

# Jervis Bay Wobbegongs are beating the cold with camaraderie



WINTER SWIM: The Jervis Bay Wobbegongs assemble for their Sunday race day at Huskisson Beach. Picture: Jorja McDonnell

It's a brisk Sunday morning on the shore of Huskisson Beach, but John Stapleton promises it's warmer in the water.

He is the president of the Jervis Bay Wobbegongs winter swim club, and today is race day.

Members are out in force to prepare for the upcoming Australian Winter Swimming national titles in September, where the Wobbegongs will be defending their crown in the 10x50 metre relay.

They have held the title since the last national competition in 2019, and are looking to bring it home again from this year's competition in Wagga Wagga.



Jervis Bay Wobbeongs president and founder, John Stapleton. Picture: Jorja McDonnell

The Wobbeongs will have a sizeable contingent at the titles, which cap off the May-September winter swimming season, and Mr Stapleton said the sport is still growing in popularity.

"We have about 50 or 60 members and are taking about 36 to the championships, which is quite good," he said.

"When we go, there would be up to 32 clubs from all around Australia - they come over from Western Australia and down from Queensland."

Some may think these swimmers are mad for jumping in to the icy waters of Jervis Bay in the middle of winter.

But for many of the members, taking up winter swimming has been transformative.



Julie Sankey and Jacqui Wilson are all smiles after their race. Picture: Jorja McDonnell

Julie Sankey took up winter swimming with the Wobbegongs about three years ago.

She initially wasn't a confident swimmer, but now loves it for the exercise. As for the cold, she said it is made all the more bearable by the 'lovely group of people' who join her.

"For years I walked past them, thinking I couldn't swim laps, or it was too early, or too cold. Then I just joined, and I'm so pleased that I did," Mrs Sankey said.

"When you join a like-minded group of people, they'll encourage you and motivate you to get in even when it's cold."

Wobbegongs club secretary Jacqui Wilson claims she 'couldn't swim a lap' when she first joined the group in 2018.

These days the enthusiastic swimmer is in the water almost every week.

Miss Wilson said a lot about winter swimming is a mental game, which is where having a motivated group makes a world of difference.

"A couple of people in the club have been swimming all their lives and will

give you hints and tips, but it's mostly the encouragement that makes you think: well I can actually do this," she said.

"It's good for your mental health, it's good for aches and pains, your bones and muscles - all of that stuff; but really it's the camaraderie that gets me here."



Soon turning 80, Donald McRae is the oldest male swimmer of the Wobbegongs. Picture: Jorja McDonnell

Currently, the youngest members of the Wobbegongs are in their 40s, while the oldest are in their 90s.

Donald McRae is nearly 80 - he is a foundation member, and the oldest male swimmer on the squad.

In his younger years, Mr McRae had tried triathlon, but didn't find much interest in the sport.

Years later, it was a chance run-in with his friend John Stapleton that got him in to winter swimming.

"We had come down here [to Huskisson Beach] one day, and John yelled out: 'do you want to swim with us?'" Mr McRae said.

The rest, as they say, is history.

At the end of their chilly swim session, the team takes the time to warm up with their tried and true method: coffee and cake.

Mr Stapleton said the morning tea has become tradition for the Wobbegongs because, ultimately, winter swimming is a social sport.

"Of course we're not going to break any records, but it's all a bit of fun," he said.

"For a community based club, you can't beat it."

The [Jervis Bay Wobbegongs](#) welcome new members year-round; people of all ages and abilities are welcome to swim.

Jorja reports across the Shoalhaven and Eurobodalla, for the South Coast Register, Milton-Ulladulla Times, and Bay Post. Previously, she was a journalist in outback Queensland.