



HITTING A WALL

Feeling soft and out of sorts, ALANNA GLASSMAN decided to train for the police fitness test. But as she discovers, getting in the best shape of her life is only half the battle

There's a concrete wall, almost six feet high, surrounding a parking lot near where I used to live. Last winter, I started taking runs at it—my very own version of parkour. I'd try to get my torso across the top, then (rather inelegantly) roll the rest of myself over. I was training for Ontario's Physical Readiness Evaluation for Police, commonly called the PREP, for which I needed to scale a four-foot wall, twice. I was quite certain that conquering the wall would be my biggest challenge.

A FEW MONTHS EARLIER, I'd had an awakening of sorts. As a then-26-year-old health editor, I was spending most of my daylight hours sitting at my desk. And as my muscles softened, I was surprised to find that my self-esteem did, too. I started thinking back to the time in my life when I felt most confident and carefree; it happened to be when I was also in peak condition. Maybe emotional strength was more wrapped up in physical strength than I had thought. And so, I decided I needed a challenge to shock myself out of complacency: I was going to train for the police fitness test, necessary for getting admitted to the academy. >

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“You want to become a cop? You’re not even remotely intimidating,” my friends told me when I announced my plan. But I didn’t really want to join the force, it was more that passing the PREP seemed like the best way to rediscover my inner strength.

In university, I had been incredibly athletic, playing basketball and volleyball, swimming and rowing. If I put my mind to a challenge, I was almost always able to complete it. So I genuinely thought that with enough training, I could pass the PREP. I signed up for a general information session—where I started to realize that hitting the gym might not be enough.

“Ladies, we want you on the force. But we find the physical test is what trips you up,” said one of the Toronto Police Service recruiters leading the session. He was six feet tall and buff; his arms were more than twice the size of mine. The dismal stats on women in policing seem to prove his point: as of 2012, 1,040 of Toronto’s 5,568 cops are female; a 19-/81-percent split that’s echoed across the country. (Toronto Police Service representatives from recruiting, corporate communications and human resources—as well as the Ministry of Community Safety & Correctional Services, which oversees PREP testing in Ontario—did not confirm how many women and men fail the PREP each year.)

“My only advice is to train hard. Those of you without rigorous fitness backgrounds may have to train harder than the men around you,” he continued. The idea that I needed to train harder than a man seemed like a dare. I had recently come across a study published in the *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology* that discussed the risk of “stereotype threat” in physical activities. Apparently, women are more likely to underperform—and even fail—at athletic challenges when told that gender can affect performance. I decided it was time to debunk a few stereotypes—my mission was both physical and feminist.

THE PREP HAS TWO physical components. The first is a timed circuit that simulates a foot chase. Wearing a nine-pound belt, you run four 25-metre laps. During each lap, you climb and descend a set of stairs two by two, and in the second and fourth rounds you scale a four-foot wall. Immedi-

ately following, you face a body control simulator—a medieval-looking contraption—where you push a pair of metal handles away from you to lift 70 pounds. Keeping the weight raised, you sidestep to the left and to the right six times. Next up is the arm restraint simulator, which requires you to use your grip strength to unlock a mechanism to lift another 70 pounds. From there, it’s back to the body control simulator. This time, you tug a cable with handles to raise 70 pounds once again, and then, in a squatting position, you shuffle from side to side six times more while keeping the weight raised. Then you return to the arm restraint simulator, before dragging a 150-pound dummy for 15 metres. All of this must be completed in two minutes and 42 seconds or less.

After a 10-minute rest, there’s an aerobic challenge, whereby you jog back and forth between two marked lines in time with a series of beeps. The lines are 20 metres apart, and you’ve got to make it from one end to the other before the next beep sounds. As the test progresses, the beeps speed up. It takes at least 29 laps (one lap equals 40 metres) to pass.

Duly daunted, I reached out to Stefan Overgaard of Toronto’s SXS Fitness and asked him to get me PREP-ready in 12 weeks. He’s a national junior champion alpine skier and a Canadian Alpine Ski Team alumnus. His functional fitness philosophy, which discourages the use of machines, appealed to me. “You can run on a treadmill all day,” he says, “but nothing transforms your body faster than one hour of strength training twice a week.” Considering I couldn’t do a proper push-up or chin-up to save my life, he cautioned that I’d have to exercise *hard*. Twelve weeks to pass the test was a stretch, but he said if I committed, he could get me over that wall.

Each of our training sessions involved three supersets of three exercises, with a five-minute active rest break on a stationary bike in between. The moves were basic but killer at the same time: modified push-ups, squats, lunges and assisted chin-ups and pull-ups. Six weeks in, I wondered if I would ever finish a workout without wanting to hurl. At the eight-week mark, after 16 hour-long strength-training sessions, Stefan took my measurements. I’d lost 14 pounds and almost two inches from my waist. Losing weight was never my intention, but it seemed to reveal the person I used to be—the confident, carefree woman who wasn’t afraid to speak up. And the sense of confidence I felt bled into all areas of my life. The morning after I completed my first unassisted chin-up, for instance, I spoke up to my supervisor at work without stammering—a small yet significant accomplishment. Later that week, I improved my relationship with a great guy by telling him what I wanted from it, something I never had the guts to do before. >

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(Unsurprisingly, a 2002 study found that 85 percent of college-aged women described themselves as “happy,” “more confident” or “at ease with myself” after 12 weeks of strength training.)

ON THE AFTERNOON of a PREP practice session—a run-through that prepares you for the real deal, with officers (all male, in my case) on hand to provide instruction—I filed into the Toronto Police College gymnasium with about 35 other people. Five of us were women, of whom three had failed the PREP a few times before. Most of the men around us had arms the size of tree trunks. Still, I felt optimistic. The same recruiter from the information session was there, and after he explained what we’d be doing, he told us about other opportunities to take the practice PREP, including a women’s-only session. “That’s not an option for you, guys,” the officer said. “You’re not pretty enough.”

As we waited for the test to start, I chatted with the other women. Each was in her early to mid-30s, and each expressed how she was looking to make a significant career change or how she wanted to feel more empowered. They looked, and sounded, just like me. I shook off the officer’s “pretty” comment, wrapped the weighted belt around my waist and got ready to take on the four-foot wall.

I put my hands across the top, pushed down and lifted my body up and over in a single smooth move. It was fluid, elegant even, so much so I surprised myself. As I sailed over the wall a second time, I realized this specific obstacle wasn’t much of a hurdle after all. I pushed and pulled the 70 pounds on the body control simulator, no problem. And I fought every ounce of exhaustion to drag that dummy around.

But I was foiled by the grip test, despite having trained for it, simply because my hands weren’t big enough to wrap around the handles and engage the mechanism. I know this for certain because the cop manning the station barked it in my face, in front of everyone, as I was attempting to do so. “Your hands are too small,” he said, adding that “women just don’t have the pec muscles” to lift the weight, either.

Ah, the female factor. This shouldn’t have come

as a surprise, because a review published as far back as 1982 in the *Journal of Police Science and Administration* urged agencies to tailor the requirements for women to meet different physical criteria than those of men, noting that “while women generally are not as physically strong as men, they can be trained to achieve a level of physical fitness that will enable them to meet the normal demands of policing.” Thirty-plus years later, and police fitness tests in North America remain unchanged. “By emphasizing muscular strength, especially upper-body strength, these tests eliminate many women candidates,” reads a special feature produced by the American Civil Liberties Union, which addresses physical ability tests for police and SWAT teams. “They continue to be used simply because they have not yet been challenged.”

Needless to say, I flunked the practice PREP solely because of the grip test. All of the other women in my group flunked too, for various reasons. I didn’t cry on the bus home—why conform to another stereotype?—but I did allow myself to feel the full weight of my disappointment. And then I got angry.

While I was working on this piece, I called the Ministry of Community Safety & Correctional Services for an interview to discuss the presumably low PREP pass rates for women. Instead, I received a blanket statement via email that included the following: “We’re confident that with the appropriate training, mentorship and practice, many female applicants can pass the test... [which is] an unbiased and valid occupational requirement.” (The Ontario Human Rights Commission also maintains that the provincial PREP is “reasonable.”) But if that’s the case, why aren’t there more female police officers?

Back at the gym, I thought Stefan would be upset when he heard I didn’t pass. “But you got over that wall,” he said. “And wasn’t that what you set out to do in the first place?” He was right. I had gotten everything I wanted out of that test—even though I do believe that it’s categorically unfair for men and women to undergo identical physical testing before they can even be admitted to the police academy.

Today, nearly a full year after my first training session, I’m still working out with Stefan twice a week. I’m stronger than I ever thought possible, though some workouts are shakier than others and I still occasionally feel like I might hurl. Stefan tells me that, in the long run, this is how progress is made; it’s never a straight line. And at least at the gym, I feel like the playing field is level. I’m still tempted to try the PREP again, conquer that grip test, show that cop what’s what. But I’m honestly not sure that’s a wall I can scale, no matter how hard I try. ♦