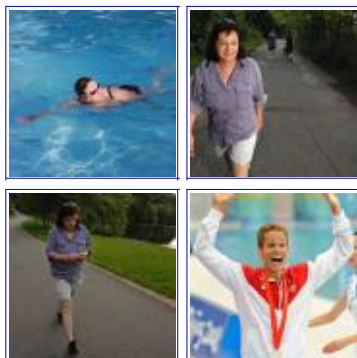


Photo 1 of 4



This photo provided by Mark W. Keeler shows Beth Walsh, 57, doing laps in a pool by her home in Encinitas, Calif., Wednesday, Aug. 13, 2008. Walsh, a competitive swimmer as a kid, hadn't swam laps in at least a decade until she heard about Dara Torres. (AP Photo/Mark W. Keeler)



Everybody in the pool: Torres inspires older women

By MEGAN K. SCOTT – 2 hours ago

NEW YORK (AP) — Beth Walsh is swimming laps again at age 57. Stasi Turrell has returned to walking, 13 weeks after giving birth to her fourth child. And Geralin Thomas is lifting hand weights and skipping rope at 47.

Until recently, all three women had fallen off their fitness programs.

That was before Dara Torres.

Torres, 41, became the oldest Olympic swimming medalist Sunday when she anchored the U.S. women's 4x100-meter freestyle relay to a silver medal finish. She has now won 10 Olympic medals and will go for an 11th when she competes in the 50-meter freestyle.

But her presence alone was enough to make history.

Eight years after retiring and two years after giving birth, Torres is the first U.S. swimmer to compete at five Olympic Games and oldest woman ever to make the U.S. Olympic swim team. She has become a testament of dedication, passion and willpower.

While most women her age lack her carved-from-stone body and ripped abs, many are feeling inspired by her remarkable comeback, and her "age is just a number" mantra.

"I think that can-do attitude is a real plus," said Walsh of Encinitas, Calif. "It says to me it doesn't matter who you are, how old you are, how successful you have been in the past. You can do it. That applies to more than athletics. It applies to life."

Before watching Torres, Walsh, a competitive swimmer as a kid, hadn't swam laps in at least a decade. And Thomas had stopped wearing her pedometer and using her stability ball.

Now, Thomas said she's making healthier food, laying off the sodas and fitting in exercise when she can; she's been doing squats while brushing her teeth. She even used Torres to motivate her husband to walk with her after dinner.

"My comment to him was if Dara can do it, we can do it," she said. "He laughed and said, 'we're no Dara Torres.'"

"I'm not going to win any medals for what I am doing," added Thomas, a mother of two in Cary, N.C. "But I am easing back into it."

Caroline Adams Miller, an author, motivational speaker and personal coach in Washington, D.C., said she is using Torres to teach her clients about the importance of taking risks and not letting age, children and time stand in the way of their goals.

And Torres herself has said that she has been contacted by a lot of middle-aged women and men who told her she was inspiration to them.

At least in the short term, she seems to be inspiring women in a way that other fabulous stars over 40 haven't.

"The 'Sex and the City' people are fun, but it's important to remember that it's entertainment," said Diane Darling, 49, of Boston, who has been keeping a food and exercise diary and drinking more water.

"I'll take Samantha's (Kim Cattrall's character) body any day. She looks fantastic. But at the end of the day, she doesn't inspire me."

Part of Torres' appeal is that she does not come from superstardom, said Robert Thompson, a Syracuse University professor who studies pop culture. People learned about her as a regular person who happened to be very good at something.

"Many people consider those celebrities completely separated from the world in which they live," he said, referring to the "Sex and the City" stars and other over-40 sexpots such as

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Halle Berry and Nicole Kidman. "That is not the case with this woman."

Torres appears in photos with her daughter, Tessa, on her hip. She is open about her age, joking that she had trouble reading the scoreboard with her middle-aged eyes at the Olympic swimming trials.

"There are times when I feel 40 and I feel like there's a piano on my back and I can't lift my arms up out of the pool and there are times when I feel like I'm 20 and just flying through the water," she told ABC.

And who can't relate to that feeling?

But what happens to all this inspiration when the Olympics are over? Walsh said she is going to sign up for masters swimming classes to keep her motivated. Thomas and her husband are having little contests.

Turrell, of Dallas, said it's about making the commitment.

"She's inspiring but she's not going to keep me going," she said of Torres. "It has to be my own decision and own choice. It's easy when you have a lot going on to make excuses. It comes down to your own personal dedication."

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