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## Older, Yes, but Making a Splash

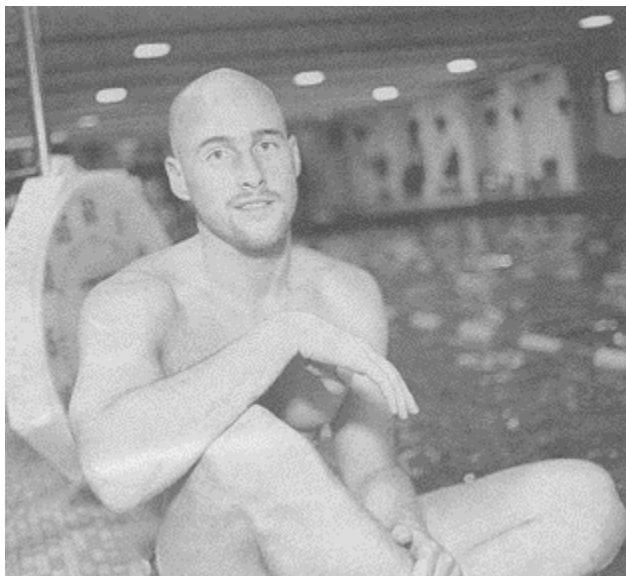
By **DARICE BAILER**

FIVE years ago, during the last swim meet of his senior year at Case Western Reserve University, Jared Walkenhorst felt his spirits plunge. "This is it," Walkenhorst recalled saying at the 1996 meet, believing that his swimming career was over.

At the time, he did not know about United States Masters Swimming Inc., a competitive swimming program for adults of all levels who are 18 years old and over.

Three years ago, however, Walkenhorst learned about the masters swimming program and joined a Connecticut team at Yale University, which is near his job at Surgical Dynamics Inc. in North Haven. He started training every morning at 6 a.m. He also joined the Westport/Weston team at the Y.M.C.A. where the practice lanes are jammed with young adults.

By training hard and competing at local meets, Walkenhorst was hoping to improve enough to qualify for a national masters championship. Last year he did just that.



While at the national meet, Walkenhorst said he saw swimmers in their 40's and 50's posting times that were faster than his. "I was shell-shocked," he said. But he was also inspired, especially after seeing a 55-year-old swimmer named Richard Abrahams of Colorado

set a record in the 50-yard freestyle (21.82 seconds) in the 55 to 59 age group. (Abrahams also broke three other records in the meet.) His time in the freestyle was only a tenth of a second slower than the one he clocked at the 1964 Olympic trials when he was 19.

It dawned on Walkenhorst that he could continue training, streamlining his body and eventually post faster times. "Thirty years from now I could still be doing those times, too," Walkenhorst remembered thinking at the time.

Though there are those who thrive on the competition, many people join masters swimming to stay in shape or to meet others who love the sport. There are about 40,569 men and women registered with the organization, according to Tracy Grilli, the group's executive secretary.

The members make up 504 clubs across the country and train for races in the backstroke, the breaststroke, the butterfly, freestyle and the individual medley. The organization, which was officially founded in 1972, is a member of United States Aquatic Sports and of FINA, the international governing body for swimming.

United States Masters is divided into smaller groups called local masters swimming committees. The local committees, in turn, are made up of the clubs. The Connecticut local masters swimming committee is one such club, but the swimmers train at different facilities, including at the Wilton Family Y.M.C.A., Western Connecticut State University in Danbury and the East Lyme Aquatics and Fitness Center.

All in all, there are 342 swimmers registered in masters programs in Connecticut. Some are just taking up the sport. Others have been training with various teams for years. The participants can swim laps at practice, or sign up for over 500 local, regional and national competitions, including open water swims such as the Greenwich Point One-Mile Swim. There are two national championships every year. The times from these meets are used to compile a top 10 list in every age group each season. There is even an all-American distinction for swimmers with the fastest times in the nation in their event and age group.

For some members, camaraderie with their teammates plays a major role. Heather Burns, 30, of Fairfield looks forward to swimming after caring for her 5-month-old baby, Brendan. "It's the highlight of my day," she said.

Burns and her Westport/Weston Y.M.C.A. teammates gather at Oscar's Delicatessen in Westport after Saturday morning practices. Burns met her husband, Eric, on the Westport team. That is also how her teammate, Cheryl Barany, 37, of Rowayton met her husband, Jeff.

The Westport/Weston team, which won the Y.M.C.A. masters' national swim meet in 1981 and 1996, draws swimmers throughout Fairfield County. Marcia Cleveland, 37, of Old Greenwich trains with the team on Saturday mornings. Cleveland swam the English Channel in 1994 and wrote a book about her experience called "Dover Solo."

Michael Laux of Westport coaches the team, which he also started. He also organized the Connecticut masters program in 1971. As a youth, Laux swam for the Westport Y.M.C.A., and also at Lawrenceville School and Amherst College. In 1972, he ran an April Fool's day meet at the Wilton Y.M.C.A. It was the first masters meet east of the Mississippi River and north of Florida.

Dorothy Donnelly, who founded the Connecticut state club with Laux, made the 1940 Olympic team but never competed because the Olympics were canceled because of the World War II. For 20 years, she was also the registration chairman for the state program and the executive secretary of the national organization from 1985 to 1996 before she died last year.

Donnelly and Burns once competed on the same freestyle relay team at a national meet in 1994. Swimmers of all age groups can compete together on a relay team. "Here I was at one age of the spectrum, loving the sport and getting in and competing, and there was someone else in my relay in their 70's who was doing the same thing," said Burns, who was 23 at the time. "I thought that was so awesome and inspiring that that this can be a lifetime sport."

John Craig, 47, of Wilton set the masters world record in the 200-meter butterfly at the short-course championship in December 2000 in his age group. For him, the program is not just about competing. "I've made more enduring friendships through swimming than through Wall Street, where all you have in common is this labor of love," said Craig, who used to be a bond trader on Wall Street before retiring to write books.

Another member, Bruce Koffsky, 41, of Weston said: "The nicest people I've ever had the opportunity of being with are swimmers. I have as much fun drinking beer and eating chips and salsa at 10 p.m. after practice with these people as I do Saturday morning at practice at the crack of dawn."

Karen Roth is an assistant coach of the Wilton Wahoos, a developmental and competitive swim program for youngsters at the Y.M.C.A. She also coaches the masters team. "Most of these guys are here because they want to be here," Roth said of her masters swimmers.

Many of them train alongside their children. Lauren Moore, who is a senior captain of the Northwestern University swim team, was swimming for the Wahoos when her mother, Meredith, joined the masters team.

"I have been involved with swimming my whole life, but I thought she would have hated it because she had to drive me to the pool at 4:45 in the morning," Lauren Moore said.

Meredith Moore, the state registrar for Connecticut masters swimming loves the sport, however. Swimming, it seems, has brought the two even closer. "Our participation in the sport of swimming is definitely a mother-daughter bond," Lauren said.



Masters swimmers practicing various strokes during an evening session at the Westport/Weston YMCA

Meredith even started competing in the 50-meter freestyle, her daughter's best event. She has since switched to the backstroke and distance events where she is ranked in the top 10 in several events in the 50 to 54 age group. Now, when Lauren comes home from Northwestern for the holidays, she and her mother go to the Y.M.C.A. and do laps together.

Fred Gliesing, 45, of Redding practices at the Wilton Y.M.C.A. with his 15-year-old twin daughters, Julie and Kelsey, who are Wahoos. "On Saturdays, they'd be in lanes one through three and we'd be in five and six," Gliesing said.

Roth said, "The wonderful thing about swimming is that you can swim forever."

Photos: While some swim for fun, others thrive on competition. Last year, Jared Walkenhorst competed in a national masters championship.; Masters swimmers practicing various strokes during an evening session at the Westport/Weston Y.M.C.A.

Photographs by Judith Pszenica for The New York Times