

AS IT WAS IN THE BEGINNING: THE DEVELOPMENT OF MASTERS SWIMMING IN CANADA

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"You were around when MASTERS SWIMMING started in Canada. How about writing a short article about its beginnings?" "Sure, I said. No problem!" And so I agreed to write a short piece on the history of MASTERS SWIMMING for Beth Whittall's fledgling newsletter. I agreed knowing that I had a few files tucked away in the basement, a few names, a few dates, and some memories. Put them all together and MASTERS AQUATICS CANADA would have a short history-style article.

But as I flipped through the dog-eared pages of my "archives" the thrust of my thoughts changed. Rather than only puzzling about where we had come from, I also began to wonder, "where are we going?"

I did not come from a swimming background. Soccer and cricket were paramount in my school days. As a fourteen-year-old, my friends and I squeezed in tennis matches in the evenings and on weekends at the local club when adults were not using the courts. When I went to university I rowed number five (the engine room) in the college eight. My introduction to swimming came later and consisted of driving the kids to the pool and saying "yes" once when a senior official, desperate to obtain the minimum number of officials on deck for a meet, asked me to be third timer on lane six. From this start it was on to officiating, club administration and regional administration. Then Larry Tapp, looking for someone who didn't know how to say "no", asked me to be Ontario's MASTERS SWIMMING Chairman. Some months later, there I was, National Chairman!

These events all took place between the fall of 1975 and the spring of 1976. But MASTERS SWIMMING had been going on for quite a while before that. So I began digging into my notes for information. The search through my first file was promising. "Bingo!" I found Volume 1 Number 1 of SWIM MASTER, the U.S. newsletter for masters swimmers. It was dated February 1972 and reported that the first official AAU Masters Swim Meet was held in Fort Lauderdale on 1 January 1972.

What does this have to do with Canadian MASTERS SWIMMING??? Everything! SWIM MASTER included lists of the top ten MASTERS for each age group in 1971-- before there was any official list in the states! A Canadian, Al Waites, held 5th place in the 45-49 age group for men's 100 yard free style and Hud Stewart, another Canadian, was first in the men's 100 and 200 backstroke for the 60-64 age group. SWIM MASTER reported further that the 1968 British Olympic co-captains, Jill Slattery and Tony Jarvis, were multiple winners in the 25-34 age group. It was these people, and others like them, who, having had their first taste of MASTERS SWIMMING in the warm south returned to Canada and began pressuring the C.A.S.A. to start a MASTERS programme in this country.

This lobbying began to bear fruit two years later. Marg Savage of Simon Fraser University was appointed as the first National Chairman in 1973. In Quebec City on 20 July 1973 she chaired the 1st meeting of the Masters Swimming Committee. The first resolution passed in the meeting proposed that C.A.S.A. ratify in principle the adoption of a Masters Swimming Programme in Canada. The C.A.S.A. accepted this recommendation at its next national meeting held on 22 July 1973. Thus, MASTERS SWIMMING in Canada was officially launched.

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After serving one year, Marg was replaced as National Chairman by Cameron Grout, a former competitive swimmer. Both Marg and Cameron struggled hard to get the new programme moving, but the time was not right. Swim clubs were directing their efforts toward the preparation for the 1976 Montreal Olympics. Not surprisingly, Marg's and Cameron's attempts to interest club coaches in working with adult masters swimmers bore little fruit. Coaches were busy fighting for more pool time which they sorely needed to prepare their swimmers for international competition and development of a Masters Programme at that time simply represented the potential threat of more competition for limited facilities.

Despite these initial problems, MASTERS SWIMMING did continue to develop albeit slowly. On 4 April 1975 the Ontario Steering Committee met for the first time in Toronto. This committee worked hard, meeting almost monthly for the next year and the provincial programme began to take shape. On 30 January 1976 the committee decided to adopt "formal procedures" by choosing to elect an executive and directors. Thus, the informal group of interested masters swimmers yielded to a formal committee as the sport came of age.

A major step forward for MASTERS SWIMMING in Canada as a whole, and other countries as well, occurred in 1976. In September of that year, F.I.N.A., the international governing body for Amateur Aquatics formally recognized MASTERS SWIMMING. However, this recognition, at least initially, proved to be a mixed blessing and a cause for much soul searching. In fact, a number of groups attempted to break this new association. The root of the problem related to F.I.N.A.'s attitudes regarding amateurs swimming with professionals (a subject for an article by itself) and its legislation that precluded Masters from swimming in world competition.

For many years the U.S.A. Masters had been trying to organize a World Masters Competition but they had been frustrated at every turn. And so, when the Canadian Masters announced in 1975 that they would hold a World Championship in 1978, no one took them seriously. In our innocence we did not realize that we would be taking on the mighty F.I.N.A.

This was a sensitive issue. If C.A.S.A. approved something that was later condemned by F.I.N.A., it could end up in a great deal of difficulty. The suspension of a Canadian Olympic Coach because of his lecture tour of South Africa was still fresh on everyone's mind. At long last F.I.N.A.'s approval came through. But, F.I.N.A. stipulated that it could not be a Masters Meet, it could not be a World Meet, it could not be an International Meet! It was to be the First Senior Age Invitational and we were allowed to invite senior swimmers, divers, waterpolo players and synchronized swimmers from other countries. Coming under the F.I.N.A. umbrella, everyone had to meet their definition of "amateur", and so there were a few disappointed coaches who would have liked to have swum themselves.

Despite these problems, in August of 1978 the meet took place in Etobicoke Ontario with the constant reminders blaring over the P.A. system at F.I.N.A.'s directions that it was NOT a Masters meet. Nonetheless, the hard work of the organizers paid off and Canadian Masters had made a major contribution to MASTERS SWIMMING on the world scene. The reason? Shortly afterwards F.I.N.A. dropped its restrictive legislation pertaining to MASTERS SWIMMING.

While Canadian Masters planned for the First Senior Age Division Aquatic Competition between 1975 and 1978, they also pushed forward with other projects. On 26 February 1977 the first major Masters Swim Clinic was held at the Fitness Institute in Mississauga. An impressive list of speakers was included on the programme. They included Paul Hutingger, Derek Snelling, Robin Campbell and Gaye Stratten. The clinic was organized by Eleanor Jarvis and attended by Masters from all across Canada. This clinic provided a major stimulus for the development of a more formal National Masters Programme.

The move toward the formalization of a National Programme was given an added boost by a meeting held in Winnipeg in April of 1978 at which Masters representatives of all of the provinces (excepting Newfoundland and Prince Edward Island) attended. The meeting was funded by Sports Canada and representatives of C.A.S.A.'s National Office were present.

The meeting voted approval of an organizational structure which would have a National Chairperson elected annually at a meeting of Provincial Chairpersons rather than the traditional grace and favour appointment made every year by the C.A.S.A. board of directors. To get the ball rolling my own National appointment was confirmed by the meeting for that year.

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Again the timing was bad. The proposed structure was only a recommendation until such time as it was approved by the C.A.S.A. The organization of the C.A.S.A. was itself undergoing some fundamental changes at the time, so this and other recommendations got lost in the shuffle. Nevertheless, everyone at the meeting

left with high hopes that people in positions of authority would give more than their blessing and that some minimal National funding would be forthcoming that could be used to promote MASTERS SWIMMING across the country. Once again, we were to be disappointed. Federal purse strings were being tightened. Although we were on the "action list", we were near the bottom and therefore MASTERS SWIMMING was not a priority programme eligible for funding. To date no federal financial support has been provided. The programme continues to gather momentum nonetheless.

In considering the past and the present situation, the question about the future inevitably arises. Where are we going? After eight years of uneven progress, I believe that MASTERS SWIMMING in Canada has not yet begun to reach its potential. In the U.S. MASTERS SWIMMING grew out of a fitness programme developed at a San Diego naval base under the guidance of Ransom Arthur, M.D. In discussing the priorities of that programme in an article for SWIM MASTER (April, 1977) Arthur wrote:

Swimming, an exercise which some of us consider ideal for middle-aged and elderly people, can be exceedingly dreary without some goal beyond the sole attainment of fitness. It was to provide this continuing motivation that the idea of MASTERS SWIMMING was generated early in the 1960's by several of us at the Naval Medical Neuropsychiatric Research Unit in San Diego (U.S. Navy). The program's major goal was to promote physical fitness through continued exercise. Its secondary purpose was to promote pleasure through the camaraderie, the formation and training of teams, and participation in organized meets.

Arthur's priorities are worth remembering. Competition is an important aspect of MASTERS SWIMMING. But, MASTERS SWIMMING is more than competition. It is also a way to maintain a high degree of fitness, enjoy friendships, and have a good time. For all of these reasons, MASTERS SWIMMING is worth the continuing efforts and dedication of those who are willing to promote and direct the programme. I encourage those actively involved in its administration and management to continue their hard work and others to lend a hand when it is their turn. The sport needs the active support of all of its participants.

LETTERS TO MAC

Congratulations on a great first issue. MAC is the kind of publication Canada and Masters Swimming needs. Your article on the future of National Championships was informative and to the point. I was one of those disappointed swimmers who could not afford the time (so close together) between the Canada Nationals at Pointe Claire and the U. S. Nationals at Fort Lauderdale. Alas, your article was not heeded. I understand the Canadian Nationals in Winnipeg are just three weeks before the U. S. Nationals in Irvine, California.
Paula Crisp

News from Nova Scotia. Generally in Nova Scotia we are forming a provincial executive to continue the development started by Bonnie Pronk. We will have a representative on the Sections Board of Directors. This was approved on November 12th, 1980. There are 3 clubs in the province with approximately 130-140 swimmers. We are hoping to get organized this year. In the past individuals have tried to carry the ball alone but this is a real struggle so a few interested individuals are going to try to form a basic structure to work from. That's all from down east. We will try to keep in touch with you folks.
Ron Zinck.

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