



SKYE HIGH CONFIDENCE

We've been waiting to bust out that pun since we booked Emily Skye for our cover! The fitness superstar may look as if her world is all sunshine and kettlebells, but she also rocks tummy rolls and stretch marks and shows every bit of it to her 13 million social followers. Here, she opens up to *WH* about conquering self-doubt, gaining 30 pounds, and why strength is so much more powerful than perfection.

By Leslie Goldman

STYLING: JACQUELINE AZRIA, HAIR: AARON LIGHT FOR HONEST BEAUTY/THE WALL GROUP, MAKEUP: NAI QUYNH FOR LANCOME MONSIEUR BIG, MASCARA/STARWORKS ARTISTS, MANICURE: EMI KUDO FOR DIOR VERNIS/OPUS BEAUTY, PROP STYLING: ABRAHAM LATHAM/ART DEPARTMENT, ABERCROMBIE AND FITCH TOP, PEIXOTO SWIM BOTTOMS, JENNIFER MEYER JEWELRY EARRINGS, PANDORA BRACELET, LOTUS JEWELRY STUDIO BRACELET, MULBERRY AND GRAND BRACELET, THOMAS SABO BRACELET

Emily Skye has to pee. Badly. “Thank god we’re here, I’m busting!”

the 32-year-old fitness guru exclaims in her cheeky Aussie accent after an hour-long, iced-almond-milk-latte-fueled drive across the San Gabriel Valley to Burbank, California. Yep, she’s as frank in person as on her wildly popular social media feeds, where she cops to zits, digestive drama, and “dessert babies”—a.k.a. post-sweets bloat.

That openness not only sets Emily apart from the gaggle of sculpted fit-fluencers out there, but has boosted her to the apex of the fitness market. The figures tell the story: 13 million followers across Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube; a number-three spot on *Forbes’s* 2017 list of the 10 most influential fitness stars worldwide; and a paying audience of 250,000 for her online workout program, F.I.T. On this sunny SoCal day, Emily is further plumping up her portfolio with back-to-back meetings about potential collaborations—makeup, TV, workout shoes, all the expected stops on the fitspo-star express.

She is driving that train in a new direction, though. “It’s so important for women to remember that the people who inspire them are human and shouldn’t be put up on pedestals,” she says. Emily is essentially creating a new version of fitspo that aspires to be fit but not obsessed, a place where she can be unabashedly proud of her cut-and-curved self one minute, and vulnerable and pal-next-door the next—with a touch of armchair psychologist.

Case in point: Her strength-training workouts are tough enough to have you hobbling the day after, but online she prefers feel-good mantras,





like “Don’t dull your sparkle to make other people more comfortable,” to the unsparing “Sweat is just your fat crying” memes. She wants women to be strong, but not too hard on themselves as they work toward that strength. Before she could teach that kind of self-acceptance to others, however, she had to find it herself.

■ A PAINFUL PAST

It didn’t come easily. “My father left when I was 2,” she reveals, a life-changing event she now believes instilled in her the “feeling that I could never be loved” and ultimately led her to fall for a string of abusive boyfriends.

Emily was also mercilessly bullied by other girls. “In grade

school, they’d make frog noises when I walked past because I had big eyes, and they called me Stick Creature because I was skinny,” she remembers. By age 11, she was so unhappy that her doctor prescribed an antidepressant. When her wide blue-gray eyes and willowy legs caught the attention of male students, the girl-on-girl torment escalated: Emily was pushed into lockers and chased home from school.

Hoping to boost Emily’s confidence in her looks, her mother enrolled her in a modeling course at 13. By her late teens, she was scoring gigs for fashion and bikini shoots, but that made her feel worse. “I’d go to castings and compare myself to the other women,” she says. “I would think, *I’m not*

pretty enough or skinny enough. But I kept modeling because I needed praise to feel loved.”

By her early twenties, Emily was “on the verge of an eating disorder,” she says. Daily two-hour cardio sessions and a diet of carrots, celery, and hummus kept her at a size 0, “but I wasn’t fit or healthy. I had so much self-hate that sometimes I didn’t feel like I wanted to live.” She also had a “nasty boyfriend” who was not only unfaithful and controlling but threatening and physically abusive. “I had to get a restraining order on him,” she says. “In retrospect, it was like a horrible movie.”

■ THE TURNING POINT

There was no place to go but up, and Emily’s first moves in

that direction began to take shape in 2009, when she was 24. “I started looking at muscle and fitness magazines, and the women seemed so strong and healthy. I loved the idea of using weights to transform your body, to look and feel powerful.” At the gym, she traded cardio machines for the weight room, playing around with lat pulldowns and biceps curls that, she now admits, “I was probably doing all wrong.”

At the same time, Emily reconnected with a friend of a friend, Declan Redmond, a former commando in the Australian army and an experienced weightlifter. The two started training together, with short bursts of HIIT and heavy weights. Emily noticed a difference in her physique within six weeks: Her arms and legs had grown more defined and she’d begun etching out abs.

As she continued reshaping her body from “twig” to “strong, fit machine”—in the process gaining almost 30 pounds, most of it pure muscle—her confidence blossomed too. Fueled by a steady stream of post-workout endorphins, her depression melted away, and she was able to stop taking the antidepressants that had been part of her life for a dozen years. “Before, I had this cloudy feeling, and now, the sun was shining. I thought, *This is what being alive is like.* I felt like a superhero.”

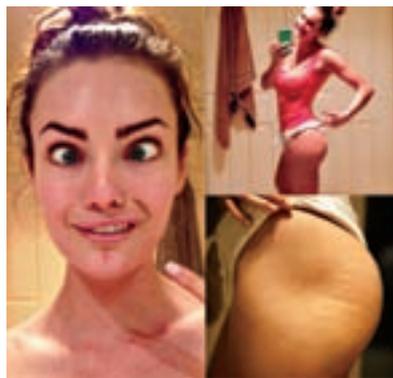
Not everyone was on board with Emily’s new passion. “Some friends wrinkled their noses at my muscles. One looked at my arms and shoulders and said I looked ‘disgusting, like a man.’” A bikini company airbrushed her abs out of photos. A fashion-house rep gestured at Emily’s sculpted arms and said, “It’s too much.” “And I was tiny then compared to now!” Emily marvels. It was high school all over again—not fitting in, not being accepted.

The Many Faces (and Bods) of Emily Skye

After Emily recovered from disordered eating, perfectionism, and self-image issues, she wanted to help other women do the same. Enter: a platform-shattering honesty about her body's awkward moments, along with a message to "just be you!" Here, a few of her most powerful posts.



October 2013: In an early post, Emily took on the thigh-gap obsession, writing that it's "not only unrealistic but ridiculous and unhealthy!" About her own amazing thighs, she added, "I don't have a gap and I don't want one!"



October 2014: Accused of making women feel insecure, Emily posted zits-and-stretch marks photos on Facebook, and a passionate personal note about her own unhealthy past. Number of views: 91 million.



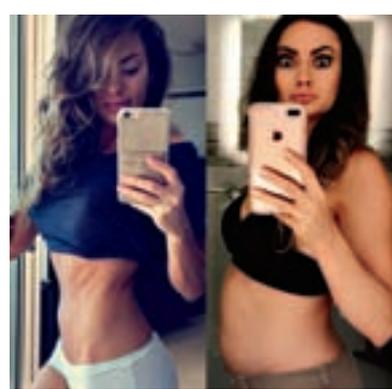
August 2016: "There's a big difference between what most people post online and 'real life,'" Emily told followers. The proof? Her face, pre- and post-makeup. "It took me years to be comfortable with my 'raw' self."



November 2016: Emily documented her transformation in an Instagram post that revealed an almost 30-pound weight gain. Her earlier self was "starving" and depressed; now she's "happier than I have ever been."



February 2017: Belly rolls rule! After a month-long trip, Emily wrote, "Sometimes I look like the pic on the left, sometimes like the pic on the right." Lesson: Even fitness icons "don't always have abs"—and that's totally cool.



March 2017: "I have something to tell you... I have a dessert baby!" Emily told Instagram followers, another step in her "perfection doesn't exist" campaign. "Here's a reminder that I bloat," she wrote. "It was SO worth it."

Only this time, she had the (BOSU) balls to speak up. The feeling of power in her body, she says, had "paved the way to mental changes." Emily began stripping away sources of negativity from her life, dropping unsupportive "friends," traveling with Declan (now her boyfriend), and modeling for fitness companies instead of fashion and beauty labels. When her

76-year-old grandma saw her flexing and said, "Stop lifting weights. You're supposed to be feminine," she simply smiled... and flexed again.

■ REDEFINING #FITSPO

It wasn't long before Emily had a wider audience for her strong-not-skinny philosophy. By 2011 she had become a certified personal trainer and was blogging and posting on

Facebook, then later Instagram and other platforms, about her meals, workouts, and experiences at body-building and swimsuit competitions. Her timing was impeccable: The fitspo movement was just springing up as a reaction to thinspo, the trend celebrating an ultra-skinny ideal—and fitspo's emphasis on strength and health dovetailed with Emily's physical and mental

transformation. "I decided everyone deserved to feel as incredible as I did," she says.

But a funny thing happened to fitspo over the next few years. It began morphing into something that could trigger perfectionism and body-size preoccupation—much like thinspo. In 2014, an Australian professor wrote an article blaming social media fitness stars for making young women

feel guilty about their bodies... with Emily Skye's photo front and center.

Emily was incensed. "The professor hadn't bothered to read my content—she just cherry-picked some photos and made assumptions," she says. Emily responded by posting a collage of zits and stretch marks, together with a heartfelt statement about her own "struggles, insecurities, and flaws." The story got more than 91 million views and ignited Emily's career.

Now her social media secret sauce is a refreshing blend of look-at-me aspiration and I'm-like-you honesty. Between the posts on moves that will lift your butt, there are tricks for lifting yourself out of the occasional sad mood...which Emily admits she still falls into. In one YouTube video, she confesses, "I'm feeling down in the dumps...I don't wanna do anything. I wanna sleep all the time; I wanna cry all the time." Her solution: "Do what you need to do to feel good in that moment—cry, skip the gym, eat chocolate—then get back to what you know works for you."

Clearly that's a message that resonates, and Emily keeps compiling more ways to send it out. Reebok made her a global ambassador last September, and she is spearheading its "Hands" campaign, designed to spark conversations about body positivity. She is also working with the company on a new shoe, a training sneaker designed to handle everything from squats to plyometric box jumps to sprints. And her F.I.T. program has led to a partnership with an Australian gym chain, with "Emily/Skye Ignite" strength-training classes offered at 75 locations.

Through the maze of new opportunities, though, Emily never loses touch with the vulnerable girl she once was. "Before I post anything, I ask myself, 'If I were talking to my youngest self, what would I have wanted to hear?'" ■

'Gram-Slam Abs!

No gym required. Instead, hit the sand (or anywhere!) with this routine from Emily. Three times a week, do this circuit in order: Perform each exercise for 40 seconds, then rest for 20 seconds before moving on to the next. After doing all five moves, rest for one minute, then repeat five times for six total rounds.



1. BODY-WEIGHT SQUAT

Stand with your feet a little more than shoulder-width apart, toes turned out slightly and hands at your sides (a). Keeping your core tight and chest upright, sit your hips back and bend your knees to lower your body until your thighs are parallel to the ground, bringing your hands together in front of you for balance (b). Press through your heels to return to start.

2. CURTSY LUNGE

Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart, hands together in front of you at chest height (a). Keeping your torso upright, take a big step back with your left leg, crossing it behind your right, then bend your knees and lower until your right thigh is nearly parallel to the floor, keeping your hips and shoulders as square as possible (b). Press through your right heel to return to standing. Repeat on the other side and continue alternating.



3. SPIDER-MAN MOUNTAIN CLIMBER

Start in pushup position, hands directly below your shoulders, legs extended and feet together (a). Brace your core, then bend your left knee out and up toward your left elbow, keeping your hips as parallel to the ground as possible (b). Return to start. Repeat with the other leg and continue alternating.



4. MODIFIED V-UP

Lie faceup on the ground with legs straight, arms at your sides, and shoulders off the ground (a). Quickly lift your torso to an upright position as you pull your knees to your chest (b). Keeping your hands next to your hips on the ground for support, slowly lower back to start.



5. MODIFIED PUSHUP

Start on your hands and knees in a modified pushup position, hands slightly more than shoulder-width apart, and your body forming a straight line from head to knees (a). Squeeze your glutes and brace your core, then bend your elbows to lower your chest toward the floor (b). Press through your palms to return to start.

WANT POINTERS?

Go to WomensHealthMag.com to see Emily perform all five moves.