

# Mad for it

Every winter Sunday for the last 38 years The Mackerels have taken the plunge at Merewether Ocean Baths, whatever the weather. Are they mad or just having a good time? *GO Magazine* went along to find out

STORY Carol Duncan PHOTOS Simone de Peak

It's a chilly 15°C in the Merewether Ocean Baths. Wetsuit territory for most of us, but not for the hardy souls of Merewether Mackerels winter swimming club.

Roy Gibbs is 83. "I'm not the oldest," he says. "Alf Carpenter is, he's 94!" Equally unphased by the wintry air temperature (7°C), Roy continues, "I had a swim yesterday, the water was about 17°C." And what about the ambulance I'd seen up the hill? Roy laughs, "It's not for us, at least not at this stage!" Brave or crazy? "We have everyone, people from industry, schoolteachers, university academics, solicitors, barristers, a priest who swims with us, and the local water polo team."

Alf Carpenter is a former WWII serviceman. "I was in the Army for 12 years, joined the 2nd AIF in 1939 and served in Palestine, Libya, Greece, Crete, Darwin and New Guinea. Alf is indeed the oldest member of the Merewether Mackerels, "I'm 93," he says. "But you just told me you were 94!" "No I didn't, my mate Roy did. My memory's fine, his is shot, and he's only 83." Alf joined the club in 1972, its first year. "One of my mates said, 'There's free grog up at the clubhouse' and I've been swimming with them ever since." Alf and Roy have only ever missed race meets in the immediate aftermath of knee replacements.

Murray Slee is 38. "I'm a standard member. If you avoid official titles, you don't have to do as much work." Of the older blokes he says, "I think it's fantastic, it keeps them alive, keeps their hearts ticking over." Is it as formal as other swimming clubs? "Yes, but it's only a one-lap race so it's more about the social aspect. It's a standard handicapping system so everyone, regardless of ability, finishes about the same time. It's open to a little bit of rorting and everyone's on the lookout for burglars that try and steal a couple of seconds in their race when they're not entitled to it. False starts won't be tolerated, claiming



they're swimming slower than they really are won't be tolerated but there are numerous ways to cheat, I can't divulge them all otherwise my plans will come unstuck!" Some members are three times Murray's age. "Yes, and there's younger guys than me. There's not many areas of society where you get interaction with people of such diverse age groups. I did one season with Bondi Icebergs but they're the glamour club of the sport, it's akin to being a show-pony, so I went around the corner to Bronte."

A wet Roy is shivering. "I feel a bit cold now. You wait until I get a port wine into my hand, I'll shake it over the top. I'd better only quarter fill it today! You have to build your fortitude up." I suggest that Roy may have left his fortitude in the pool. "I'll be right, but it's taking me a while to get my shoes on I'm shaking so much!"

Being a 100% swimmer - swimming every day of the

season - is prestigious. "One of the members is working this morning so he's coming down this afternoon for a verification swim," explains Murray. "Two members will have to witness that to make sure he's had that swim. If you're away, as long as it's not a tropical region, you can have a swim, have it verified, sometimes by rather dubious means, but you need to have a verified swim if you're going for that 100% honour."

There are now over 60 Merewether Mackerels, but only a handful are women. "This is only the second or third year we've had women swimming in the club," says Roy. "It was a real man's show and a lot of them still have a burr under their saddle because the women are coming swimming with us. I don't mind at all. We had one young woman swimming with us one time, she said, 'I'll fix youse!' and leapt in topless!" >>

**MAIN** Taking a dive into the icy waters;  
**OPPOSITE** Roy Gibbs (left) and Alf Carpenter are two of the club's more senior members

# AD



MAIN A wave distracts from the start of a heat; BELOW Jamie Quinn and his 'Mongrel' collar; Helen Cullen, one of the first women to join the Mackerels; swimmers take their place in the queue

"It's a Mongrel collar. It's voted on by fellow Mongrels. Each collar is tailored to reflect its owner's winning mongrel trait." *Jamie Quinn*

Billie Holmes-Fairfull is one of the women who had the rules changed. "The blokes took a bit of convincing, we swam for a couple of seasons then last season they agreed to vote us in," she says. Helen Cullen, 59, joined with Billie. "It was actually some of the boys from the Mackerels who invited us over. What we didn't know was that women weren't actually part of the club. There was a bit of an undercurrent. Two fellows decided they wouldn't swim if we were staying but at the AGM it was put to the members that we join, and those two are still swimming with us. They're great."

The club's President, Alan Pickles, describes it as, "A fairly motley bunch of guys and girls. Friendship and fitness is the club's motto. We get down here for a swim, hot soup, a couple of beers, talk about the morning swims and see how the week's gone for everyone." What about younger membership? "The majority of our members are now under 40, our youngest is about 11, he's the son of an older member. It's good to see the tradition carrying on. I'm only 35, our club captain is 25. We have a good core of younger blokes and they're getting more involved in the running of the club."

Jamie Quinn is large, loud, bald and wearing nothing but a black leather studded dog collar

and swimmers. "My jewellery - it's a Mongrel collar. I earned it through various deeds, misdeeds, adventures and misadventures. It's voted on by fellow Mongrels and it's an honour to be included with the Mongrels as there are some elite members." Each collar is tailored to reflect its owner's winning mongrel trait. "My Mongrel collar has a baby's dummy. I had a bit of a dummy spit when I was president of the club. It wouldn't be the Merewether Mackerels without me as clown jester. If I'd known you were coming I'd have put some whales on!"

After the swimming, there's hot soup, muscat, conversation, laughs and fines to be paid. Ziggy Gnojek, 81, says, "There are fines for whatever you've done 'wrong' through the week. If you've done something wrong, something funny, something unusual, you get fined and the club benefits." Has Roy been fined? "Plenty of bloody times. I'll get fined today for talking to you too much! You get seen out at the shops and your wife is pushing the trolley, you get a fine. It doesn't just happen here, you can get nicked anywhere. It's fierce!"

*If you'd like to know more about the Mackerels or even fancy joining them for a swim visit [www.merewethermackerels.org](http://www.merewethermackerels.org)*

