

Challenge

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FREEDOM IN THE WATER:

The Benefits of Adaptive Swimming

Credit: Reed Hoffmann



Credit: Reed Hoffmann



Credit: Aquability

Water is such an equalizer, which is why swimming is a great sport for anyone, regardless of their physical disability.

“It really frees you up,” said U.S. Paralympics swim coach and classifier Glen O’Sullivan.

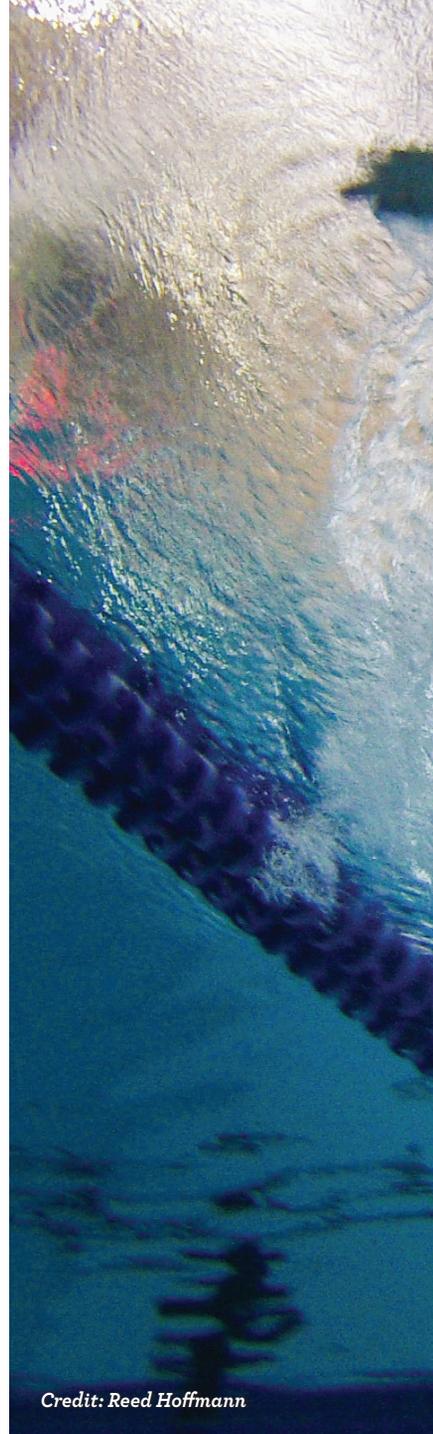
Karen Morrison, the founder and executive director of Aquability, a Disabled Sports USA chapter based in Idaho, agrees. “The buoyancy of the water provides a sense of freedom, something you may not find in other adaptive sports.”

Both O’Sullivan and Morrison also believe that swimming is one of the best sports for getting into shape. Swimming is great for balance, flexibility, increased circulation, pain control, and improving the respiratory system, not to mention the escape it can often provide. “When you are in the water, and particularly under the water, you really can shut out the rest of the world,” Morrison said. Furthermore, swimming is an essential life skill that can ensure one’s own safety while participating in other water sports or activities. For those reasons, swimming can benefit individuals with a wide range of ages and abilities.

Learning to swim is actually a byproduct of Morrison’s therapeutic aquatics program. Promoting healthy lifestyles and positive social interactions are two of the main advantages of the program she founded in 2010.

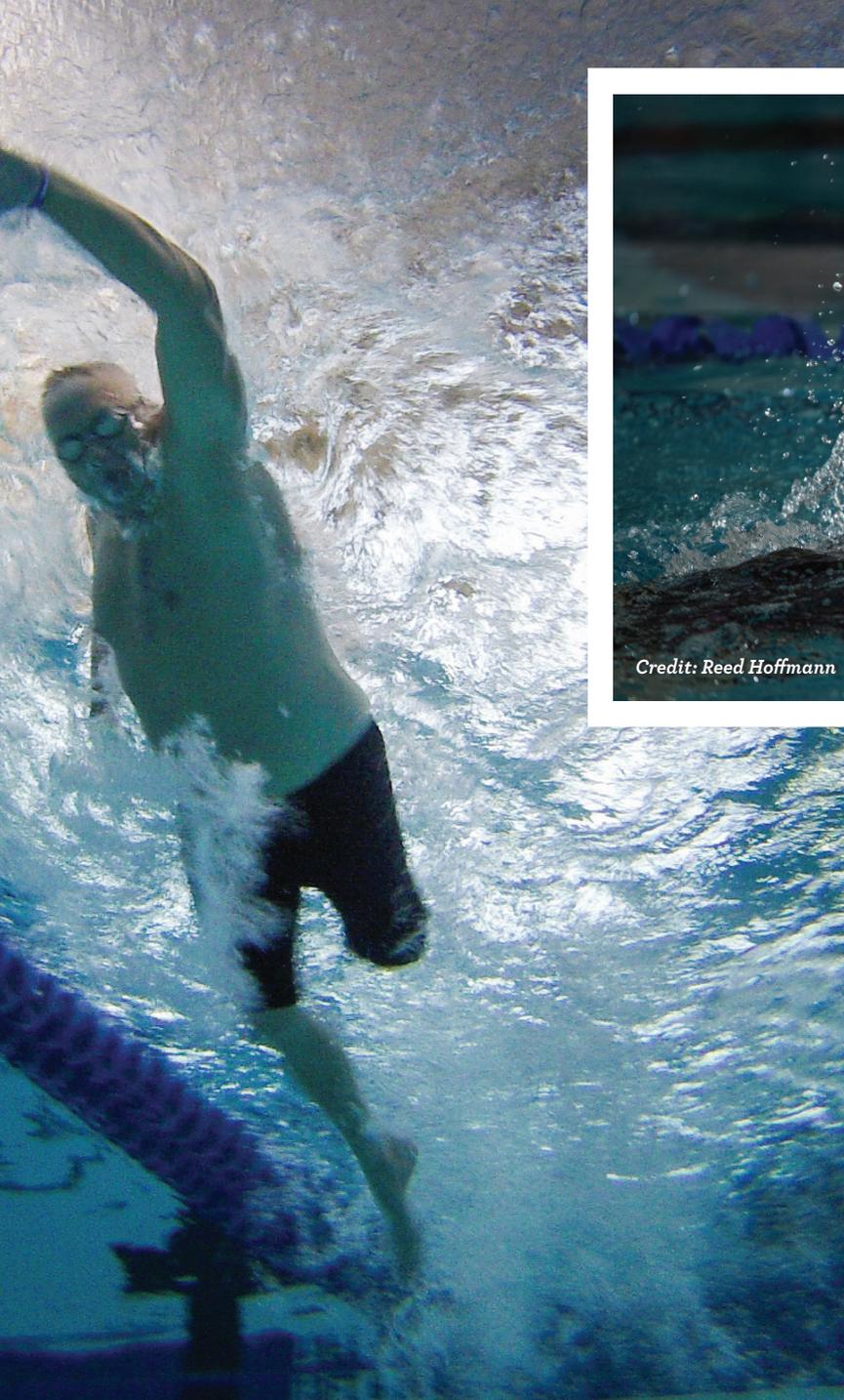
GETTING STARTED

Very little is required for someone interested in getting into adaptive swimming, just a swimsuit and a towel is all you really need. “Swimming is a very affordable sport, not a lot of equipment is



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Credit: Aquability

required,” O’Sullivan said. “You mainly have to have a desire to get into the water.”

Goggles and a swim cap are optional purchases but everything else you need can typically be found at the pool. “I use things that are already on the pool deck,” said O’Sullivan, a former member of the Marine Corps who started teaching with Great Lakes Adaptive Sports Association (GLASA), a chapter of Disabled Sports USA, in 1997. For example: items like kickboards and noodles help with flotation and balance; dive sticks can help streamline the arms; and buoys can prevent legs from dragging.

Morrison also suggests that snorkels can assist those with mobility issues with breathing and for not turning their head. She is also a big supporter of flotation wraps that can improve body position in the water. For visually impaired swimmers, tennis balls or other items can be used as tappers to help alert the swimmer when he or she is approaching the end of the pool.

One of the first things any new swimmer must do is get comfortable in the water. “You have to figure out how to move your body in the water,” O’Sullivan said. As an instructor, he works on balance and breathing first, followed by strokes (arm and leg techniques).

“Every swimmer is different, so different approaches are needed. Sometimes it requires experimentation to find out what works,” he said.

Modifications to a swim stroke or kick can be made, depending on the athlete’s impairment. For example, athletes with cerebral palsy who may not have the coordination to complete the kick can show the intent to kick or drag their legs.

Other adaptations are permissible as well. Athletes may start from the water, the wall, or the blocks and can be given time to get into the appropriate

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starting position. In addition, the swimmer may need assistance from someone on the deck as well. For athletes with visual impairments, a personal assistant can serve as a “tapper” and notify the swimmer of a turn or the wall by using a pole with soft-tipped ends to tap the swimmer accordingly. It is also helpful to use rich verbal descriptions when communicating instructions and physically assist a visually-impaired swimmer to achieve correct technique.

ON YOUR MARK

There are a number of programs that offer swimming as a recreational sport only, like Aquability. If you are interested in taking it to the next level, you will need to find a swim coach or instructor. Lindsay Grogan, a member of the U.S. Paralympic Swim Team for the 2016 Rio Games, suggests doing research to learn more about adaptive sports groups and swim clubs in your area.

At the age of 7, Grogan had her left leg from the knee down amputated after years of scleroderma-related contractures. One year later, she had the opportunity to watch the Paralympic Games when they were held in Atlanta. That led her to eventually connect with BlazeSports, a chapter of Disabled Sports USA, and pursue swimming competitively. “It was because of my experience with BlazeSports that I wanted to get involved in an adaptive sports organization,” Grogan said. She now serves as a coach for Kinetic Kids, another Disabled Sports USA chapter in San Antonio, Texas.

To compete at the highest level, Grogan recommends stepping up training. “You definitely have to swim more and practice more,” she said. “But I would do it all over again because of the experiences that I’ve had, the places I’ve gone to, and the people I’ve met.”

Four-time Paralympian Jessica Long, the second most decorated athlete in U.S. Paralympic history, was born with fibular hemimelia. At just 18 months old, her legs were amputated below the knee. She tried a number of sports, but swimming was (and definitely has been) the best sport for her. Growing up, the prosthetics were giving her trouble. “But in swimming, you don’t wear prosthetics,” she said. “I felt free and not any different.”

Swimming also allowed Long to become comfortable with who she was. Challenges still persisted though. She experienced a number of growth moments and calculated having over 20 surgeries. “There were lots of moments I could have given up,” she said.

To other aspiring athletes, Long says go for it. “It is going to change your life.” But a lot of hard work is required. Long, who

has won 23 Paralympic medals, puts in about five to seven hours of work every day. “Practice ... always,” she recommends to those who want to competitively swim. Her routine on a typical day starts with a morning practice, then breakfast, then stretching or some form of physical training, followed by a nap, lunch, afternoon practice, and wrapping up in the weight room.

She also encourages athletes to have a good attitude. “You have to realize that everyone’s going to have bad days. My parents allowed me to fail (fall down, lose a leg, etc.), which really prepared me in so many ways.”

Swimming will always be part of her life moving forward. “I am always going to swim for exercise. It is one of the best sports for your joints and heart,” she said.

O’Sullivan, who went to the Rio Games in 2016 as a Team USA coach, offers some additional advice for swimmers who are ready to go from recreational swimming to competitive swimming. “To make the jump to elite level, you must live and breathe swimming. The elite athlete has to be in the water every day,” he said.

Besides getting in the water as much as you can, you should start going to regional swim meets as well as some of the adaptive sports regional games that exist (a number of them hosted by DSUSA chapters). You should also go through the classification process to get an idea of who you might be competing against and check your times against the other swimmers.

From a training perspective, competitive swimmers should work on all the strokes and focus on techniques that will help prevent injuries. “A lot of cross training and strength training (weights and calisthenics) will go a long way,” O’Sullivan said.

In the pool, a snorkel can help build stronger lungs or focus where your head should be placed. Paddles can help with strengthening and strapping a parachute around your waist can build resistance.

After having focused on the physical element of sports training, you have to mentally prepare. “A lot of elite athletes will work with sports psychologists,” O’Sullivan said.

FIND A PROGRAM

Regardless of whether you want to swim recreationally or competitively, it is a great sport to consider. As Grogan notes, “Just about everybody can swim.”

Reach out to a local swim club or adaptive sports organization to find the right fit. Most aquatic facilities are accessible. You can find a local swim club near you by visiting www.usaswimming.org/join. Over 30 Disabled Sports USA chapters offer adaptive swimming programs at some level. To check out that listing, visit: <https://www.disabledsportsusa.org/location-map/>.

