

The Aquadettes swim team of Laguna Woods celebrates 60 years in the pool

Their annual show is coming up.



Members of the Aquadettes rehearse in Laguna Woods, CA on Friday, August 8, 2025. The water ballet group is preparing for The Aqua Follies to celebrate their 60th anniversary. (Photo by Paul Bersebach, Orange County Register/SCNG)



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It's been 60 years since a group of women began swimming together for fun and exercise, back when the city of Laguna Woods didn't even exist yet and their retirement community was still called Leisure World. And, before long, they started adding choreography and practicing together every week.

Nowadays, they're known as the [Aquadettes](#), but don't call them synchronized swimmers. They are "artistic" swimmers, thank you very much. Think Esther Williams in a pool, but without the movie camera or special effects.

Even though the members of this swim team are nearly all retired, they don't spend much time rocking on the porch. They're too busy, putting in as many as 12 hours of rehearsal each week. Soon, they'll be showing off all that hard work at their upcoming [Aqua Follies](#) show featuring 24 team members, taking place Thursday, Aug. 14 through Saturday, Aug. 16.

“Putting on the show is a big deal,” said Judy Sterrett-Rizzo, currently the senior member of the team, who’s happy to still be swimming at age 86.



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Judy Sterrett-Rizzo practices with the Aquadettes in Laguna Woods, CA on Friday, August 8, 2025. The group is rehearsing for The Aqua Follies to celebrate their 60th anniversary. (Photo by Paul Bersebach, Orange County Register/SCNG)



The 2025 Aqua Follies is entitled “Hooray for Hollywood: A Night of Oscars Music.” The team plans to put on 11 choreographed numbers during the 90-minute-long show, not only requiring strength and agility in the water, but also running for quick changes between the scenes.



Photo for the Aquadettes of Laguna Woods (Image from 9 Aug. 2025 Courtesy of the Aquadettes)

Team members range in age from their 50s to 86. They don't have to live in the [Laguna Woods Village](#) retirement community of 18,000, although most do. Belonging to the team requires a year-round commitment of around eight hours per week, including rehearsing their numbers out of the water on a deck, then working out in the pool, plus watching videos of their performances to see how they can improve.



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Members of the Aquadettes rehearse in Laguna Woods, CA on Friday, August 8, 2025. The water ballet group is preparing for The Aqua Follies to celebrate their 60th anniversary. (Photo by Paul Bersebach, Orange County Register/SCNG)

Sterrett-Rizzo — a retired psychiatric nurse originally from Michigan — said that continuing to swim at age 86 has kept her stronger than most women her age, but also keeps her mind sharp, because there are so many things to remember for each show, such as choreography, counting steps and more. She also cherishes the many friends she's made on the team.

“Right now, we're just finishing up the fittings for the costumes, which are being sewn,” she said. At her age, she doesn't mind being in the water, but she's not too crazy about the part where she has to kick her legs, dancing up on a stage in full view of everyone.



Laguna Woods resident Judy Sterrett-Rizzo is the oldest member of the Aquadettes swim team, at age 86 in Aug. 2025. (Photo courtesy of Ruth Wardwell)

To become an Aquadette, women must be able to swim four basic strokes, be able to hold their breath underwater, have enough rhythm to swim to music and commit to attending practice regularly, according to team member Ruth Wardwell. Members also get involved in designing and sewing costumes for the many changes — particularly costume designer Catherine Titus — as well as making props, developing the program and fundraising. Rehearsals go on rain or shine, warm or cold, Wardwell said.

The annual shows are entirely put on by volunteers, including their coach, Bunny Quartararo, who also lives in Laguna Woods. She requires team members to swim laps for 20 minutes at every rehearsal, to increase their fitness levels.

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Costumes for the Aquadettes upcoming show "Hooray for Hollywood," courtesy of costume designer Catherine Titus. (Courtesy of Catherine Titus)



Even though the show is run by volunteers, there are still thousands of dollars in costs, including to set up risers, curtains for the big entrances and exits and the like. Although the swimmers are all women, there's also a group of guys called Aquadudes who help behind the scenes, with carpentry, lights and music.

Although the benefits of staying physically fit might be obvious, Sterrett-Rizzo said the friendships she's made over the years are also special.

"One of the reasons to swim is to reduce loneliness and isolation," she said.