

Like Ducks to Water

Masters Swimmers Define the Term 'Friendly Competition'

by Susan Dawson-Cook

Many swimmers who train alone find it difficult to push themselves and put in the distance required to be fit or competitive.

Imagine training daily with swimmers who are not only competitors but friends, in a setting where an experienced coach is standing by to offer help on stroke technique. This too-good-to-be good fantasy can become reality through United States Masters Swimming (USMS). A national organization for swimmers over 18 years-of-age, USMS offers organized workouts, competitions, clinics and workshops nationwide. Founded in 1970, the non-profit corporation has more than 42,000 members, ranging in age from 18 to over 100, swimming on more than 500 teams.

Dozens of Masters teams in southern Arizona attract highly competitive former age group swimmers as well as enthusiasts who pursue the sport for health and fitness. A list of teams in any given area can be located on the USMS Web site (usms.org). One of the most outstanding Masters teams in the Tucson area is the Ford Aquatics Masters program, coached by Jim Stites.

The centrally-located Ford Aquatics Masters team currently has 130 swimmers and offers three one-hour structured, coached practices Monday through Friday; at 6 a.m., Noon, and 6:30 p.m. No matter what time they practice, everyone on the team shares one common interest; a love for the sport of swimming.

Barry Roth, a former University of Arizona swimmer, left the pool and stayed fit cycling and running after graduation. Teaching science for TUSD, he remained on the perimeter of the swimming pool for many years, coaching summer league swimming for 12 years and high school swimming for more than 18 years. But in 1999, Roth dove back into the swimming arena in full force, joining Ford Aquatic's Masters program and "competing as often as I possibly could."

"We're actually really lucky here in Tucson," he said. "Jim Stites coordinates so many events. People travel from New Mexico, Colorado,

and Southern California. We have good quality meets and have them fairly frequently."

As Arizona's top ten representative, Roth records times from each swimming event and submits them to the national office. He says that the quality of swimmers from 19 to 90 years old is really good, and that many Arizona swimmers make the top 10. Roth is one of those swimmers.

"Over the years, I've been consistently ranked in the top ten nationally," he said. In 2005, Roth was ranked No. 1 in the world in the 50-54 men in the SCM 50 meter freestyle with a time of 25.14.

"That was really kind of cool," he said.

Despite his reputation as a sprinter, Roth also managed to acquire a Top 10 ranking in the 1500 meter freestyle in 2007.

Roth will compete in the Masters SC Yards Nationals in May at the Texas Swim Center in Austin. Roth said he was looking forward to the meet and the fun he will have after hours, spending leisure time with teammates and visiting his nephew.

"There's a whole social aspect to it," he said. "Ten minutes before your

event, it's a little different, but when it's all done, we'll go out for dinner after a day's meet and it's a lot of fun."

Many of Roth's teammates travel with him to Nationals, uniting with other Arizona swimmers. On the National level, all Arizona teams compete as the Arizona Masters "which is quite cool because then our friends from elsewhere all get to swim as one unit," he said. "We have a few folks who routinely win events." Some even set Masters world records.

Numerous Arizonans traveled to the Long Course Masters World Championships at Stanford in August of 2006, he says, where more than 5000 swimmers gathered to compete.

"That was incredibly fun," Roth said, raving about a 92-year-old man from Japan who dove off the blocks and swam a 50-meter freestyle in 42 seconds. "He dives in and is just cruising," Roth marveled.

Roth's current position as Clinical Assistant Professor of Teaching and Teacher Education at the University of Arizona makes it convenient for him to practice at Hillenbrand pool. Despite his busy schedule, he looks forward to practicing four or five times each week with teammates who have become his closest friends.

"You have someone to commiserate [with] when you're feeling bad and rejoice [with] when you're feeling good and everyone goes through both of those."

Swimmers work on stroke, speed, endurance and conditioning on various days of the week.

"Jim does a nice job of varying the style of workout day to day," said Roth. "And he encourages accomplished athletes to modify workouts to meet their specific needs as long as it doesn't interfere with other swimmers."

Swimmers often do a series of repeats, such as a set of five 100-yard swims of a specific stroke, at a specific pace. Times for intervals are determined based on a swimmer's anaerobic threshold (AT), said Roth, which can be computed by doing a timed swim of 1500 yards and calculating an individual's 100-yard average pace and using that as a base. Swimmers are segregated into lanes according to AT with the fastest swimmers operating at an AT of 1:10 per hundred. Swimmers might use their



Ford Aquatics Masters swimmers enjoy the sunshine and the swimming at the SCY State Championship. From left: Sue Montgomery, Caren Bidegain, and Monica Bailey. Photo by Helen Bayly



The author swimming the 200 yard breaststroke in the SCY State Championship at Hillenbrand Aquatic Center. Photo by Marion Cook



anaerobic threshold plus a minute's rest as an interval if doing speed work, or the AT plus 10 seconds for distance-oriented repeats.

What Roth enjoys most about swimming for Ford Aquatics is "the friends I've made without a doubt. I like swimming hard, feeling tired, being fit, like what it does for my body. Those are all really important things. But there are lots of ways one can maintain that level of fitness. But I have the best group of friends and the camaraderie in the pool is really quite special."

Much socializing and friendly conversation occurs between swimmers of all levels during practice and at meets.

"I know how fast [my friends] swim, I know their times, I pay attention to what they do at swimming meets," he said. "I count for them when they are doing distance events and we cheer for each other and are very appreciative of each other's accomplishments."

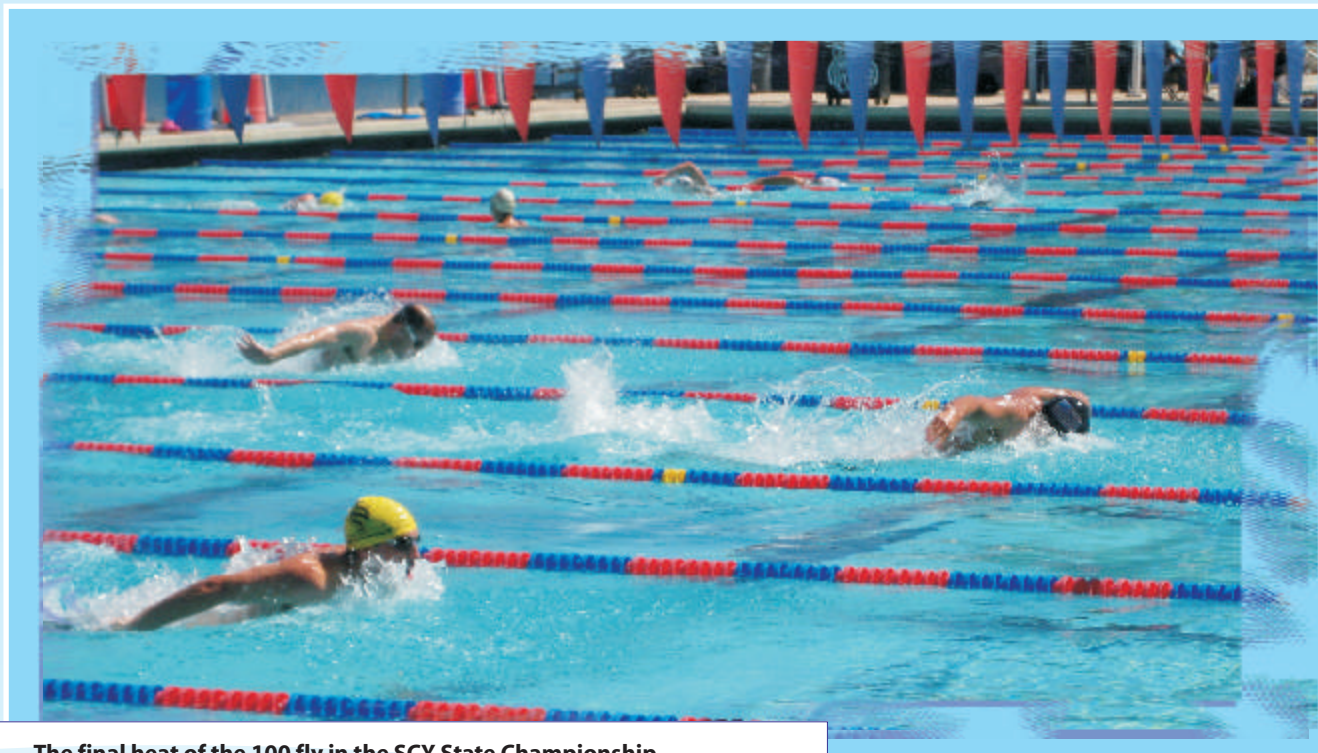
"I do compete pretty seriously but in coaching high school, at least for me, it wasn't all about winning or losing, it was about getting kids out and participating," he continued. "With our Masters programs and certainly at Ford Aquatics, anyone can participate. There are people who have a very low skill level in swimming who are still there every day and enjoying the camaraderie and all of that."

One of Roth's teammates, Dianne Wygal-Springer, 41, a Captain in the Tucson Fire Department, won the 50 and 100 meter long course butterfly events at the USMS LC Meters Nationals last August in Houston. She also swam on the winning women's relay with cyclist Trish Tracy and runner Laura Baker in the recent Tucson Triathlon.

Wygal-Springer began competing as an 8-and-under swimmer and swam with several swim teams, including Tucson Farmer John and Ott YMCA, until she was 18. Wygal-Springer found other ways to stay fit beyond high school until 1992, when activity at Hillenbrand pool distracted her from early morning stadium step running at McKale. She found Jim Stites on the pool deck, asked him about the Masters program and started practicing with the team the next day.

Practicing four to six days per week, depending on her schedule, Wygal-Springer originally joined Masters for the workouts and didn't plan to compete.

"I've made great friends with the men and women that I swim with," she



The final heat of the 100 fly in the SCY State Championship.

Photo by Susan Dawson-Cook.

said. "People are there wanting to workout, wanting to be fit."

The main social aspect of swimming is training together daily, she said, but dinner parties are often scheduled before or after nationals and other meets, and occasionally someone organizes a special event, such as a girls' night out. "It's kind of fun to see people with their hair dry and not in a swim suit and socialize in a different environment."

During pool workouts, focusing on intervals, pacing with other swimmers and pushing herself to the limit is like therapy for Wygal-Springer. "I can forget everything that's going on in life for that hour that I'm in the pool," she said.

Wygal-Springer likes the consistency and quality of the program, noting that Stites cares about the sport immensely. "For me, you can see that a mile away," she said. "Jim is a good coach and he writes good workouts and his swimmers get results. It's a good formula."

Workouts are predictable but never dull, she said. "He puts a lot of time and effort into it."

Monday and Friday will be distance training, Tuesday will be Individual Medley training, Wednesday sprint, Thursday a combination day.

Wygal-Springer and Olympic-caliber swimmers such as 26-year-old open water great Erica Rose and 40-year-old butterfly and freestyle swimmer Dana Torres have transformed the 1980s adage that swimmers reach their peak at age 14 into an outdated myth.

"I love to place high and I like to race, but I really do look at my times and race against the clock," she said. "My first nationals was where I had all

my lifetime best times — I was beating all my high school times."

Wygal-Springer describes her teammates as super supportive. "We all cheer each other on," she said. Many focus on beating the clock rather than other people and offer encouragement to teammates not having an especially good meet or race.

Wygal-Springer finds the most elderly swimmers the most inspiring.

"I look at the older people at nationals and even at our state meets and they are in their 80s and in their 90s and they are racing," she said. "That to me is what the ultimate goal would be for me. I have

this sport that I love so much — I want to do this until I can't stand on the block or push off the wall."

The University of Arizona men and women, who recently won the NCAA swimming titles, are another source of inspiration to Wygal-Springer.

"That's the other aspect of swimming that I love," she said. "You look at the level of elite swimmers in Tucson and they are the best in the world. They are swimming in the same pool we're swimming — we get to see them almost every day. Talk about inspiration — holy smokes!"

Masters has led Wygal-Springer to some exotic places. She especially enjoyed her open water experiences in Hawaii, where she swam

in a relay event in the Maui Channel Swim and individually in the 1.2 mile King's swim in Kona, at the Iron Man start.

"If it weren't for Masters swimming, I wouldn't get to do things like that," she said.

Supporting Wygal-Springer's passion for swimming, her mother and sister often baby-sit her 4-year-old son while she practices and her husband, John, also a firefighter, steps in on his days off. "My family helps me because they know I love to swim," she said. "It is part of what I want to do, part of who I am."

SWIM RESOURCES

Masters Teams in Arizona

For a complete listing of teams in southern Arizona, go to usms.org. Click on the local programs tab, select places to swim and then click on the state of Arizona.

Ford Aquatics Masters Swimming

<http://homepage.mac.com/jimstites/FordAquatics/index.html>

Swim Seasons

Masters offers three different competition courses/seasons each year. In the United States, the Short Course Yards (SCY) season is January through the USMS SC Yards Nationals in May; the Long Course Meters (LCM) season is May through the USMS LC Meters Nationals in August; and the Short Course Meters (SCM) season runs from August through Zone Championships in December.