

MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS AND AQUAFITNESS CLASSES

by Peggy Stirling, CALA certified, Author of CALA Aqua Arthritis Resources

In several pools across the country, people with Multiple Sclerosis have been making the effort to improve their quality of life. For some the improvements have been small and for others the improvements have meant a great deal.

Four participants who have been taking part in the classes offered at the Sackville Sports Stadium pool in Lower Sackville, Nova Scotia, were only too happy to share their stories with others. MS has affected each of these four individuals in different ways. Zee is confined to a wheelchair most of the time, while Pat uses a cane to assist her in walking. While Zoe and Joyce do not normally rely on walking aids, their gait is, at times, somewhat hesitant.

Each of these ladies began the aquafitness program in the fall of 2002. Their enthusiasm for the class and positive outlook towards the disease has impressed me so much that I felt it was worth sharing. I asked each of them to write a description of how they have benefited from the program. Here are the responses I got back.

Zoe writes: Dear Peggy,

Since taking your class, I feel more in control of myself and have been able to do chores I had been afraid to even try. I can't go as fast as I used to go but - slow and steady wins the race. My balance has been greatly improved and if I misstep I recover more quickly. The greatest change for me was the toes of my right foot. The 4 small toes were curling under and sometimes my toenails would scrape on the floor. I was afraid to go without shoes or sneakers even inside the house. Now my toes are almost back to normal. They don't curl under and I enjoy stimulating them by walking barefoot for sometime every day as well as tapping them. My posture has improved and I'm working on strengthening my right leg. In class I understand how tiredness and heat can affect you. Meeting others with MS is great as well. You can talk to others who have similar problems.

Jeanne, my friend, says I have lost the sense of futility of not being able to do anything about MS. She says I'm not nearly as tipsy and no longer complain about pain in my hip and leg.

Hope this is helpful to you as your class has been to me.

Zee spends a lot of time confined to a wheelchair, but this is what she has to say about her improvements:

Zee writes: How the MS Aquafit Class Has Benefited Me

I have been attending the MS Aquafit Class at the Sackville Sports Stadium since 28 September 2002. I am extremely pleased that the class was offered because I have benefited from it in a number of ways. Since beginning of the classes I have been aware of improvements in energy level, strength, endurance, range of motion, flexibility, appetite, mental attitude and enjoyment of life.

I have noticed the following improvements;

Increased energy. *While my energy level fluctuates over a two-day medication cycle, I have enjoyed a higher average level of energy than before I started the classes. I feel more inclined to be active and I am able to engage in activities for longer periods of time before needing to rest.*

Increased strength. *My walking strength has improved and I find it easier to get out of a chair or a car.*

Increased endurance. *During the exercises in the pool, I notice that I am able to walk for longer periods of time without getting tired. I have increased the time spent exercising on my feet by almost 100% since the classes began.*

Improved flexibility and range of motion. *My instructors tell me that my joints are more supple, especially on the side affected by MS, and that my range of motion has increased.*

Improved appetite. *I have better appetite and more interest in food since I started the classes. In the previous year, I was almost never hungry and did not look forward to meals.*

Improved outlook on life. *The aquatic environment has had a very beneficial psychological effect on me resulting from the tremendous pleasure I get from being able to walk so much more easily in the water. The benefit of the buoyancy cannot be over-emphasized for someone with a major weakness in the leg. The fact of taking action to improve one's own health is another source of psychological benefit.*

Relief from stress and spasm. *The fifteen minutes I spend each session with the Bad Ragaz treatment has a calming effect on my mind and greatly relaxes my muscles, at the same time exercising my spine and core muscles.*

The exercises I carry out each Tuesday and Thursday are only a part of the beneficial treatment that I receive. Equally important are the attitudes of the two instructors, the volunteer workers, and the other staff of the aquatic department. Instructors Peggy Stirling and Denise Lewis both provide humour, constant encouragement, explanations of why specific exercises are helpful, and they display a real concern for my welfare. I will never forget the first day I attended class and Denise showed me how to walk in the water. When Peggy had me lift my left knee, it was a real thrill to find that I was still able to do that. I am deeply grateful for their thoughtful work and generous support.

Joyce writes: Dear Peggy,

The things that I have noticed most since I have started taking the MS Aquatic Fitness program are:

- more energy,
- left foot picks up better, not stumbling as much
- my writing has improved

I enjoy going to the program and have learned a lot about MS. I wish I had heard about the program earlier. I think there should be more of them and better advertised.

Pat has also added her comments:

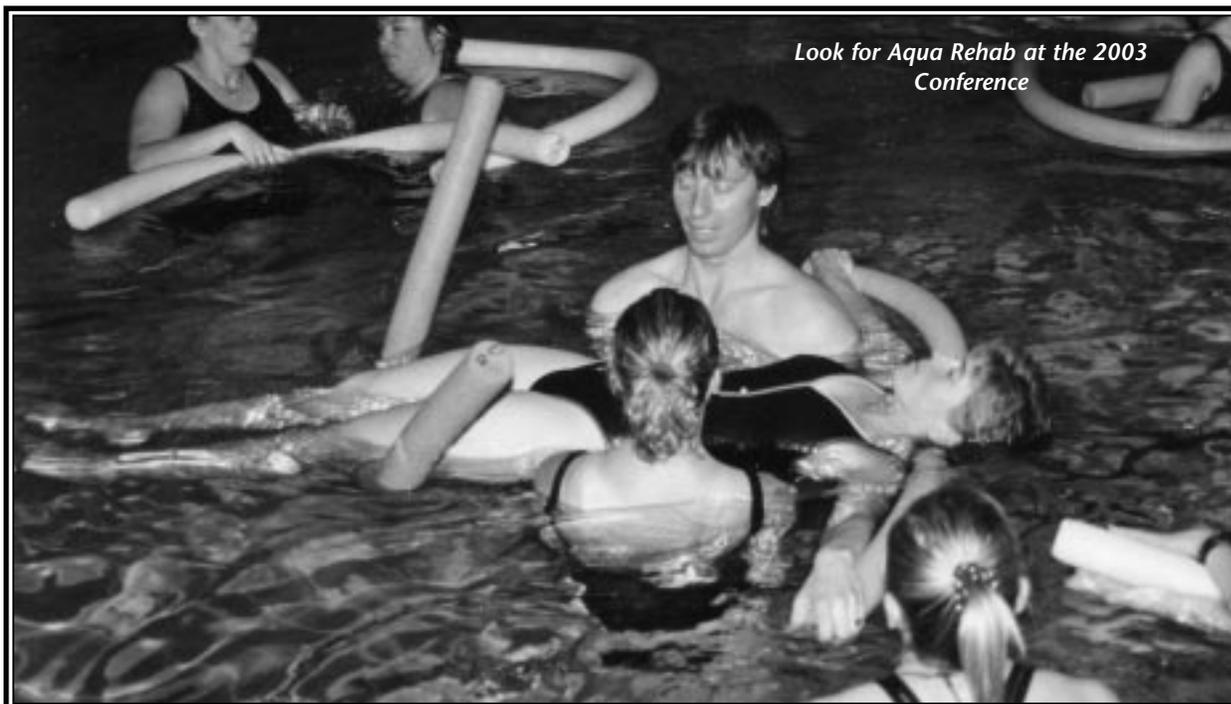
I am a long time sufferer of Multiple Sclerosis. I was diagnosed in 1989, and have found that attending the MS Aquatic Program, hosted by the Sackville Sports Stadium, these past few months, has been a great benefit to me, both physically and mentally.

The water allows me to maintain my balance while performing movements that would not be possible on dry land. The pace of the class is very well designed and a refreshing break from the "go as fast as you can" type of programs.

I have had increased difficulty maintaining a consistent gait over the last few years and have reluctantly started using a cane. I have now been able to, with the instructor's assistance, focus on the specific movements to assist my balance. I have noticed a definite improvement in my lower legs and in particular my left foot. I had been having problems lifting the front of my foot as I walk, where it now rolls more naturally as I step forward.

The relationships I have developed with the other class members and instructors have been positive and rewarding. I feel less isolated in society and feel a new confidence in day-to-day situations.

There have been many other positive stories with the MS Aquafit classes. We are all very pleased with each and every small or large achievement. We see big smiles on a lot of faces, and many a class has emitted loud guffaws on more than one occasion. The testimonials of these four people has proven to us that while our numbers are not huge, we are definitely accomplishing goals beyond our dreams.



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