

61-year-old goes from couch potato to triathlete

Erin Swensen: ‘Something inside of me that was fascinated with the idea’

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After six decades of physical inactivity, Erin Swensen moved off the sofa and onto the bike and track and into the pool. The Atlanta woman tried her hand at running, swimming and cycling — competing in her first triathlon last year.

“It was the most exciting thing I’d done in my adulthood,” said Swensen, 61, of the 400-to-600-yard swim, 10-to-12-mile bike ride and 3-mile run. She finished in 2 hours, 15 minutes and earned a trophy as the fastest (and only) woman in the 60-64 age group.

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Jason Getz/jgetz@ajc.com

Triathlete Erin Swensen, 61, of Atlanta swims laps before work at the City Club of Buckhead.

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Erin Swensen works with a coach and uses a weight machine as part of her training.

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A year and 50 pounds prior to that, Swensen had read a book that challenged older people to fight aging through exercise. She joined City Club of Buckhead, where she walked on the treadmill, pedaled the recumbent bicycle and circuit-trained.

As the pounds dropped, Swensen pushed herself to master new challenges such as a spin class, and then a triathlon, which she trained for by reading magazine articles.

“There was something inside of me that was fascinated with the idea,” said the mother of a disabled daughter.

On race day, Swensen drove down early and was awed by the parking lot full of people, bikes and blasting rock music.

When the race got under way, she hurried her way through the events, but grew exhausted and was forced to walk the last leg of the run. Swensen “had a ball,” but realized a more formal training program was warranted.

Swensen now works with a coach and trains six days a week, with running, swimming and interval training. She shaved 30 minutes off her performance, finishing her third competition in 1:43.

She has progressed very well and remains enthusiastic, says her triathlon coach, Debbie Alexander. Triathlons are attracting a new audience of older competitors who perform

well after learning the terminology and how to maneuver from one event to the other in the least amount of time, she said.

“It’s not like riding a bike,” Alexander said. “It’s learning how to ride the bike correctly.”

For Swensen, the ride has been smooth, and the journey has only just begun.

“Older people think they’re not capable of intense exercise,” she said, “but I got convinced.”