

LOCAL PROFILE II



Laurie Hug (left) after a GAAC Masters workout coached by Lisa Fantini (right).

U.S. MASTERS SWIMMING

Photos and Story by Rebecca Guenard

If you are looking for a place to swim while open water temperatures are still frigid, consider conditioning with a local Masters Swim team. According to their website, "U.S. Masters Swimming (USMS) is a national organization that provides organized workouts, competitions, clinics and workshops for adults aged 18 and over." Yes, it is the dreaded (for some) circle swim, but it is also a great place to build strength, endurance, and even, lifelong friendships.

Steve Dougherty, Paul Sweeney and Geoff Meyer, Sr. have been swimming together since high school. Meyer and Dougherty attended La Salle High School, in Wyndmoor, PA, and competed against Sweeney who was at Father Judge High School in Philadelphia. They parted ways after graduation until Dougherty and Sweeney reunited at a Masters swimming club. It took some nagging, but they finally got Meyer to join them. The gentlemen, now in their 60s, swim three nights a week at the Germantown Academy Aquatic Club (GAAC) in Fort Washington, PA.

Don't picture them bobbing in the pool like some scene from Cocoon. These men are swimming fast and each hold National Masters records for various age group events. Paul Sweeney says, "It is not everyday that you find a bunch of 60 year old's still swimming competitively." According to Geoff Meyer, Sr., "the workouts at GA are competitive and intense, but you still do you what you can do at the level you do it." Steve Dougherty explains, "One person will lead one set and then a different person might lead the next, but we all push each other to do the best we can in our workout. Meyer adds, "You take it seriously, but you still try to enjoy it. I'm not going to London in 2012."

The GAAC Masters is coordinated and coached by Laurie Hug who inaugurated the team in 1997 with her friend Kevin Berkoff. The team started out small at first with 3-6 swimmers per workout. Hug says, "That would be unheard of now where there is an average of 15-20 swimmers, with a peak attendance of 32 swimmers." You will usually find Hug poolside at GAAC Masters practices, but there are now a handful of coaches that support the team. One of which, Lisa Fantini, just coached the Upper Dublin High School boy's team to a District One Swimming Championship. All of the coaches drive swimmers (young or not so young) to their potential. This is not leisurely lap swimming.

To give you an example, consider Laurie Hug's 40th birthday party. She invited guests to do 40 quarter mile laps around a track, 40x100 yards in the pool and a 40 mile bike ride. Essentially she handed out an Olympic Distance Triathlon as a party favor. If this is her idea of a party, you can imagine how seriously she takes swim practice.

This type of behavior makes sense when you consider that Laurie Hug is the 2011 USA Triathlon Long Course Age Group National Champion. But also, Hug just likes to keep things fun. To churn the waters, she adds seasonal challenge workouts to the GAAC Masters yearly swim schedule.

In the summer workouts are geared more toward triathletes. Most of the swimming is freestyle and this is also when Hug holds the Swimmer vs. Runner Smackdown series. Known simply as The Smackdown, this inner-club race combines different distances of swim/run/swim or run/swim/run so the result is 1500 yards of swimming and 5 kilometers



Paul Sweeney, Steve Dougherty and Geoff Meyer, Sr.

of running. There are three in the series, held in June, July and August. "The distances are set such that a balanced athlete should take approximately the same amount of time in each discipline," explains Hug. "The male and female series winners receive prizes after the 3rd race. Sometimes an athlete with a running background wins; other times a swimmer wins. We have even had some local professional triathletes participate such as Heather Lieggie, Sharon Mongrain-Schmidt and John Kenny."

In the fall workouts revolve around the One Hour Postal Swim. This is a nation wide Masters competition where everyone swims as far as they can in an hour. Results are submitted to a meet director and ranked according to yardage within each age group. "In preparation for this swim, we do something I dubbed the Triple Challenge," says Hug. In October, November and December swimmers do 50, 75, and 100 repeats, respectively, on send off times designated by the coach. Swimmers then get to choose distances and strokes. The final workout of 100 repeats is over 20 hours long. Prizes are given out to those who complete all 3 stages. Also in the same three months there are timed 15, 30, and 45 minute swims at goal one hour pace.

After the One Hour Postal Swim in January winter workouts focus on strokes in preparation for swim meet season. For many GAAC Masters swimmers, the meets are the whole point of coming to the pool. "I didn't want to do it (join USMS) if I couldn't be competitive," says Meyer "I want to excel for whatever age I am." Meyer says there are some unbelievably good swimmers in the area that participate in meets. Steve Dougherty agrees, "so many people do swimming just for the exercise not for the competition." Dougherty feels they are missing out. "Meets are a wonderful social experience."

Whatever your intentions, GAAC Masters is a great place to reach your swimming goals. Swimmers are pushing towards their optimum at every practice. "Laurie's workouts are intense," said Paul Sweeney. "She is always looking at technique and making you improve. She will not let you slack." Steve Dougherty says that what makes GAAC Masters unique is the openness. "Laurie is welcoming to anybody, people coming back to swimming or triathletes working on skills. She welcomes anyone and will help anybody who wants advice on swimming."

GAAC Masters is part of The Delaware Valley masters swimming program which encompassed southern New Jersey, Northern Maryland, eastern Pennsylvania and Delaware. There are 711 registered USMS members who swim with 17 different clubs. Among them, the Colonials 1776 (the team that includes GAAC Masters) is the largest with 216 registered swimmers who swim at several different pools. There are nearly 70 pools listed as Delaware Valley Local Masters Swim Clubs. To find one near you go to USMS.org. Then, start swimming!



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