

Swimmer Profile –Randy Russell

By Elaine Krugman



It was his response to my Facebook post that served as my introduction to Randy Russell. I was in search of three other Georgia Masters swimmers to join me on mixed medley and freestyle relays at the National Senior Games to represent our state. Randy immediately answered the call.

Fortunately, Randy had met two other Georgia swimmers from Augusta while competing at the Florida Senior Games qualifying meet, and they were interested in competing in the relays as well. We were good to go.

In preparation for the National Senior Games, last June, Randy and I met for the first time at the Spring Splash at Georgia Tech and swam together on mixed relays.

Fast-forward to the National Senior Games, Randy swam butterfly in the medley relay and was also in the third slot, following us gals, for the freestyle relay. The goal was for the guys to overcome whatever deficits we were probably going to leave for them, and mow down the competition. Randy did just that in both relays with personal best split times in both the butterfly and freestyle, in come-from-behind swims to help us take home bronze medals.

For Randy, his success at the National Senior Games—including a gold medal in the 50 Yard Freestyle (55-59) — was the culmination of a 52-year personal history in the sport.

The son of two swim coaches, Randy first got his start in swimming competition at age five. His father, Lowell, managed the swimming programs and coached the swim team at their local park pool in St. Marys, Georgia, during the summer. Two years later, knowing that both he and his swimmers could benefit greatly from attending swim camp, Lowell escorted Randy and nineteen of his teammates to Bolles School swim camp, in Jacksonville, Florida. “The team went from being a very mediocre team to a dominating team,” Randy said about the improvements made following their two-week stint at the well-known camp.

Randy made such strides that at age seven, he won four gold medals in his four races at the Georgia Parks and Recreation Association (GRPA) state meet.

His early success continued when his family moved to Florida and Randy set the 25-meter butterfly record for the state of Florida, at eight years old.

When his family moved back to Georgia the following year, Randy won gold again in butterfly, and then won four gold medals at the GRPA meet, when he was ten years old.

The following year, Randy swam in Warner Robins for Georgia's top-ranked GRPA team and continued with them through high school. From ages 15-17, he set five Georgia state records, and then subsequently lowered them.

Since Warner Robins didn't have a high school swim team, Randy only swam in summer league. For this reason, he wasn't recruited by college coaches; so, Randy was a walk-on at UGA, instead. He lettered as a freshman, and then left the team to concentrate on his studies.

Over the years since graduating from UGA, Randy mainly stayed in the sport on deck as a coach for seven different swim teams. It wasn't until he played in a work-related golf tournament and won a three-month membership to the Bradley Wellness Center, in Dalton, that he decided to get back in the pool. "My thought was that I had gained more weight than was comfortable, so I needed to get back in the pool, lose some weight, and get back in shape."

Once Randy started swimming regularly, one of his financial planning clients encouraged the swim coach to join him in training for the 2018 regional Senior Olympics meet, in Chattanooga. It was the 57-year-old's first swim competition since college, and it was a success. Randy swam National Senior Games qualifying times in all six of his races, although he later learned that they didn't count. In order to qualify for the national meet in Albuquerque, the sprinter would need to repeat his performance at a state-level Senior Games meet.

Since the Georgia Golden Olympics had already been held the previous month, Randy needed to find a state-level meet outside of Georgia. He ended up going down to Clearwater, Florida for the Florida Senior Games, last December, where he won four gold medals and two silver medals. There, he met Swim Atlanta coach Pat Eddy, Coach's Chair of Georgia Masters, and learned about U.S. Masters Swimming. Pat encouraged Randy to join Georgia Masters, so he could participate in Masters meets that would prepare him for the National Senior Games, in June 2019. The new GAJA swimmer's first meet was last January at the Gwinnett Developmental Meet.

Since Randy had already achieved his first goal of making qualifying times in all of his Senior Games events, the former collegiate swimmer set his sights on taking home some hardware from the National Senior Games. Not only did Randy win those two relay bronze medals; but he swam a personal best time to beat out eighteen other sprinters and win an individual gold medal in the 50 Yard Freestyle. In addition, he took home ribbons for placing 4th in the 50 Backstroke, and 5th in the 50 Breaststroke and 50 Butterfly.

About his first national swim meet experience, Randy said, "My favorite part was meeting and getting to know lots of athletes in the pool, hotel, and Parade of Athletes (which was part of the Celebration of Athletes). For my accomplishments, I was blessed to have swum personal best times in all six races... The freestyle was the pinnacle," adding that he had trained really hard to win that medal. "Back in December (2018), I started training with the Calhoun Swim Team. I knew I had to build my base of training, so I did the Christmas workouts with [them]. I had swum strictly on my own up to that point." Randy had been putting in about 3,000 meters, 4-5 days per week. When he started doing the Christmas workouts, his daily yardage increased, including swimming some doubles. From that point, the dedicated swimmer committed to swimming daily, from Christmas up until three weeks before the National Senior Games when he started his taper.

Considering the fact that Randy has type 1 diabetes and has twice experienced “frozen shoulder,” a condition that often afflicts those with type 1 diabetes, this was quite an accomplishment for the determined swimmer who had previously had shoulder surgery to correct the condition.

Randy has enjoyed his successful journey back to swimming competition, and his shoulders have stood up to the training. “The biggest thing has probably been just getting back in shape. I feel a lot better after losing twenty pounds and now feeling like I am physically fit again. It’s good to be able to compete and do well in something you have loved all your life. And, getting back in shape is a big part of it, too,” he said.

What’s next for the National Senior Games champion? “My immediate goals are just to swim my best times. Now that I have been through a full season and have set some decent times with my performance at [the National Senior Games], it’s really a question of can I get better from here. That’s where, if I can, in national competition, Top Ten times are not far out of reach.”

To help prepare him for achieving those goals, Randy has formed a small team at Calhoun Aquatic Center with a core of six swimmers that train together with him while he coaches from in the pool.

Coaching is in his blood, so it doesn’t stop with his Calhoun teammates. “Any time I’m in the pool training, most people will start paying attention and start asking questions. They notice that I’m doing fairly well compared to most of the people out there, and I intentionally go out of my way to try and help anybody that’s out there with whatever they are doing to get better in the pool. It happens every time I go to the pool. I’ll go out there and someone is swimming beside me, and I will volunteer to help them. Normally, there are just two or three little things-- I can make them a better swimmer just by being a coach...”

Randy has helped several triathletes improve their swimming by teaching them how to train, improve their distance per stroke, and improve their breathing technique.

What is Randy’s favorite advice to give to other swimmers? “The big deal is to just keep swimming and keep pushing yourself for whatever you think is a good goal. Always the best goal is to try and better your times; and, enjoy what you’re doing, and try to make it fun.”

