

SWIMMER PROFILE: MICHAEL FOX

By
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It had been over a decade since the former Plano, Texas Top Ten Masters swimmer had competed in a Masters meet, but Michael Fox made a big splash during last year's long course and short course seasons, with a total of 13 USMS Top Ten rankings. As a result, his name is all over the Georgia Masters record book with eight short course meters records and six long course meters records that were all broken at the Atlanta Rainbow Trout's meets at Georgia Tech. He broke four short course yards records at the 2022 Georgia Groundhog Invite at his current home pool in Columbus, Georgia, where he is a member of the Columbus Aquatic Club Hurricanes. The Men's 70-74 age group didn't see that Hurricane coming!

The former U.S. Air Force Navigator, then JAG, and now trial attorney won't be waiting another decade to return to competition. The soon-to-be 73-year-old plans on wrapping up his law career in two years and finishing out his life much the

way he began—in the pool.

When Michael was in first grade, he joined the Nashville YMCA's swim team. He would take the city bus from home to the 'Y' and back on his own. As he recalled, "My dad's office was across the street from the 'Y,' so he could look out the window and see me get off the bus and go in." That was back in the 1960's when it was safe for a child to ride the bus alone.

Swimming stopped for a while when the family moved to Maryville, Tennessee in fourth grade. During high school, Michael started swimming on the local country club team. His swimming career didn't end there, however. He had done pretty well locally, so as he headed over to attend South Carolina University, his dad suggested he try out for the team there. An Assistant Coach took him on as a project, and by the end of the first semester he made the team. The Gamecock pool had been built in 1936 with wooden starting blocks, and Michael laughed when he added, "The lane lines looked like those plastic Easter eggs that you hide chocolates in." The only

downside he noted was, “During the year, we had to be back at school the day after Christmas, and would do three-a-days. We would be the only people on campus, just going back and forth to the pool. Other folks went to Florida; we stared at the empty streets.”

Michael graduated in 1971 and went into the Air Force. “I flew for six years, and then went to law school; so, fitness was doing some jogging every now and then. But in the late 80’s, jogging turned into 10K’s, and then marathons, and then triathlons, which meant back in the pool. I’d come out of the water first in the over 40 age group and then watch as the rest of the pack blew by me like I was on a tricycle. Moreover, I run like a pregnant duck,” he laughed. Retiring from the Air Force in Dallas in 1991, training time decreased, but “I started cycling more as there was a sponsored ride every weekend. They weren’t actual races, but you know how that goes. The season culminated in a 100-mile ride around Wichita Falls, which of course is called, ‘The Hotter Than Hell Hundred.’ And it is. And always with a head wind coming back to town. But I’ve done that 32 years in a row.”

A few years later, the now empty nesters moved over to Plano, a north Dallas suburb, to ease their commute. He learned about the Plano Wetcats Masters team and joined. But in 2005 the law practice ratcheted back up a couple of notches, and swimming took a back seat.

In 2015, he retired a second time (at least he attempted to!), and moved to Columbus, Georgia to be near family there and in East Tennessee. “On the drive over (from Texas), I took a call from a former client, and much to my wife’s surprise, I came out of retirement while we were driving on Interstate 20.” The job started slowly, so he joined the Hurricanes, the local age group team. “Then came the virus, and then trials stopped and travel stopped. The local ‘Y’ opened up first, and then the Aquatic Center; so, I got back on the team, and that led to going to meets last summer and fall. I even swam in an age group meet last weekend (January 2022). The kids are helpful; an 8yo came up and made sure I knew the order of the strokes for the 400IM.”

In between Michael’s move to Columbus and COVID-19 putting a temporary stop to his trial work, an injury kept him out of the pool. “In 2019, I broke my collar bone in three places. It was from a fall while skiing, getting hit by a snowboarder. Got a plate and six screws in February of 2019 that we then took out in 2021—it took a while when I got back into swimming to get that right arm back to where it would pull and travel properly... It was a challenge.”

Thankfully, Michael’s collar bone healed successfully, and he has been swimming 2,800-3,400 yards per session, averaging four days per week, since last summer. He also takes a weekly spin class for cardio, and then rides on weekends.

When I asked Michael about his favorite events to race, the 200 freestyle, which was his favorite college race, made the top of the list. “The timing and the challenge; I really like the 200 (free).” When I mentioned his 200 fly record, he replied, “That’s just because it’s there, and nobody swims it. If you want a chance at a Top Ten time, go swim something where there’s only eight guys in the Top Ten! Of course, it may hurt a lot.”

In two years, when Michael wraps up his law career again (for good???), he has his sights set on competing at the U.S. Masters Swimming long course national championship meet. As he explained, “I have to try and redeem the 400 IM. I lost at Nationals in Savannah when I was 55; I lost the it by one-one-hundredths (.01) of a second. All I was trying to do was break six minutes, so maybe that would be my goal again.” (Not only did he break six minutes, but he swam that race in 5:55.20 landing him 3rd on the F.I.N.A. World Masters Swimming Top Ten list.)

Reflecting back on all his years in Masters Swimming (his competition results date back to 1997), I was curious if Michael had a favorite memory that stuck out in his mind. He deadpanned, “Yeah. Let’s go back to losing the 400 IM by .01.” I laughed and replied, “Yeah, but is that a *favorite* memory?” Michael quipped, “That’s a reminder to charge the wall! Actually, ego-wise, it’s a fond memory, because I ended up with a high world ranking, because, one, nobody else swam it that year, and, two, I went hard. I tried to break six minutes and did. It paid off... I was proud of how it turned out.”

Masters Swimming has been a fulfilling and enjoyable experience for Michael—and, entertaining, too. “The most fun at the SCM Georgia Tech Masters meets is watching the lifeguards figuring out how to put 25-yard lane lines in a [25] meter pool! The amusing thing is that it’s the Georgia Tech Institute of Technology. The lifeguards are students there, so you assume they are engineers. They finally found [the 25-meter lane lines] in the basement across the street.” (When we discussed backstroke flag issues at previous meets, he laughed, “Warming up for the long course, they had four sets of [backstroke] flags!”) But, they do put on good meets.”

In addition to competing at a national competition again after Michael turns 75, he aims to improve his other race times. “You remember what you were doing in your 50’s—all your distance intervals were multiples of 40 seconds. Alright, so it’s twenty years later, so now you’re holding [intervals] on 45’s (seconds); well, so 40 (seconds) isn’t that much different, so you try to do that. Remember, your 100 is only as fast as your 50. It’s just a sense of personal accomplishment. It’s a goal. It’s just one of those things that keeps you alive. So many people when they retire don’t have those things any more... To me, it’s not the competition... it’s not about winning the heat or getting first even; it’s just making your goals.”

