

# Life begins at 80: profiling senior athlete Ilse Walters

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Senior Scene

In early 2008, shortly before her 80th birthday, Ilse Walters decided she needed a new challenge. A year later, that challenge took her where she would never have dreamed: the National Senior Games, sometimes called the Senior Olympics.

In February 2008, Ilse was doing water aerobics and some swimming to help relieve her back problems. One day as she was swimming at the Soldiers Field House Pool at Fort Lewis, she was approached by Jim Nelson, a water fitness trainer. He gave her a flyer about the Washington State Senior Games and told her, "if you can swim 25 yards you can win a medal."

"I said, that would be great," recalls Ilse, "I can do that."

Nelson, himself a senior games athlete, later told a local newspaper that Ilse had "the most beautiful swimming breaststroke I ever saw."

With Nelson's encouragement, Ilse started training to race. "I had learned to swim with my head above the water," she explains. She had to break that lifetime habit and learn to swim with her head in the water to comply with competition standards.

At her 80th birthday party, in April 2008, Ilse told her friends and family that "...life begins at 80. I have made a decision. I'm going to go for the gold!"

And so she did. She won two gold medals in her first competition, in June 2008. At her first Washington State Senior Games, in July 2008, Ilse won gold medals in the 25 yard and 50

yard breaststroke. Ilse's performance not only qualified her to be a Master Swimmer, it also qualified her for the Summer National Senior Games, held every two years.

The 2009 National Senior Games were held in early August. More than 12,000 athletes from all over the country, ages 51-100+, descended on the San Francisco Bay Area for two weeks of competition in 18 medal sports and seven demonstration sports. Athletes compete in age groups; Ilse's bracket is the 80-84 group.

Swimming events for the National Games were held at Stanford University. Ilse says one of her biggest thrills was seeing her name on the lighted scoreboard at the Stanford University pool.

Because there are no 25 yard events at nationals, Ilse swam only a single event, the 50 yard breaststroke. Although her time would have won her a silver medal, she missed the required two-handed touch at the finish and was disqualified. She says the large crowds and national stage made her a little nervous. "Next time I'll know better," she vows. The experience at the national games left Ilse disappointed but undaunted.

So what's next? Her immediate training goal is to build endurance and strength, so she is planning to enroll in a 12-week fitness program at the Lakewood YMCA. She wants to compete in more events, adding the 100 and 200 yard breaststroke, and is mulling the possibility of competing in track events as well.

Meanwhile, Ilse trains on her own at the Lakewood YMCA. She consults her former son-in-law, a professional swim coach, for



advice on technique and competition.

When she's not in the water, Ilse keeps busy with her family and hobbies. She has recently completed a memoir, recounting for her family the stories of her upbringing in Germany and her experiences during World War II. She also loves to garden and is an accomplished woodworker, using a variety of exotic woods in her creations.

The week prior to the National Games, Ilse successfully defended both of her gold medals at the 2009 Washington State Senior Games. She now holds state records in both of her events; 35.58 in the 25-yard breaststroke and 1:16.42 in the 50-yard breaststroke.

Ilse has already set her sights on a return to the National Senior Games, next scheduled for 2011 in Houston. "I'm more determined than ever," she says with a twinkle. Given all that she's accomplished so far, expect to see her there.

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