

PURSUIITS

Flippin' Awesome

Pediatrician Trina Wiggins, 47, stays in practice with fitness contests.

BY CYNTHIA ROBINS

PEOPLE WHO'VE NEVER BEEN to a Ms. Fitness competition can watch one of Trina Wiggins's performances in a video at YouTube. The rigorous floor exercise routine seems effortless for Wiggins, a 47-year-old pediatrician, the mother of 14-year-old twin sons and the step-grandmother of a 2-year-old.

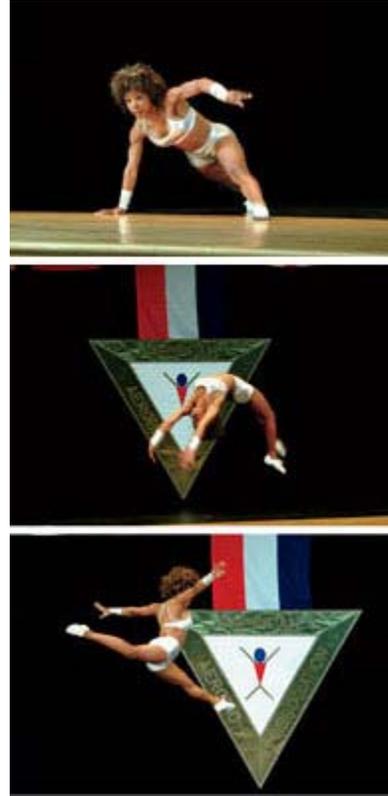
In a white mini flapper dress and a Tina Turner wig, she waits for her music cue and then approaches three white-painted steps. To the pulsing strains of "Proud Mary," she flings away most of the dress to reveal a fringed white bikini, and does a handstand into a straddle hold, using the steps as her pommel horse. In the next two minutes, she performs Chinese splits, one-handed push-ups, and runs of handstands, handsprings and backflips at a pace that rivals the one she kept as a teen gymnast.

Since 2003, Wiggins, '82, has been a stalwart in fitness—a competition circuit in which contestants must shine in three events: presenting a brief inspirational speech in an evening gown, showing a stunningly toned physique in bikini and heels, and performing an exercise routine that could make a Marine recruit flinch. Unlike female bodybuilding competitions, the emphasis is on flexibility, strength and grace, not muscularity per se. Among the sport's oldest competitors, Wiggins is also among its best, consistently finishing among the top 15 who win cash or other prizes. In September she placed 13th (among 41 qualifiers) in the Ms. Fitness USA contest and third in the International Flex Appeal contest.

Wiggins moved to Las Vegas nearly 11 years ago with her husband, Carl Allen, an obstetrician and gynecologist; and their sons, Marcus and Malcolm. The couple created a hard-charging life in which they sought balance between their professional lives and family time.

Wiggins earned her MD at Washington University in St. Louis, where she met Allen, and then went to Swainsboro, in southern Georgia. On her first day on the job as a pediatrician, someone in the hospital nursery spotted her and asked, "Who's that little colored girl going up the stairs?" Wiggins told her husband, "Carl, I know we won't be here very long. I can't raise my children in this kind of atmosphere."

Searching for a place to put down roots, the Allens sought "a city close to California where the real estate was cheap." In Las Vegas, they built a house that included an exercise room equipped with a treadmill, an elliptical trainer and a stationary bike. One night, lying in bed watching TV, Wiggins saw a fitness contest on Fox Sports. "I said to Carl, 'You know, I can do that!'"



FLEX TIME: Wiggins, a gymnast at Stanford, has never placed lower than 11th in the floor-exercise-like portion of fitness contests.

Courtesy Trina Wiggins

So began a five-year odyssey through gymnastics studios, hotel ballrooms and stages at small community colleges. Month after month, Wiggins competed for fitness titles, adding another gold-painted trophy to a growing collection.



ACTION FIGURE: Fitness contestants are judged on their form in a swimsuit, but grace in movement counts more than muscularity.

Shay Peretz

Born in San Francisco and raised in Oakland, Wiggins was one of the sprites who started taking gymnastics lessons after Olga Korbut competed in the 1972 Munich Olympics. "I told my mom, 'That's what I want to do,'" Wiggins remembers. There were no programs close to home, but 25 minutes away by car was one in Walnut Creek. "I went three times a week and then every day." Trina got a dispensation from the nuns at Holy Names, her school in Oakland, to leave at 1 p.m. to make her training sessions at the Diablo Gymnastics School.

The center was owned by Jim Gault, who coached at the University of Arizona for 18 years and mentored Olympian Kerri Strug, '01, MA '02. He's seen a lot of young girls come and go; Trina was one of the good ones. "She had a gymnast's body. She was short, slim, muscular and very strong for a little girl. You just pray for a girl like her to walk through the door. She was a natural runner and ended up being a first-class vaulter."

Moreover, she had the "work ethic that's hard to teach. It just has to be in there. I don't remember ever having to get on her case."

That kind of perseverance, determination and work ethic have stayed with Wiggins, who sees way beyond the trophies and the precise little speeches she gives in competition. "The goal," she avers, "is to achieve optimum health and fitness. Everything I do contributes to a healthy lifestyle. It's the philosophical glue of my life."

So long as her medical group permitted her to work a truncated schedule, Wiggins's life felt balanced among work, workouts and family. But when the group began requiring all its doctors to work full time, she quit. Preventive medicine—getting kids of all ages and sizes to form healthy eating and fitness habits—would become her goal. She started a summer camp program called Fit Kidz in which she trains a class of 8 to 12. Her website, opt2bfit.com, outlines other kinds of fitness and nutrition coaching she offers.

Wiggins uses her own family as her lab rats.

'In order to be a winner,

"If my kids will eat it, I figure, so will the children at Fit Kidz." The family hasn't given up foods they really love ("Carl is from Mississippi; he loves grits.") But they focus on healthy substitutions: turkey burgers instead of beef; fruits and juice instead of chocolates and cake.

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Over steamed vegetables and rice at a fast-food Chinese restaurant, Wiggins described her training. Even in workout clothes, the muscle definition is apparent on her 5-foot-2, 125-pound frame. ("I'm the same size I was in high school.") Training every day, she does an hour of cardio and 20 minutes of stretching. But then there are the sit-ups, pushups, stretches and repetitive performances of her floor routine.

Her regimen hasn't changed much since her days at Stanford, where she majored in human biology and competed on the women's gymnastics team. Neither has her dedication to health and fitness. "My father got sick when he was 34 with a rare form of leukemia," she explains. "I was in junior high then, and I decided that I wanted to help people and have a medical career. He died when I was 16."

She qualified early for this year's Ms. Fitness USA contest, held at the Rio Hotel in Las Vegas. At the event, finalists attack the stage like a swarm of fierce ballerinas. Each has spent countless hours perfecting her strength and flexibility, and doing the kind of costume shopping, choreography and speech-writing that separates the women from the girls.



Dave Robinet

Wiggins's 2008 battle plan was a medical theme, inspired after she saw a competitor do a routine that was about being a judge. "I always try to tell a story. It's not just dance, tumble, dance, tumble." Her white costume is adorned with a red cross. At the routine's opening she is on a cot, feigning sleep, and then she is awakened by the medical emergency of a Raggedy-Ann-doll patient. ("We thought about using a CPR mannequin," but it was too cumbersome a prop.) Her music includes a Herbie Hancock hit, circus music and the "flatline" sound from a medical monitor.

The judging for the events can be, as with gymnastics competitions, "subjective." Wiggins won a Colorado Springs competition early in August in which this year's Ms. Fitness winner placed third.

But "it's not about the trophy or the other women who placed above me. It was about competing with myself. Did I live up to my own expectations? . . .

"My goal has always been to have fun, to enjoy myself and to perform. If I think of it as a performance and not a competition, it's a different feeling. After the years on the Stanford team, competition was my only frame of reference. But when you're in your 40s, it's not about the competition. As I try to teach my kids, in order to be a winner, you don't have to win the race, but you do have to stay in the game. If you go out there and hustle and be aggressive, you are going to get a good result. You win with grace. You lose with dignity."

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