

## SWIMMER PROFILE: ANDREJS DUDA

By, Elaine Krugman



Andrejs Duda may be fairly new to U.S. Masters Swimming, but he sure isn't new to the sport. Case in point: The two-time Olympian broke the men's 50 Yard Butterfly national record in the 40-44 age group at the Maria Thrash Memorial Meet, last March.

Growing up in Latvia, he began swimming and participating in other sports as a child, but he stuck with swimming. In his late teens, Andrejs broke a few Latvian national records and decided to pursue swimming further. As he explained, "That's when I came to the U.S. to continue my swimming career (in 2002). When I came to the U.S. I was 20 [years old]. I went to Kenyon College, in Ohio, a Division III school. I got a degree in linguistics (Languages and Literature). During college, I ended up going to the (2004) Athens Olympics for Latvia. Then after college, I continued swimming, because I felt like I hadn't fulfilled my potential. I think I was constantly over-trained in college. The whole load of academics, and double practices a day was maybe too much for me to keep growing... I decided I wanted to keep [swimming]. I switched it up a little bit and ended up going significantly faster after college."

This nine-time NCAA Division III individual champion wasn't exactly slow in college. He set a college record with 24 NCAA national event titles! Improvements in Andrejs's race times after college, however, landed him on the Latvian Olympic Team in 2004 and 2008 where he qualified for the 200 Individual Medley and 100 Butterfly.

Although a vast majority of Olympians would have been excited about going to the Olympics, for Andrejs, not so much. "I was never really a big Olympic enthusiast for personal reasons, but eventually the bottom line for me was that it was just another swim meet that happens once every four years. I think you have to treat it like that or you're just going to over think it. I think Beijing was more impressive than Athens, just because of the different culture; it was more grandiose in Beijing than Athens. I went to the opening ceremonies in Athens, and that was actually pretty cool. The one in China [I didn't go to]. The Olympics to me seems like a big show for the spectators and not so much for the athletes. I basically went to those as a tourist, which they call us in the country. If you're not in the top eight, then you're basically a tourist, which is accurate. I only went because I could, and my country asked me to do it. But if it were up to me, I wouldn't [have gone]. Back then, I didn't like to go to meets where I couldn't win... If we

are going to take support for the athletes in each country and make it the same, then it would be more fun. But I rarely received any funding, any extra costs for food [or other expenses] ...” Andrejs didn’t think this was fair, which dampened his enthusiasm.

Andrejs’s last competition before becoming a Masters swimmer was when he tried to qualify for the 2012 Olympics, which was unsuccessful. He had some injuries as well. “I decided to take a break. In the meantime, I coached a lot-- an age group team at Swim Atlanta, for six years.” He also gave private swimming lessons. “I was very involved in swimming, coaching, mentoring, but my own swimming career took a break. I started doing Cross Fit; I’ve always stayed in shape, and I was happy with that. Two or three years later, in 2014, I decided I was going to take a completely different path and got into real estate. I coached and gave swim lessons here and there, but I focused on becoming a real estate agent and a real estate investor. In 2020, when I was a pretty successful real estate investor, I had a pretty good income—a passive income—the pandemic is what basically got me back into swimming. I had achieved a lifestyle that pretty much let me do what I wanted, travel to wherever I wanted.”

While his real estate career was on hold during the pandemic, Andrejs decided to return to Latvia before the COVID shut down and ride out the pandemic where the cost of living was a lot less. During his six-month visit, his Latvian swimming friends encouraged Andrejs to join them in Masters competitions, so he got back into the pool. He started practicing a few times a week and realized he was in excellent swimming shape to compete. “I was going only about a second, second-and-a-half slower than my all-time fast times. I realized there might be something there, so me and my Latvian friends started going to meets here and there. Every two to three months we would go to a meet and have organized practices that I would organize and have training workouts for. In 2022 was when we decided we wanted to try a little bit bigger pond, so we decided to go to the (2022) European Masters Championships in Rome. I ended up breaking two World Records in my age group, in 50 Free and 50 Fly long course.”

Needing to work, Andrejs returned to Atlanta and his real estate business; however, he continued to travel between the U.S.A. and Latvia, spending 6-12 months at a time in each country.

Continuing with his swim training, Andrejs first trained at Dynamo, and then at Chastain Park Athletic Club. As a sprinter with specific goals, Andrejs trains on his own rather than with the team, because the team workouts focus more on long distance swimming, catering to competitors swimming longer events and triathlons.

Before injuring his shoulder in October of 20023 at the Chastain Park meet, and then again at the 2024 Maria Thrash meet, Andrejs was training 2-3,000 yards per session, two to three times a week. He focused solely on sprints, including starts, breakouts, turns, and tempo training. On alternate days, he lifted weights in the gym, and then took one day off a week. Since training heavy weights, Andrejs has gained 35 pounds in muscle weight above his Olympian weight of 190 pounds, which has helped him become a faster sprinter.

“I’ve been dealing with a shoulder injury since that meet in October, so I took a month off in December and January to deal with that, to rehab, and started training again in February and March. Everything went well until the Maria Thrash meet and the injury is back. I think I need to do a surgery... If surgery doesn’t help, and I end up never being able to sprint again, I’m fine with that. I’ve done a lot in the last couple of years and in my entire career. There’s always coaching. I’ve been coaching a lot, and there is so much information in my head about swimming. The sheer experience alone from being a professional long-time swimmer, racer; there is so much to give back. I love working with kids, and I love working with Masters swimmers who are hungry to improve their times... If I have to retire, so be it,” Andrejs remarked, adding that he enjoys doing private coaching sessions. If you are interested, you can contact him on Instagram (“Andrejs Duda”).

Meanwhile Andrejs has some free coaching advice: “Practicing with a specific goal is what I tell myself and tell the guys I coach. Especially Masters swimmers that race. When you are older, and you have your life together, your focus is so much better on little things if you really want it... Going to practice and working on little things, focusing on details; specific training is the key. If you are a distance swimmer, focus on distance training, and if you are a sprinter, focus on sprint training is what I would recommend.”

If Andrejs’s surgery goes well and he is able to sprint again, he is looking forward to competing in the 2025 World Aquatics Masters Championships, in Singapore.

“That will be my last year in my age group to try and beat my own record,” he commented.

Looking back over the highlights of his competitive swimming career, Andrejs said the European Masters Championships were more enjoyable than the Olympics, because he had set goals that were achievable, which included breaking records. Six months before the championships, he looked up the Masters World records for the 50 Freestyle and 50 Butterfly in his age group and realized he only needed to improve one half of a second in each event to break those records. “I knew the goals were attainable and that certainly gave me better focus.” Training was fun for Andrejs and he enjoyed the international atmosphere at both the

European Masters Championships and the World Masters Championships, in Japan—both huge events with thousands of participants. “[Crowded warm-up pools at those meets was the] challenging aspect of it, but the other aspect was that there were so many people that you met a lot of people. I think from that aspect, I fell in love with the Masters community even more. You go race, and bring your family, and travel.”

Competing in Singapore should suit Andrejs well, since his favorite Masters memory was, “...being in a completely new culture and country like Japan and sharing that experience with 7,000 other swimmers.”

“Racing is what I like the most [about swimming]. Just getting up on the blocks and racing and feeling fast. I think when you are a little bit older and doing Masters, you realize, ‘Wow, I really missed that. Swimming in practice is one thing, but when you get up on the blocks and have a little bit of that anxiety; that’s what I miss the most and enjoy the most right now.’”