

## Age no factor for women's triathlon club

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After not working out for years, Lisa D'Astuto took the plunge.

The 49-year-old didn't just put her toes in the workout waters, though. The Mullica Hill mother of two teenagers dove into the deep end of athletic training for any age.

She pumped up the tires of an old bike in the garage a few weeks ago, embarking on an 8-mile ride her first time on the two-wheeler.

"I must have swallowed eight bugs," D'Astuto said laughing, "but I loved it."

D'Astuto went on her first bike ride in years with members of the Mullica Hill Women's Triathlon Club. The club eased not only her transition into activity, but also her fears of trying.

"My kids said, 'Why are you doing this? You are almost 50.' I said, 'That is why I am doing this.' I told them," D'Astuto explained, wearing a proud smile.

The motivation was sparked by the calendar and her children, but the opportunity and encouragement came from this engaging and encouraging club for women only who compete in the challenging swimming, running and biking competitions.

Colleen Fossett, the president, started the club in 2010 along with Lydia DelRosso, Maureen Brigham and Michelle Powell. The four founders are warm and welcoming, so it is easy to understand how the club grew to 120 members by the end of the first year.

In 2011, the club ended the season with an incredible 260 participants, which screams volumes on the club's leaders ability to organize and approach to participate.

"We have almost 400 members now," glowed DelRosso.

Fossett, 42, started doing triathlons about five years ago with a few neighbors in Mullica Hill. The mother of two wanted to stay in shape. When other neighbors saw what they were doing, they inquired and consequently started the club.

"Wherever we go, whatever we do, we run into someone from the tri club," Fossett said. "The enthusiasm it has created in Mullica Hill and the surrounding towns is infectious."

The club, which is non-profit, costs \$40 per year. The value, though, can't be measured by money.

"It is catching on like wildfire thanks to these four women," Stacy Butts, a club member for three years, said about the founders. "It was very selfless of them and shows their dedication and compassion for doing something bigger than themselves."

"Competitor Magazine" ranked Mullica Hill as the best triathlon club in the Northeast for 2011. The club's inaugural Queen of the Hill Sprint Triathlon -- a quarter mile swim, 10-mile bike ride and a 3.1 mile run -- last year was voted the best female triathlon in the Northeast.

"Michelle worked tirelessly last year for the Queen of the Hill just to give back," Butts said about Powell.

The members, as Fossett says, are "all ages, all abilities, all shapes and sizes."

D'Astuto is one of the members of varying abilities. She plans to compete in a sprint triathlon, which are "mini" events like the Queen of the Hill and not the distances of the heralded Ironman triathlons. She came out on a recent Wednesday when the club held "Newbie Night" for other first-timers who recently joined or who are considering doing triathlons.

During this Newbie 101 hour-and-a-half meeting, the entire triathlon process -- swim, bike, run as well as the transitions -- were explained to the 40 newcomers.

Fossett defines a newbie as someone who hasn't trained or participated in a triathlon before, which she said is 40 percent of the club.

"It could be someone who just had a baby or a woman who has raised their babies," Fossett said, "someone new to the area or newly divorced ..."

Fossett insures the Newbie she will be "ready for their first triathlon."

Peggy Kramme, 48, and grandmother of two, is a Newbie who is delighted and determined to train with the club for her first triathlon.

"I put on 50 pounds and I am ready to lose the weight," the Monroeville resident said. "I want to get in shape and be the kicking grandmom I want to be."

Peggy Edwards, 40, joined the club last year and did three triathlons, losing 30 pounds while training a few days a week with other members.

"Having others to do it with you helps you do it," said the mother of two from Logan.

The club also boasts Boston Marathon and New York City Marathon finishers as well as Iron Women and Half-Iron Women.

"The beauty of the group is that the experts are so willing to help the new kid on the block," Fossett said.

The women are mostly from Gloucester and Camden counties, but some come from Cape May, Philadelphia and Delaware.

"We train together and tri together," Fossett said.

The club also raises money and awareness for a different charity each year.

"Not only does the club encourage, support and empower women of all ages and athletic abilities to find their 'inner athlete,' it also has a philanthropic focus in order to raise awareness about a specific cause each year," Butts said.

The first year, the club embraced the cause of autism. Last year it supported ovarian cancer. This year, club members sweat for Melanoma.

"We currently have six women in our club who are melanoma survivors," Fossett said.

Butts is one of the survivors.

"It also gives people courage to come out and talk about their own diagnosis. I know for me it was hard to process," Butts said. "I feel like I am getting to share the knowledge and just another way to give back.

"It is another way I feel they are supporting me and the other woman who are affected. It is just so much more than meeting on a Saturday morning for a run."

At their kick-off meeting on Feb 13, the club raised \$5,000 for the Melanoma International Foundation.

A mother of 5-year-old twins, Butts, 43, who lives in Mullica Hill, is one of the many members who "never thought she could do it," but has completed several triathlons.

"As someone who, just two years ago, could not run to the mailbox or even tread water, I can tell you that this club and the women who are members have absolutely changed my life," Butts said. "I have since completed multiple triathlons and even ran the Broad Street Run.

"I am just one person of many who feel this way and our appreciation of and gratefulness to these women is beyond words."

The club works out together three days per week in March and April and six days per week May through September.

"Members just make what they can. There is no obligation," Fossett said. "We keep it low key and fun and are very Newbie friendly."

Kathy Conneen, 51, did her first triathlon last summer, competing in a quarter-mile swim, a 4-mile run and an 11-mile ride in Brigantine.

"My goal was just to finish," the Logan resident said, "but I broke two hours. It was quite an accomplishment."

Conneen's daughter, Kate, 27, was so impressed that she, too, joined the club this year to compete and train with her mom, who has lost 40 pounds since starting.

"I'm proud of her," said Kate, who is from Logan, "and how much fun she is having with it."

The club breaks up the intensity of the training with light-hearted, but still heavy workouts.

Members do runs around the Philadelphia Art Museum and finish up by sprinting up the steps like Rocky. They do bike rides in which they stop at farm markets.

The club also has a BYOM -- Bring Your Own Man -- training days.

Indeed, the women are enjoying a good time while getting in great shape.

"We want women to think about becoming fit," Fossett said, "making themselves a priority and finding their inner athlete that they lost so many years ago."

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