

# DO NOT HIT SNOOZE

## Swimming Through the Winter Blues Takes Creativity

by Amy Wu

At 5:30 a.m. in Rochester, Minn., the temperature hovers around zero and an icy wind whistles. Inside the Olmsted-Rochester Recreation Center, Vince Herring is churning through the water with stop-

**Freelance writer Amy Wu recently relocated to New York City and is looking for a new Masters home. She comes highly recommended by Rochester Area Masters, part of Niagara Masters.**

watch in check. Although January temperatures are typically in the single digits in Minnesota, Herring is undeterred. When he

finishes, he will log in his workout times and reward himself with a hot shower.

"It's not unusual to have 20 below or 30 below weather. When it's that cold, the hairs in my nostrils freeze," says Herring, who clicks through 5,000 yards in a typical workout.

Rather than drilling deeper into bed when Arctic winds blow, Herring steps up the laps. "It's much easier once you're in that routine of

always coming," says the 63-year-old. "I feel invigorated versus if I got up and I didn't swim—I'd feel like a road kill and death warmed over."

To keep swimming through Minnesota's infamous winters, this hardcore member of Rochester Swim Club Orcas Masters uses different tactics: setting multiple alarm clocks, setting specific goals, checking in with his swim mates to keep each other motivated and focusing on training for future competitions. One of the rare times he missed a winter workout at his regular pool was when a tree fell across his driveway. "I happen to own an excavator," he says. "I waited until it was light enough to see, moved the tree, and went to a different pool to workout."

Herring is far from alone. The many swimmers and coaches interviewed for this article said that their passion for the pool doesn't plummet with winter's arrival. Sleet or snow, nor'easter or icy downpour, they find ways to keep

training despite winter's capriciousness.

Fitness experts point out that swimming is a sport in which the environment doesn't dramatically vary with the seasons. Unlike running or biking, swimming is often done indoor even during summer. Alaska, for example, doesn't have outdoor pools. And many swimmers are used to the pre-dawn workouts and waking up in darkness.

"My first thought is [swimming] would be one sport that doesn't change very much in the winter," says Aynsley M. Smith, a sport and exercise psychology consultant at the Mayo Clinic Sports Medicine Center in Rochester, Minn. "They [swimmers] get to the pool, and then they are in a pool swimming lengths. The environment hasn't changed much."

Nonetheless winter does present greater challenges to even the most serious swimmers. Hurdles include shorter days, slipping temperatures and in cold-climate places

Diego Cervio

such as Rochester, Minn., it can mean significant ice and snowstorms that make it tough to get to the pool. Swimmers must get up earlier, pack their gear and often clear their car and driveway before tackling harsh road conditions. Shorter days and frigid temperatures can throw even the most upbeat people into the occasional funk, triggering the urge to sleep and eat more.

Starting the engines can be twice as hard with fewer daylight hours during winter months. Physicians say that darkness often confuses the body's internal time clock also

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known as the circadian rhythm. This internal clock makes a person want to sleep when it is dark, and be up and moving when it's light.

Humans follow in the footsteps of animals that tend to hibernate more in the winter.

With cold, darkness and the stress that typically comes around the holidays, "people go into hibernation mode," says Carol Watkins, a clinical psychiatrist in Baltimore, Md., who specializes in seasonal affective disorder (SAD), also referred to as "winter blues" or "holiday blues."

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dark because your body has not had the light cues it needs to activate the hormonal system to your own 'artificial' daytime," says Hap Davis, sports psychologist for the Canadian National Swim Team. "It's not 'day' yet but you have to go to train; so you tell your body to act as though it is daytime. You will get going as soon as you are active, but just getting active is hard."

Although there are no definitive studies that show that swimmers in cold climates are more prone to the blues, studies do show that the farther you live from the equator the

more at risk you are to melancholy. For example, about 1 percent of Floridians get SAD, compared to nearly 10 percent in New Hampshire, according to a still-cited seminal study published by *Psychiatry Research* in 1990.

Those who suffer from SAD see their first symptoms set in during late fall or winter as a result of light deprivation. Watkins describes SAD as a biochemical imbalance where lack of light increases melatonin production, resulting in symptoms such as consistent fatigue, loss of appetite, inability to focus and changes in

sleep patterns. It is important to get evaluated by a physician since the symptoms can be easily mistaken for other illnesses, she says.

Many swimmers cope with the occasional winter blues with creativity. Back in Rochester, Minn., Herring steps up his training by setting specific goals. In December, he begins upping his yardage to prepare for the February Fitness Challenge, a postal event hosted by the Tualatin Hills Barracudas in Oregon, which challenges swimmers to log as much yardage as they can during February.

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"It's a great motivator; if you're going to do it you have to be in shape," says Herring. His goal this February is to hit the 500,000-yard mark. Another motivator is to choose a summer event in which to compete. For Herring, who has crossed the English Channel numerous times in relays, this often means picking an open water swim.

Swimming helps combat the blues during winter and beyond. Mayo Clinic's Smith points to the "iceberg profile of psychological mood states in successful athletes" (originally published by William P. Morgan, University of Wisconsin), which shows that with aerobic exercise, "vigor" skyrockets while tension, depression, anger, fatigue and confusion remain flat.

Other ways to combat the winter doldrums include investing in a sunlight alarm clock that gently wakes you with light, finding a swim/exercise buddy, buying more bright light fixtures for the home, trying to avoid overeating (especially carbohydrates), getting enough hours of sleep and exercising at least 30 to 40 minutes four times a week.

For the 191 registered Masters swimmers in Alaska, swimming can be a safeguard against depression. When winter temps drop to minus 13, accompanied by average cumulative snowfall of 70 inches, membership actually hits an all-time high.

"We lose people like crazy in the summer," says Paula

Smith a member of Alaska Masters in Anchorage. "We can lose as much as two-thirds of people in the summer." Swimmers often swap swimming for other activities when the weather is nice. But when temperatures begin to fall, swimmers congregate at the pool once again.

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To combat the blues, she forces herself to get to the pool, rallied by the encouragement of fellow swimmers. She makes swimming into an event by carefully preparing for each workout and routinely laminating workouts that's she clipped from magazines or downloaded from the web. And she competes in events such as February fitness challenge to keep herself motivated.

"Even though it's the shortest month, it just seems like the longest month up here. The February fitness challenge is a blessing," Wainwright says, adding that she feels fortunate compared to Masters swimmers in Fairbanks who get an anemic two and a half hours

of sunlight on winter days and have to contend with 40 below winters (and, yes, there are Masters swimmers there).

As it is, the Anchorage swimmers have a lot to contend with. Alaska reportedly has the highest number of people who suffer from depression and SAD, as high as 9 percent compared to 2 to 5 percent for the general population in affected climates, according to Douglas George Jacobs, president and CEO of Screening for Mental Health in Wellesley Hills, Mass.

In addition, sleep experts say that swimmers in sunlight-deprived places like Alaska continue to stay active even though it's dark, so it's harder to keep track of how much sleep they get.

Members of Alaska Masters say that the challenging weather often draws them closer. Swimmers routinely check in with teammates, using phone and e-mail chains. "Once I break the surface and feel the water, I am motivated.

Knowing that my lane mates will give me grief if I start skipping practices is another motivation," says Ruth Carter.

Across the country in New York City, seasoned swimmer Jane Katz says that a big get-to-the-pool motivator is the social aspect of the sport, especially during the winter. Katz, who swims with Asphalt Green Masters, notes that the team makes it a point to go out for dinner after night practices.

To keep things fun during the gray months, Katz also mixes and matches workout times, often slipping in a mid-day workout for a mood boost. "I call it my liquid lunch," Katz jokes. "Being in the water helps me get out the kinks in my body and mind...I feel sharper." Keeping the holiday pounds off is another workout driver. In addition, Katz points out that many teams make the winter fun by hosting Christmas, New Year's or Valentine's Day swims.

Most important, it's OK to

### Bluesbusters

- **Find a swim friend.** Designate a swim buddy who can help motivate you to get to practice and stick with it.
- **Set several alarms.** For the pre-dawn swimmers, set four alarm clocks or have a good friend and fellow swimmer give you a wake-up call.
- **Keep a journal.** Create a winter swimming journal, logging your workouts, writing down specific goals and keeping tabs on how you feel.
- **Choose an event.** Sign up early for specific events and competitions, such as a local meet, the USMS One Hour Postal swim, fitness challenges or Short Course Nationals. An upcoming competition can be a great motivator (and you may get to travel!)
- **Take a swim vacation.** If you have the time and finances, consider a swim vacation— preferably to a warm destination that will reinvigorate your mood and motivation.
- **Turn lemons into lemonade.** Try a polar bear plunge or a holiday swim. Join your teammates for fun events such as New Year's Eve swims.
- **Throw a party.** January is a great time for a winter swim party after practice.
- **Laugh.** Get to know your teammates and share some jokes. It's OK to miss an occasional practice or swim fewer yards. Just plan to show up and enjoy yourself.
- **Engage in positive self-talk.** Think of winter as a time to prepare mentally and physically for the meets and events upcoming in the spring and summer.

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occasionally cut yourself some slack. One solution is to try a new exercise such as yoga, belly dancing or Tai Chi. Water aerobics or Pilates can actually help with swimming too.

In Portland, Maine, David Bright has marked winter as his "off season" because of the lack of indoor pool space. The New England Masters member used to quit swimming cold turkey in the winter, but has now decided to take a more positive approach. He trims down on the swimming, and blends in more drills and weight training.

"I made a few changes in my approach and expectations," says Bright. "Instead of saying 'there's not enough time for a real workout so I won't bother,' I try to get in [the pool] even if it's only 20 to 30 minutes. I gave up worrying about yardage totals, repeat times and intervals. I try to ignore the clock and focus more on technique and feel for the water."

Fitness experts say being kind to the body is the best way to avoid burnout. "I think you do need a little break. You can have the best food, but you can get tired of that," says Phil Hasebro, executive director with the National Association for Health and Fitness, based in Buffalo, N.Y.

And, yes, winter blues do affect swimmers in warm-weather states envied for their year-round sun and surf. Swimmers in Hawaii, California, Florida and Texas say one of the toughest parts of the winter months is making the dreaded icy dash from the locker room to the outdoor pools, even though the pools are heated.

They often combat the cold with parkas, shedding their winter gear right before taking the plunge.

"You run, you jump in and you're fine. I drop the towel on the bleachers...and grab my towel and dart back in," says Jill Gellatly of Woodlands Masters, noting that temperatures in Texas drop to as low as 28 degrees in the early morning. "The weather has kept me in bed plenty of times."

On Hawaii's island of Maui, Masters swimmers, who often train in the ocean, face winter challenges including dangerously high surf. When the ocean gets rough, USMS member Janet Renner says she and her teammates ask themselves, "What would Lynne Cox [the famous long distance swimmer] do?"

In Southern California, winter is often marked by heavy rains. "I have to be more motivated when it's raining than when it's cold," says Julie Heather, an avid member of Southern California Masters who admits that she sometimes feels like slacking when it's gray and rainy. On a bright note? "It doesn't really affect what I do at the pool," she says.

Back in Anchorage, Wainwright and her teammates continue to fend off darkness and cold by sticking with the swimming with a when-there's-a-will-there's-a-way attitude. And come March or April, daylight lengthens and temperatures begin rising. After 17 winters of swimming in Alaska, Wainwright puts it simply: "You just have to get yourself to the pool and take the plunge." And that goes for all swimmers. <<<

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