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Swim School

Helping adults overcome a lifelong fear of the water requires as much attention to comfort and confidence-building as it does to skills development.

By Michael Popke
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When Mitch Klitzka walked into her office for the first time three years ago as the new aquatics specialist for the Town of Castle Rock, Colo., a book she'd never seen before was waiting on her desk. *Conquer Your Fear of Water: An Innovative Self-Discovery Course in Swimming*, written by longtime competitive swimmer and Miracle Swimming Institute founder Melon Dash, explains why so many adults are afraid to swim and presents a strategy for helping them feel comfortable and confident in the water. "It's a good thing my predecessor left it there," Klitzka says.



Otherwise, she most certainly wouldn't be in the midst of revamping Castle Rock's entire aquatics program. Klitzka read the book, and then took three members of her staff to one of Dash's daylong sessions for swimming instructors at a nearby private swim school. Beginning next January, Castle Rock will introduce a new learn-to-swim curriculum that builds on two classes the town began offering last year — "Overcome Your Aquaphobia" and "Adult Swim 101" — while becoming, in her words, "the kinder, gentler program when it comes to fear."

"The common belief is if you're afraid of water, you just need to learn how to swim," says Dash, who teaches new adult swimmers and swimming instructors at the Miracle Swimming Institute's Sarasota, Fla., headquarters and several other sites around the country. "Well, that's backwards. The truth is if you want to know how to swim, you have to overcome your fear of water first."

"Traditional swim lessons don't address fear at all," adds Klitzka, who says that participants in Castle Rock's two adult swimming classes range in age from their early 20s to their late 60s. "If somebody is afraid, there is no system in place to deal with it. I would like to build that system into our program, because there are so many adults out there who don't know how to swim and still want to."

The latest statistics, albeit from a decade-old Gallup Poll, indicate that 46 percent of

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American adults are afraid of deep water in pools, and 64 percent are afraid of deep open water. "I commissioned Gallup in 1998, because I knew that the number of people who were afraid was absolutely vast, but nobody would believe me," says Dash, who has been teaching adults to swim since 1983. "This way, everybody pays attention."

Aquaphobia can usually be traced to a single incident in a person's life in which he or she panicked in the water. Tales of personal horror range from being tossed into the deep end of a pool as a child to surviving the sinking of a seagoing vessel as an adult. Moreover, adults who can't swim typically have at least one parent with aquaphobia, and they may have even taken traditional swimming lessons as a child but for whatever reason were never comfortable in water. Now, many of them are embarrassed.

"People have difficulties adjusting physiologically or psychologically to the weightless environment of water, but they hide it and make excuses to stay out of the water," says Paul Lennon, founder and owner of the Adult Aquaphobia Swim Center in Glendale, Calif. Founded in 1979 as the Aquatic Development Clinic, the center was considered the first school of its kind in the United States. "Like the fear of heights, the fear of depths is a defense mechanism," Lennon continues. "These fears are absolutely intuitive. However, our recreational culture makes us believe that swimming and water sports are a normal part of life. The most common thing I hear from my students is that being a non-swimmer is a social handicap."

"It's kind of like with reading and writing; adults don't like the stigma that goes with not being able to swim," agrees Jim Montgomery, a self-described swimming entrepreneur who won Olympic Gold in 1976 as the first man to break the 50-second mark in the 100-meter freestyle. He is now co-owner of the Dallas Aquatic Masters Swim Club, where he teaches all levels of swimming but focuses on adults. "There are so many adults out there who could use a learn-to-swim program, and I think those programs would be incredibly successful if they were put into more facilities that have warm and deep water."

Water that's warm (with minimum temperatures in the high 80s) and deep (to help students develop self-reliability) aid tremendously in getting adults to feel at ease in the water. So do sessions that last at least a couple hours and older instructors who are comfortable working with fellow adults. Although many municipal recreation centers, health clubs and YMCAs offer some type of adult learn-to-swim programming, they may experience varying degrees of success. "Teaching adults to swim is a pretty specialized area," says Montgomery, who recently co-authored his first book, *Mastering Swimming: Your Guide for Fitness, Training, and Competition* (Human Kinetics). "You're dealing with 30, 40, sometimes 50 years of fear. The majority of adults don't want to swim in a Masters competition or work out with a Masters team. They want to overcome their fear and learn to swim freestyle so they can go out to their club or community pool and do their own thing. Most adults are going to wind up in the water, anyway — especially as they get older."

In fact, new research released in February suggests that men who swim for exercise live longer than those who run or walk. Steven Blair, a professor in the departments of Exercise Science and Biostatistics and Epidemiology at the University of South Carolina's Arnold School of Public Health, evaluated 32 years worth of comprehensive physical exams and behavioral surveys of more than 40,000 men enrolled in the Aerobics Center Longitudinal Study. During the 13-year follow-up period —



which took into account age, body mass index, smoking status, alcohol intake and family history — swimmers had a nearly 50 percent lower death rate than runners and walkers. "There is no compelling reason to assume that the benefits of swimming would be different for women," he says.

DON'T BE AFRAID

Overcoming a fear of the water is the first step toward learning how to swim as an adult.

Swimming to maintain personal health is one of three common reasons that adults finally decide to face their fears, according to Mary Sanders, a Masters swimmer and associate professor at the University of Nevada's School of Medicine, as well as a clinical exercise physiologist and water fitness instructor. "The objectives for each person are individual," she says. "And if you as a facility operator are not meeting those objectives, you're not going to create a good learning environment. Some people just want to be able to be safe in the water and feel comfortable. Others want to be competitive. But I think more and more people are coming to the pool looking for swim-skills training based on their need for fitness. That's really the future of swimming."

If Sanders, Blair and other medical experts are right, why has Dash been, as she says, "knocking my head against the wall" for 26 years trying to convince more aquatics administrators of the need for adult programming? After all, she argues, the first step is helping students simply stay calm in deep water, not teaching them how to do the breaststroke. "They think that the way to stop drowning is to teach children how to swim," she says. "And if they teach all the children, there eventually won't be any adults left who can't swim. And if every person were a swimmer, then drowning probably would plummet to zero. But the question is — and this is a biggie — what defines a swimmer? The American Red Cross says a swimmer is somebody who can swim 'X' yards. We say that a swimmer is somebody who can stay afloat in deep and open water until help arrives, whether it's 10 minutes or four days. That distinction in the definition is the difference between surviving and drowning."

Many commercial aquatic facilities approach swim lessons for both kids and adults in the same way. But children are often taught using an approach that assumes they are ready to learn and aren't afraid of the water, and that simply doesn't work with all older people. Dash's students — some of whom pay more than \$2,000 to take her courses — have claimed that previous swim instructors told them to put their faces in the water and blow bubbles, just like 5-year-olds. "That is not the way to heal fear," she says. "It requires a paradigm shift in teaching."

That shift at the Miracle Swimming Institute (known prior to last year as the Transpersonal Swimming Institute) is based on a trademarked curriculum that uses the 5 Circles™ method to teach students the art of being in control. Each circle represents panic and fear, with the first completely wrapped around an individual — meaning that the person is in total control. Dash uses crude but effective stick figures to illustrate how each successive circle gradually surrounds less and less of the individual, representing a greater loss of control, until the fifth circle has become completely separated from the individual. When that happens in the water, drowning typically follows. The point: If someone is not comfortable in the water and not in control of his or her body, that person is highly unlikely to learn how to swim.

Dash says she has used this method — usually at hotel pools and private swim schools — to get more than 4,000 individuals between the ages of 15 and 89 to feel comfortable in the water. And since 2004, she has trained almost 75 learn-to-swim instructors to use it, as well.

To support her contention that all swimmers should be able to stay afloat and survive in open water until help arrives, Dash designed a promotional poster that reads, in part: "No

one plans to slip off a dock, fall out of a boat, drive off a bridge . . . but these things happen every month in every state by surprise."

Lennon argues that traditional swimming lessons, which place a strong emphasis on stroke development, don't really teach people how to swim. "Stroking is not swimming," he says. "You need to have complete control over your body in the weightless environment of the pool."

In the beginning, it's natural for students to feel a loss of control in the water. Lennon likens the feeling to what someone sitting in a chair would experience if gravity were suddenly switched off. "If you floated out of your chair, your heart rate would go up dramatically, because you'd be taken by surprise," he says.

His objective is to bring that heart rate back down and make his students "at peace with the water." He does so by holding long classes (up to six hours a day) at a 92-degree, 20-by-60-foot indoor Jewish Community Center pool with no observers. Soft jazz or classical music plays as Lennon keeps his students in constant motion — floating, gliding, rolling and eventually performing what he calls "aqua-gymnastics." "If they're not busy, they're self-absorbed and thinking about the strangeness of being in a weightless environment," he says. "You've got to keep them busy doing soft, gentle, extremely easy things, and they adjust quite quickly."

After students leave Lennon's classes (which can cost up to \$1,000), they then must struggle to adjust to cooler water in a new, noisier environment populated by swimmers of all skill levels. He stresses it could take eight or more trips to a local facility until a new adult swimmer finally adapts and feels comfortable.

Lennon estimates that he has helped "thousands and thousands" of adults. Yet he still regrets that he has so little competition in this market. "Teaching adults to swim," he says, "is a low priority within our society's value system."

College students represent a growing segment of adult non-swimmers, according to Sanders. "If you think about where some of these kids came from, a lot of the physical education programs have been discontinued," she says. "A lot of them just didn't have access to pools, which is interesting because I teach water fitness classes in Japan, and over there you have to know how to swim before you graduate from high school. They teach the sport in the schools."

The University of Nevada is one of numerous institutions that have created triathlon-training classes for students who don't know how to swim. And swim spas, also known as "endless" pools in which an individual swims against a manufactured current, boast small footprints and can be used in facilities that don't have the space (or the budget) for a full-size pool. They are becoming more common, Sanders says, adding that facilities catering to beginning adult swimmers should not call learn-to-swim classes "swimming lessons;" she suggests calling them "swim skills" training, to provide students with a different psychological perspective.

And even if adult beginners only learn a few strokes, that's better than nothing, Lennon stresses. "Locomotion is an aspect of swimming," he says. "It's important, although it's only a small part. But it also might be enough to keep people coming back to the pool."

Klitzka hopes to get more adults than ever coming to Castle Rock's pools. "We're rewriting the whole aquatics program with our most talented and experienced instructors," she says, adding that she's trying to ensure that a younger generation doesn't grow up to be non-swimmers, too. "I really think there's a lot to be gained by implementing some of these

ideas for adults into our kids' programs. If kids have a genuine fear, you can make them afraid of the water for life. You can't just force people if they're not ready."

The Castle Rock Recreation Center, which includes a lap pool, a leisure pool and two outdoor pools, isn't what experts suggest is an ideal environment for adult learn-to-swim programming. "Warm water is a great idea, but our only deep pool is our lap pool, which we keep at 83 degrees," she says. "We have lap swimmers, so we're never going to have a pool that's as warm as recommended."

But Klitzka isn't letting that stop her, as she and her staff consider more effective ways to market their adult programs so potential students will know whether they should take an aquaphobia class before signing up for a learn-to-swim session. That kind of commitment gives Dash hope. "It's a slow process," she says. "But little by little, I can see the culture of swimming instruction reflecting what I've been saying — instructors are starting to put comfort first. It's taken much longer than I had hoped, but I think there's a shift happening."

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[Michael Popke](#) is managing editor of *Athletic Business*.

Comments:

Great article Michael. Thanks for the Endless Pools mention, it highlights what we're seeing as well, compact swim schools across the country in private residences and retail locations. Here's a short list http://www.endlesspools.com/triathlon/tri_showrooms.html (domestic) and http://www.endlesspools.co.uk/triathlon/tri_showrooms.html (abroad)

Daniel Fraley Endless Pools, Inc. 5/12/2009 7:08:30 AM

This is a huge market that can be tapped by effective and positive promotion. There are thousands of adults out there that are totally unaware about adult learning possibilities for swimming and would be enabled to learn if creative programming and scheduling were provided. Embarrassment is a huge road block for non swimmers and can be moved with proper incentives and upshot promotion such as no weight activity for fitness plus the benefit of improved respiratory function and overall well being.

Herb de Bray Aquatic Consultant 5/6/2009 2:46:01 PM

Thanks, Mike, for a great article. I'd also like to mention that Jim Montgomery is one of our licensed Miracle Swimming instructors. Thanks very much, Melon

Melon Dash Director, Miracle Swimming Institute 5/6/2009 11:50:40 AM

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