

SWIMMER PROFILE: MAURY MCKINNEY

By
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If you wanted to raise awareness and money for a project you were passionate about, perhaps you would go big and run a marathon. You are a swimmer, though, so what about *swimming* a marathon? The 20 Bridges swim is a 28.5-mile swim around Manhattan Island, in New York, so how about that? Nah, the project is in New Hampshire; you need to stay local. How about a 42-mile double swim of Lake Winnepesaukee, instead? Wrap your head around that, because that's exactly what Maury McKinney did in 2009. What makes this guy tick?

It all started as a young boy growing up in Orlando, Florida. As Maury explained, "If there is anyone that really deserves a lot of thanks, it's my mom, because when I was two, I seemed to just really enjoy throwing myself off the high dive and crashing into the water. [I would swim] to the side, and go back up again, and again, and again. My mom showed a lot of patience, a lot of nurturing; and, just kept me safe, and encouraged me. Eight years later, I found myself often swimming in the ocean at Cocoa Beach or New Smyrna Beach, in Florida. And, again, it was my mom walking up and down the beach with my brother and me. We played, we swam, bodysurfed, and ran for hours and hours and hours. And, I just relished it."

Although Maury never took formal swim lessons, he joined the Orange County, Florida YMCA team coached by Bill Behrens. “He was a great coach. I learned the strokes, and I learned the turns. I enjoyed every opportunity to practice and compete. I just really thought of it as great fun. From there, I went on to swim with a team called the ‘Blue Dolphins,’ in Winter Park, Florida, under the tutelage of Harry Meisel. He had developed a phenomenal team...” Maury said, adding that he earned a spot on the national team during his six years competing with the Blue Dolphins.

During high school, in the late 1970’s, Maury stayed on with the Blue Dolphins but trained under Skip Foster at Winter Park High School. (Foster went on to coach at University of Florida.) “I was very fortunate to have had some really skilled, capable, and experienced coaches... Growing up in Florida, it was a highly-developed competition scene with competitions just about every weekend...I was just glad to be a part of it.”

After high school, Maury was recruited to swim for West Point under Jack Ryan; however, he became very ill during his freshman year and had to drop out and take an entire year off. “It was traumatizing, because I was away from my friends and away from the sport I had participated in for so many years.”

Following his illness, Maury went to Auburn, but didn’t swim for the team, because the high-volume workouts were too taxing on his body.

After earning a degree in biology, he continued on to earn a Master’s Degree in exercise physiology. It was during those years he learned about a swimmer’s house where Rowdy Gaines lived. When Rowdy moved out, Maury took his room. As the older member at the house, he became the “Swim Dad” for the house, making sure the bills got paid and the household was managed properly. “During those years, I really got to keep up with swimming, vicariously through my roommates. I went to all the home meets.” The team was coached by Richard Quick, considered one of the best coaches in the country.

Prior to finishing his Master’s thesis, Maury took a break and hiked the Appalachian Trail, all the way up to Maine. “I did not complete the trail, because I was able to stop and get a job with the Appalachian Mountain Club. It was right there in the heart of the White Mountain, I was out in the mountains every single day, and that’s really where my life changed.”



Maury later moved to New Hampshire and became the school director and guide for the International Mountain Climbing School. He then became the president of the school.

In addition to climbing over 250 days per year, Maury swam in Lake Winnepesaukee, the only swimming available in the entire area. “I just felt like it was something I needed to do. It was sort of a balance and getting in touch with myself in some way.” Maury didn’t have a background in open water swimming, but swimming in Lake Winnepesaukee is where he developed his skills and love of the open water. “I can’t describe how beautiful [the lakes are] to swim in. There was one lake I did a 10k race in and if you got thirsty, you could just drink the water. Nobody stopped at the water stops! It was a spring-fed lake that was as clear and clean as you could imagine.”

His passion for swimming and experience in the sport led to Maury being recruited to add a part-time job to his schedule, working afternoons in a summer swimming program, teaching and coaching 60 kids who had very little prior swimming experience. “I had been teaching climbing for years and years, but this piqued my interest; so, I took on the challenge, and I absolutely fell in love with it, immediately.” Maury ended up selling his shares as one of the owners of the climbing company, left, and became the full-time Aquatics Director of the swim program. There was nobody else teaching swimming in the entire area, and Maury had to line up hotel pools for the kids to swim in.

“I thought, the better I swim, the better teacher I’ll be; so, I committed to getting in good shape, and churning out the mileage. It was 2008 when the swimming bug hit.” Maury joined a Masters club in Maine—a three-hour round-trip drive, because there was nothing closer to home. He mostly trained on his own and swam with the team at meets where he amassed 19 relay Top Ten achievements, a 2009 Relay All-American award, and 11 individual Top Ten achievements.

At the pool where he was Water Safety Instructor, a teacher, and coach, Maury kept very busy. “There was a period of eight years when I had probably 125 kids a week for 48 weeks a year—every week, every year, season in, season out.” Maury taught infants on up to teenagers as well as children with special needs.

Meanwhile, a foundation was formed to raise money to build a much-needed aquatic facility, and Maury thought of ways he could help. He had been doing long-distance lake swims—the longest being a 21-mile lake crossing. To raise awareness and money, he decided to repeat that swim AND swim back; a 42-mile round-trip marathon. “My goal was to do it, to do it well, and to do it safely. Even more than [raising] money was [raising] awareness [for the importance of an aquatic facility] for community health, safety and wellbeing; for people of all ages, abilities, and disabilities; from the cradle to the grave type of thing,” he explained.

For twenty years, Maury had been swimming on his own in area lakes due to the lack of an aquatic facility. “The idea for the big swim was to challenge myself. I had to dig deep, and [ask myself], “If I believe in this project, how deeply do I believe in it, and what am I willing to pay?” Maury didn’t allow himself to think about the possibility of failing; he was determined to complete the swim.

“The long crossing was definitely debilitating and very, very strenuous physically and mentally; but, no time was I really in a lot of pain or anything.” He hurt all over, especially his core, though, and when asked by a crew member, “Maury, what *doesn’t* hurt?” Maury replied, “My legs.”

“There were times during the night, that if I had stopped, I would have been blown back. It became very important to keep moving forward in as streamline of a position as possible, because of the 14-knot (16+ mph) winds.”

During the swim, Maury lost range of motion in his shoulder, and with three miles to go, he told his support crew, “I have thought about nothing but my stroke for the last 72,000 yards.”

Maury completed the 42-mile swim in 26 hours and 18 minutes.

The keys to Maury's successful swim were applying his razor-sharp focus on muscle movement gained from his years of rock climbing as well as utilizing the knowledge of exercise physiology. He approaches swimming from, as he calls it, "a skeletal swimming perspective," thinking about "...what position my skeleton is in, so I can be buoyant, so I can be balanced, and so I can breathe and move as far and as fast as I can, as easily as possible... For me [utilizing early vertical forearm] was a survival skill for the end of that swim, because if I didn't use a really good early vertical forearm, my shoulders just wouldn't take it. So, it was really a valuable experience at times, because of the mechanics of swimming, the physical aspects of swimming, the mental aspects of swimming, and even the spiritual part in terms of your soul; you have to really enjoy it and want to do it; and, find this natural, basic pleasure in it."

Having accomplished his goal of completing the swim and learning a lot about the physiology of a marathon swim in the process, Maury took three weeks to recover, and then returned to the water. "I've gotten back to it with a much deeper appreciation for swimming in my life," he said.

Following the 42-mile marathon swim, Maury tackled several more marathon-distance open water competitive swims.

When Maury's mother became less able to live independently, Maury moved to Georgia to care for her. Wanting to stay involved in swimming, he picked up a job as a lifeguard at the Francis Meadows pool, in Gainesville.

Asked about whether he had any long-distance swims in his future, Maury replied, "I have a map of Lake Lanier now!" I suggested a relay swim with some of his Olympic Nopeful teammates who are high-volume, *Go the Distance* enthusiasts. As a big fan of relays, Maury liked that idea. "I just know there is a way to do it safely, and I think there is also a way to do it community-oriented— and, maybe also raise people's awareness for safety, health, and wellness in swimming... If you can get that across to people, that makes sense. The safety part of it is— if you are going to be a boater or a fisherman, you're going to be better at it and safer at it if you know how to swim. You're going to be more confident; you're going to have more fun doing it... it's going to end up being a better experience. The health and wellness is—people can keep themselves healthier through swimming, and they can do it their entire lives..." Maury added that as a lifeguard observing people at the pool where he works, they all seem to leave happier after swimming, or even

just socializing while walking in the water. That happiness, he says, is wellness. That includes his Olympic Nopeful teammates who he guards rather than trains with, due to his work schedule and their varying training schedules. The Nopefuls have been trying to grow the team and start a cohesive workout group by bringing together all of the individual swimmers who are training on their own.

These days, as a 62-year-old swimmer, Maury's training focus has changed. "I have got to really retrain myself as an older aging swimmer who is also focused on the quality of the experience as well as the camaraderie... Being with other swimmers and learning from them; and, just hearing about how their swimming has progressed throughout their lives is meaningful to me and gives me inspiration to continue swimming."

"To me, water is sacred. I wish that all society would treat it with the sanctity that it deserves. It supports all of us. If we think the waters right now are bad, just wait. They are going to get really nasty... Maury continued to talk about the importance of conservation and respecting the water. On a personal level, he concluded, "Water is the essence of life, and whenever I can get in it, it just makes me feel childish!"

About Maury's 42 mile swim, a wonderful video was made about it; watch it here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DgXG8RvLAm4>