

Why swimming is the perfect sport at any age

Masters swimmer Val Thorp, 64, loved swimming as a child but it wasn't until she was in her mid-forties that she started taking it seriously.

How did you start swimming?

I can't remember a time when I couldn't swim. I think it was my dad who first took me. He had been a gymnast and was very keen for me to do something active. The funny thing was that he couldn't swim, so he was there in the shallow end encouraging me to give it a try. Someone must have suggested I did some lessons so I ended up as a member of a swimming club in London. I just loved the sense of freedom I had in the water. I swam at county level as a youngster and continued a bit at university but once I became a teacher it really took a back seat.

How did you return to competitive swimming?

It did cross my mind many times that I should go back but I never did anything about it. When I was about 45 I read an article about masters swimming [a class of competitive swimming for over-25s]. The [race] times that they were making didn't look outrageous and I wondered if it might be something I could do. I got in touch with the coordinator and she gave me the details of my nearest club.

The first time in the pool was grim because I remembered the things I used to be able to do years ago and couldn't any more. But everyone was so nice and encouraging that I kept going back and just got better and better. I've had a great year and it's been really satisfying. I won open-water competitions at national and British levels, and then got a bronze at the Europeans.

What are the benefits of swimming?

The health benefits are tremendous. It's great for your cardio system and when I went to my 'well woman' check at 60 they said it's given me so many physical advantages. I think there are mental benefits as well. When I was a teacher, if I had a hard day I'd swim and by the end of it all the stress was gone.

It's very sociable too. I've travelled all over the world and made new friends. There are people I swim with who are 18/19 and others in their eighties, so you meet all sorts of different people. My husband was diagnosed with oesophageal cancer seven or eight years ago and the club gave me such fantastic support. He used to swim when he was younger and said if he recovered he would come to swim. So he's gone back too.

How accessible is swimming?

At the moment my club is taking people who are comfortable swimming 400 to 500 metres but there are some clubs that will teach people from scratch, and lots of adult classes, so there are always opportunities to get involved. You don't have to be swimming competitively.

There are also lots of terrific opportunities to get involved in open-water swimming. There are lots of events, even if people don't want to swim competitively, such as the Henley Mile [an annual event in the River Thames]. It's great fun, with hundreds and hundreds of people doing it.

Masters swimmer Val Thorp March 28 2017