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Post

## Saved By Swimming

Award-winning ‘Parting the Waters’ documents Michele Kuvin Kupfer’s resilient return to swimming

By Elaine K. Howley

As a kid, Michele Kuvin Kupfer found comfort, joy, and excellence in swimming. It was her saving grace when life on land was heavy, and she thrived in the water and competition. By the time she was a teenager, she was headed to the Olympics.

She was slated to compete in the 200, 400, and 800 freestyle at the 1980 Moscow Games, but her home country of Israel, as the U.S. and some 60 other nations did, boycotted the Olympics that year to protest the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The political gambit did nothing other than rob a generation of Olympians of their chance to shine on the world stage, and for many, it was a bitter pill to swallow.

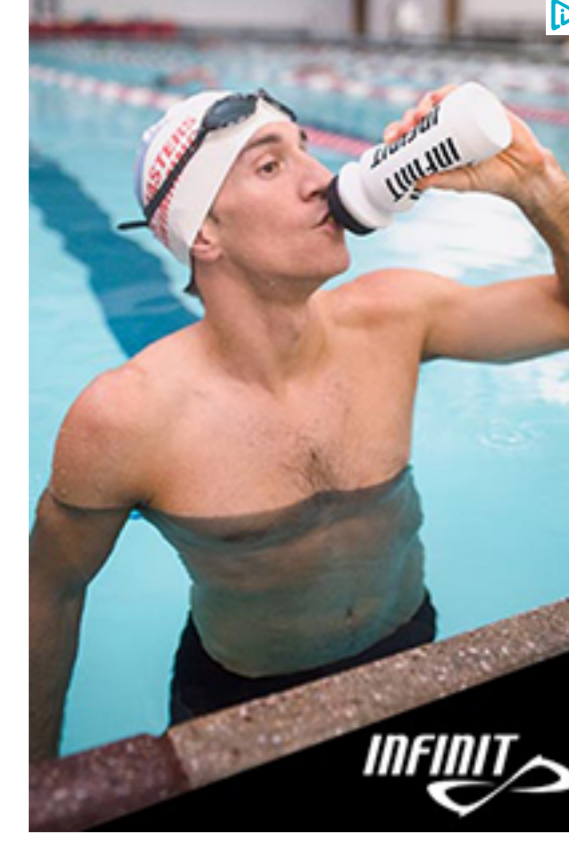
For Kuvin Kupfer, 63, the theft of her Olympics was heartbreaking. Swimming had long been her refuge from the learning disabilities that plagued her on land and the generational trauma of growing up between Florida and Israel as the daughter of a Holocaust survivor in an era rife with antisemitism.

But she triumphed at the 1981 Maccabiah Games, sometimes referred to as the Jewish Olympics for the massive quadrennial event’s ability to draw the most talented Jewish athletes from around the world to compete against each other.

After that crowning moment, Kuvin Kupfer moved on with her life. She enrolled at Indiana University (where she briefly swam under legendary coach Doc Counsilman). She spent her junior and senior years studying at Hebrew University and went on to earn a master’s degree from Syracuse University.

She became a behavioral therapist and educator, and along the way, she married and had three children. Her life was rich and meaningful as she left swimming in the rearview mirror.

That is until 2019, when the world began closing in on her and Kuvin Kupfer realized she needed to make a change to feed her soul. Triggered by a crisis with her adult son and the loss of her best friend, fellow Israeli swimmer Lior Birkhahn, to cancer in 2020, Kuvin Kupfer again turned to swimming to cope with the unbearable.



Returning to the water, Kuvin Kupfer found the same refuge that was her salvation in childhood. This time, the challenges were different, but the salve was much the same, and she felt the return of a piece of herself she’d been missing for some time. That spurred her on to continue swimming, and soon, an idea gelled: To honor her lost friend, Kuvin Kupfer gathered as many of their 1980 teammates as she could to compete at the 2022 Maccabiah Games.

A member of both Arlington Masters in Washington, D.C., and the Aqvatikim Masters Swim Team in Israel, Kuvin Kupfer aimed high in that homecoming to the ranks of elite swimming. She competed in eight events and earned seven golds and one silver while also setting a record in the 400-meter freestyle in the 60–64 age group.

Throughout this journey, Kuvin Kupfer, who is also a documentary filmmaker, turned the camera on herself. In the resulting “Parting the Waters,” she shares her greatest fears, deepest pains, and ultimate triumph. The film premiered at the Oscar-qualifying Rhode Island International Film Festival in 2025, where it won first prize for best feature documentary.

In the film, Kuvin Kupfer and her teammates celebrate the wonder of not just swimming but Masters swimming specifically and how it has helped them reconnect to each other and to the sport they’ve always loved. “There’s such a camaraderie and such a sense of joy,” she says. “A room full of Masters swimmers is just nothing but joy.”

Calling swimming “medicine for the soul” with the gratitude of a person who’s rekindled a long-dormant flame, Kuvin Kupfer is relishing the reception the film has received. But she’s even more grateful for the emotional release this journey enabled and how it helped her get reacquainted with her true inner herself.

Firmly back in the swim of things, Kuvin Kupfer is looking forward to the 2026 Maccabiah Games, where she’ll be competing again in her signature mid- and long-distance freestyle events.

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About The Author

### Elaine K Howley

Elaine K. Howley is an award-winning freelance writer and editor specializing in sports, health, and history topics. Her work has appeared in numerous print and online publications including [AARP.org](#), *Atlas Obscura*, *espnW*, and *U.S. News & World Report*. A lifelong swimmer who specializes in cold water marathon swimming, she has contributed to *SWIMMER* magazine since 2009 and [USMS.org](#) since 2012. Contact her via her website: [elainekhowley.com](#)

### About USMS

- What is Masters Swimming?
- Mission Vision Values
- Development Programs
- Organizational Structure
- Staff
- National Committees and Assignments
- Local Masters Swimming Committees
- USMS History
- Partners
- Diversity & Inclusion
- College Club Swimming
- Grown-Up Swimming
- Logo Merchandise
- Donate to ALTS Grants
- SWIMMER magazine
- STREAMLINES Newsletters
- Community
- Try Masters Swimming

### Join

- Join or Renew
- Membership Benefits
- Trial Membership Form
- USMS+
- Membership Comparison

### Pool and Open Water Events

- Calendar of Events
- Event Development Program
- Sanction an Event
- Open Water Central
- Fitness Events
- National Championships
- Event Results
- Rankings
- Records
- Top 10
- All-American
- All-Stars
- World Aquatics Masters Championships
- Pan Am Masters Championships
- Stroke Development Clinic

### Club Central

- Club Central
- Join to Start a Club
- Register - Renew - Update Club
- Club Resources
- Gold Club Designation
- Insurance
- Club Development Program
- Membership Lists

### Coach Central

- Coach Central
- Become a Coach
- National Coaches Clinic
- Coach Certification
- Certified Coaches
- Designated Coach Resources
- Continuing Education
- Mentor Coach Program
- Coaching Jobs

### ALTS Central

- ALTS Central
- April is Adult Learn-to-Swim Month
- Donate to ALTS Grants
- ALTS Grants
- How to Apply for a Grant
- Adult Learn-to-Swim Initiatives
- Instructor Certification

### Fitness and Training

- Club Finder
- Freestyle Guide
- Workout Library
- Training Plans
- Fitness Logs
- Swim.com Integration
- Articles and Videos
- Swimming 101
- Learn to Swim
- Triathletes

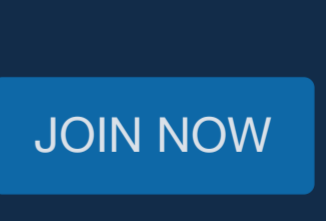
### Governance

- Rule Book
- Organizational Policies
- Guidelines, Procedures, and Forms
- Event Management and Sanctioning
- LMSC Operations and Resources
- Meeting Minutes

### Volunteers

- Volunteer Central
- Annual Meeting
- Volunteer Relay
- Elections
- Committee Assignments
- Officials
- Guide to Local Operations
- LMSC Resources
- Awards
- Meetings Minutes

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