

Age is only a number to these women athletes

By [Dayton Morinaga](#)
Advertiser Staff Writer

Some of Hawai'i's hidden treasures can be found on the ocean's surface rather than beneath it, and on the beaten paths rather than off them.

They are paddlers, swimmers, runners, surfers and triathletes. Nine women, all over the age of 40. Each already a winner, yet still in pursuit of daily victories.

Lorenn Walker, 50 and a champion triathlete, will feature these women — including herself — in a yet-to-be published book titled "Aging With Strength."

"I always wanted to write something about motivation and resiliency," Walker said. "And this was an opportunity to get to know these women and find out what motivated them, because they motivated me."

She said she targeted female athletes over 40 in an effort to "look at the area of aging in a positive way, and to get other women — other people — to continue performing physical activities as they age."

Walker hopes to get her book published by the end of this year.

The nine women gathered at a North Shore beach house a few days back to share ideas and stories.

"It's so amazing to learn about these women and what they've accomplished," Walker said.

The featured women:

Jeannie Chesser, 51 and a lifelong surfer.

Chesser moved to Hawai'i from Florida in the 1970s in pursuit of year-round waves. She still surfs virtually every day and competes in amateur contests against women half her age.

"I feel bad for people who don't have athletics and sports to fall back on," she said. "I know it's my high, my energy. Just thinking that the waves might be good today gives me a reason to wake up every day."

Chesser said surfing also has helped her cope with tragedy. Before she moved to Hawai'i, her husband, David, died in a car accident. Six years ago, her only son, Todd, died in a big-wave surfing accident.

"Surfing is a daily part of my life," she said. "I get bummed out when I don't go surfing."

Patty Eames, 54 and considered one of the world's best female canoe paddlers.

She has been on the championship crew of the past four Na Wahine O Ke Kai Moloka'i-to-O'ahu races, including the last three with Kai 'Opua Canoe Club. Among her teammates has been her daughter, Jessie.

In 1998, Eames won seven gold medals at the World Sprints Championships in Tahiti.

"I still go out on the water every day because I love it," she said. "I see that when I don't do it, I have more aches and pains. But when I do, it keeps the whole energy level flowing and takes away all the physical pains and mental blues."

Karen Gallagher, 41 and another lifelong surfer.

She runs her own surf-instruction school on O'ahu's North Shore, judges surf contests and competes in amateur meets.

"I love being involved in the whole sport," she said.

Gallagher also earned a black belt in karate within two years and practices yoga on a regular basis. She said it has resulted in the best surfing of her life.

"I'm surfing better now at 41 than I ever have — way better," she said. "Looking at that, I don't feel like I've even hit my plateau yet."

Ruth Heidrich, 67 and a champion runner and triathlete.

She was diagnosed with breast cancer at age 47 and started competing in triathlons shortly after.

"Right after the cancer diagnosis, I thought that was the beginning of the end," she said. "Little did I know, it was just the beginning."

Four years ago, a delivery truck hit her while she was training on her bicycle, leaving her with a broken leg and pelvis. Even that was not enough to stop her.

Her daily training schedule still consists of one hour of cycling, one hour of running and either swimming or weight training.

"It's fantastic knowing that with each decade you can do more and you don't have to go downhill after a certain age," she said.

Vi Jones-Medusky, 50 and an accomplished triathlete and surfer.

She recently qualified for the New Zealand Ironman Triathlon and has been spending 15 to 18 hours per week training. She also works full time as a nurse at Kaiser Medical Center.

"I just fit in training time whenever I can," she said. "If you want to live long, you have to lead a quality life. As a nurse, I see for myself every day what can happen if you don't take care of yourself."

Her daughter, Malia Jones, is a recognized international model and former professional surfer. Her sons, Mikala and Daniel, are professional surfers.

Diane Stowell, 67 and a champion swimmer.

She didn't compete in collegiate swimming because "women weren't allowed." She has made up for it in the past 23 years.

"I came back to Hawai'i in 1980 and have been swimming ever since," she said. She has won national and world titles for her age group, and swims 3,000 yards daily. She also surfs, jogs, and paddles for the Outrigger Canoe Club.

Never mind that she has two torn rotator cuffs that are beyond repair.

"We've all been through life's struggles," she said. "But athletics gives you such a positive attitude. It doesn't matter what sport, it's just important to get out there and be a part of it."

Melissa Suarez, 41 and a competitive windsurfer and mountain biker.

When she was 10, she developed staph pneumonia and eventually had to have the upper lobe of one of her lungs removed.

"The doctors never told me I couldn't do sports," she said. "As it turns out, it was actually important for me to develop through sports."

She moved to Maui from Maryland because of windsurfing in 1986, and more recently started competing in mountain bike races and off-road triathlons.

"There's a tendency to think that once you hit 35 or 40, it's time to start taking it easy," she said. "But I notice that because of sports, I'm healthier and happier than ever. And I look at all these other women and realize I have a lot more years to go."

Audrey Sutherland, 81 and an adventurous solo kayak paddler.

Over the past 20 years, she has paddled more than 8,000 miles along the coasts of southeast Alaska and British Columbia. She has completed every mile by herself.

"Well, I don't have to worry about anybody else, and I can take my time," she said.

She has an amazing collection of photographs to show for it, including killer whales and grizzly

bears a few feet away from her kayak. She has also completed solo paddles off Norway, New Zealand, and the Hawaiian Islands.

Her son, Jock Sutherland, and grandson, Gavin Sutherland, are well-known surfers, although Audrey has never surfed herself.

"I like the ocean better when it's flat," she said.

She has a solo trip planned for the Cook Islands next month and another visit to Alaska this summer.

Walker, who is now adding author to her list of achievements.

Last October, she was the oldest woman to complete "The Double," one of the most grueling accomplishments in sports. It requires competing in the Kona Ironman Triathlon World Championships (2.4-mile ocean swim, 112-mile bicycle ride and 26.2-mile run) and then the Xterra World Championships (1.5-kilometer swim, 30-kilometer mountain bike ride and 11-kilometer trail run) a week later.

"People tell me, 'aren't you too old to be doing that?' and that only motivates me more," she said.

"I started doing triathlons in 1999, so I want people to know that it's never too late and you can never be too old."