

PREMIUM SCIENCE

Rowing is hugely beneficial for older women. Here's why I do it.

Julia Flynn Siler is one of many women over 40 who have taken up oars in recent years. This is what she's learned about the joy—and other benefits—of exercise for older women.



In recent years, there has been a swell of women between 40 and 69 taking up rowing for its health benefits, including some of the women members of the Marin Rowing Association seen here practicing in the San Francisco Bay.

PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRISTIE HEMM KLOK

By Julia Flynn Siler
Photographs by Christie Hemm Klok
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Before daybreak, eight blades *whoosh* through the waters of the San Francisco Bay, followed by a rhythmical *chu-chin*. I hear the breath of the woman behind me and follow the cadence of the rower ahead as we slide forward and back on our seats. We push against foot

stretchers while our arms guide our oars in and out of the bay. Our boat surges forward as pink ribbons in the sky magically transform the color of the water beneath us.

At 64, I never thought I would find myself arriving at a **boathouse** before dawn to row three or four days a week. My teammates are women who range in age from their twenties to their seventies. Many of us grew up at a time when most team sports were reserved for men. That I've become a competitive athlete in my sixth decade—after surviving a life-threatening medical condition—is something I never expected.

*(**Why outdoor adventure is important for women as they age.**)*

In the last seven years, there has been a swell of women between 40 and 69 taking up oars, according to U.S. Rowing, the sport's governing federation. Some are rowing and even competing well into their later years. There are mornings when I find myself climbing into boats with an octogenarian or even a nonagenarian.



Lydia Arellano, 71, in the Marin Rowing Association boathouse after practice. Arellano insists on carrying her own 31-pound single scull from the dock to the boathouse, argui... [Read More](#) ▾



Writer Julia Flynn Siler joined the Marin Rowing Association in her 60s to get back into shape and ease her social isolation after the COVID-19 pandemic and a life-threatening ill... [Read More](#) ▾



Marta Osterloh, 75, near the Corte Madera creek where the Marin Rowing Association's boats launch from and practice. Osterloh was one of eight women who won the first-ever g... [Read More](#) ▾



Beverlee Bentley, 86, stands outside the boathouse. One of the team's most accomplished senior rowers, she has won gold medals at the storied Head of the Charles and ot... [Read More](#) ▾

There's no one remotely looking like me or my teammates in the recent film adaptation of *The Boys in the Boat*, Daniel James Brown's nonfiction book about a group of young male Olympic rowers. Some of us have begun joking that we're the "Old Girls in the Boat."

So why are so many women like me channeling our inner Diana Nyads now?

There's been much recent scientific research on the benefits of intense cardiovascular exercise for older women, including a [2024 study](#) on how exercise helps bulk up our brains and [several other studies](#) that suggest it may reduce the risk of breast cancer. There's also [evidence](#) that exercise can reduce the effects that loneliness and social isolation [can have on your health](#).

Yet those health findings are not as much of a surprise to me as the unexpected joy of the cross-generational friendships the boathouse has made possible.



Women rowers lift the eight-boat out of the water and onto their shoulders to bring it back to the boathouse after morning practice. Studies [show](#) that rowing can help women build their strength and aerobic conditioning.

Why we row

My own journey as a rower began nine years ago, when I was diagnosed with an unruptured aneurysm in the vein behind my left eye. I underwent open brain surgery to fix the weakened blood vessel. Because the repair was so close to the optic nerve, I suffered double-vision and unsteadiness.

After about six months, I woke up one morning to find the double vision had vanished. But I'd lost my physical conditioning and was spending too much time alone. I felt fragile, burdened by a sense of my own mortality.

A friend who'd driven me to appointments during my recovery suggested I try out for the Marin Rowing Association's novice team. I finally decided to give it a try during the pandemic—craving a reason to leave the house. Becoming a competitive rower was never my goal. I joined the team in April 2021 to get back into shape and ease my social isolation.

(When does old age begin? Science says later than you might think.)

My early days as a rower weren't promising. I struggled through back muscle strains, oozing blisters, and taking unexpected swims in the 54-degree bay. I was unable to do a single push-up when I first

arrived. I also discovered the hard way that drinking wine the night before was a sure way to mess up my next morning's practice.

But whenever I felt discouraged by my slow progress as a rower, I'd look to the older women at the boathouse who inspired me to imagine a different future for myself.

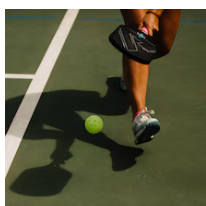


Marcia Felton, 91, stills rows with her team three days a week. She no longer helps carry the boat, but carries oars to and from the boathouse to the dock.

One was Beverlee Bentley, 86, who just retired from a full-time team but continues to row with the club to fill an extra seat in the boat. She is one of the boathouse's most accomplished senior rowers, with many medals to her name—including golds from the storied Head of the Charles regatta, held each fall in Boston.

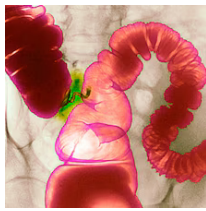
As the full-time caregiver for her late quadriplegic husband, Beverlee found a community through rowing. “If a doctor wrote a mental health prescription for me to exercise and connect with people, it couldn't have worked out better,” she says.

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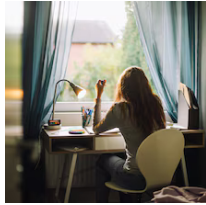
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On days when I'd feel down about competing in a sport that favored taller people, I'd look for my 70-year-old teammate, Lydia Arellano, who stands 5'3" and weighs just over 110 pounds. Born and raised in Cuba, Lydia has purple streaks adorning her grey hair. On a recent morning, I offered to help carry her 31-pound single scull from the dock to the boathouse. Lydia declined.

Staying strong "is a mindset," she explained, clad in a fluorescent green long-sleeved top that makes her more visible to bigger boats out on the water. "You need to be independent," she said, "to carry (your boat) on your own" for as long as you can.



A women's eight boat glides through the water after navigating the bridges between the San Francisco Bay and Corte Madera Creek. Scientists [have shown](#) that experiencing moments of awe like witnessing sunrise on the water can help reduce yo... [Read More](#) ▾

The benefits we've reaped

I can now row 10,900 meters (around 6.8 miles) in a morning practice and do 20 or so push-ups. I mountain bike and take long hikes at least once a week.

By working hard to master the difficult new sport of rowing, I forced my brain to keep learning. Learning new skills as you age can boost brain cell growth and slow cognitive decline, studies show. Those benefits are multiplied when the new skill involves intense cardiovascular exercise, which sends more blood flow into the brain and boosts the chemicals that can help repair brain cells.

(How to take better care of your aging brain.)

Tougher to quantify but just as important, witnessing sunrise on the water and watching squadrons of white pelicans arrive in the summer has replenished my sense of awe—the wonderment I’d lost in the dark days after my surgery and the pandemic. A 2023 study found that as people experience more daily moments of awe in their lives, they feel less stress and a greater sense of well-being. And some mornings, I have to tell myself to quit gawking at the birds and refocus on rowing.

Aside from shedding about fifteen pounds and building up my aerobic conditioning, I discovered that in recent years, breast cancer survivors have begun joining Dragon Boat rowing teams across the world—and it really did help them build strength, improve body image, and elevate their moods. Many of those survivors had never been part of a sports team before.

For me, the highlight of joining a team has been making new boathouse friends. We laugh and commiserate with each other over strained muscles, choppy water, and the psychological challenges of learning new skills. We’ve competed in regattas (and, alas, hit racing buoys, and come in dead last.) Intense exercise first thing in the morning put the challenges of the rest of my day in better perspective and given me confidence. It also helps me sleep better at night.

I’m not alone. The oldest “girl” in our boathouse is Marcia Felton, a marvel of strength, good humor, and agility at age 91. Marcia began rowing a quarter century ago and has continued, with brief time off for two knee replacements. While she no longer carries the boat to the dock, she believes rowing has contributed to her good mental health, through the camaraderie it creates. “It is so beautiful,” she told me. “The synchronicity of it.”

Recently I asked my rowing mentor Marta Osterloh, 75, about how long she planned to keep rowing. She was one of eight women who won the first-ever gold medal in the 70-year-plus category in 2015 at the Head of the Charles (categories are based on the average age of the rowers in the boat.)

Her answer: “As long as I can!”

I’m following Marta’s plan.

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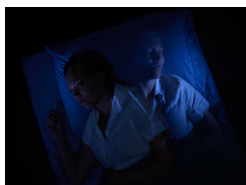
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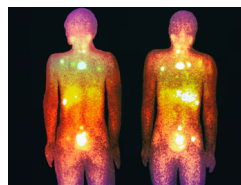
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