

SWIMMER PROFILE: DEDRAIN “DEE” FRANKLIN

By
Elaine Krugman



To a non-swimmer afraid of the water, an unwanted push into a pool can do one of two things: Make that person an affirmed non-swimmer for life, or motivate them to overcome their fear and learn how to swim. In the case of 64-year-old Dedrain “Dee” Franklin, she made a great choice, and finally learned how to swim when she took a class taught by Coach Ilonga Thandiwe at the Andrew & Walter Young YMCA, in 2018. “I knew I needed somebody that was going to be patient... I tell you, that was probably the scariest thing that I have *ever*

done in my life! I was determined that I was going to learn.”

“Coach Ilonga is a godsend!” Dee said about her swim instructor. During her first class, she started by learning how to blow bubbles in the water. As she explained, “I’m the type of person I’m going to ask, ‘Why are we doing that? And, what happens if I don’t do that? And, what are the effects of doing [it]?’ He was able to answer every question that I had.”

It was a bit of a rocky start for the fearful swimmer, though. “I used to have nightmares before we went for our training on Mondays and Wednesdays. All I could see was the deep end, and it looked like it was just grabbing me up!... Now I can swim the length of the pool freestyle, I can backstroke, breaststroke; I’m still trying to work my stamina up for the butterfly.”

“In our second class, [Coach Ilonga] kind of pushed us a little farther. That was when we jumped into the [deep end]. I was like, ‘Oh my God! Are you kidding me right now?!’” Dee wasn’t sure she would be able to come back up. “I couldn’t believe I did it! I was excited, because that has been a fear all my life. Now I understand how the body works, and how the breathing works. I’m good!” She explained that if she is ever pushed in a pool again, instinct will kick in, and not to panic.

Asked what she liked most about Coach Ilonga, Dee replied, “That patience! If we didn’t get it, he would go over it a million times! And, the key for me was learning how to breathe. Once I learned how to breathe above water and exhale underwater, I had it. Then, I just had to work on my stroke.”

Following the completion of her second class, Coach Ilonga asked Dee if she wanted to join his Masters team, and she did so enthusiastically.

Since Coach Ilonga’s team is small, she has been able to get a lot of individualized attention. He gives a personalized plan to each swimmer, according to their needs and goals. In Dee’s case, she is working on speeding up her stroke turnover rate while still maintaining good technique. “I was swimming slowly, because of the breathing. I had to get used to breathing faster. Once I learn how to become comfortable with my breathing, then I can swim faster in freestyle.”

When Dee first learned how to swim, she told her classmates she wouldn’t compete, but that has changed. “Beyond my wildest dreams, I never thought I would even be where I am now. From what I learned about swimming, it was totally different. I was always told (not by swim instructors) you had to hold your breath when you swam. That’s totally wrong! People that I know that I have seen swim, they swim with their head above the water, and that’s not the proper way to swim. I didn’t know that.”

Unfortunately, Dee had some health challenges that interfered with swimming consistently after she joined Masters. First, her skin became discolored in a few areas of her body by vitiligo, a skin condition. Following that issue, she got very dizzy one day while swimming, and she had to be pulled out of the water. Her doctor figured out that the dizziness was caused by water not draining properly from her ear. Now she wears ear plugs, which have resolved the problem; however, she started having panic attacks as a result of that episode. Between these two challenges, followed by a case of COVID, and a trip to the emergency room, she took a break from swimming.

When Dee returned to the pool she made sure to swim along the edge, so she could pull herself up if she started to panic. She was determined not to give up. “I’m not going to stop swimming. That’s one of the best things that has ever happened to me, and I love it!”

In anticipation of going to the pool, Dee sometimes still experiences anxiety about swimming. “Sometimes I will just be thinking about going swimming, and I will

start having anxiety until I get there, and then I'm fine!" To relieve the anxiety, Dee first does bobs up and down in the pool to get comfortable, and then begins her swim workout by doing kicking with a kickboard. "That kind of takes the edge off."

The first challenge Dee had to overcome when she started swimming, though, was getting over being self-conscious. As she explained, "I am so self-conscious about my weight, but I didn't let that stop me from learning to swim... I'm still working on my weight. I think I can do better; I can swim better. Those are just some of my personal goals that I need to work on, but I am not going to let that stop me."

Dee's advice to others with the same issue is, "Just go for it, regardless. Initially, when I first started, I brought a pair of swim shorts with me, but I got to the pool and saw women that were bigger than me and older than me, and I [said to myself], 'What's your problem? Just grow up and enjoy the moment!'"

Dee loves swimming so much that she dedicates time to watching swimming videos on YouTube every week. "One thing I do look for, and I don't see enough is black swimmers." She mentioned just hearing about the all-black swim team at Howard University and being familiar with the Mahogany Mermaids Masters Swim Team and being inspired by them. Dee's favorite Olympic swimmers are Cullen Jones and Simone Manuel.

Will swimming be in Dee's future? She explained it this way, "Once you learn how to ride a bike, you don't forget it. Of course, I don't want to forget [swimming], but now that I've got it, I want to *do* something with it, now that I've got it. A guy that I used to date, we used to go out of the country every year, and I was so tired of looking beautiful sitting *next* to the pool. He could swim, and I told him one day, 'You know what? I'm tired of this! I'm tired of sitting next to the pool and looking beautiful. I want to go *in* the pool and look beautiful! Whenever I see him again, I've got something to show him. He really got a kick out of the fact that I didn't swim, but now that I have learned how to swim, he was doing it all wrong anyway!"

Dee is proud of the fact she has also helped break the cycle of non-swimmers in her family. "I think because I learned how to swim, that pushed me to push my grandson to learn how to swim." After much pestering of her daughter, Jaya, she finally put her son, Jakai, in a swim class. "Now he is competing with his school. He loves it. Actually, after he learned how to swim, he told his mom he wanted to compete."

Competition is in Dee's future as well. "Yes, I want to compete. I would definitely swim freestyle and breaststroke; and, even the backstroke. I feel that from what I have learned, I am strong enough that I could compete in those. I would just like to compete to see how strong I am." Coach Iilonga has an outline set for his swimmers letting them know what they need to work on to prepare for competition, so she will compete when he feels she is ready. "I do plan before this year is out to compete."

Whether Dee competes or not, she just loves to swim. "I feel so invigorated when I get out of the pool. I feel so refreshed! I'm exhausted but I feel just like I could conquer the world. That's how I feel; I'm not going to stop.

"I just feel a oneness with God. I think it's because of the stuff I never knew my body could do. I feel so free and so natural. It's amazing, and I think the fact that I have learned that our bodies can do more than what we think or we thought it could do... It's almost like spiritual for me."

Dee was a bit apprehensive, not only because of her fears, but because she was also self-conscious. "I am so self-conscious about my weight, but I didn't let that stop me from learning to swim... I'm still working on my weight. I think I can do better; I can swim better. Those are just some of my personal goals that I need to work on, but I am not going to let that stop me."