and direction. She became a coxswain.

"The coxswain steers and motivates," she explains of the person who sits in the bow facing the rowers and keeps them in line. "I really enjoyed it."

Steering? Motivating? Her direction was suddenly clear: I'll become a sports psychologist. That is why she's on the Fit page today: To steer and motivate those of you who may have already thrown in the towel on your resolve to become lean and mean in 2008.

So what happened?

"A lot of people set nonrealistic goals," Joshua says of why you may be sitting on your couch right now instead of on an exercise bike. "It sounds so good in theory: I should be able to get to the gym three days a week."

But we often fail to think about how that might play out. If you've decided to become a surfer, for instance, January might not be the best time to start training.

If you can't stand being cooped up inside, maybe joining a gym isn't your best option.

If you thrive on being around other people, on the other hand, then the gym probably is preferable, say, to taking long, solitary walks in the forest.



You don't have to be stuck pedaling an exercycle at the gym -- unless you want to. You could be on a bike in the fresh air -- if that's what you like. Choose an activity that you will enjoy so you'll do it more often.

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It also helps to find something that doesn't feel like a chore.

"Ask yourself," Joshua says, "'Do I really love running on a treadmill?' Find options." Think back, she says. "What did you do for fun before you became an adult? How did you play?"

You might be surprised at the options available. Were you a clock-watcher for recess and kickball? The World Adult Kickball Association (www.kickball.com) has leagues in the Triangle. Enjoyed working out your long-division issues with a spirited game of dodge ball? Raleigh Parks & Rec. has an adult league (www.raleighnc.gov).

Spend some time Googling your favorite pursuits, Joshua advises.

"If you perceive exercise as a chore, you're not likely to stick with it," says Joshua, who is part of the North Raleigh-based Carolina Performance sports counseling practice. She also has a Web site -- www.workitoutconsulting.com -- that deals with sport performance issues.

"We can force ourselves to do anything for a short amount of time."

That may explain why you made it to the gym the first week of January, maybe the second. But now ...

If you find yourself on the bench (or couch) going into Week 4 of 2008 and want to get back in the game, Joshua says the first thing you need is a goal. Know what it really is that you're working for. Then establish a feasible strategy for reaching that goal.

"I'm a big fan of the baby-step method," Joshua says. "You should only make incremental changes that seem like they'll fit your lifestyle. ... Be realistic. Do it once a week to start. Once you master once a week, then we'll bump it up."

Joshua suggests easing into anything new because we're resistant to change. "Even if it's good change. We all think we want to change, but when our back is against the wall, we don't want to do it."

Even if you have benched yourself, Joshua says, don't take yourself out of the game entirely.

"People beat up on themselves all the time; they see themselves as failures." That, she says, is the result of our "achievement-oriented society" in which we want it all now. "It doesn't always work that way."

"They're not failures," Joshua says of folks who stumble in their resolutions. "They're just not doing it the right way. Adding a layer of self-loathing doesn't help."

Take a breath, regroup, begin anew.

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