

# Just go and do it!

**Fleur Mealing** meets three inspiring older Kiwi women who have refused to let their age define them – holding their own on the basketball courts and at surfing competitions, and even taking on an ironman.

PHOTOGRAPHY ● EMILY CHALK AND KIRSTEN SIMCOX

## **Ronnie Vance, age 77** **Basketballer**

Ronnie Vance has played basketball for more than 60 years, and even now – at 77 years old – she shows no signs of stopping. Not even a broken leg has kept the grandmother away from the sport she loves.

Ronnie picked up a basketball for the first time at the age of 16. She was working as a milliner at the Auckland department store Smith and Caughey's and had become weary of sitting down all day. On her way home from work one evening she stopped at the YMCA to look for a sport to take up and discovered what would become a

**For Ronnie, the friendships she has made through basketball are as important as the game itself.**

lifelong passion for basketball.

Her commitment to the game continued after she had her children. Being a working mother of three didn't leave much spare time to play, so she would head to the courts at night.

"It was the enjoyment and all the friendships and camaraderie with the girls. It was wonderful. I was still working full time, even with three little children, but I needed that at night.

"I need to get out and exercise. I get grumpy if I don't," she says.

Even now the social aspect of the game is still one of the things she loves most, hitting the courts with women she has known for more than »





*“When everybody left home I thought, ‘What can I do for me?’”*

**Jane Lee, age 67  
Ironman**

For many people, a New Year’s resolution might be to save more money or perhaps lose some weight. Jane Lee, however, looks for a bigger challenge.

In 2016 - at the age of 66 - it was to complete the New Zealand Ironman Triathlon in Taupo for the first time. Completing an ironman is no mean feat for anyone. Even the youngest and fittest of athletes struggle to keep up the training, nutrition and overall discipline required to swim 3.86km, bike 180.25km and then run 42.20km, all without a break.

But Jane needed a new sporting challenge and, with a half ironman already under her belt, she decided on New Year’s Day to enter the competition. Jane describes herself as a tortoise, saying she knew she could do it but it would be at her own pace.

Despite struggling with her swimming, it was the moment she stepped out of the water that she knew she could finish the course. She was sure the cycling wouldn’t be an issue as she had competed in the Lake Taupo Cycle Challenge for the previous 13 years. When it came to the run, she decided to take it slow and steady - running the first 10km and walking the rest. With family cheering her on, Jane completed the final lap with her daughter by her side - something she describes as special.

“It is amazing how you can be tired and only walk, but when you cross the finish line you run, you get the energy back.”

Staying fit and healthy has not always been a priority for Jane. “When I got married and had children I did get overweight and it wasn’t until everybody left home that I thought, ‘What can I do for me?’” she says.

Now, each morning, Jane wakes up and goes for a 5km run. She also swims twice a week and rides her bike on the weekends.

“It’s kind of my hobby but it’s a good, healthy hobby and something I can do on my own.”

She enjoys being out on the road or in the water, and being able to take part in competitions with her daughter and grandchildren.

“I still just love it and that’s what keeps me going.”

Jane wants to encourage other women to get out there and be active and reminds them that they can do it. So many sports now cater to the older generation, so there’s no excuse not to be involved in something, she says. As for herself, she likes to think she will still be able to do an ironman at 70. »

40 years. Every Monday Ronnie still makes the trip from her home in Orewa to the North Shore YMCA, where her squad plays for up to an hour and a half. Women of all ages turn up to play but Ronnie admits she’s the oldest by almost 20 years.

“They keep complaining that they have got to keep playing because I’m still playing,” she laughs.

And that is despite the injury toll. Over the years Ronnie has broken all her fingers, an arm and, at 60, she broke her leg on the courts. Her sister and son both thought it was sign, telling her it was about time she gave up.

“I’m lying there thinking, ‘How dare you tell me it’s about time I gave up,’ so I made my mind up I was definitely going back,” she says.

Within 10 weeks, she was on the court again, running around and shooting baskets - proving that nothing could hold her back.

Ronnie’s advice for other women looking to stay active is simply to get out there and do something, whatever it may be. “You can’t just sit down and read books and watch television - you grow too old too quick,” she says.

There is definitely no slowing down for Ronnie. “I’d like to be able to keep going; another three years until I was 80 would be wonderful... much to the family’s disgust probably, she laughs.”

**ABOVE: Ronnie hopes to keep playing until she is at least 80. RIGHT: Jane enjoys a challenge and completed her first ironman at the age of 66.**



## Marguerite Vujcich, age 58 Surfer

At 16 years old, South African Marguerite Vujcich decided to teach herself how to surf. She thought if all the boys could do it, she could do it too.

Despite being the only girl at the beach and facing flak from the male surfers, Marguerite pushed on, eventually competing and beating the same boys who had teased her.

It appeared nothing could stop Marguerite. By the age of 46, she had competed in an international surfing tour, trained as a barrister, moved to New Zealand and became a mother to three sons, returning to her high-flying career only weeks after each birth. Then, 12 years ago, her world was turned upside down.

The woman who once fought against apartheid in her home country was stopped in her tracks, unable to walk, or simply hold a cup of tea.

She suffered from chronic pneumonia, liver dysfunction and loss of memory among other things. Doctors could not pinpoint the cause of her symptoms and Marguerite's condition continued to worsen – to the point where she was so convinced she was going to die that she contacted her pastor to organise her own funeral.

Eventually Marguerite was diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome. Despite months of recovery, she was unable to return to work, cutting her career short. So, instead, she looked to an old passion to help her pass the time.

At 50, Marguerite left the hustle and bustle of Auckland for a slower life in Napier near to the beach – and rediscovered her love of surfing.

After spending months in bed due to her



*“The ocean keeps me going because my career was taken away from me.”*

**After first learning to surf in her teens, Marguerite returned to the sport later in life.**

plus, yet only one for females.

Even at 58, she is still as driven as she was as a young girl.

“The ocean keeps me going because my career was taken away from me,” she says.

As for the future, Marguerite plans on competing until she is well over 100.

“If I went while I was catching a wave, that would be the ultimate,” she says. **AWW**

condition, she was able to slowly regain the strength to walk, and eventually make it down to the beach. With her 30-year-old surfboard, nicknamed “Sergeant Major”, Marguerite took to the waves again.

“Every time I get into the ocean it is like a new adventure and, with my illness, now it is like a healing for me,” she says. “I will never let it [chronic fatigue syndrome] beat me. I will always strive to be a surfing champion whatever challenge arises.”

In the past eight years, Marguerite has channelled all her energy into surfing. She has acquired a professional coach and has won 19 trophies along the way.

When she's not on the water, Marguerite is using her barrister background to fight for equal rights for women in the surfing community.

In early 2017, she won a hard-fought battle to compete on the same basis as men. Marguerite had complained that Surfing New Zealand was “sexist” as there were multiple age categories for male surfers aged 30 to 60-

