

Living with my beautiful Toby

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so she has set up CareTrade, a registered charity, to help other businesses employ people with autism and run "buddy" schemes. The pilot will be in Southwark but it will eventually go national. As well as lobbying government, they will award a CareTrade mark of excellence to businesses that meet their objectives. The charity was launched with a gala performance of Josh Hartnett in *Rain Man* (Doré knows how to utilise that famous address book).

Her life has been devoted to theatre since the age of eight, but with CareTrade she has found a cause that is more important. "The prevalence of autism is one in a hundred children now. The local authorities do not have the resources to look after these young people in the way they and their families would like." It's a mammoth task, but, as she jokes, nothing can be harder than convincing backers that an all-male version of *Swan Lake* would be a success. Best of all she gets to work alongside Toby.

She describes his diagnosis as like planning a holiday to France and arriving in Amsterdam. The holiday isn't cancelled, just different. She's very funny about his current favourite thing: hugging the dummies in shop windows. "I'm not saying there aren't times when I see a little blond child running up to its mother and saying, 'Mummy, I love you,' and I don't think, 'That's never happened to me. I'd love that to happen to me.' But it happens in Toby's way. You go with him and with his ways. I am immensely lucky with him because compared to some kids with autism, he's a very easy young person to look after. He gives you a great deal and that enables me to get through an awful lot. He's an equal one of three in this family."

■ Bestagno olive oil (500ml £12.95, 250ml £6.99): www.bestoliveoil.org.

■ www.caretradeuk.org, 020 7407 7772.

Fighting fit

Performing arts have turned martial as Hollywood's latest fitness fad kicks in. **Sophie Goodchild** gives the lowdown on karate-kid classes for beginners

THE LATEST fitness craze among Hollywood A-listers is "fusion" martial arts. Stars including Jennifer Aniston and Courteney Cox Arquette are converts to these new workouts which combine combat techniques found in kickboxing and karate with yoga and meditation. Traditionally, self-defence and martial arts just focus on strikes, grappling or boxing. But new hybrid workouts such as Budokon and Muay Thai are more women-friendly and are aimed at self-empowerment. The physical benefits include burning up to 900 calories a session, improved cardio fitness, enhanced muscle tone and feeling more confident. And

they are also a great way of learning self-defence techniques that will come in handy as the credit crunch bites. Government experts are already warning that muggings will rise as the recession worsens. Home Office chief statistician Paul Wiles says that a serious economic slowdown will put "upward pressure on property crime". The principle is to learn to defend yourself from a physical threat and also to get a great workout. It may be physically punishing but comes with a spiritual uplift.

So what are the top martial arts workouts to get you fighting fit? We sent six of our writers along to try out the best on offer in the capital.



MUAY THAI

WHAT IS IT? A form of kickboxing invented in Thailand that takes place in a boxing ring. Known as "King of the Ring", it allows the use of kicks, elbows and grappling.

WHAT DOES IT INVOLVE? Trainer Chris ushers us all into the ring where we warm up with a few stretches. Then it's time to bind our wrists, don our gloves and find a partner to punch. Muay Thai is practised by Buddhists, so controlled aggression is the aim. I'm recovering from a severe cold so my punches and kicks are a bit limp. Chris explains that self-defence is all about reading your opponent's body language so you know when to kick. In between the pad work, there are high-impact workouts including stretches, star jumps and press-ups. The class finishes with Chris demonstrating how to balance on your partner's back as they crouch on the floor.

VERDICT: Once I overcame my fear of injuring my opponent, there was no holding back. It was a major insight learning when to kick an aggressor. An exhilarating cardio and full-body workout that has given me vital self-protection skills on dark nights.

CONTACT: The Third Space, 13 Sherwood Street, W1 (020 7439 6333, www.thethirdspace.com).

COST: £118 for membership to The Third Space. No additional cost for the class.

SOPHIE GOODCHILD

Hooked: Sophie practises her Muay Thai punches

Kick-start: Jasmine is put through her paces by Budokon coach Ryan Carldon

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FIGHTKLUB

WHAT IS IT? A group exercise class based on combat training and boxing using a freestanding training bag. Benefits include calorie burn, improved upper-arm muscle tone and increased flexibility and strength.

WHAT DOES IT INVOLVE? The 45-minute session begins with a 10-minute warm-up with skipping, jumping and punching. Our instructor is strict and insists everyone keeps moving as we collect our training bag and boxing gloves.

The high-impact workout kicks off with single jabs at the bag then builds up to a routine of hooks, squats and kicks — all at high speed.

VERDICT: The combination of cardio workout and resistance punching is punishing but addictive. You still have to bounce on your toes even when the instructor allows you a breather. My new skills meant I felt ready to tackle any mugger on the way home.

CONTACT: Gymbox, 71 Lombard Street, EC3 (020 7337 9790, www.gymbox.co.uk).

COST: From £50 a month for membership or £20 for a day pass.

AMY IGGULDEN

PUNCH

WHAT IS IT? A high-intensity workout based on boxing. Benefits include calorie burn of up to 900 a session, increased agility and improved muscle tone, rather than muscle bulk.

WHAT DOES IT INVOLVE? The one-hour class provides a full-body workout. It was mostly women in the group, so not intimidating.

The warm-up stretches were similar to an aerobics class. But the difficult part was the paired session. I held up a set of pads while my partner pounded away at them with her boxing gloves for three minutes.

We then swapped and carried on like this for most of the session. By the end, we had also learned jabs, uppercuts and kicks.

VERDICT: Holding the pads was quite tiring on the wrists and we were all wary of punching too hard. But I left feeling refreshed and energised.

CONTACT: Virgin Active, 108-110 Cricklewood Lane, NW2 (0845 270 4088, www.virginactive.co.uk).

COST: From £70 a month for gym membership or £10 for day pass.

ANNA DAVIS

SAVATE

WHAT IS IT? A combination of French kicking arts and English boxing. Described as "dancing with the feet", savate provides a mental and physical workout aimed at developing both flexibility and control.

WHAT DOES IT INVOLVE? Alarm bells rang when instructor James told me to bring a mouthguard and boxing gloves. But I need not have worried — beginners are not pushed beyond their own comfort zones and brute force is out.

The workout centred on four basic kicks and punches. The fouetté (whip) and chasse (push) kicks exercise the abs, quads and glutes. The pushing action of the punch gets the triceps working. This means the hamstrings and quads are forced into providing stability and balance.

VERDICT: My endurance, balance, flexibility and co-ordination were all put to the test. The positioning and balancing techniques are great for self-defence although the kicking and punching skills will take more practice.

CONTACT: London Savate Club, Soho Gym, 11-15 Brad Street, SE1 (0845 270 9270).

COST: A five-session trial is £30.

DAISY DUMAS