



THE EVOLUTION OF ELSA

She's exercised for decades and is no stranger to the power of a good sweat session. But, for Elsa Pataky, the learning never stops – and an exciting new project has totally flipped her training script

By Alex Davies Photography by Steven Chee



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There are certain topics you're likely to chat about with a *Women's Health* cover star. Tasmanian devils isn't one of them. And yet, here I am talking about those little marsupials with Elsa Pataky. She's telling me about a conservation project she and husband of 10 years – actor Chris Hemsworth – are supporting to reintroduce devils into mainland Australia for the first time in 3,000 years. Her family (including daughter India, eight, and six-year-old twin boys Tristan and Sasha) have spent time with the groups involved, such as Aussie Ark and Global Wildlife Conservation. “Having the opportunity to protect the animals and try to bring them back... it's amazing and so interesting for the kids, too,” says Elsa.

It's no secret Elsa is a huge animal lover, especially of horses (scroll her Instagram for an awesome video of her helping to deliver a foal). And, although the 44-year-old already knew the value of spending time with these majestic creatures for her mental wellbeing, being at home more over the past year has truly cemented it. “When we were in lockdown, I could still ride, so it was [all about] my family, my husband and my horses,” she says. “It's such a passion; kind of like meditation for me. I think it's important for your mind to have something you enjoy – a hobby that's just for *you* and your time.”

Whenever she's not at home in Byron Bay – where she and Chris have lived since 2014 – the Madrid-born actor and Swisse ambassador seeks out nature and open space as much as possible. She adores Western Australia (“The beaches and water are unbelievable”) as well as Lord Howe Island, where the family have been on holiday twice. “It looks like *Jurassic Park*, it's so untouched. Limited people can go there and you can't take cars; you just go on bicycles. It's beautiful.” She enjoys cities, but the great outdoors is her happy place. “Even now, coming to Sydney, it immediately gets me like...” she says, doing an exaggerated inhale. “Then I come back [home] and see the greenery, and I just feel so much better.”

TRAINING, REINVENTED

When we speak, Elsa's in Sydney to film *Carmen*, a modern adaptation of the iconic opera. She plays a cabaret waitress in the “really, really special” musical production, which is directed by renowned choreographer Benjamin Millepied and stars Melissa Barrera, *Normal People*'s Paul Mescal (yep, Elsa's a fan of the hit show – she loves *The Queen's Gambit*, too) and Spanish actor Rossy de Palma. Chris is filming Marvel blockbuster *Thor: Love and Thunder* in Sydney at the moment, so soon the whole family will arrive to spend a couple of months in the city. In fact, a few weeks after this magazine hits shelves, Elsa will start shooting a new project – one of the most exciting of her career so far.

She can't share much right now; only that it's an action movie and training for the role has revolutionised her fitness approach. For the first time, she's ventured into the world of heavy weights. “I need to get really strong for this role [and have] a massive change in my body – I knew I had to start [working with] heavy weights to get more muscular,” Elsa explains. “My character has to fight but also be able to *move*, so the training has to be functional, too. I want her to be believable.”

Elsa will work with fight trainers and stuntpeople, but she's also enlisted a top trainer in British athlete



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and adventurer Ross Edgley. He spent a month last year training Elsa and Chris and is due for another visit soon. "We worked with big weights and, at the same time, exercises that improve functional movement – we were swimming, we were climbing ropes, we were doing burpees, we were doing a lot of moving and acceleration," she reveals. "It's a mix of everything that really helps, and my body started to change a lot in just four weeks. Ross has an amazing energy – he pushes you to your limit. I'd finish training and I couldn't even go up the stairs in my house. My legs would be shaking!"

When I ask if she's enough of a convert to stick with heavy lifting after filming wraps, she doesn't hesitate. "Absolutely! I feel such an amazing change in my body and much more muscular, which I love. As a woman, and as you age, maintaining muscle is so important. If you want to start training with heavy weights, learn what exercises to do and how to do them in the right position with a trainer. You need to know how to train to not hurt yourself. Then, you can keep going up and up in your weights until you're [lifting] massive ones."

WELLBEING WARRIOR

Alongside the newbie on her fitness roster, Elsa has been a dedicated yogi for a decade and credits the practice for stretching and toning her body. Fans of Chris' Centr app will spot her in videos with her Byron-based instructor Tahl Rinsky (see opposite for an epic power flow).

But, exercising since her teens has taught Elsa there's always something new to learn, and she still loves exploring fresh ways to feel healthy and energised. Sleep? She's delving deeper into hers with the Oura Ring smart tracker and wears blue-light-blocking glasses when she's using her phone or iPad at night. Food? She isn't a fan of "useless" quick-fix diets ("healthy eating is a process and about developing sustainable habits") but does dabble in intermittent fasting. Edgley has taught her to fuel her body with a combination of protein and carbohydrates after a big training session. And, if you catch her on a school run, she'll likely have a green smoothie in hand – vegies, banana, berries or mango, almond butter and protein powder, since you asked.

Despite her passion for soaking up knowledge, Elsa's exercise ethos remains refreshingly simple. "It's about finding something you love that also improves your quality of fitness and moves your body," she says. "That could be running, swimming, whatever you like. There are things, like yoga, that I love and will always do, but there are always new things to try and ways to improve, change and learn. That inspires you to keep going."

Another newish habit that's stuck is daily meditation, even if it's just for five or 10 minutes in the morning or before she goes to sleep. "Finding those little spaces in the day helps my mind a lot," Elsa says. "Meditation helps you slow down and feel calmer when there are so many things on your mind." At a time when mental wellbeing feels more important than ever, who *doesn't* need a dose of that? Whether your meditation comes via an app, a workout, time in nature – or a night on the couch in front of *The Queen's Gambit*. Blue-light glasses, optional.

STAY CENTR'D

Want to kickbox with Elsa then cook with her? Sure you do! Thanks to this exclusive offer, every *WH* reader gets 2 weeks access to the Centr app for free*. Think fitness, nutrition and mindfulness content direct from an expert squad hand-picked by the couple – from trainer Luke Zocchi to chef Dan Churchill. Just log on to centr.com and use the code WHCENTR2021. Too easy! *Offer ends 5/5/21 Conditions apply.

Centr



Who better to take you through a power yoga flow than Elsa's own instructor? Tahl Rinsky is one of the featured trainers in Centr's new six-week hybrid program Centr Fusion, which combines Power Flow yoga, boxHIIT and strength to help you score major fitness gains. Consider this workout a taster. Do two rounds and feel the zen.

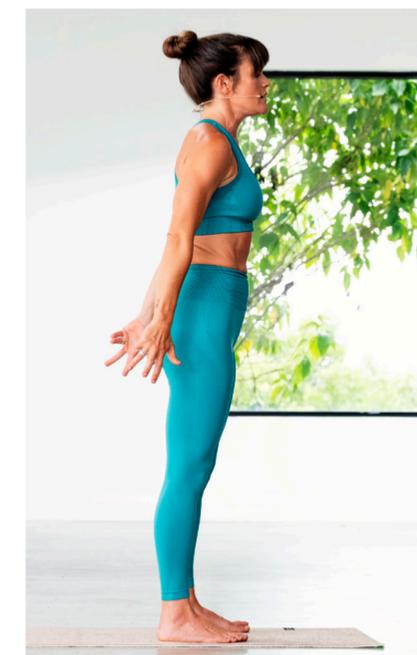
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DOWNDOG

Come onto all fours, shoulders over the wrist, hips over knees. Walk your hands one handspan forward. Press your hands firmly down into the mat, float the knees just off the floor. Drop the head down and start pushing your hips up toward the ceiling until you are in an inverted V shape. Heels can be high or melt them down into the mat, working within a comfortable range. Spread out your shoulder and breathe through the stretch.

MOUNTAIN POSE



Stand up tall with your feet parallel, arms up, spin your palms forward. Take a deep breath in and begin to 'cactus' the arms – bend the elbows, taking them out and down while drawing the bottom tip of the shoulder blades together. Inhale and reach your arms back up.

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CHAIR POSE SQUAT PULSE HOLDS

Begin with your feet hip width apart. Spin your feet out 45 degrees, and come into a squat with your hands reaching forward. You can stay high or sink down into the squat as low as you are comfortable with your heels down. Try to pull the floor apart with your feet, sinking your weight into your feet and keeping your shoulders light. Breathe in, then exhale, drive the heels down firmly into the ground to pulse up and down five times.



MOUNTAIN CLIMBERS

Step into a high plank pose, balancing on hands and toes with your arms locked out. Draw the belly button into the spine and, alternating legs, draw one knee up toward your chest at a time. Repeat this move for 10 knee raises.

HIGH LUNGE

From standing, exhale and fold forward over your legs, with a bend in the knees. Bring your palms to the floor and step one leg back. Inhale and rise up to bring your torso upright. Bring your arms above your head and bend your back knee, keeping heavy on the front foot. Keep the knee hovering off the floor or bring it down to the floor if needed. Inhale and interlace your palms above your head. Wrap the thighs together. As you exhale, draw your belly back, and take three knee taps, dropping knee to floor. Repeat on the other side for round two.



DOWNDOG HOPS

Begin in your downward dog position. Take a breath to prepare, then as you exhale, shift your weight forward while jumping both feet forward, landing softly. If the jump is too much, you can step your feet forward one at a time. Squat down slightly before jumping or stepping the feet back to your start position. Repeat for three jumps. Awesome work! **wh**