

Going for the Gold

This swimming champion is quite familiar with the touch of a gold medal, but since retiring, Stephanie Rice is aiming for a new gold standard: In wellness and a healthy lifestyle.

By Yi-Hwa Hanna

A woman with dark hair pulled back, wearing a grey and black athletic tank top and black leggings. She is holding a dumbbell in her right hand. The tank top has "RUSSELL ATHLETIC" written vertically on the side. The background is a blurred gym setting.

It's not every day that you get the chance to participate in a swimming masterclass with a former Olympian—and a gold medalist, no less—but that's exactly what some lucky folk got to do earlier this year, when Australian beauty and proud owner of three Olympic gold medals, Stephanie Rice, came to town. Her swim clinics at Dubai College and Jumeirah Emirates Towers were a hit among schoolkids and adults alike, and we're in luck: She came by to see what the swim culture in the region was like, and if there were opportunities to grow her business here. The verdict? She loved it, and can't wait to be back soon. We picked her brains on everything from swimming to food and holistic health and happiness.

WH: What's are your thoughts on the swimming scene in the UAE so far?

SR: It's great! The school programmes are awesome, there's great infrastructure, and the pools are fantastic. But what I've noticed a lot through speaking to some of the parents is that for the elite level of swimming, there isn't really a community here for that. By that I mean incorporating sports massage and psychology, recovery systems, and so on. Many people here seem to hit a certain level then go to another



country to have that structure about them, and I'd love to bring that to the region so we can create those kinds of top-level athletes and swimmers here. Dubai is really growing as a sporting community, so it's there—we love supporting athletes. I love that I'm already saying “we” like I live here (*laughs*). It would be great to see that grow.

WH: What advice would you give to people here who find swimming intimidating, and what do you think they find so scary about it all?

SR: I think the biggest difference is that in Australia, it's almost compulsory to learn how to swim at around six months of age. Everyone needs to be water-safe. Like here, we have so many beaches, every school has a pool, backyards and hotels have them... so as a parent, you just want to know your child will be safe, and as a result a learning-to-swim program is super important. As an adult, it can be embarrassing to try and swim if you've never learned how to do it, so many people do yoga or hit the gym instead since it seems more “normal” to have a personal trainer than a swimming coach. I teach people the most basic things, starting with how to breathe: Once you know how to do that, it makes a world of difference, and people then say they start to enjoy

swimming now that they get those very basic things.

WH: People tend to forget that, much like running, swimming can be done in sprints or long distance, and we need to pace ourselves.

SR: Definitely! When we swim, it's the same, there's always a warm-up, a main set, and a cool down. So many people I see just dive in and go at 100 miles an hour, they do three laps and say they're done, when they could have gotten a great workout if they just slowed it down a little.

WH: Swimming also makes us really hungry after...

SR: So hungry!

WH: Totally! But how do we deal with it, and not ruin any progress because of it?

SR: Swimming made me so hungry too, especially since we were swimming for 2-3 hours and it was an intense workout, but as with any exercise, that recovery right after finishing a session is the most important time. That 5-20 minutes after, when you see people having protein shakes or a juice, is key. Grab some carbs and protein to go straight into the muscles then, for the recovery.

WH: Why do you think it's so important for people to look at health from a 360 view?

SR: You can't really do just one

thing for having longevity in your health. I think of it like a pie chart, and every piece of the pie has to work together for the best possible result. Thus when I wrote my e-book, *The Art of Wellness*, it was all about a holistic approach to health. So many people put out 12-week bikini programmes or 6-week detoxes, and they all have their place, but I'm not talking about being healthy for 12 weeks. I mean being healthy forever. A lot of it is listening to your body too, like if you're tired and need more sleep, or if you're feeling lethargic then you need more exercise. It's implementing things where you can, and not stressing yourself out about it. That's important. You need balance, and just to keep things ticking along, rather than stress about the outcome necessarily.

WH: You're a champion for eating healthily, aren't you...

SR: I believe wholeheartedly that everything you eat is really fuel, and that what you choose to put in your body is going to have the same reaction, so anything sugary or alcoholic for instance, they'll affect you in a negative way. Just listen to your body—I use mine as an experiment, and go for healthy, whole foods with good hydration, and that's when I have better moods and great skin. When I go out for late dinners and indulge in things I don't normally eat, I notice it; my tummy may get a little sore, and I just take that into consideration. I try not to restrict myself and figure out what does and doesn't feel good.

WH: What are your favourite workouts and healthy foods these days?

SR: These days I'm really enjoying circuit workouts, because I don't need a lot of equipment and it fits easily into my schedule (or hotel room!). Every now and then I enjoy yoga, and I meditate almost every day. Food-wise, I find a fresh green juice makes a world of difference. Some people don't like those, and that's ok: Some

people put pressure on themselves to have what some celebrity has, then they feel like they're not doing a good job.

WH: So you've apparently “discovered your curves” since retiring from that level of swimming... what are your thoughts on body image and the pressure for women to be in a certain shape?

SR: I can definitely relate to [that pressure] especially when you're in swimming togs all day, and you're on TV appearances [and so on]. When I stopped competing, I was still putting myself under that same amount of pressure, but I didn't need to because I wasn't performing, and it was just this transition I had to go through where I was like ‘I can't expect myself to look like an athlete if I don't want to train like an athlete’ which I didn't. I didn't want to spend 7 hours a day still exercising when I didn't need to! It was about finding out what I enjoyed doing. If you do something because you think an Instagram girl is pretty, whether it's an exercise or food, and think “I'm going to do it because they do it” then it's great motivation, but then it doesn't last, because you need to find what works for *you*. What type of exercise I enjoy doing. The advice I'd have for people is to take some pressure off. Be grateful for what we do have, and treat yourself kindly with healthy foods without being too strict, and make the goal be something not that you want to achieve in 12 weeks time, but more that you're growing and slowly evolving. I feel really good about myself now because I've been on a healthy journey for 2-3 years, and I feel so good because it doesn't stress me. I allow myself to have things that I feel like I'd like to have. As women, we do it to ourselves a lot, and we over analyse people without knowing their story too. And what we see online, it could be a good pose, or just good filters. They could be unhappy! ■