

The health benefits of rowing

When 23-year-old Olivia Perigo started rowing with the University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee rowing team last year, she noticed changes in the way she looked and felt almost immediately.

"When I started, I wasn't in bad shape. I've always been a fitness junkie but nothing could get me past a plateau," said Perigo, an English major at the college.

After her first two weeks of vigorous team practice last year, she started noticing changes in her muscle tone. After six months, muscles in her back, abdomen and arms were defined and her legs were becoming incredibly strong. Before the year was over, she had lost 15 pounds and gone from a tight size eight to a loose size six.

"Even my mother says she's never seen me in such good shape," said Perigo.

Could rowing be the perfect sport? You might think so after talking to rowing enthusiasts. Rowing is both aerobic and anaerobic, meaning it improves the cardiovascular system and also builds muscle strength.

"Rowing affects everything from the top of your cervical spine down to your tippy toes," said Trish Jackson, head coach for Manatee County Youth Rowing.

Because rowing is low-impact, it doesn't pound joints. It's not uncommon to see people aged 80 or more still rowing on masters rowing teams.

"That's the beauty of the sport. With most other sports, like running, there is an expiration date," said Jackson.

Manatee Youth Rowing began in 2012 and is comprised of students from Palmetto, Manatee and Southeast high schools. Jackson has seen dramatic transformations in fitness levels. One boy on the team, who is now in college, was significantly overweight and had never really participated in a sport when he started.

"He was 50 pounds overweight and had sat inside playing video games," said Jackson. "By

the end of the year, in all total he had dropped 50 pounds. That says volumes about the health benefits of rowing."

Like other rowing teams, the Youth Rowers team does substantial land workouts and not just time on the water. Practice is from 3:30 to 6 p.m. Monday through Thursday and another three hours on Saturday mornings throughout the school year. Three-mile runs, planks, pushups, abdominal work and squats are part of the routine.

Strength and overall fitness are part of rowing in the low-slung, narrow shells used for racing. Unlike a canoe or kayak, the boats used by rowing teams have sliding seats propelled by leg power for swifter forward motion as the upper body works the oars.

Learning how to balance in the boat is one of the biggest challenges for novices, said avid rower Jennifer Bencie, a physician and administrator for the Florida Department of Health.

Bencie rows with the Sarasota County Rowing Club, a masters group that has a boathouse in Osprey and rows on the Intercoastal Waterway. To get started, she took the club's two-week introduction to rowing course.

"I heard it was a total-body sport and I wanted to try it," said Bencie. "It's really great -- you are using your arms and your core and your chest and back. It builds the upper body and you'll lose weight around the abdomen."

Before joining the Sarasota County Rowing Club, prospective members must have some level of fitness beyond the lower percentiles. Minimal physical requirements include being able to touch your ankles without bending the knees and the ability to lift 35 pounds over your head.

Part of the appeal for Bencie is being out on the water where she sees dolphins and manatees. Rowing is the only time she's without a cell phone during the week.

Exercise is known for improving mood and rowing is no exception.

The benefits to the mind is one of the first things that Perigo of the USF Sarasota-Manatee team will mention when talking about how she loves the sport. Her team meets at 6:30 a.m.

for workouts on the water or on land in the boathouse. That might seem a little early for a college student, but Perigo doesn't mind.

"I love how I feel afterward -- positive and happy. I'm more energetic and mentally I'm ready to conquer the day," she said.

Can't join a team? Try a rowing exercise machine and work on ramping up the intensity as you get more fit. You may not get to see dolphins and reflections on the water, but you'll get a similar workout that combines aerobic exercise and muscle power.

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