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Cold Water Swimming



Since I started cold water swimming, I have almost always received the same response, ‘WHY?!’. To be quite honest, I often find this reply difficult to answer. I usually respond with a mumbled answer about the health benefits and a simple ‘It’s fun’. Perhaps I don’t know how to answer the question of ‘why?’ because I didn’t know the answer myself. Why did I jump into next to freezing water twice a week? Were the health benefits really that life-changing for me? Why would I choose this rather than a heated pool, like the ones I had been used to my whole life? Once I developed these questions, I set out to figure it out the answers. I wanted to study not only what I was feeling physically and mentally when I was cold-water swimming, but also my peers. Was there a specific type of person I saw cold-water swimming? What was the commonality between everyone at the pool? Did all of us cold-water swimmers have one specific trait that bonded us? Once I narrowed down what I wanted to know and what I wanted to look for, I aimed for peak awareness each time I swam. I spent time watching and listening to my peers as I warmed up on the side of the pool, in the sauna, and in the café. While I was swimming, I was completely in tune with what my body

was feeling, and what I was thinking about. I tried to focus on my mood and how swimming affected me throughout the rest of the day. By doing this and doing some outside research, I was able to find answers for my questions. Through this ethnography I will be explaining my research and the conclusions I came to.

While cold-water swimming is fairly unexplored, there has been a significant amount of studies pointing in the direction of many benefits. In his new documentary style show *Limitless*, Chris Hemsworth says, “Cold water triggers some extremely powerful survival mechanisms”. Some other studies have shown the following as benefits of cold-water swimming; an increased tolerance to stress, self-esteem booster, reduced anxiety, decreased inflammation, and an increased immune system. Chris Hemsworth decided to try cold-water swimming to improve his long-term health after learning about his risk of Alzheimer’s. While all of this sounds great on paper, I want to know what actually pushes people to take that step into the freezing cold.

All my research will be done at Parliament Hill Lido through participant-observation, so I can see first-hand what these swimmers are experiencing. I will be observing the other members of this lido to see if I can get a better categorization and ways to answer my questions. I plan to go and swim at the lido about two times a week, so I can gain the most out of my study. I will also be doing outside research through research and statistics that have been done on cold-water swimming. I hope by doing this I will be able to get a better understanding of the sport in general, and cold-water swimming as a cultural and social activity. I hope to learn if this practice can actually be beneficial to many and if more people should know about it. Living throughout the United States, I had never even heard of what a lido was. Growing up ten minutes from the beach, it was not unusual to participate in a dunk during the winter, but never had I heard of it being a consistent sport. I’ll be able to understand the UK people and culture and their view on wellness better through this study.

To many, swimming is either seen as a competitive racing sport, or a leisurely activity to participate in during the hot summer months. However, there is a less known middle ground version, cold-water swimming. An activity that combines the health benefits of competitive swimming, and the serotonin boost of a jump in the ocean. To me, cold water seemed to emerge out of nowhere around the time of COVID-19. Staying inside not being able to go to work, see friends, or workout, was not a healthy way of living. People were looking for alternatives to keep a healthy mind and body. Many people turned to cold water swimming. According to a study done by Simon Griffiths, founder of Outdoor Swimmer, there was a 53% increase in Google searches linked to outdoor swimming from 2019 to 2020. People were looking for a new and safe way to stay active during COVID, and the cold-water swimming community grew. However, this was not the start of cold-water swimming, this activity had been practiced for decades before. Cold-water swimming first was practiced in the mid to late 18th century in England. According to Susie Parr, author of *The Story of Swimming: A Social History of Bathing in Britain*, the practice was started by wealthy, old, and sickly people looking to improve. The specific lido I joined, Parliament Hill Lido, first opened in 1938, a place for people to enjoy swimming all year long. Since it was opened, I ended up in 3-degree water on January 26th.

I can confidently say that after each swim, I have noticed something new, and have tried to improve in some way. When the water was hovering around 3 degrees, I challenged myself by trying to stay longer and linger in the pool. 5 degrees had me trying to keep my head under without getting a brain freeze or a headache. And 7 degrees and up, I have practiced swimming full on freestyle laps while trying to perfect the same form I have been trying to after 13 years of competitive swimming. After going twice a week for about four months, I think I can finally call myself a cold-water swimmer. I can also say that I thoroughly enjoyed this new experience. I can't pinpoint the exact reason I started, partly because of the supposed

benefits for joint pain, and partly because it was healthy. I now have a better understanding of why I wanted to go back every week after conducting a personal study.

The best way I was able to explain the feeling through my body was numbness. Not a bad sort of numbness, the kind I feel with my knee pain, but a relaxing peaceful numbness. Once I learned to control my body and the initial shock was over, my body and brain were at peace. Cold-water swimming actually lowers the heart rate and can be dangerous for people with previous heart problems according to a Harvard study (Ferringno, 1). I had no risk of this and enjoyed the feeling of slowing down, unlike other workouts. Although I felt completely numb from the cold, I felt very in tune with my body and what it needed. I knew when I could push myself, and I knew when I had to slow down. I had more time to just swim and think than I've ever had in my life. I would compare the experience to meditation or a spa day. The full relaxation while swimming was something I would crave the days I couldn't make it to the pool, but there were other benefits I noticed in myself.

I have had bad knees from the moment I was born. My mother, my grandfather, and now I, all were born with reoccurring knee dislocations. Until my three separate surgeries, I was used to my knee going out once or twice a week. Although I don't experience the dislocations anymore, I still have constant knee pain and arthritis flare-ups. I have not been able to physically run since I was ten years old, and swimming was all I knew. So, obviously when I heard cold-water swimming was good for joint pain, I was intrigued. After a cold-water swimming session, I was able to go on long walks without feeling any pain the next day, something unheard of after being on crutches just last summer. I have especially noticed the difference cold-water swimming has played with my knee pain since stopping. I now wake up most mornings with knee pain no matter how much I did or didn't do the day before.

The most important benefit that I found in myself was how happy cold-water swimming made me. One of the main benefits was a self-esteem boost I discovered after doing some

research. I wasn't sure how accurate this would be for me personally, as I've always been pretty confident, but I was intrigued to find out how powerful the cold-water could be. While I didn't feel this sudden boost that had been described to me after the first swim I did, I felt extremely confident. I felt that after jumping in next to freezing water, I could do anything. The more I swam the more I saw the benefits. A study done by Bournemouth University found that after just five minutes in cold-water, participants had more energy and were more upbeat (Keane 1). In addition to more energy, a study in Prague found that cold-water swimming can boost dopamine levels by 530% (Newkey-Burden). I found these studies to be very accurate when it came to my experience. I would be absolutely giddy walking around the streets of London, attentive during class, and overall, extremely productive after a cold-water swim. After the feeling wore off, I would crave another swim. I can't say I relate to the swimmer I heard saying "I wish it was a bit colder" about 10-degree water, I definitely will miss the thrill and adrenaline rush during the hot summer months.

While I found a lot about myself and went through a self-discovery period, I was also able to learn about my peers. A quote by Harry Styles has perfectly summed up what I have found, "I feel like people who have discovered cold water swimming are just so happy for you that you've also found it". If I were to explain my experience with fellow cold-water swimmers in one sentence, it would probably be that. From the moment I stepped through I felt welcomed and accepted. Before then, I was having trouble finding that type of friendliness in London. When I first went to pick up my wristband making me a member, the gate worker and another patron joked with me saying, "You're stuck with us now!". When I was swimming with my head above the water, every swimmer would smile and say hello as we passed each other. I was the youngest swimmer there most days, so I was really not expecting the friendliness and willingness to talk people approached me with. I talked about everything from swimming to the football matches with these people.

While I originally went in looking for a physical trait these cold-water swimmers shared, I discovered that it wasn't something that could be seen on the outside. The swimmers all shared the strength of the community. It was a community built on respect; everyone knew how hard it was to submerge your body in the cold water. I saw countless interactions between members who simply knew each other because of the pool. One of the first times I went I overheard a man checking in with another man to see if he could make the dinner. At first, I assumed they must have worked together or knew each other outside of the pool, but the more they went on I realized they became friends through cold-water swimming. Most of the people there had become close friends with their peers after seeing them every week for years. That's what makes cold-water swimming different from any other activity. For example, at the gym I wouldn't dare put my head up, while at the lido, I was encouraged to interact with others.

After almost four months, I was able to categorize people into three different types of cold-water swimming. The first of these groups was where I found myself, the former swimmers. These were the people in the 'fast lanes' swimming laps back and forth with perfect form. Most of these swimmers were above the age of fifty, and after being able to swim lengths for hours in a heated pool, were looking for a new challenge. This group was very experienced in cold-water swimming. The first time I built up the courage to join them, after ten minutes, I developed a painful headache and was unable to see straight for a while. After swimming laps a couple of times, my body and head became used to this, and I felt as if I could stay in the water for hours. The second group I categorized was one I would never dare to join. This group would jump or even do a flip into the water, swim about 60 yards, and then enter the sauna to warm up. After they were warmed up, they would repeat. I decided that this was the daredevil group, because repeating going through the initial shock of the cold water felt like torture to me. I often heard them discussing with each other in the

sauna how many ‘rounds’ they were going to do. The majority of this group contained men, aged thirty to forty-five. The final group I determined were the social swimmers. These swimmers would usually come in groups, and swim a couple of laps while chatting and keeping their head above water. These people would then spend hours drinking tea, reading a book, or just talking with each other on the pool deck. This group usually consisted of young women. I was able to categorize these groups into types of people based on the majority, but that doesn’t mean I didn’t see the occasional old woman join the daredevil group.

Throughout this study I was able to discover multiple different things about myself as well as the cold-water community. I discovered that the dozens of blog posts I had read discussing the mental and physical health benefits were not lies. I was able to focus on myself and listen to what my body needed. In addition, I was able to figure out how I was similar to the cold-water swimmers. While I was able to put the swimmers into groups the best I could, it was not about how they swam or what physical traits they shared. The bond and the community of the cold-water swimmers at the Parliament Hill Lido was the most notable thing to me. Hundreds of people from different backgrounds, different ages, and different lives, came together every day to share cold-water swimming. ‘Real-life’ problems were left at the door and the people rejoiced in the relaxation and break. Whether I was in the sauna, the pool, the café, or even the changing rooms, I was met with glowing faces who just seemed happy to be alive. Cold-water swimming is a sport that has no room for judgement, as everyone knew how hard it was to get in the cold water. Whether someone stayed in for five seconds, or an hour, it seemed that the whole pool was proud of you.

After one of my first swims, I sat getting changed and the man next to me asked how long I had spent in the water. I answered, a bit embarrassed with my short amount of 300 yards. I still felt like I was missing something because this wasn’t an activity I was dying to do, which to me, it seemed like my peers were. The man responded with an enthusiastic ‘Nice!’, and he

was on his way. After that short interaction, I called my mom explaining that if she wanted to know where the nicest people in London were, it was the Parliament Hill Lido. Although this man seemed like a seasoned cold-water swimmer, he was impressed with what I was doing. After becoming more of a 'regular', I understood this more. Whenever I saw someone who was clearly struggling with the cold do just one lap, I was so happy for them. I was happy that they were trying something new, pushing themselves, and hopefully one day they could reap the same benefits I was. This was the general feeling I picked up at the pool. The one consistent thing I picked up on from the cold-water swimmers was the positive energy. I believe that even if I wasn't swimming, and I just sat around these people for an hour, I would leave feeling amazing. The positive energy, friendliness, and overall happiness were contagious. So, next time I am presented with a 'Why?', I will explain the community, or better yet, I will urge them to go themselves.

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