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Not just for the kids, Olympian Kyle Shewfelt's facility out to open up gymnastics to everyone

BY MEGHAN JESSIMAN, CALGARY HERALD JULY 17, 2014



A group of adults participate in an adult fitness class at Kyle Shewfelt Gymnastics in Calgary.

Photograph by: Jenn Pierce, Calgary Herald

“Just bend your knees like you’re squatting, throw your arms over your head toward the ground, and your feet will follow,” Tanis Tzavaras, the adult gymnastics coach at Kyle Shewfelt Gymnastics tells me as I prepare (hesitantly) to attempt my first back handspring. “I’ve got you.”

And she does. As long as I hurl my body backwards and upside down with commitment and don’t allow my elbows to buckle upon impact with the floor, all Tzavaras has to do is give a quick push on my

lower back to ensure that my feet follow the lead of my hands. In theory, it's pretty simple: If you have enough shoulder and back flexibility — and apparently, I do — and enough strength to support your body weight in a handstand position, physics takes care of the rest. In reality, though, it's one of the more daunting tasks I've ever been asked to perform.

"You want me to do what?" is heard repeatedly on Wednesday nights when the adult gymnastics class takes place at Shewfelt's, the 2004 Olympic gold medallist in the men's floor event in Athens, southwest facility. Since they opened the doors in fall 2013 there has been group of eight or so grown-ups, varying in age from mid-twenties to mid-fifties, just looking to learn and explore what they are capable of in this challenging discipline, right alongside the kiddies decked out in their glittering bodysuits. (For the record, most of the adults opt for a slightly less flashy look during their practice.)

"Kyle and I are on the same page when it comes to 'gymnastics for everyone'. We love the sport and, even though we were both competitive athletes ourselves, we love the learning and enjoyment process of gymnastics outside of the competitive atmosphere," Tzavaras explains of her and Shewfelt's decision to offer classes to a more mature demographic as well.

It's difficult to say whether the rise in adults interested in gymnastics programs can be directly linked to the rise in popularity of crossfit, but considering the founder of the "sport of fitness", is a former gymnast and many of their cornerstone movements are based in gymnastics, it's a pretty safe assumption.

Crossfitters aren't the only ones showing up for adult gymboree, however.

"Crossfit has skyrocketed in popularity, so there is a group that will show a subsequent interest in gymnastics, and it makes sense," Tzavaras says. "I have also noticed a lot of parkour athletes, as well. It's nice to have a range of backgrounds, as adults can really learn from each other in a different way than children."

So what can one expect to learn in one of Shewfelt's eight-week programs? During each 90-minute class, students work on traditional aparati like trampoline, tumble track, rings, bars, ropes and balance beams, as well as floor skills like cartwheels, roundoffs and handsprings — it's the real deal. Each week, slightly more advanced options are offered for those who are ready, and those who are not yet comfortable with a particular movement can just keep practising.

"In a session we start with getting everyone on the same page with basics, stability, and safety. Then we progress to movements, twisting, and rotations — going both forwards and backwards — getting comfortable being upside down, and then working with different comfort and skill levels in progressions," Tzavaras says. "The basics are established and from there the opportunities are endless."

Adult students Angie Dean and Maury Dodd are proof of this. Both have enrolled in every session offered since October and, though they started out with very different backgrounds, both have found themselves improving with every class.

For Dean, who took gymnastics from the age of four to 14, she found returning to the activity she once loved to be not only a great way to round out her running and fitness class routine, but also legitimately

fun.

"I go to a strength class on Tuesdays, and it's pure torture the entire time. It's hard work and it feels great to really push myself, but the best part by far is when it's done," says the 36-year-old city planner. "With gymnastics, it's the opposite. I go to the class and have a blast the entire time — I don't even realize how much of a workout it really is! It's not until I notice halfway through class that I'm sweating, or I wake up the next day and have sore muscles, that I realize how much work I was doing."

Tzavaras's classes were Dodd's first foray into gymnastics. It's not something most 50-year-old men think about signing up for, but with an athletic background in baseball, hockey, martial arts and longboarding, just to name a few, Dodd clearly isn't like most guys his age.

"I want to do a handstand on my skateboard again. That hasn't happened since I was about 16," he says of what inspired him to sign up in the first place.

"Gymnastics makes me smile, I find myself grinning throughout the class. With age, people care less about what others think and more about what drives them, feels good, or is just good old-fashioned fun. Ask someone the last time they tried a somersault — now that's fun!"

Dodd, Dean and the rest of the adult gymnastics crew whip them out every week and the looks on their faces are a pretty good indication that they are loving every minute of it.

As an added bonus, both Dean and Dodd are able to get their training in while their kids are working on their skills.

"The sense of accomplishment I get from nailing a move, or even just trying something that 14-year-old me couldn't even do — it's phenomenal. I go home from class every week feeling exhilarated," Dean says.

Crushing a skill-enhancing workout while their children do the same? Well it certainly beats spending an hour and a half in the waiting room focusing on Candy Crush.

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