

LIFE & ARTS



FROM TOP: ANGELA DENZO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL; BETTMANN ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

GAIL ROPER should have been terrified of swimming. At 17, she heard from a high school gym coach that she'd have chronic heart failure and might not be able to have children if she dared to swim a mile. "In the 1940s, women weren't supposed to exert themselves," she says. Now 89, she keeps fit in summer by swimming in the Russian River near her home in Healdsburg, Calif.

Ms. Roper grew up in Trenton, N.J., and taught herself to swim in the Delaware River. Unable to find a coach serious enough to work with her, she voraciously read books to help improve her stroke. Her mother didn't support the idea of young women competing, so Ms. Roper had to hitchhike to swim meets.

Her competitive drive and powerful stroke made her a dominant swimmer in the 1950s. In 1952 she was the U.S. national champion in the breast stroke and she went on to represent the U.S. in the 200-meter breast stroke at the 1952 Olympic Games in Helsinki.

By 1953 she was ranked first in the world for the 100-meter breast stroke and had won seven national titles.

Ms. Roper took a break from

competing so she could raise her seven children. "I'd still jump in the pool when I took my kids for swim lessons," she says. At 44, she started swimming in Masters competitions, shattering records in all four strokes. Today she is one of the most decorated Masters swimmers of all time, having set more than 325 records throughout her career. She was inducted into the International Swimming Hall of Fame in 1997.

"Masters saved my life," says Ms. Roper, who retired from her work as a marine biologist at age 82. "My doctor always tells me I'm doing really well and I think, you shouldn't need a walker when you get older. I can't help it if every-one else sat on the couch overeating for years." Ms. Roper lives in a senior community and says the only thing preventing her from competing these days is her driving. "I think I have enough records," she jokes. "I've proved myself."

The Workout

Ms. Roper tries to swim three days a week. When the weather is warmer she swims 2,000 yards in an outdoor pool, alternating strokes. "Backstroke has always



Gail Roper's speedy breast stroke earned her a trip to the 1952 Olympics in Helsinki, above. These days she still loves swimming, top.

been the most challenging for me. Still is," she says. In the winter, she swims in a therapy pool that's heated to 86 degrees. (She gets cold easily.) She tethers herself to the pool ladder with a bungee cord and will swim in place, trying to keep her body fully stretched. "It's a good way to keep up my upper-body strength and stroke technique," she says.

WHAT'S YOUR WORKOUT? | JEN MURPHY

She Can't Stay Out of the Pool at 89

Home Workouts Hiding in Plain Sight

If household chores are cutting into your gym time, turn them into a workout.

Lynn Millar, chair of the department of physical therapy at Winston-Salem State University in North Carolina, says mundane tidying or daily habits, like watching the news, provide plenty of opportunities to burn more calories.

Turn vacuuming into a leg workout by doing a lunge every time you push the vacuum forward, she suggests. Doing push-ups against the kitchen or bathroom sink as you wash up provides a quick upper-body workout.

"You can also do a few reps of biceps curls with your iron, but before you plug it in," she says. "We want to be creative, but also safe."

Dr. Millar emphasizes the importance of training our balance as we age.

She suggests trying to balance on one foot, then alternating while drying the dishes or folding laundry. Commercials are a great opportunity for a plank challenge.

"See if you can hold a side plank for one entire commercial, then switch sides for the next one, then hold a normal plank for a third," she says.

She set up exercise stations around her home. In the morning, she does 20 sit-ups while watching the news. She does 20 push-ups against her kitchen sink between washing dishes.

She aims to get in 200 revolutions on her stationary bike every day and 100 steps on her stair stepper. Ms. Roper uses resistance bands to stretch. "If you want to stay straight up and down rather than humped over, you need to work at it," she says.

Ms. Roper also makes a point to exercise her brain, working on jigsaw puzzles and reading the New Yorker magazine. She has a rule that she must speak to five people a day to keep up her social skills.

The Diet

Ms. Roper starts her day with a cup of Nespresso coffee, granola and fruit. Occasionally she adds yogurt. She snacks throughout the day on walnuts, almonds and dried fruit. Lunch is her main meal. She usually dines at the Healdsburg Senior Center. "The menu changes monthly and always offers a salad, beverage and main," she says. "It's a nice way for me to meet people and socialize." Dinner could be a bowl of cereal or chicken curry

with rice, but always a small portion. She avoids fast food, soda and, with the exception of the occasional burger, red meat. On Sundays she splurges, which usually means pizza and wine.

The Gear and Cost

Ms. Roper still remembers wearing swimsuits with full skirts, and eventually front skirts known as modesty panels.

"Speedo was a revelation," she says. But now that she's almost 90, she says their suits' high cuts don't do much for her.

Her Strokemakers hand paddles cost around \$20 a pair and her Finis Positive Drive Fins cost \$35. A melanoma survivor, Ms. Roper swims in a full-length Stinger Suit with a UPF of 50 made by Fun Sun Wear. She pays \$90 a month for her membership at Parkpoint Health Club in Healdsburg. "It's expensive when you're living off Social Security," she says. "But they have a heated outdoor pool that I can use in the winters."

The Playlist

"Alexa, play Spanish guitar" is Ms. Roper's go-to music demand when she does her short bursts of home exercise.