



‘Some rowers could barely walk when they first came here’ Free 311224

## Description



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**“Are you going to win?” asks BBC sports reporter Chris Slegg, “Of course”, says 77-year-old Joan Morris from Romford.**

After rowing practice, east Londoners aged over 60 who are part of a group called Cool Rowings are sitting down sipping tea, having a natter and listening to music. This is all in preparation for the annual British Rowing Indoor Championships in Birmingham this weekend.

Group leader Weininger Irwin – who won the first series of TV show Gladiators in 1992 – started a seniors group named Ageless Teenagers to help locals keep fit.

Members train across Romford, Dagenham and Ilford, among them 86-year-old Hazel Parkins, from Goodmayes in Ilford.

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One of the oldest members, affectionately known as “Miss Hazel”, she is described as the “poster girl” by Weininger.

“Let me tell you something about Miss Hazel,” he begins. “She comes here with her walking stick and her trolley, she parks her trolley, she puts her walking stick on the side, jumps on the rowing machine and she’s off – you can’t stop her!”

As Hazel prepares herself for the competition, she says that “age is just a number, there’s nothing you can’t do”.

“I feel very refreshed when I come here. It gives me something to look forward to, we are like family here,” she adds

“They are inspiring their children and grandchildren,” says Weininger. “They are mini Gladiators.”

Described as a “gift from God,” “outgoing” and “magic” by the members, Weininger Irwin started Ageless Teenagers and Cool Rowings in Romford to encourage people to get active.

“They could never ever imagine that they were going to take part in a national rowing competition,” he says.

“When these guys go to Birmingham, they’re bringing their grandchildren with them. Imagine that child saying, ‘That’s my grandmother rowing’. It’s crazy.”

Reiterating what he said after winning Gladiators, he told BBC London: “No matter what you do in life, always have a positive attitude, it will get you through.

“Thirty-two years later, I’m still doing the same thing.”

Cool Rowings started with “four of us and now it’s grown into 400”, says 77-year-old Joan Morris, from Romford.

“There are some people here who are now able to get on to the machine who could barely walk when they came in,” she tells BBC London.

They “don’t age”, Joan says, adding: “It’s what goes on in your head a lot of the time that drives you.”

She says rowing “loosens your body” and “is not demanding because you do it at your own pace”.

Having recently won an indoor rowing competition in Ilford, Joan adds: “I will be collecting my medal for that race, and in Birmingham.”

For 77-year-old Colin Brien, who lives in Dagenham, the prospect of heading to the championships “is a bit daunting, but I reckon I’ll do alright”.

“Apparently our age group is a minority,” he jokes.

“It was just a bit of fun at first, and then I thought, ‘I don’t mind this’,” Colin adds.

“Each week I’ve done better, now I want to beat the person next to me.”

The rowing competition is part of the UK’s biggest fitness festival, FitFest, where over 2,000 rowers and fitness enthusiasts will compete across a series of disciplines and age categories at the NEC.

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