

fitness report

TAKING THE PLUNGE

After a sports injury made other forms of exercise inadvisable, food and fitness writer Dana McMahan (finally) learns to swim ... and enjoy it.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL CLEVINGER

herscene.com

HER SCENE 53

What's a fitness enthusiast to do when assorted injuries prevent you from getting into the gym? Turns out, for me it was time to take the plunge and learn to swim. That's right — learn.

I grew up on Lake Cumberland in Southern Kentucky, where swimming lessons consisted of jumping off the boat to paddle around. I never got around to mastering proper strokes and techniques. Until a few months ago. That was when my sports doctor, exasperated with my latest workout injury, pushed me into the deep end and ordered that I swap all my other exercise for swimming.

I wasn't thrilled. Honestly, I have never understood why anyone would swim on purpose. But I was determined not to let my hard-earned physical condition deteriorate, so I bought a membership to the Ralph R. Wright Natatorium, donned a hot pink swim cap, and dived head first into swimming. OK, I didn't dive. Actually, I slipped into the slow lane. But I learned quickly that propelling yourself through water is as challenging as any workout I've ever done.

"It's a total body workout, using upper and lower body strength to push through the water," Jessica Gibb, a University of Louisville exercise physiologist and instructor, explained to me. Plus, "It can be a greater stress on your cardio system, which makes it stronger." Stress, indeed. The first time I went swimming, I had to rest a good minute-plus after each lap to catch my breath. But I was surprised at how quickly this improved. Things really started looking up when I took my first lesson and began to grasp the different strokes. As a former strength athlete, I appreciate the ability to focus on different muscle areas. And in the pool, you can target just about any one of them.

Gibb explained how most strokes will work the deltoids, but the butterfly, for instance, also emphasizes the traps, lats and rhomboids — all the muscles you'd like to look sleek in those slinky New Year's cocktail dresses. And for nicely developed (read: jiggle-free) glutes, hamstrings and quads, you can focus on kicking alone, using a float to rest your arms. And doing the butterfly kick with a float, judging by the way I felt my abs working, will seriously sculpt the core. And a strong core is about more than rocking a bikini next spring; it's going to improve your abilities in any other sport you try. Oh, and in case you are worried about linebacker-esque shoulders from all the swimming? Jessica couldn't suppress a laugh when I asked about that.

Ready to take the plunge? Where to swim this winter.

- Milestone has dozens of aqua classes a week, including those for beginners, plus a lap pool, and it offers trainers certified in aqua training. www.baptistmilestone.com/aquatics
- Mary T. Meagher Aquatic Center offers a lap pool and swimming lessons. www.louisvilleky.gov/metroparks/recreation/aquaticcenter.htm
- University of Louisville's Ralph R. Wright Natatorium features a competition pool for lap swimming and also offers lessons. For motivation, you can also watch U of L champion swimmers practice. www.ralphwrightnatatorium.com
- One of the best-kept secrets in town, the Home of the Innocents' 92-degree salt water therapy pool, is open to the public if you have a doctor's release and offers classes, including water Pilates. www.homeoftheinnocents.org/atc

"That's *not* going to happen," she assured me. "Women with that build are doing strength training to improve their swimming. Big, bulky shoulders for the average woman are never going to happen." And in fact the other women I saw swimming simply looked graceful and athletic. As an athlete with a tendency to push myself too hard, it's nice to know I can maintain a strong body like that without risk of injury.

"The buoyancy of the water takes the stress off the joints," Gibb explained. "The way water reacts to tissues in the body — especially fat mass — allows you to feel lighter. It takes the pressure off, especially the lower body."

Anyone dealing with injuries or other limitations, those with knee, back, or hip issues who can't do great compound exercises like squats — or even those who struggle with walking — can push harder in the water, Gibb said. And you don't even have to swim. Jessica works at Baptist East Milestone Wellness Center, where clients can do

aqua aerobics, running in the pool against the water resistance or weight training. Using an underwater bench, she teaches women to do squats, adding weight for additional resistance.

And for the really exuberant exerciser, swim and water exercise can be done quite often without fear of an overuse injury because it's so low-impact. "I recommend it as often as possible ... up to five to seven days a week," Jessica said. (However if you're just starting out, she advises beginning with three to four days a week.)

My swimming sentence is over, since I've been cleared to return to my usual workouts. So what's the legacy of my swimming days, besides that pink cap? I kept up my hard-won muscle mass while I stayed away from my beloved weights. I maintained my body weight, and best of all, my cardio has improved so much that I can fly through high-rep workouts without the breaks I used to need. You know, maybe I'll just plan to keep swimming in my workout lineup.

