

## SWIMMER PROFILE: CAROLINE JOHNSON

By, Elaine Krugman



If the name “Caroline Johnson” sounds familiar, you may have read about her outstanding achievements at USMS Spring Nationals in the June Georgia Masters Newsletter. She won gold in the 200 Freestyle, landing her second in the nation in her age group for the 2024 season. Her silver medal in the 200 Backstroke resulted in another #2 spot. She also won silver in the 100 Freestyle as well as bronze medals in the 500 Freestyle, 50 Backstroke, and 100 Backstroke. All her races placed her within the top six places on the 2024 Top Ten list.

About her results at Nationals, she said, “I was surprised. I knew that I had put in a lot of work, especially this past year, but I was pleasantly surprised at my freestyle times. I was a little disappointed in the backstroke, but I can’t complain, because they were my best Masters times for me over the past couple of years. But I know I have more in me in the backstroke.

Caroline’s goal for the 200 Freestyle was to break two minutes, and she swam it in 1:56.30. For the 100, she wanted to break :55, which she accomplished with a time of :53.44. “The 500 I almost scratched, because I wasn’t sure I was quite ready for it, but I ended up dropping ten seconds (her time was 5:23.49)! I’m very competitive with myself, so if I don’t think I am going to do good for me, like for my own goals, I get in my head, and sometimes it’s not good; so, I approach the 500 as something I do for fun... and that’s when I end up doing my best. I take the pressure off myself.”

The success Caroline has achieved in the pool since joining Masters is remarkable. Although the former Georgia Tech swimmer and 2009 graduate had kept active in fitness and sports since leaving the collegiate pool, she didn’t become a dedicated swimmer again until rejoining Masters in 2022. (She joined briefly in 2010 to swim at USMS Spring Nationals at Georgia Tech.)

As a member of Stingrays Masters, Caroline is coached by Michael Soderlund and puts in about 20,000 yards per week in the pool. “We have three organized

practices a week with the Stingrays team, and then my coach gives me another 1 to 2 practices to do on our own, because we don't have very much lane space, so we'll go during open swim. So, I try to swim five times a week; sometimes it's four. I also do some dryland; I try to work on my weaknesses, so I do heavy core exercises and some upper body, like push-ups and pull-ups," she explained, adding that doing CrossFit for nine years left her back susceptible to injury during heavy weightlifting.

Caroline's favorite events are the 200 distances of freestyle and backstroke, but sprints look to be in her future, perhaps with the goal of turning some of those silver and bronze medals into gold at 2025 Spring Nationals. "My focus over the next year will be trying to sprint faster in the 100 free and 100 back... I'm generally better at long course than short course, so next summer, I am definitely prioritizing long course Nationals," she said.

This Top Ten swimmer knows what she wants, and her goals are set. As she explained, "Now that I have these [personal best short course yards] times, I feel like I am going to want to beat them. I want to focus on backstroke a little bit more. I definitely want to break 1:00 in the 100 back; that's been on my mind for a while. In the 200, I know I have more in me than a 2:12; so, anything under that I would be happy with. My goal is to just keep doing what I am doing and keep having fun with it, like having fun with my teammates. We encourage each other a lot and have fun together. As long as it's still fun, I'm doing the right thing."

"I always kind of hold myself back mentally, so that's something I'm trying to work on now as an adult—like trying to push back on some of my mental barriers when it comes to racing." To accomplish this, Caroline has found that if she takes the pressure off herself and is having fun, "That has always been the ticket. Just having teammates has been the best thing." Caroline must have been having A LOT of fun at Nationals, in Indiana, because she cleaned up on the medals and personal best times! And, as it turned out, it was her favorite Masters memory to date. "I felt like a teenager again! [My teammates and I] stayed in the same hotel and were in the same vehicle most of the time. Driving to and from the pool, we were just laughing the whole time!"

Caroline continued, “The girls went to Olympic Trials... On the way home, we were on the same flight as Katie Ledecky, Caleb Dressel, Bobby Finke, and Kieran Smith. So, we got photos with all those people, and it was the coolest thing ever!”

In addition to enjoying her swimming, I asked this 36-year-old what she attributes to her success. Caroline replied, “Definitely having such a great coach. Michael wants us to do well, and he will go out of his way to help us get what we need. Like, extra workouts or advice... I signed up for Nationals first on my team. Worst case scenario, I thought I would just go alone... But, we ended up having four ladies and four men. Thank goodness we encouraged Michael to come. He has a full-time job. We were so lucky to have him come along! He was there for all our races, and he gives great advice.” Michael even swam the men’s relays when they were short a male swimmer, and in between coaching his swimmers, he worked remotely on his laptop, taking work calls up in the stands.

Caroline, previously a quality engineer and currently a full-time mom, also appreciates the wonderful support she has received from her husband, Ryan. “He knows that swimming has been a big part of my life, and on those days that we have practice in the morning, he’s there in the morning getting [our three small kids, Wynne, Tess, and Dean] ready and out the door. [Ryan] has never complained for those mornings or for the Saturdays when I go [swimming]. He knows it is as much for my physical health as it is for my mental health to swim. He is so supportive, which I am thankful for,” she said.

What is it about the time Caroline spends at the pool she enjoys so much? “I love practicing, I love training hard, I love the feeling after a really hard workout when you know you did well; and, hanging out in the locker room and seeing how everybody else did. That’s the most fun to me.”

“I would encourage people to come back to swimming if they have been away for a long time. You can find joy later in life!”