

PLAY TIME

Could a simple ball game be the secret to combating burnout? Adults are rediscovering childhood sports at record rates and enjoying the myriad benefits that come with them, writes Ana Eksouzian-Cavadas. Photographed by David Portela.

Major life changes, career struggles, lacking motivation, waning mental health – that’s where then-thirtysomething Sarah Tuckett found herself just over a decade ago. An appointment with an integrative GP suggested a new path of meaningful, intentional movement, and Tuckett’s personal and professional trajectory changed forever. After experiencing a session herself, she began training in somatic psychotherapy, a holistic approach to healing that explores the mind-body connection. Reconnecting her body with movement was “what I needed to do to get my life back, to get my energy back”, she says.

Today, the Queensland-based practitioner is paying forward her transformational experiences with movement – especially those that appeal to our sense of play. Tuckett has noticed that women in their 30s make up the largest cohort among her clients. “There are stressors at each life stage, but [these women] are being squashed from every side,” says Tuckett, adding that leads to potential anxiety, burnout and chronic stress. She emphasises sleep, nutrition and movement as three key pillars of mental health. Her focus is on the latter and, as a result, many of her clients take up sports including futsal, netball and badminton. “Go for it,” Tuckett advises. “Because [playing sport] has all these amazing benefits, from a neurological perspective and a nervous system perspective.”

A 2022 Monash University study found that high levels of regular exercise boosted brain function in both young and middle-aged adults. The Australian Sports Foundation also found we need just 30 minutes of exercise a day to reduce our risk of stroke, cardiovascular disease, metabolic syndrome and diabetes, and a total of 150 minutes of physical activity each week to increase our life span by up to seven years. In addition, people who

participate in high levels of activity demonstrate a 38 per cent reduction in cognitive decline.

For adults dealing with stressful stages of life, all kinds of movement are often first to fall off the priority list – these numbers are a wake-up call. As children, sport and play are a given. Movement, both organised and improvised, is incorporated at every opportunity to help develop critical life skills, build resilience and confidence and foster social connection and inclusion. With so many positives, why does this crucial component of our physical and mental wellbeing often disappear during adulthood? And if we reframe the need to exercise as an opportunity to play and take joy from movement, can we combat this?

Long-term benefits aside, play offers an immediate endorphin spike, as well as a welcome distraction from reality. Few understand this better than Liz Ellis. During nearly two decades starring in national and international netball, the sports professional was also quietly working away on a law degree, and went on to practice property and infrastructure law. Throughout, she has remained devoted to sport, understanding the importance of movement even with a demanding career.

“I was really ambitious about wanting to get into university to study law. [People said] ‘You can’t keep playing netball’, but I knew I had to keep playing, because it kept me sane,” Ellis explains. “For me, it’s always been that sense of freedom just to be and just to focus on the ball. You step over the line and all your worries just go away.”

Aside from the physical benefits – increased cardiovascular fitness, better balance, improved muscle and joint health – she describes a mental clarity that comes with moving on the court. “Physical activity gives your brain a bit of a chance to work through the problem in the →

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MAISON MARGIELA hoodie, \$2,610. CHANEL swimsuit \$2,080, from the Chanel boutiques. NIKE socks, \$30, and sneakers, \$180.

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background while you’re thinking about passing and catching,” she says. “I always found that if I had a problem at work that I couldn’t quite break open, I’d go to training or have a game and I’d come back to my desk the next day and the answer was sort of looking at me because my subconscious was doing it in the background.”

Thanks to netball’s accessibility to all ages, genders and fitness levels – Ellis describes it as a “whole-of-life sport” with a low barrier for entry and high level of inclusivity – there’s been a big uptick in adult participation. Initiatives such as twilight netball have particularly resonated with men. “Netball is the fastest-growing sport for men and boys,” Ellis says. The male entry point is via social netball games and through a desire to invest in, and expand, their communities. “They want to play with partners, their girlfriends and, increasingly, their daughters.”

Nearly two decades on from her retirement from professional netball and now living in New South Wales’s Northern Rivers, Ellis’s own passion for the sport has been reignited, not only as the chair of Netball Australia but also, once again, as a player.

“It actually has put me back in touch with why I do what I do,” she says of the twilight netball competition she recently joined with her 14-year-old daughter. (Ellis previously coached her daughter’s team.) “I’m finding all those feelings again: the freedom, the competitiveness, the fun. And now the added layer

of doing something that I love with my daughter, who loves it. There’s just something so special and so unique about that.”

Professional surfer, writer and director Lauren Hill has seen a rise in those following her into the waves, both in her neighbourhood of Byron Bay and beyond. “The demographics of the surf community shifted significantly in the 2020s. Women make up about 40 per cent of the total surfing population, and roughly half of all teen surfers are girls,” she says, adding that peak participation for Australian women is now between ages 35 and 44.

At 40, and predominantly desk-bound, Hill finds herself in need of a paddle more than ever. “Midlife leaves many of us parched for play, more time with friends, more time to move. Being in the ocean can touch all of these needs. Plus, it’s fun.”

Ahead of her most recent birthday, she organised a surf trip for herself and her best friends, creating an opportunity to embrace the parts of themselves so often muted by mundane daily routine. “We each pushed our comfort zones in the ocean on bigger waves, hollower waves, or breath-holding,” Hill says.

There were also “many naps”, and the chance to form deeper connections. “We tore into hot topics together: politics, mid-life dating, perimenopause, the feasibility of ‘mommunes’. Journalling, weaving and watercolouring had space to emerge. Core memories were made and friendships were fast-tracked.”

British writer, podcaster and brand consultant Billie Bhatia is equally passionate about the benefits of community-led movement. “I grew up sporty,” the 35-year-old creative says. “Squash, that was my number one sport, and netball, rounders, hockey – kind of everything I got thrown into at school. And it became a real safe space.”

When she considered recommitting to her fitness in her 30s, however, the barriers to entry seemed higher than before. “When I entered back into that environment, I was like, ‘this is rough,’” she remembers, of the classic gym experience. “There’s this big barrier to joining because people don’t think they’re any kind of enough; whether that’s not thin, fit, beautiful or popular enough. Not any of these classic stereotypes of athleticism.” Yet still she craved what play – sport being a form of this – once offered her.

“The biggest thing about sport for me was that it was the only time the noise in my head was really silent. I didn’t think about my body, I didn’t think about not fitting in, about comparing myself to other people in that environment. You just have to get the ball over the net, or you just have to get the ball back, or you just do whatever you have to do.”

It was into this gap that Bhatia launched her own movement collective, Club Squash. “I wanted to totally squash an ideal of what fit, healthy and someone who’s happy to work out looks like. I wanted to create a space where we, one, cheer each other on, two, encourage each other to do and try new things, and three, actually move our bodies in an environment that feels uplifting as opposed to critical.”

The concept has resonated. “I honestly had about five thousand people message me and say, ‘this is what I want to be part of.’” So far, Club Squash has hosted group walks, dance classes and high-intensity interval training (HIIT) workouts. Yet one type of activity has exceeded all others among the club’s community: racket sports. Bhatia is a personal fan of padel, the hybrid of tennis and squash that’s rapidly growing in popularity. It’s reported that more than 30 million people now play padel worldwide, on some 70,000 (and counting) newly built courts. Padel even has ambitions to become officially included as a sport in the Brisbane 2032 Olympic Games.

There are longevity benefits to playing, with racket sports said to increase life expectancy by up to 10 years, plus the added element of community and connection through padel’s teamwork and in-built socialising. Bhatia, who is currently based in Indonesia, lives next door to a padel court and rises at 7am to get in a game with her girlfriends before they start their workday. “I’ve not met a single person who hasn’t become totally addicted after one game,” she says.

Beyond the obvious physical and mental benefits of playing sport, other elements may be just as impactful, Tuckett says. “If you join a sport, especially a team sport, you’re gonna get all these wonderful bonding moments and social connection, which we are so lacking,” she says.

“There’s this really magical thing that happens when humans move together. It’s called in synchrony. Whether we’re dancing to the same song, in a netball warm-up or in a yoga class, we might be moving different body parts or moving the same body part, we get this release of chemicals in our body. We get endorphins, endocannabinoids, serotonin, sometimes oxytocin, and that makes us happier, it helps regulate

our mood, it helps regulate our sleep, it makes us feel closer to these people, and we feel more bonded.”

There is also the benefit of reconnecting with your inner child. “I was in such a routine as a kid; school, after-school sport, home, dinner, homework, bed,” says Bhatia. “I think about it in the same way that I did when I was growing up, I put my racket in my bag like I used to at school. It just simplifies so much for me, anchoring my day to sport because I remember how good that used to make me feel as a child.”

Reflecting on her experiences as a surfer, Hill references neoteny, the retention of childlike characteristics into adulthood. “When I think I don’t have time to get in the water, I remind myself of [that]. Only a few species, like dolphins, dogs and humans, exhibit it,” she says. “Neoteny is an evolutionary adaptation that allows us to innovate and create in ways our logical, literal minds may not necessarily touch, through play.”

No matter how you come to it, Tuckett emphasises the positive impacts of play at any age. The key is not to approach it seriously. She cites a quote from play researcher Stuart Brown: “The opposite of play is not work. The opposite of play is depression.”

“Because what we’re doing is denying ourselves fun and novelty and all of these great things in life,” says Tuckett. “There’s no end goal for play, you’re just having fun. You’re just doing it.” ■

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