

Profile: Gemma Lovatt

When an initially reluctant **Gemma Lovatt** tried indoor rowing at school, she fell in love with the sport. After joining a club and spending lots of time on the water, she found she also gained confidence, friends and a healthier lifestyle...

At 5'7" tall and weighing in at well over 12 stone, Gemma Lovatt was an overweight teenager who never exercised and was being bullied at school. "Trust me it's not fun," said Gemma. "I had no confidence, I hated my body and I was allergic to any form of exercise."

Gemma attempted lots of sports at school but, having never particularly enjoyed any of them, she was reluctant to try rowing when her PE teacher suggested it. "Still, I thought I might as well give it a try," Gemma said. "We used the indoor rowers in a school PE lesson and I quite enjoyed it, but as for going down to row on the lake, I was scared senseless. I thought I'd be too fat and that I wouldn't fit in."

Fears of being seen as "a fat geek" were quickly quashed when Gemma had her first session on the water. "Everyone made me feel great and I loved it," she enthused. However, soon the rowing stopped. "The boat club wasn't formed properly and the rowing died out," said Gemma.

Having enjoyed her first few sessions so much, when Gemma's school PE teacher announced that rowing was again available, she jumped at the chance to get back onto the water. "It was April, I was bored and I love rowing, so I went to see the coach, Darren, to ask if he wouldn't mind teaching me," said Gemma.

"That's when it all started. Between Easter and the summer holidays I went down to the lake twice a week. I'd go in anything from a virus to a quad or a double," Gemma continued. "Darren even put me in a single scull, which is quite daunting for someone who can't even ride a bike! It was hard work but I stuck with it and had a great time."

Gemma spent much of her summer holidays at the lake. "Rowing is one of the few things I enjoy and the atmosphere at the club is great," she said. "I've tried everything – coxing, coaching and rowing in all different kinds of boat. I even did some running to improve my fitness. If you had said to me six months ago that I would be like I am now, I wouldn't have believed you."

The members of the boat club were instrumental in making Gemma feel at home. "I was terrified I wouldn't fit in, but I have made some of the best friends I've ever had. They believe in me and they never gave up on me," she said. "I even won a race in a double. I'd never won a race before in my life and it felt absolutely great."

As well as the social benefits, Gemma says her health and overall fitness have improved drastically. "Since I started rowing I have grown three inches taller and have lost one stone and 10 pounds. I have dropped a dress size, I'm continuing to lose weight and I've finally got some confidence back," she said. "I don't even get out of breath walking to school anymore."



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Gemma has wise words for anyone in a similar position as she was: "If you want to feel better, try a sport. Any sport could work for you. The sport for me is rowing and whilst it may sound melodramatic, it's changed my life. Don't put yourself down, just have a go. You won't believe the difference it will make to your life."

Do you have a life-changing story to share? Are you new to the sport or a dedicated volunteer? Perhaps you met your partner at a race? Send your stories to sarah.chapman@ara-rowing.org ■

Know someone who might like to try rowing?

Rowing is a sport for all ages – and whether you want to go it alone, on land or water, or as part of a team, there is an aspect of the sport that appeals to most people.

As a low impact form of exercise it places very little stress and strain on joints, but uses more muscles than any other sport and is a proven way to improve health and fitness.

Direct anyone who might be interested in getting into rowing to www.ara-rowing.org/getstarted. The ARA website also includes a club finder as well as a glossary of terms and lots of advice on how to get involved.