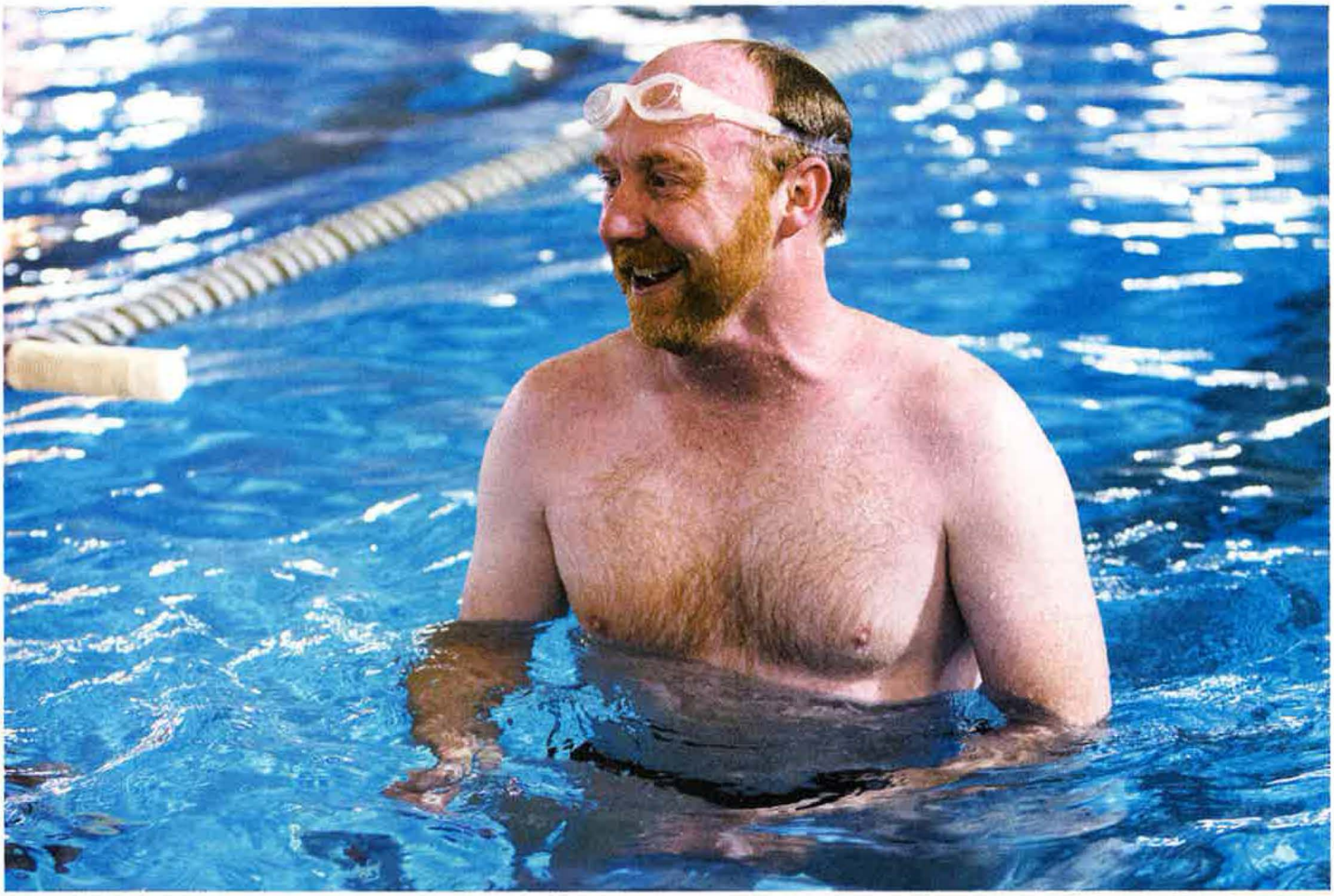


Ben Harris enjoys both the challenges and benefits of swimming.

Exercise to Live

We Follow Four Alaskans on Their Journey

By JOSH NIVA

Special to Pulse

The new year is here, and with it comes opportunities to reflect on, assess and feel inspired to change your life and as well as your workout. Whether you resolve to lose weight, get healthier, feel stronger or feel more confident in the year ahead, be sure to also resolve to try new approaches to exercise in order to get results and your endorphins popping like New Year's Eve fireworks.

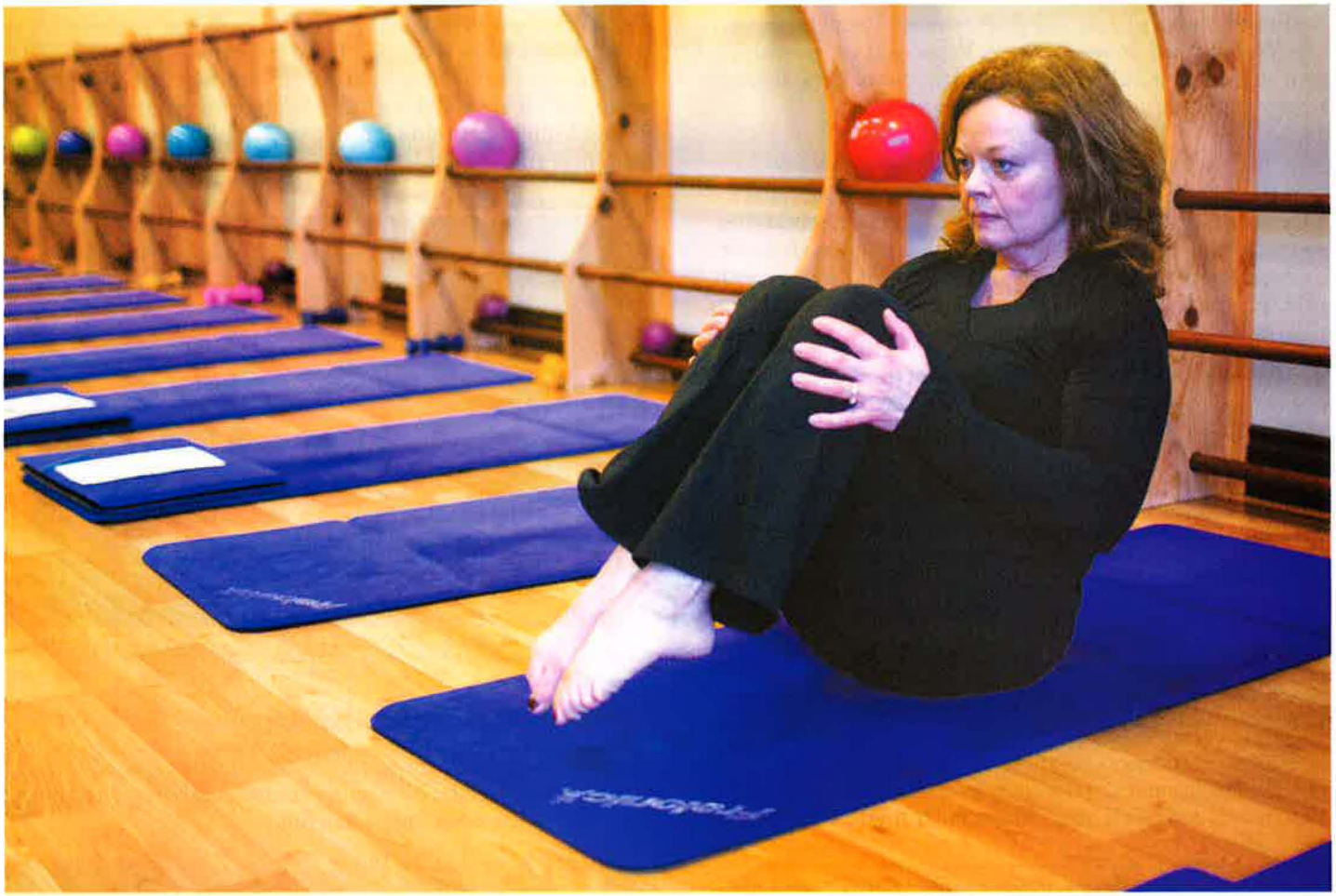
Here are some inspiring stories from people just like you who have found workout success, and long-term health benefits, from trying something new with their exercise time.

SWIMMING

Two men were looking for body breakthroughs — one hoping to maximize his workouts, one hoping to improve his health. Both turned to an old fitness friend, swimming.

Jeff Woods and Ben Harris found swimming's familiar benefits: Aerobic exercise leading to a serious calorie burn, a healthier heart, better blood flow, lower cholesterol and lower diabetes risk. Swimmers also lose weight and increase muscle tone and strength, as well as bone strength, flexibility and body awareness. Water is also magic for workouts — it's low on impact but high on resistance, providing more bang for your workout effort.

As a young man growing up in Texas, Woods was an avid swimmer, but gave up the sport as he became a busy adult, husband, father and Alaskan. Over the years, his blood pres-



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ERIN HOOLEY

Susie Kiger practices Pilates, offering her full-body benefits.

sure and waistline increased steadily until he had finally had enough. In December 2011, he decided on a whim to try swimming again.

That whim and that workout gave him big results in just one year: His blood pressure returned to healthy levels, 8 inches disappeared from his waist, and at 64, he says he feels years younger.

"Swimming has been a life-changer for me," says Woods, who lives and swims in Soldotna. "It completely turned things around for me — I just feel so much better now. The health benefits have been tremendous."

"Swimming has been a life-changer for me."

Woods' dedication has been pretty awesome, too. He now swims five days a week, utilizing four strokes while swimming a mile, or 72 lengths of the pool, each session. A few months ago, he joined the Alaska Masters Swimming club to take his swimming to the next level.

Harris' quest for a better workout also inspired him to join a masters training club. He spent most of his childhood swimming in California and Missouri. As a very active adult, he tried to maintain his swimming, but wasn't making progress, improving his strokes or working variety into his training. He joined the Swimming With Alaska Masters (SWAM) club a little over two years ago to shake it up.

"It's a little intimidating — you've got all these competitive people, triathletes and super-humans, in there splashing around," says Harris, 47, a Web specialist at the Anchorage School District. "But the coaches ease you into it, and I kept practicing and kept coming back. And I've found it more challenging than any of the other sports I've done."

Already fit, Harris comments that his swimming workouts are still producing challenges and results.

"Generally, I feel better all-around — I sleep better, breathe better, and it benefits everything else I do like biking, running and hiking," says Harris. "You're using your whole body, getting a cardio workout and exercising all your muscles. And it's low impact, so your body doesn't feel beat up."

Want to make a splash on your workout? Woods and Harris say dive into the pool!

"I would tell someone that when you go to the pool you're going to see everybody from fantastic swimmers to people on

floaties who wear glasses and don't even get their glasses wet," says Woods. "Just do your routine. When you go, go with your own abilities in mind. You'll get benefits out of it, no matter what you do."

PILATES

After a lifetime of being a sporting superwoman, Susie Kiger was suddenly human. When she reached her mid-40s, all those hard miles caught up to her. The triathlon stud, the hardcore runner, hiker and skier couldn't bend her back without pain. Her muscles were tight; her body was out of alignment.

"It started in the low back, but I didn't realize how short my muscles were or how out of shape I was getting," Kiger says. "I was extremely strong cardiovascularly, but extremely unfit in another sense. I just started to fall apart and I was searching for something to fix me."

Kiger found Pilates, the low-impact workout sessions beloved for focusing on core and abdominal strength while offering full-body benefits. Pilates improves range of motion, flexibility, circulation, balance and posture. Practicing also provides a body awareness that people take into all aspects of their daily life, from walking and sitting to sports movements. It builds lean muscle and even changes body types from by weight loss, toning, and lengthening muscles … and it also provides some pretty amazing looking abdominals.

Pilates practitioners get there with exercises and breathing that engage and activate muscles around the body, in the abdominals and pelvic areas, in the inner thigh, knees and toes, and beyond.

Kiger, now 56 and working as a director of sales and marketing at Alaska Railroad, was just happy to get her body back. Always adventurous, Kiger gave Pilates a try after stopping by Studio One Pilates nine years ago. She has been devoted to her practice ever since and says the work has changed her life. But the change didn't come overnight.

"I remember lying on the floor doing the exercises, and I could barely do any of them — it was humiliating," Kiger says. Through Pilates and deep-tissue Rolfing sessions, her body slowly realigned itself and began rebuilding strength "from the tip of my toes to the top of my head."

"The folks at Studio One Pilates taught me breathing and how to reach those deep layers," Kiger adds. "I could feel the length in my body, and my body also started to get smaller without losing weight."

She's become stronger and more toned over the years. Her active lifestyle and confidence have returned, as well.

"I feel like I'm back in my 30s — Pilates has enabled me to do the things that I had lost the ability to do, including most recently running again," says Kiger, who attends classes two or three times a week. "In order for me to be able to grow older and do all the things I love to do, and to be functionally fit, I have to keep doing this. I feel like it will be something that I will do myself for the rest of my life. I continue to get better the more I do it."

Kiger encourages you to try Pilates, too.

"If you want to grow old gracefully, or de-age yourself as you grow older, Pilates is the best thing you can do," says Kiger. "I look younger today than I did 10, 15 years ago. People comment, 'What are you doing?'… I continue to test myself on things I might not think I'm able to do and I surprise myself with how strong I am."

Jackie Jointer found Zumba classes changed both her body and attitude.

ZUMBA

The popularity of the world's hottest fitness craze, Zumba, is not relenting. In fact, it's sizzling around Anchorage, and burning calories has never been more fun.

Just ask Jackie Jointer. In five months, Zumba has changed her body and her attitude about working out.

Jointer was a swimmer and cheerleader in high school, but as an adult, she became bored and uninspired after she stopped seeing results with the same-old gym routine of using the treadmill, elliptical, weights and Nautilus machines. "Sick of the treadmill" she took extended breaks from working out.

In 2012, her mother and a close friend convinced her to try Zumba. Jointer suddenly found what she was missing: Great workouts, results, and a good time.

"The classes are so much fun," she says. "The hour flies by — on a treadmill you just stare at the clock for the hour. And as far as cardio goes, Zumba is the best workout for me — I burn 600-1,000 calories in an hour."

Jointer, a 39-year-old salesperson with GCI, is also loving Zumba's benefits. "I've dropped a pant size, but weight wasn't the big thing for me. More important is that I'm toned and I've really firmed up. I'm more comfortable in my clothing and confident in whatever I'm wearing."

For those living under Mount McKinley, Zumba is a cardio-heavy dance workout set to up-tempo, Latin-and-pop-inspired music. Usually about an hour long, the classes offer a lot of bass, movement, smiles, and plenty of sweat. Like all great cardio and aerobic workouts, Zumba gets the heart pumping, increases stamina, burns calories and stress, and leads to weight loss and muscle toning. Some say Zumba even improves balance, coordination and body awareness.

And you don't have to be a disco inferno to try Zumba: It's perfect for all fitness and dancing levels. Instructors lead the choreography but allow class participants the flexibility to match them step-for-step or to simply freestyle to the beat.

"I really liked it a lot in the beginning, but I didn't have a clue what I was doing and I was always a step or two behind the instructor," Jointer says with a laugh. "The steps are very simple when you break them down, and there's a lot of repetition. But it's not so much what you're doing, it's that you are moving and having fun."

The fun is everywhere in Zumba— in the moves, the music and the social environment.

"It's a party-like atmosphere," says Jointer. "I'll catch myself singing along to songs. Some people wear jingle skirts. It's just very cool.

"And all the endorphins!" she adds. "I'm always smiling or looking at the person in front of me giving it their al land that makes me give it my all."

Jointer now attends Zumba classes four or five times a week, usually at the Anchorage Athletic Club, and would love to see even more people get into the groove.

"I would tell people to just jump right in!" said Jointer. "Watch the instructor, do the best you can and keep coming back. It gets better every class.I couldn't imagine my life without it now."

TRY ZUMBA

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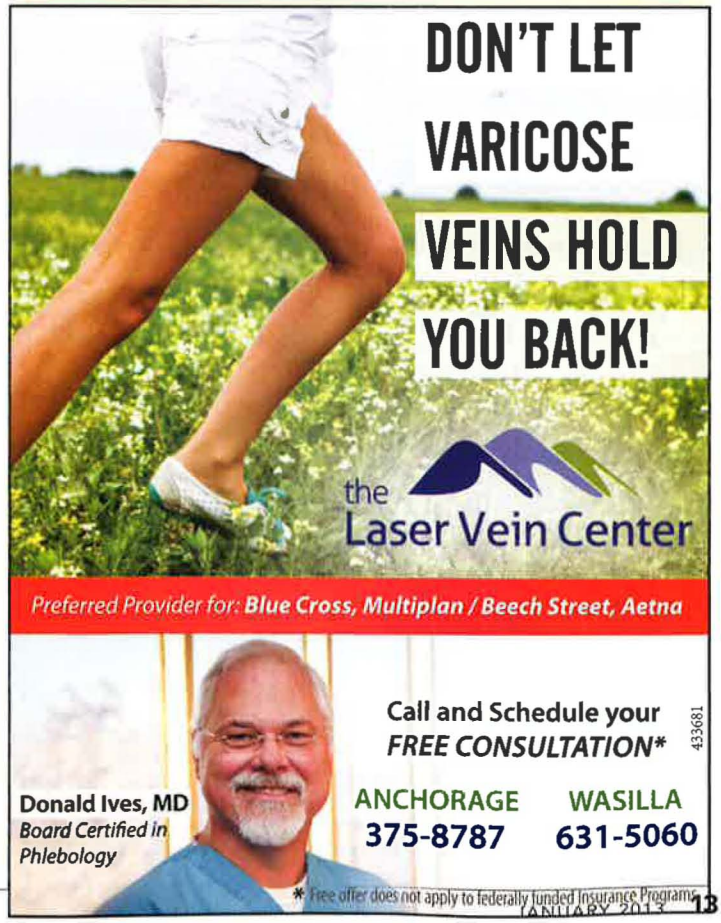
Swimming With Alaska Masters (SWAM):
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