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A photograph of a swimmer in a pool, captured mid-stroke. The swimmer is in the foreground, with their arms extended forward. The pool is divided into lanes by black lane lines. In the background, there are evergreen trees and a mountain range under a clear sky. A string of blue and yellow pennant flags hangs across the top of the pool area. The water is a vibrant blue-green color.

AQUA BLISS

How swimming prolongs life
and enhances longevity

by Emily Williams

SWIMMING IS CONSIDERED A LOW-IMPACT, HIGHLY EFFECTIVE CARDIOVASCULAR WORKOUT, but does it stand apart from other sports as we age? Aquatic activities such as swimming, water aerobics, and aquatic therapy have emerged as catalysts for improved vitality and longevity. From improved mental health to a strong sense of community, the benefits of aquatic activities for well-being are evident among aging athletes here in the Wood River Valley.

At 90 years old, retired surgeon Fred Bieker rejoices, “Swimming is a life-saver—I can swim a mile faster than I can walk it!” Fred swims one mile three days a week in Zenergy’s state-of-the-art 25-yard saltwater pool. Unlike many land-based exercises that can be hard on joints, swimming provides resistance without impact, promoting muscle development without risking injury. As we age, maintaining muscle mass becomes increasingly essential for overall health and longevity. Swimming helps combat age-related muscle loss, enhancing mobility and reducing the risk of falls and fractures. By allowing us to continue to engage in physical activity, even while injured or experiencing joint pain, swimming helps us pursue a healthy and active lifestyle at the core of longevity.

Aquatic exercise enhances flexibility and helps to improve joint mobility by moving the body through a wide range of motion. Sixty-five-year-old John Gove, a local powerhouse athlete, found solace in the pool’s embrace after a broken shoulder in 2018. John says, “The range of motion on my left shoulder was down about 40 degrees, and my physical therapist recommended that I try swimming to gain some of that back.” After making a full recovery, John established lap swimming as a staple in his workout regimen. “Now, I swim approximately 300 miles a year.”

“The buoyancy of water provides support to limbs and joints, allowing them to engage fully more easily,” explains Zenergy Aquatic Therapist Maria Beattie. “You can always get in the water, even when weight bearing is not an option. From helping recover after injury to promoting lifelong flexibility and joint health, the pool is a powerful tool for rehabilitation and injury prevention.”

As a longtime swimmer, 72-year-old Linda Clemens transitioned from lap swimming to Zenergy’s Hydrofit classes after a hip replacement and hasn’t looked back. “I’ve been doing Hydrofit for the last four years, and the energy of the class and the cardio workout that I get has been wonderful,” says Linda. “The outdoor pool at Zenergy is my piece of heaven.” Hydrofit instructors use buoyancy and resistance equipment to deliver an enhanced core body workout in the pool. As the premier outdoor pool in the Valley, the Zenergy pool is renowned for providing swimmers with unparalleled views of Bald Mountain.

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—*Maria Beattie*

Beyond the stunning setting, participating in aquatics often occurs in group settings, engendering a sense of community and inclusion. Former professional ballet dancer and equestrian Nadine McWilliams shares, “I had everything taken away, but then I found Hydrofit—so I’m not feeling too terribly deprived.” Nadine faced a rare cancer diagnosis that forced her to give up some of her favorite activities. Social engagement is crucial for mental well-being, and the sense of community with group aquatic activities can help combat feelings of isolation or loneliness.

Eighty-four-year-old marathon swimming hall of famer Harry Huffaker affirms, “You stretch out, burn calories, the endorphins kick in, and you get a good attitude about almost everything.” The decorated swimmer’s words underscore the transformative power of swimming on body and mind.

“Being able to swim in the outdoor pool year-round fills my spirit and makes me want to go on!” exclaims 78-year-old Jeannie Koleno, who participates in outdoor pool-based Hydrofit whether the sun is shining or the snow is flying. Exercise has been proven to reduce levels of the body’s stress hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol. It also stimulates the production of endorphins, chemicals in the brain that are the body’s natural painkillers and mood elevators.

Daily Zenergy lap swimmer Katherine O’Malley reflects, “My mind has always craved peace and quiet, and going back and forth in the water is how I find it.” Swimming can have a calming, meditative effect, creating space for reflection and mental clarity. For these swimmers and many more, the pool provides more than just a fitness destination. It nurtures mental resilience and develops lasting social connections. Swimming is a powerful tool that can enhance your lifespan and the quality of your years. ■

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