



surfing over 40

Is it time to hang up your wetsuit boots up once you get to 40? Absolutely not! Hayley Lawrence (aka @middleagedsurfmum) explains why it's important to embrace the challenges ageing brings and talks to six inspiring women about surfing past 40 and beyond.

INTERVIEWS HAYLEY LAWRENCE

Turning 40 doesn't mean it's time to retire your surfboard, or give up on the dream of taking up surfing if it's something you've always wanted to do. Women of all ages are hitting line-ups around the globe and sharing the stoke of riding waves.

A proud middle-aged surfer mum, my surfing journey really took off in my 40s. After seeing surfers in Santa Cruz in my late teens, it was something I'd wanted to do my whole life. But after a few attempts in Oz and Cornwall, life kinda got in the way. Now I'm sliding and gliding my way into my 50s, surfing is so much more than a sport to me. It's the driver behind my physical and mental fitness, the way I found my tribe of like-minded water women, and the lifestyle that enables me to dip in the ocean and feel free around work, family and life commitments. The learning curve is tough and frustrating, which can be off-putting. I mean, what other sport do you only spend about 1% of your time actually doing around paddling out, waiting for waves and wiping out. But boy, the journey sure is worth it.

As we get a little older, it's much easier to avoid the challenges of a demanding activity that revolves around the tides, swell, wind and time, and instead opt for a pair of trainers or the next series on Netflix. But hang on. What other activity leaves you buzzing and invigorated, flooded with dopamine, connected with nature, pushes your boundaries, encourages mindfulness and makes you physically and mentally stronger?

Surfing beyond your 40s is great for your health and your mindset. It's a vigorous, entire body workout, burning calories at the same rate as a gym session – while being low-impact on your joints. It's also great for cardiovascular fitness and a healthy heart, builds strength and co-ordination, and all while connecting you to Mother Nature and giving you a whopping dose of Vitamin Sea.

Don't take my word for it – I met with all sorts of women over 40 – from elite athletes to surfing mums – to find out about their surfing journeys. And it's no coincidence that they're an inspiring bunch with a youthful outlook on life and buckets full of courage, strength and stamina.



Federica Zecca, 53, Sardinia and Cornwall

"Surfing is truly ageless. It gives me new energy to deal with everyday life and makes me feel so well in my body and mind, giving me strength, positivity, drive and lots of fun!"

Now known locally as 'Shreddie' for her surfing performance, there are few days when Fede isn't out riding waves on the Newquay beaches with a Cheshire-cat grin. But that hasn't always been the case. Fede only took up surfing a couple of years ago at the age of 53, when she joined a women's surf group at her local break of Mawgan Porth. "Having sailed half of my life I have always loved the sea, so I joined a surfing group just for fun and a new experience. I did a lot of laughing and falling off, trying to stand up on a big floaty board in the messy foam of a Cornish beach," she recalls.

However, her persistence paid off. "I never thought I'd be able to surf. I'm still amazed when I find myself paddling out back and being in the middle of the ocean on my own, floating on a board and feeling completely free. Every time I go surfing it makes me challenge myself, overcome my initial fear of the waves and push the limits of what I can do. I'm lucky to live by the beach and be able to go in the water every day for a surf or a dip. Just being in the ocean is essential for me and I will keep enjoying the blue magic."



Gwyneth Haslock, 78, Cornwall

"I just love the sea and surfing has kept me fit in body and mind."

Cornwall's oldest female surfer, Gwyneth Haslock turned 78 this year, and has no intention of retiring from the line-up while her health allows it – albeit she's more often riding waves on a bellyboard these days. "Surfing has kept me fit in body and mind", she explains. "I just love going in the sea and the feeling of the saltwater. I feel absolutely free, completely at one with nature." Gwyneth has been riding waves since she was six years-old, and took up stand-up surfing at 21 in 1965, when she saw the lifeguards on Tolcarne Beach doing it. In her youth she surfed in male-only competitions, going on to win a host of titles in the 60s and 70s.

"I think a lot of women think you need to spend all day on the beach so it puts them off surfing", she

says. "But if you get up early and catch a few waves, you feel great and you've still got the rest of the day ahead of you." Living near Truro and having to fit surfing around work and the tides, she's no stranger to having to find time for her love of the sea, and urges other women to do the same. These days she admits she is less agile, but she's still out there catching waves, and that's the main thing.

"I just love the sea and surfing has kept me fit in body and mind."

Claire Stafford, 45, Australia

"I feel really strong and more confident now. 10 years ago I was still worried about what people thought if I fluffed a wave, but now I don't care if I wipeout, I just want to have a good time."

Claire has been obsessed with surfing since she read Gidget and was teen wearing a Hot Tuna t-shirt in the 80s. "Growing up I loved the sea, and I had few surf lessons in Cornwall, Devon and Brazil, but never got the hang of it, so I kinda gave up. When I moved to Australia in 2006 I fell pregnant, and when I got back in the water after having kids, I'd lost all my confidence. You have to be assertive out there. You have to be brave. You have to commit and take right of way. And when you become a parent everything about your identity changes. Paddling out on your own in a predominantly male line-up as an older female – a mum – can be so intimidating."

Keen to surf in a safe, supportive environment, Claire joined Surfing Mums – an incentive where you buddy up with another surfing mum and share childcare duties. "I thought they'd all be ripping and I wouldn't fit it. But I've met my three best friends through Surfing Mums. We all share a passion for being in the ocean and wanting to surf in a safe, supportive environment. Every Friday we save a few precious hours to surf after dropping our kids at school. Even if it's shocking conditions we go out, or if it's flat we go for a paddle. When you surf with a group of like-minded girls they encourage you, hoot you onto waves and laugh with you."

"There's something very healing and spiritual about going in the water. Afterwards you feel very cleansed, and refreshed, like everything's going to be alright. I might not be quite as quick at popping up these days but I feel fitter than I've ever been."



Maria's top tips:

- When you're learning to surf, be kind to yourself.
- Set goals according to the conditions – it might just be to paddle out to the line-up and back safely. Then if you do happen to catch three waves you'll feel elated.
- Praise yourself, breathe deeply, accept fear, and paddle hard. Control the things you can control. Because you can't control the ocean.
- You have to be patient in surfing, don't take yourself too seriously.
- There are some days when you won't even catch a wave. It can be really frustrating, but don't give up.
- Stick with it, train hard, focus and have fun.
- It's an extreme sport so it's normal to be scared, but if we expose ourselves to it in a safe manner over and over again, the fear dissipates.

Surfer Susie, 75, Australia

"My ONLY goal is to surf till I can't. If you want it bad enough, you can make it happen."

Sharing the stoke since 1959, Susie knew she was going to be a surfer after watching the original Gidget movie in San Diego. Although she favours small waves and a longboard these days, at 75 years-old she surfs as much as possible. "Surfing is a lifestyle I'll do till I can't. I also run/walk, do daily ball work, daily stretching, rehab routines and indoor spinning."

A self-confessed exercise-aholic, it's not just fitness that has enabled Susie to ride the waves long after most people would retire their surfboards. "A positive mental attitude is 100% required when you're old, trust me. My mind moves my body and talks me into doing what I know I can do! Negativity is the enemy. As you get older things change dramatically. Mostly physically, but your mindset changes too."

So what's her secret? "Where I surf matters. Wave selection is smaller. Time spent out is less. Staying

healthy is huge." There are also some huge benefits to surfing when you're older – such as having the time. "Making time is the easiest now I'm retired," admits Susie. "I do what I want, when I want."

"People are usually so shocked that an old lady is out in the water that they're super nice! I've only had a couple of smart ass punks that I had to set straight (ha ha)."

"I just love the sea and surfing has kept me fit in body and mind."

Maria Allebring, 42, Sweden

"It's never too late to achieve your dreams."

While some of us just want to ride the waves for fun, after surfing for just two-and-a-half years, 42 year-old Maria Allebring is aiming to win the Swedish surfing championships, get a place on the National Team and – within 5 years – win a QS1000 event.

Inspired by her cousin when she visited Hawaii when she was just 11, Maria always had surfing on her agenda. But it's in her nature not to do things half heartedly, so it wasn't until she closed her business (a trio of surf-themed restaurants) in the pandemic, that she packed up her life and set off to Brazil on a one-way ticket to pursue her surfing dreams.

"I spent three months learning to surf, every day, training with a coach and video analysis. When a fellow surfer commented that if I'd started earlier I could've been an elite surfer, it triggered me to think – 'maybe it's not too late'. When I got a message inviting me to the Swedish Championships, I thought it was hilarious as I was still being pushed into waves. But

then I made the decision to do it. So I trained, surfing the best waves all over the world – the Maldives, Mexico, Hawaii, Costa Rica, Brazil, the wave pool in Texas..."

"The main barrier as an older professional surfer has been getting sponsorship. I have a Crowd Funder and some private sponsors, but some people wonder why I'm travelling around the world surfing instead of working. But this is my job. I'm training as an athlete. Fitness hasn't been a huge barrier – I was already a runner and weightlifter, and had flexibility from yoga. But I do need more recovery time than younger competitors and can't do five-hour endurance sessions in big, challenging surf like they can. At my age you have to listen to your body and use the massage gun and ice baths to recover."

"Having a coach and video analysis is game changing if you want to improve. But as well as technique, a positive mental attitude is essential – what you think about yourself influences your actions, energy and what you think you can achieve."