

Health

Tai one on

Tai chi offers all the right moves with a low-impact workout

BY SIGNE LANGFORD

Let's face it: after a certain age, we don't bound so much as limp up that third flight of stairs. And joining the grandkids on the floor is all fun and games until we have to get back up again.

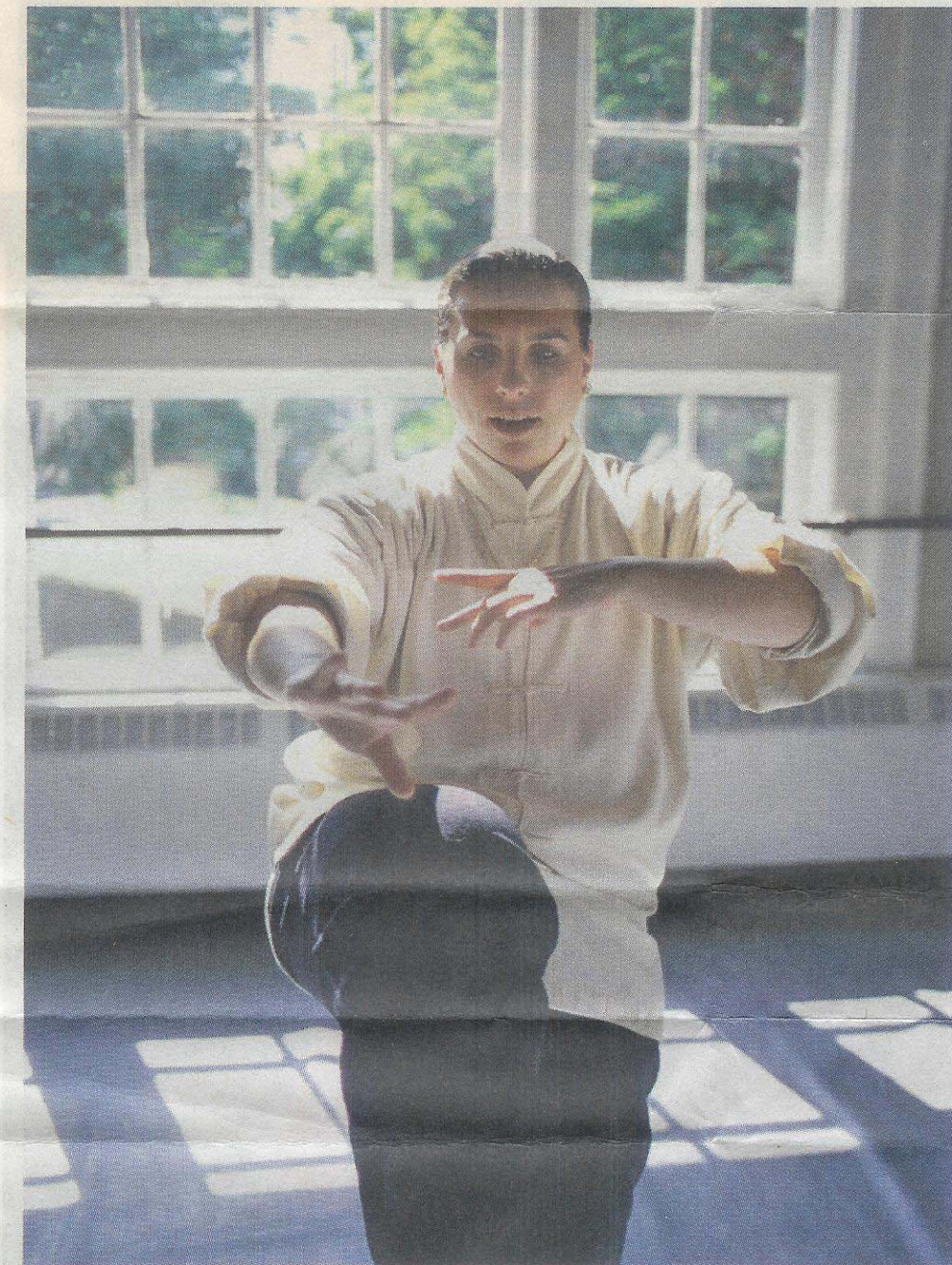
Yes, there are 80-year-old superstars running marathons, but for us in the vast majority, middle age begins when those joints start talking back and stiffness sets in. Taking up running at 50 would be commendable but could leave a formerly sedentary person vulnerable to injury. Something gentler might be called for. Consider tai chi.

Some suggest tai chi chuan was developed in the late 16th century, by a Taoist priest, who, observing a crane hunting a snake, mimicked their movements—hunter and hunted—to create the first series of postures, or forms, still practised to this day. Initially developed as a quick-footed, fighting form, tai chi has evolved into a serene flow of slow movements—a moving meditation—capable of increasing flexibility, balance and agility while providing a gentle cardio workout.

Practising tai chi for about a year now, 66-year-old Coby Jonker has already noticed the benefits. "After a second ski injury, I realized I should do exercise that is more suited for a 'senior.' I had heard tai chi was good for you, that it helped with chronic problems such as arthritis, and that it would help relieve the mild pain I experienced in my hip and my knees." And the benefits are more than physical. "I'm learning to become more conscious of how I stand and walk; how to meditate [while doing] tai chi—pushing out my worried thoughts."

But Jonker cautions, "Tai chi is not like taking a pill—you won't get good effects right away. It's more a way of doing things and moving with a conscious attitude. And it helps relieve tension."

Her teacher, Linda Tenenbaum, fit and fabulous-looking at 59, has been practising and teaching this martial art for 25 years. At the core of tai chi, Tenenbaum explains,



Tai chi devotees say the martial art is gaining wide acceptance; Mount Sinai Hospital recently launched a medical tai chi program for managing pain.

it's all about the mind-body connection and chi, or life force—life energy. "Day-to-day stress causes our bodies to stiffen and be tight, and this causes energy blockages. With tai chi, we relax the breath, relax the mind, get the body into correct alignment. And when we do that, we get our energy, or chi, flowing."

Not aware you had chi, let alone realized

it was blocked? If you've ever had acupuncture or acupressure, then you've experienced *your* chi. Tai chi is based on the same theory of unblocking the flow of chi to create healing and balance in the mind, body and spirit.

If all this seems too mystical, think of tai chi simply as a weight-bearing exercise that has been proven to increase bone density.

It promotes stability by incorporating balancing poses, which also improves ankle strength and flexibility, thus reducing the risk of falling. And those with poor peripheral circulation—cold hands and feet—will experience improved blood flow and, as a result, feel warmer. Tai chi also alleviates hypertension, sometimes resulting in a reduced need for medication.

For chronic pain sufferers, it can be a welcome, non-medicinal relief. Notes Tenenbaum, "Some of my students see immediate effects. That's because natural endorphins are being released. When you move in tai chi, it's a flow of gentle, circular motion, opening and closing joints, [which] feels like an internal massage."

For Jonker, it is also about what tai chi is teaching her. "I'm learning to feel my inner energy, that the slow movements are beneficial for my body, especially as I age. I see tai chi as one of many good things I can do for my body and soul."