



There's Only One of You

A personal journey from burnout, weight gain and declining health to strength, fitness and self-respect.



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Life At Full Speed

Seven years ago, I completed my year as President of the NAHT, the largest school leadership union in Western Europe. It was an incredible experience. I spent the year travelling the country, meeting members, speaking at conferences and appearing on national television. It was exciting, rewarding and incredibly busy.

The downside was that my health took a back seat. After 21 years in school leadership, 17 of them as a headteacher, I had fallen into habits that many school leaders will recognise. I ate when I could, exercised when I could and rarely put my own wellbeing at the top of the priority list.

I assumed I was reasonably healthy. I'd had asthma since childhood but otherwise considered myself fit enough. Then, towards the end of my presidential year, I stepped onto the scales and realised I'd passed 18 stone. That moment was difficult to ignore.

I had always tried to stay active and had completed three Great North Runs alongside several 10Ks. However, years of carrying extra weight were beginning to catch up with me. Persistent pain in my right knee eventually led me to see a specialist. His message was simple and unforgettable.

The weight I was carrying had worn away cartilage in my knee and the pain was coming from bone-on-bone contact. Running was no longer helping me. In his words, there was simply "too much of me".

It was a difficult truth to hear, but it was also the wake-up call I needed.

The Warning Signs

Looking back, the warning signs had been there for years.

Asthma reviews regularly highlighted the impact my weight was having on my health, but like many people, I heard what I wanted to hear and ignored what I didn't.

When I returned to school after my presidential year, I noticed things were becoming harder. I was more breathless doing everyday tasks. Small aches and strains seemed to appear more frequently. My body was sending me a clear message that it needed more attention than I was giving it.

Something had to change.

Making The Decision to Change

One day I walked into a senior leadership meeting and announced that I was going to start going to the gym twice a week. I asked whether anyone wanted to join me. Our School Business Leader volunteered and, seven years later, we're still going together. That accountability made all the difference.

Like most people, there are days when I'd rather go home, put my feet up and promise myself I'll exercise tomorrow. Having someone else expecting you to turn up makes it much harder to find excuses.

Within a few months of regular gym sessions, I started seeing changes. I felt stronger, could see muscle definition beginning to appear and realised I was rebuilding strength that naturally declines as we age. For the first time in a long while, I felt I was moving in the right direction.

Exercise Wasn't Enough

While the gym was helping me build strength, one area remained stubbornly unchanged. My waistline. If I'm honest, part of me expected that simply turning up at the gym would be enough. It wasn't. I quickly realised that if I wanted to lose weight, I would need to pay as much attention to what I was eating as I was to how much I was exercising.

I started tracking my calories and aimed to keep my daily intake below 2,000 calories. The weight began to come off, but progress was slow. Then came another wake-up call.

The Wake-Up Call

At 58, I visited the nurse after experiencing persistent headaches. Out came the blood pressure monitor and the results weren't what I wanted to hear. My blood pressure was higher than it should have been.

The nurse explained that my weight, diet and lack of cardiovascular exercise were all contributing factors. For the first time, I realised that ignoring my health wasn't just affecting how I looked or felt. It was beginning to affect my long-term wellbeing. She gave me a choice. Either I made meaningful lifestyle changes or medication was likely to become a permanent part of my future.

That conversation hit home. Around the same time, she explained the impact of visceral fat, the fat stored around our vital organs. Learning how excess weight could affect the body's ability to function properly was a turning point for me. I knew I had to take action.

Body Response to Food

As I started researching weight gain and ageing, I learned something that made perfect sense of my own experience. As men get older, declining testosterone levels and reduced muscle mass can make it easier to gain weight and harder to lose it.

That described me perfectly. Wanting to understand my body better, I undertook testing through a programme called Zoe after it was recommended to me by another school leader.

The results were fascinating. I discovered that certain foods, particularly bread, pasta and other carbohydrates, were causing significant spikes in my blood sugar. Rather than providing sustained energy, they were leaving me hungry again much sooner and contributing to the cycle of overeating.

The experience reinforced something important. We all respond differently to food. What works for one person may not work for another. Once I began making changes based on those results, everything started to accelerate.

More Than Weight Loss

Whether it was the personalised nutrition, the exercise, the reduction in processed foods or a combination of all three, I began noticing benefits that went far beyond the scales.

One of the most significant changes involved my asthma. After years of relying on inhalers, my asthma nurse eventually told me I no longer needed one. Touching wood, I haven't experienced an asthma episode in more than two years.

At the same time, my weight loss began to gather momentum. The belly I'd struggled with for years started to disappear. My energy levels improved, my fitness increased and, for the first time in a long time, I felt comfortable in my own skin again.

This wasn't about vanity. It was about self-respect. Looking in the mirror and seeing someone who was taking care of themselves felt good.

Finding a New Challenge

In the summer of 2025, while on holiday in Italy, I rediscovered swimming. What started as a few lengths in a hotel pool quickly became something I wanted to continue once I returned home.

Swimming offered something different to the gym. It challenged my cardiovascular fitness in a way I hadn't experienced for some time. Those first few weeks reminded me just how much room for improvement there still was.

Today, I swim a mile each week and can comfortably complete 64 lengths without stopping. More importantly, it reminded me that exercise should be enjoyable. Finding activities you genuinely look forward to makes consistency far easier.

Discovering Reformer Pilates

Despite the progress I'd made, I still felt there were areas of my fitness that needed attention. My strength had improved, but my flexibility, balance and core stability were poor. Then I came across Reformer Pilates.

At first, I wasn't convinced it was for me. Most of what I saw online seemed to suggest it was primarily aimed at women. However, after some searching, I found Kore Reformer Pilates in Garstang, Lancashire, and decided to give it a try. I'm glad I did.

The first session challenged me in ways I hadn't expected. While the strength I'd built in the gym certainly helped, Reformer Pilates exposed weaknesses in my balance, mobility and core strength that I hadn't fully appreciated. The next morning, every muscle seemed to remind me that I'd had a proper workout. But that was exactly the point. I had found a form of exercise that was strengthening areas of my body that I'd largely neglected for years.

Over time, Reformer Pilates helped me develop greater core strength, flexibility and balance. I learned how important strong glutes are for posture and stability. Most importantly, I realised that many of the aches and strains I'd accepted as part of getting older weren't necessarily inevitable.

Week by week, things improved. Movements became easier. Balance improved. Flexibility increased. Six months later, I could see and feel the difference. Areas that had stubbornly resisted change for years were finally responding.

The Results Speak for Themselves

Today, I have a routine that keeps me active throughout the week. I go to the gym three times a week, swim once a week and attend two Reformer Pilates sessions. It requires planning and commitment, but I see it as an investment in my future health.

The results have been remarkable. For the first time since my twenties, I am under 14 stone. My waist size has reduced from 42 inches to 34 inches. More importantly, I feel healthier, stronger and more confident than I have in years.

During a holiday in Portugal in 2026, I realised something that would have seemed impossible only a few years earlier. For the first time, I wasn't embarrassed by my body. That feeling alone made every difficult workout worthwhile.

What I've Learned Along the Way

This story isn't about showing off or claiming to have all the answers. It's simply proof that change is possible. It doesn't happen overnight and it certainly isn't always easy. There will be days when motivation disappears and progress feels slow.

That's why having support matters. For me, having someone to exercise alongside and remain accountable to has been invaluable. I also keep a simple reminder in my house that says: "When you feel like giving up, remember why you started." Whenever things become difficult, those words help bring me back to what matters.

Your Body Will Thank You

Looking back, my body had been trying to tell me something for years. Eventually, I decided to listen. There is no shortcut and there is no one else who can make the change for you.

It starts with a decision, followed by small, consistent actions repeated over time. You don't need to begin with six exercise sessions a week. Start with one or two. Build momentum. Create habits that fit your life and stick with them.

The results won't happen overnight, but they will come. If my experience proves anything, it's that it's never too late to take better care of yourself. There is only one of you. Your body will thank you for looking after it.