

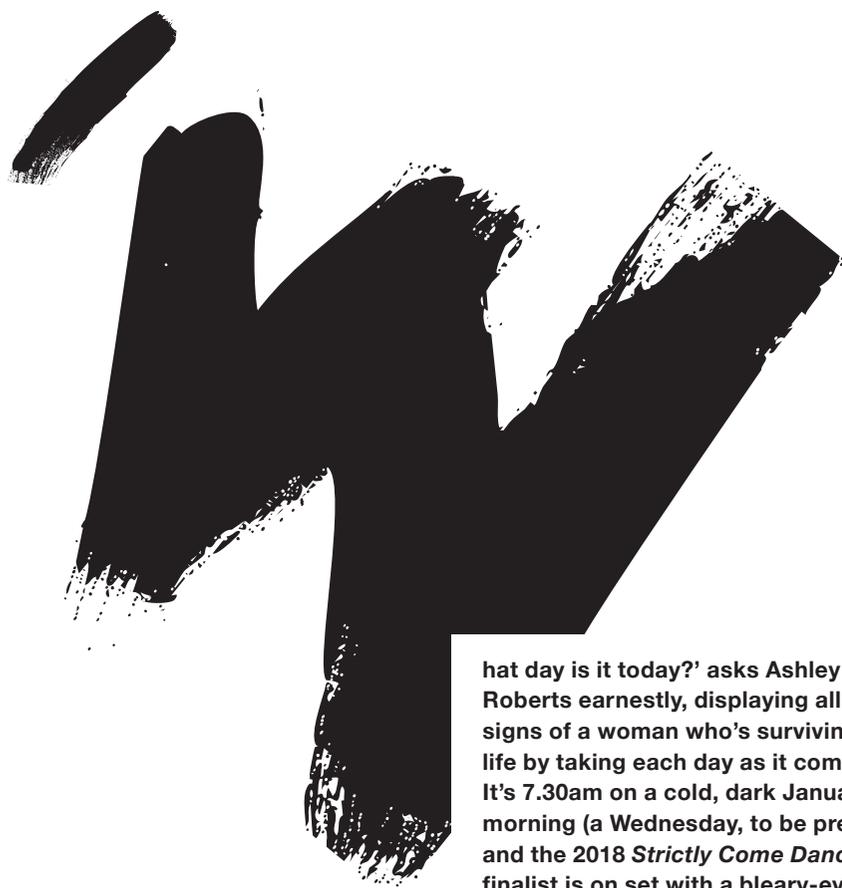
STRICTLY ASHLEY

We catch up with Ashley Roberts post *Strictly...* to find out the secrets behind her powerful athleticism and strong mind

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PHOTOGRAPHY: Helen Marsden







hat day is it today?’ asks Ashley Roberts earnestly, displaying all the signs of a woman who’s surviving life by taking each day as it comes. It’s 7.30am on a cold, dark January morning (a Wednesday, to be precise), and the 2018 *Strictly Come Dancing* finalist is on set with a bleary-eyed H&F team, graciously squeezing us in for our cover shoot before she has to hotfoot across town to another eight-hour-long rehearsal for the forthcoming *Strictly Come Dancing: The Live Tour* (strictlycomedancinglive.com). Yet, despite her relentlessly hectic schedule (the tour lasts two months and visits eight UK cities), the 37-year-old former Pussycat Doll couldn’t be more chuffed to be heading back into the dance studio.

A new stage

‘I just can’t wait to go out on the tour and have some fun,’ she explains passionately. ‘The cast and I had our first meeting back after the Christmas break a few days ago, and we were all giggling like kids in the playground. We only have to practise the routines we know already, and we’re not being scored by judges or trying to win votes from the public, so the pressure has been lifted and we all feel we can breathe a bit now. Performing is what I love to do so I’m very excited to dance for the people paying to come see us, without all the stress that happened through the series.’

To say Ashley’s *Strictly...* experience was a bit of an emotional rollercoaster is an understatement. From the soaring high of being the first contestant of the series to win a perfect score of 40 for her Jive with professional dance partner Pasha Kovalev

during Blackpool week (she went on score 40 twice more) to the devastating *W* of ending up in the dance-off three weeks on the trot, and surviving that to win place in the final, the now-TV presenter multaneously dazzled some viewers with her performances, and drew criticism from others who claimed her previous dance experience gave her an unfair advantage over contestants with non-dancing backgrounds. But Ashley remains as philosophical as ever on the subject that drew so much controversy.

‘I understand where the public was coming from,’ she says thoughtfully. ‘But I was invited by the BBC to do the show, and I really was beyond grateful to do it.’

‘I’m very excited to dance without all the stress of the *Strictly...* TV series’

Pasha and I set an intention from the very beginning to just go out there every week pretending it was our last, and to give it our best,’ she says with a fond laugh. ‘My mum also reminded me how excited I was when I first got the call to do the show, and that it was all about having the opportunity to perform, and wear awesome costumes. And that’s what helped get me back in the studio on Monday mornings. It did suck at times, and there were moments when I wondered if it was a personal thing – did the public not like me? Luckily, I have a lot of amazing mentors who’ve taught me that in life, you have a choice. And when you



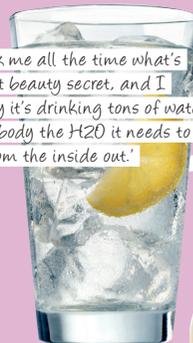
Ashley's beauty essentials

I've been having Mesotherapy facial treatments with Jo-Anne Newman at SkinCAN (£135 for one treatment; skincan.co.uk) for years, and really notice the difference in my skin – they put all the nutrients and elasticity back into your skin to leave you toned and glowing.'

I'm very strict with my cleansing and moisturising routine before I go to bed, and massage in a few drops of Lumity Natural Anti-Ageing Facial Oil (£60 for 30ml; lumitylife.co.uk) every night.'



People ask me all the time what's my biggest beauty secret, and I always say it's drinking tons of water. Give your body the H2O it needs to cleanse from the inside out.'



I always moisturise after I shower, and love using Kiehl's Creme de Corps Body Butter (£28 for 250ml; kiehls.co.uk) – it's am-az-ing!'



I love using the Skyn Iceland Hydro Cool Firming Eye Gels (£25 for 8 pairs of patches; marksandspencer.com). I get bags and dark circles under my eyes and these just magic them away after 10 minutes!'



get knocked down, you can either stay down or get back up again.'

Training secrets

It also helped, she adds, that there was never really enough time to think about anything else other than learning a new routine each week. 'People talk about the *Strictly*... "bubble", and let me tell you, it's very real. Your life is consumed by the show, which is good when you want to give it your all and be really focused. On Monday, we'd get all the choreography thrown at us. Then on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, Pasha would start breaking it down, trying to help me understand the movement, the style, the transfer of weight (everything is so precise in the ballroom and Latin world). And on Thursdays there'd be times I'd tell Pasha we had to change the moves because I didn't believe it would all come together in time. The iconic lift we did for the *Dirty Dancing*-themed salsa in week three really stressed me out! Pasha kept saying that it would be okay, and somehow it came together in the end. It was a very challenging process, but one I learned to trust in as it went on.'

So was Ashley's *Strictly*... experience everything she thought it would be? 'Everything and more. Definitely more!' she exclaims with a giggle. 'All my girlfriends

who had done *Strictly*... warned me how physically challenging it was, but because I consider myself a pretty fit and healthy person, I was like, "I've got this!" But you can't really understand [Ashley laughs hysterically] the demands your body faces! Doing *Strictly*... was amazing, but it was also the toughest thing I've ever done – physically, mentally and emotionally. I had such high expectations of myself for the judges and the audience; I pushed myself in ways I'd never done before. It was completely different to getting ready for the last Pussycat Dolls tour 10 years ago, when we prepped for a month, going over and over the same routines, and not being

judged if there was a toe out of place.'

Ashley reveals that her and Pasha – now a 'buddy for life' – mostly trained for nine hours a day, but there were a few days where he stopped rehearsals after six. 'Some days my body would just shut down, or there'd be no more storage left in my brain to take anything else in. Pasha would say "okay, we're done", while I just stood there with a blank stare. But the stamina I built up was amazing.'

Body shock

Prior to signing up for *Strictly*..., Ashley regularly exercised four to five times a week

MAIN FEATURE SHOTS: PHOTOGRAPHY: Helen Marsden; STYLIST: Kellie Daggret; HAIR & MAKE-UP: Jo Clayton using Clinique make-up and Paul Mitchell haircare. CLOTHING: Atria Sports Bra, £40; Noli at My Gym Wardrobe (mygymwardrobe.com); Track Pants, £24.99; H&M (2hm.com); Trainers, Ashley's own; Adidas (adidas.co.uk)

with low-impact workouts such as boxing, Spin and hot yoga classes – which she favours due to her ‘dodgy knees’, which she initially feared would prevent her from taking part in *Strictly...* – plus one-on-one sessions with top PT Dalton Wong of Twenty Two Training (twentytwotraining.com) to ‘tighten and tone’ her body. Fitness is a way of life for her: a habit she credits to her mum, who was a Step aerobics, Pilates and fitness instructor while she was growing up.

‘I like to work out in the mornings as I think it’s the best way to start your day,’ she confesses. ‘I love to get my sweat on, release feelgood hormones and feel my heart thumping in my chest – that’s how I connect with my body. It’s all about feeling good, feeling strong and feeling healthy. I’d planned to continue my workouts throughout *Strictly...*, but I was too physically exhausted.’

Core values

So does she think her existing fitness levels helped to improve her performance during her dance training? ‘I do think it helped... how could it not?! My core strength certainly helped during lifts,’ she admits. ‘But I don’t think you can compare 45 minutes of 20-30 second intervals of high-intensity exercise followed by 10-second rests to running through a 90-second dance routine over and over for eight hours – it’s a totally different animal. Although I was already slim, I definitely got much tinier during the *Strictly...* process, and had lots of comments saying “you’re getting too small!”. Thankfully, my body had a much-needed rest over Christmas and I drank a bunch of wine as a rare treat, so I’ve gained a few pounds back!’

Ashley’s daily diet



Breakfast: ‘Greek yoghurt with berries, nuts and seeds.’



Mid-morning: ‘Eggs and avocado – maybe with bread, depending on whether I’m cutting down on carbs or not.’



Lunch: ‘An omelette with veggies and a little Parmesan cheese. I love adding chilli flakes to give some extra flavour.’



Dinner: ‘Always a protein with veg, like a chicken and avocado salad. But if I want to indulge, it could be Mexican or a pizza!’



Snacks: ‘I sip on Sunwarrior’s Classic Plus Organic Plant-Based Protein in Chocolate Flavour (£2.95 for 500g; sunwarrior.co.uk) mixed with coconut water for an extra bit of protein throughout the day. It’s really gummy!’

Ashley says she doesn’t drink alcohol if she wants to feel good the next day ‘as it hits me much harder than it used to’, occasionally having a glass of wine or gin and soda if she’s out for dinner. But when it comes to food, she’s much more likely to indulge. ‘I love to eat clean and healthy with lots of veggies and protein as it’s important to put good fuel into your body, but I also really love pizza and cookies,’ she reveals with a giggle. ‘I’d never take those things out of my diet unless I had to get ready for a shoot, event or holiday. I did go vegetarian for a year a while back, but have gradually introduced chicken, turkey and eggs back into my diet to keep things balanced. Although, actually, I adore vegan food and, as Pasha is vegan, I ate a lot of plant-based food during rehearsals.’

Finding balance

Achieving balance in life is another passion of Ashley’s, who regularly meditates and sends out gratitude to ‘counterbalance the more gruelling aspects of life’. She also loves reading books that help reset her mind in a positive way, citing author Cleo Wade as a favourite; enjoys ‘cosy baths with candles to connect with my more feminine side’; and often turns to reiki and crystal healer-turned-friend, Emma Knowles (lucykingdom.com), for help with her energy levels. But the one thing Ashley’s adamant about keeping going for her long-term happiness is her rediscovered love of dance.

‘I hadn’t danced for so many years so, when *Strictly...* came around, it felt like a gift to learn something new. I have to incorporate dance in my life going forward. I can’t not! So once the tour’s over, I’ll be going to dance classes alongside my regular fitness ones. I definitely want to keep performing... it’s what I love to do!’ And long may she continue... ■

Ashley’s workout must-haves



‘Sweaty Betty do great hoodies for throwing over your gym kit after training, like this Luxe Invigorate Hoodie. (£115; sweatybetty.com).’



I wear high-waisted leggings and crop tops to work out, and My Gym Wardrobe is great for decently priced fitness kit. I love this Arcaa Movement Sia Sports Bra, £60, and Aurum Breathe Out Leggings (£94; mygymwardrobe.com).’



I used my trainer Dalton Wong’s Mini-Bands (£48; twentytwotraining.com) every morning before *Strictly* rehearsals to warm up my body, activate my glutes and realign my posture.’

I love Nike’s Metcon Flyknit 3 Trainers (£134.95; nike.com) which I wear for my boxing and circuit-training workouts.’



I always carry a reusable water bottle, like ALOR’s 500ml Stainless Steel water bottle (£20; alorstore.com). Given the state of our planet, I think it’s really important to reduce plastic waste.’



**Fitness is a
way of life for
Ashley, whose
mum was a
fitness
instructor**