

Weightless

Ella Ackley decided at 65 that it was time to get back in the pool. As expected, floating freely still feels great. Winning national swim meets? That comes as a surprise.

**As told to Carsten Knox
Photograph by Woods Wheatcroft**



Name: Ella Ackley
Age: 71
Activity: Swimming
Location: Troy, Montana

I swam as a kid but took it up again more seriously about six years ago. I've run marathons, which put me in good cardiovascular shape and made it kind of an easy switch to swimming. Now I travel to swim meets all across the country.

Being back in the water turned out to be very satisfying. When the grandkids and I go to a hot springs or some other place to take a dip for fun, I can just play—diving under, holding my breath. I love being underwater—it's the most wonderful feeling.

What do I like most about swimming? The weightlessness.

Good Technique

When it comes to swimming, the number one thing is technique. When I took it up again, my technique was outdated. Now I know much better what I'm doing. When I first get in the pool I wear a snorkel, so I can see and focus on my body position before I start thinking about my breathing. When I push off the wall, I make sure my arms are stretched

out in front of my head and my body is in a totally neutral streamlined position, so I go through the water with as little resistance as possible.

I check my head to make sure it's in the right position, with forehead down and chin tucked. I start with arm strokes, and when my arm is above my head and entering the water, I make sure it's bent at the elbow, with an emphasis on the palm of my hand, pulling and rotating at the same time and pushing all the way back to my thigh.

Focus

I can only think about one thing at a time. My brain just can't do more than that. I've never thought multitasking was a very good idea. I'm intense, so I can focus. When I was studying in college, there could be a party going on behind me and I wouldn't even know it was there.

I like competition, but I don't have a killer instinct. I love doing well against the clock, and I get great satisfaction beating my best time. But I don't have

that "I'm going to beat you if it kills me" thing that an Olympic gold medalist like Michael Phelps has.

I love practicing and improving my ability to move through the water. The women I compete against—holy moly!—they're fantastic. But I haven't peaked yet.

Competition

I was competing in Cleveland in August and there were two swimmers in my age group who are really good. I thought if I did a pretty good time in the backstroke, I'd probably get third place. I'd be happy with that.

So I just went for it. And when I touched the wall and looked up at the board, it said first place. I thought, that's got to be a mistake!

The other two were swimming lanes away from me. They couldn't see me and I couldn't see them. I had whizzed by them and they didn't know it, and neither did I. It's the first time I took first place in a major meet. ●