

SWIMMER PROFILE: LEONARD “CHIP” WOODY

By
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Leonard “Chip” Woody has been a fixture on deck around the local Masters swim meet circuit. Since 2015, he has logged in a whopping 148 races!

I first met Chip at a Tennessee swim meet, in 2017. We were the only competitors from Georgia, and I wanted to meet my GAJA teammate. As it turned out, we twice raced (and beat) each other in our favorite breaststroke races.

Chip, 71, began swimming competitively as a teenager. As he explained, “I started swimming when I was 13 or 14 in the mid-1960’s. My parents joined a swim and tennis club, then it just started. They had a race, and I ended up with a third-place trophy my first time doing freestyle. That was about the only stroke I knew

at the time, but I enjoyed it... My mom was always very encouraging. She was a timer, she ran bullpens, and she organized heats. She ran a stop watch, and I still have that watch she used to time me in the club circuit.” (See 2014 photo above.)

When Chip entered Auburn University as a freshman, he joined the swim team as a walk-on. His college swimming career ended after that first season for the same reason it did for a lot of college swimmers during the pre-goggle era. “We didn’t have goggles [then], so when I would finish practice and try to go back and do some studying, it was like the old halo effect; sometimes, it was difficult to see,” Chip explained.

Following graduation, Chip was commissioned a Second Lieutenant in the U.S. Army. At the time, there was an option to either run or swim as part of the physical fitness test. In 1987, Chip had sustained a foot injury in a fall that required surgery, so he was unable to run. “I remember the orthopedic surgeon that came in the night they operated on my ankle, and he said, ‘Well, I have bad news for you; you will never run again.’ I could have gotten up off the gurney and kissed him, because I didn’t necessarily like running, anyway! So, the alternative event was the 800-yard swim. I had to be able to do it in 20-25 minutes. For me, 800 yards was like a warm-up...” he said.

Chip was inspired to return to competition after he and his wife, Georgia, retired and moved from Northern Virginia to Georgia, in fall of 2011. Soon after, he saw an ad in *Atlanta Journal Constitution* for the North Fulton Senior Games and saw that swimming was one of the events. “I looked at it for a couple of years before my wife finally said, ‘You know, you really ought to go try that.’ That’s where I met Walter Lean and John Zeigler, and a host of other crew in the Killer Whales. Walter was actually the one that encouraged me to get back into swimming.”

“I had to kind of learn the new way how to do strokes—putting the head underwater with the breaststroke—the big change was goggles. I had tried, but going from the blocks with starts, I was eating goggles, if you know what I mean! They went down my nose, and across my mouth...” Ultimately, with the help of a swim instructor at Swim Atlanta, he was able to try different brands and models of goggles and settled on a pair of TYR goggles that fit him properly.

A fellow GAJA teammate was a big help with Chip’s breaststroke technique. “When I was down at Ft. Lauderdale I met Barbara Ingold. She coaches the Masters team in Augusta. She watched me do breaststroke, and said, “You know, your head comes too far out of the water. You need to practice on your out[sweep] and putting your head down so your ears are between your elbows. So, I started doing that, and sure enough, it seems to work. She was kind enough to also send the workouts that she sends to her team.”

When it comes to swimming backstroke, the older-style of turns suits him just fine. “One thing that continues to challenge me is the backstroke flip turn. I’m not used to rolling over and doing that. When I was swimming (before the rule change), you couldn’t do that, so I look like a beached whale trying to make a turn on backstroke,” he joked.

Although there was a learning curve for Chip when it came to the new stroke techniques, he was happy about the Masters rule for butterfly kick. “Thank goodness the rules for Masters [allow you to] do the breaststroke kick for butterfly; and, actually you can alternate. So, I tend on turns and starts to do a couple of dolphin kicks, and then the breaststroke kick kicks in. I would never be able to do the hula, because my hips don’t move really well, particularly for the dolphin kick!” he laughed.

Chip doesn’t live near any organized Masters team workouts, so he trains on his own, which he prefers and enjoys. He belongs to the John’s Creek Life Time Fitness and does group aerobics and strength-training classes a few days per week, swimming on alternate days.

“When I started swimming competitively again, I would invite [my mom] over, and she would watch me swim, and take the stopwatch, and time me... She passed away in 2020; she lived to be 96.” Her stopwatch is now hanging with Chip’s ribbons and medals.

Since those earlier years in swimming, Chip has given up the longer events, focusing on 50's and 100's. As a result, most of his training in the pool entails sprint sets. "For me, my practices teach me to concentrate on what I'm doing; and, also to read articles, look at Masters videos, and try to do stroke improvement... I'll put a plug in for you. I do read your articles, particularly the time that you were putting in the different stretching exercises and things like that."

Since Chip trains on his own and is used to having a lot of space when he swims, he is more inclined to participate in the less-crowded local meets. Last December, he competed in the St. Nick's meet at Georgia Tech, and won his first High Points Award for his effort. "Age has its advantages!" he said, about the small 70-74 age group at the meet.

On the flip side, age can have its disadvantages as well, according to Chip. "With age, parts sometimes don't move like they're supposed to, and I kind of gage how I feel before I sign up for a meet. But, I also look at it from the standpoint that if it's an opportunity to go swim, I'm going to try, because I do enjoy it. I enjoy seeing people I haven't seen in a while. Probably the only hobby that I'm more serious about than others is swimming and the competitions."

"It's a case of enjoying the camaraderie of the meets; that's really my biggest draw... I do try as hard as I can, but if I get a first, a second, or a third—or, just show up; that's fine, too. I can't deny that [winning] is part of the motivation, too; being able to compete and come home with [an award]. I've been fortunate enough [that] besides just swimming locally in the Masters events, I have branched out more into the Seniors [Games] level of swimming. I've swum in Mississippi, Montana, Alabama; and, I've swum in Nationals in Minnesota, Birmingham, Albuquerque, and down in Fort Lauderdale."

In addition to enjoying the camaraderie and competition at swim meets, Chip enjoys the physical benefits of swimming. "It is the sport of swimming and the exercise of swimming. I had my annual physical three or four years ago, and the nurse practitioner that we like to see said, 'You know, you're in better shape than most 35-year-olds I see.' That pumped me up to keep at this."

"I appreciate what Masters has brought back into my life... It has brought me back in to give me something to do that I enjoyed growing up in my teenage years."

If Chip has his way, he will be keeping at swimming for many years to come. "When I swam at the National Senior Games in Birmingham, there was a gentleman competing that was 90 or 91. I just kind of said, ok, there is prime goal #1, to swim as long as I can and enjoy it while I can."