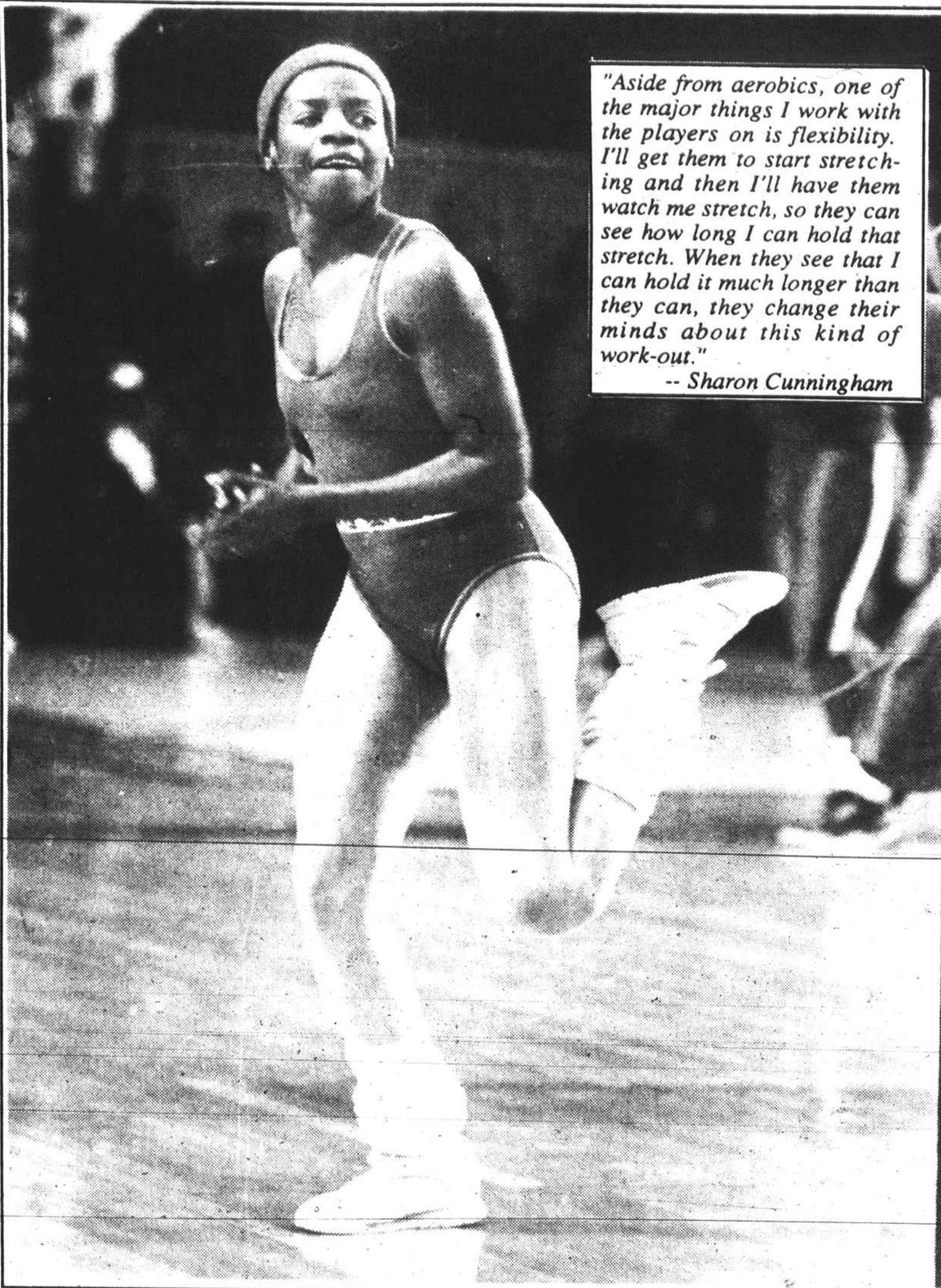


Aerobic work-outs

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-- Sharon Cunningham

Photo by Craig T. Greenlee

endurance and strength and feel good in the process. "It's a total body work-out that you can't get with most other forms of exercise. You work all the muscle groups and you enhance your cardiovascular fitness."

Cardiovascular fitness is the ability of the body to handle progressively intense, non-stop work-outs for longer periods of time. The result is that athletes can maintain their highest level of strength longer and that's a key to success in football. In that sport, the teams who are more fit in the fourth quarter of their games are the teams that win consistently year after year.

The work-outs she prescribes helps reduce injuries because the exercises are designed to make the muscles more supple and increase the muscles ability to work at a high level. In addition, aerobic fitness helps one recover more quickly from injuries, because the fitness attained increases the body's recuperative powers.

Male athletes in particular, have been somewhat reluctant to engage in aerobics. The reason for that reticence is the perception that aerobics is more on the "girlish" side of becoming fit.

It's no secret that when Cunningham started this program three years ago, there were some Rams players who felt that exercising to pulsating music was a waste of time.

"I never considered whether or not the players would accept the work-outs or not," she admits. "But that's because I believe in what I do and I can prove that it works."

The first time that WSSU gridsters participated in the morning sessions wasn't exactly a joyous occasion for them. Getting up before the sun rises during the off-season, wasn't what many of them had in mind.

"A lot of the players were upset that they had to get up so early," Cunningham recalls. "That first session was really rough on them. But afterwards, I could start to see a change in their outlook. More and more players started looking forward to the work-outs because it made them feel good."

Football players tend to much larger physical specimens than the average person. Cunningham's stature is more like that of a dwarf in comparison to the guys who put on pads and knock people silly.

Cunningham, however, likes the idea that she can use her comparatively diminutive size to demonstrate her points about fitness to her beefy pupils.

"Aside from aerobics, one of the major things I work with the players on is flexibility," she says. "I'll get them to start stretching and then I'll have them watch me stretch so they can see how long I can hold that stretch. When they see that I can hold it much longer than they can, they change their minds about this kind of work-out."

Athletes, she adds, are more prone to accept aerobics than non-athletes, because they know it will them improve their performance level. "One of the things I always like to tell the players is that yes -- you do have the muscles and the weight. But it's not how much you can lift, but how much control you have over your own body."

"I've found that men don't like to do stretching exercises. And I've had to demonstrate that additional flexibility gives one a fuller range of motion. So what if you can lift 400 lbs.? The major question is, how many times can you lift 400 lbs? For example, we've done arm exercises which emphasizes endurance and when we've done them, a lot of the players just dropped out while I was still going. I know that I've earned their respect. They can see that I know what I'm talking about. They've seen for themselves that what I'm telling them works to their benefit as athletes. I'm there with them at 6 in the morning and when I talk, they consume what I'm telling them. That makes me feel very good about what I'm doing."

Les Barley, the Rams all-CIAA linebacker is a firm believer in what aerobics can do for an athlete. "I can feel the difference," he says. "Those work-outs give us an edge. We're a lot more flexible and basically that makes us quicker, stronger, and faster."

The work-out itself, Barley adds, has never been much of a problem. The early morning hours are still hard to get accustomed to. "It's still rough," he continues, "and it's going to be rough anyway when you have to get up at 5:30 in the morning. But once we get there, everything is fine. We have a lot of fun during the work-outs."

Cunningham, says Barley, maintains total control of the sessions. She's in charge of the gym for that one hour and the players are attentive to the ideas they are being exposed to.

"Sometimes," he says, "I think she takes it easy on us. I know she could work us harder because she's so much

more flexible than the rest of us:"

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