

Seniors keep fit with synchronized swimming program

NEW YORK (AP) — Like ballerinas in the water, the Harlem Honeys and Bears float, flutter and twirl gracefully across the Olympic-sized oasis at East Harlem's Thomas Jefferson Park.

From the way they move, you'd never know these synchronized swimmers are also senior citizens.

The 41 men and women of the Honeys and Bears, ranging in age from 62 to 100 years old, are members of Manhattan's only 50-and-over synchronized swimming team. Despite the fact that many of them have walkers and wheelchairs, arthritis and asthma, these swimmers practice at the Hansborough Recreation Center up to three times a week for more than an hour and a half on end.

Their seniority, they say, is merely an afterthought.

"Age is just a number," said Lettice Graham, 90, who has been with the team since 1986.

Graham is no slouch when it comes to being active; she frequently does yoga, line dancing and runs competitive track. But she credits swimming with keeping her healthy in her later years.

"It's the best exercise in

the world," Graham said. "It keeps me out of the doctor's office."

Donning the uniform of black bathing suits, red swim caps and, for some, goggles and nose plugs, the Honeys and Bears performed Monday one of their approximately 40 choreographed routines — "The Pyramid" — before a sizable crowd of city officials and visitors.

As the name suggests, it began with a 10-person pyramid of female swimmers doing the backstroke in unison as another group of adjacent Honeys and Bears held hands and slowly spun around the placid waters. Coach Oliver Foot nervously paced the pool's outer edges, following his swimmers' moves with extreme attentiveness to detail.

Foot, 63, is a cross between a classical symphony conductor and a football coach — a gentle but intense, cautiously directing every little stroke with his fingers while he shouts at his swimmers when they miss a step.

Foot, who has coached the team for 19 years, aptly describes himself as a "bulldog and angel mixed together."

"It's pretty difficult," he



Members of the Honeys and Bears senior synchronized swim group perform at Harlem's Thomas Jefferson Park pool in New York. The group, which started in 1979, now has 41 members — 10 men and 31 women — who range in age from 62 to 100 years old.

AP photo

said of managing his senior swimmers, "but I enjoy every minute of it."

The Honeys and Bears group was established in 1979 with fewer than a dozen members. But every year its members actively recruit new swimmers to join, like Joyce Clarke.

The 62-year-old Clarke had never performed with the team before Monday's show. In fact, she didn't even know how to swim before joining the Honeys and Bears more than a year ago — she had "only the desire" to learn, she said.

Today, Clarke is a dedicated teammate and synchronized swimming enthusiast.

"Winter, snow, cold, I'm coming from Brooklyn to swim with the team," she said. "It's absolutely, positively worth it."

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