

Swimming club makes waves

Love it or hate it, learning to swim is a vital safety skill as well as one of the best ways to keep fit and healthy. Hannah George reports on one Sutton club which is making sure Sutton youngsters from tots to teens are strokes ahead in the water

by Hannah
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BOLDMERE Swimming Club has been teaching children to swim for over a century. Since it started in the pools of Sutton Park, it has grown to become one of the city's biggest sports clubs with over 400 members attending 17 sessions at eight venues.

While its success in competition is renowned, less well known is the club's commitment to teaching children from as young as five how to swim.

Having visited a session at Wyndley baths to see some of the club's voluntary teachers in action, I was left with the impression that Boldmere is more than just a club, it is a community with members who really care about each other and are eager to put something back into an organisation that has given them years of pleasure.

Chief instructor Dave Marsh shows me round.

Just out of armbands

In the baby pool there are the tiny tots, just out of armbands, learning to keep their heads above water.

Teaching them is Tom Pratt, an 18-year-old student who joined Boldmere at the age of 12.

He has just announced his retirement from competitive swimming but his commitment to the club remains strong.

"My mum teaches and I like to see the kids progressing," he says.

"It's nice to give something back."

In the main pool the session is now in full swing with groups ranging from beginners in the shallows to those being coached for competition at the deep end.

Aimee Perry, aged 20, is instructing an intermediate group.

She has been teaching since she was 16.

As another of Boldmere's competitive swimmers, she will be training after the session.

Boldmere Swimming Club instructors, from left, Aimee Perry, Alison Ridal, Dave Marsh, Shirley Wigley, Brandon Lacey and Tom Pratt.

Currently a student at Loughborough University, she returns to Boldmere in the holidays.

"I wanted to join in with the club and help out," she says of her decision to teach.

"I really enjoy seeing the children getting better.

"I come back from university in the summer and it is great to see the children I have taught have moved further up the pool."

With 250 children under instruction, chief instructors, Dave Marsh and Shirley Wigley have their work cut out to ensure sessions run smoothly.

Dave has 45 years experience as a swimming teacher and 24 of them he has spent at the club.

"It's great that so many of our younger members are willing to give their time back to the club," he said.

"Most come up through instruction, into competitive swimming and then into teaching."

Boldmere pays to train their own teachers

through Birmingham University and they can qualify at the age of 16.

Dave says: "It's lovely to see some of our big tough water polo players teaching little girls and boys how to swim, and they are really good, they all have a lot to offer."

Rewarding

Throughout the session, Dave and Shirley keep a close eye to ensure all swimmers are progressing and are moved up at the appropriate rate.

Shirley, who has been teaching swimming for 37 years, says she finds it a release from work.

"I forget all about the stresses of the day once I'm here," she said.

"I like being around young people, it's rewarding and it keeps us young."

At the other end of the scale, is Keith Andrews, now in his 80s, who teaches the older swimmers.

"We encompass a wide age group and we are

very proud of that," said Shirley. "A lot of our parents want to be involved too."

"We have 160 adult volunteers working in some capacity for the club."

The one problem the club does face however, is the mass exodus of its student teachers once term begins in September.

"We have this constant cycle of training teachers because we lose so many of them when they go back to college or university," says Dave.

"Which is why we also like to train parents." Although 50 per cent of Boldmere's young swimmers go on to compete, there is no obligation for them to do so.

Shirley said: "They can start competing at the age of nine, but not everyone wants to."

"Many come for fitness and for the social side of the club, others want to play water polo which we can offer."

"As long as they are in the water doing some kind of aquatic sport we are happy."

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