

SWIMMER PROFILE: JOHN SNYDER

By
Elaine Krugman



When I saw John Snyder’s swift breaststroke turnover rate at the 2022 Southside Pentathlon, I never would have guessed he had suffered severe injuries by a hit-and-run driver just 13 months earlier.

Mike Stille, of the Southside Seals, pointed out his teammate and emphatically suggested I interview him for a Swimmer Profile feature. John’s story, he said, was one I was going to want to hear. He was not wrong. After interviewing John about his horrifying ordeal, I, was amazed at how far he had come.

The 36-year-old had a solid swimming background leading up to the day that turned his life upside down. John had made the Auburn University Swim Team as a walk-on, in 2005, and the 200 IM and 400 IM were his best events. Breaststroke was his strongest stroke, and the 200 Breaststroke was his third competitive event.

As the former Auburn Tiger described his collegiate swimming career, “It was a cool experience. I grew up an Auburn fan. My dad was also an Auburn grad. I always grew up dreaming of representing Auburn in some form or fashion, and to get that opportunity was awesome. On the team, I was the slow kid, but that was o.k. I was happy to be on the team. My job was to make good grades, work hard, and have a positive attitude; and, that’s what I did.”

The hard work outside of the pool paid off, because John earned a Bachelor’s Degree in Civil Engineering as well as a Master’s in Business Administration. His degrees ultimately led him to a career working for Georgia Power.

Although John had stayed active in swimming; he left the starting blocks behind in favor of the open water. “When I finished swimming in college, I always thought it would be cool to do an ironman triathlon, and so my wife gave me the go-ahead. I started running and biking. I could have gone and swam by myself, but part of the fun of swimming is to do it with teammates and to have a coach give you a workout, instead of coming up with your own [workouts]. I really got into

[Masters] to rebuild that foundation of swimming... I knew the aerobic benefit [of swimming] would carry over to the running and biking as well. I wanted to make sure I was strong in that area. So, that was the focus; to leverage the swimming background and give myself a good foundation into the triathlons.”

John achieved his goal in 2018 when he competed in Ironman Chattanooga. Asked about his experience, he said, “It went well; it was fun. I finished it, which was a major win, and I felt it was a respectable time; so, it was a good experience. It encouraged me to continue doing triathlons, and I did some other little local Peachtree City sprints, super sprint, and I did the Olympic distance.”

“I have family. I’m married, and I have two kids; so, there are time limits that come into play. I couldn’t go all in on ironman stuff. I was training for a half ironman in Augusta, in 2021, but there was an accident when I was out bicycling. I got hit by a car; it was a hit-and-run accident...” John was knocked unconscious, so he doesn’t remember what happened, and doesn’t know the circumstances or details of the driver. In describing his injuries, he said that although he had been wearing a helmet, “I basically had a concussion on steroids. I broke my C-1 and C-2 (vertebrae) at the top of my neck.” Fortunately, another driver saw him on the side of the road, stopped, and called 9-1-1. John was put on a Life Flight to Grady Hospital, in Atlanta, where he had surgery and spent two weeks in recovery for those injuries as well as several broken small bones. He was then transferred to the Sheperd Center for rehabilitation, where he spent another seven weeks as an in-patient, and an additional five weeks on an out-patient basis. This was during the summer of 2021, and he wasn’t able to return to swimming until March of 2022.

“Getting back in the pool actually took longer than I thought,” John explained, because of all of the titanium plates, screws, and other hardware that had to be used to surgically repair his neck. In addition, John had sustained nerve damage in his shoulder, which took a long time to heal. As a result, he had to start off by just kicking with fins. “I took it a step at a time, and with time, I started playing around. I still can’t do fly at all right now.” Breaststroke is the one stroke he can do well, because of the lack of an over-arm recovery, so he raced all three breaststroke events at his first meet back and won all three races.

“It’s crazy that [my recovery] went that well and that quickly,” John remarked about his rehabilitation following the accident. “I think if you had told most of the medical folks that I would be racing again [in 13 months], they would have rolled their eyes at you.”

When asked how it felt to be back on the blocks and competing again, the Southside Seal replied, “It was fun. It was a little overwhelming. Honestly, it was a little humbling in a way. The things that we take for granted; it was a stark reminder not to take things for granted. It was a little bit unreal to be back on the blocks and racing that quickly. It was slow compared to what it used to be for me. The fact that I could get up on the block, and dive in, race; it was all ok. It was surreal, but it was really cool to be able to do that at that point... My times were actually a little bit faster than I thought they would be. I’m nothing but being thankful for that.”

John attributes his faith and the support of his family (wife, Amy; 12-year-old son, Jackson, and 9-year-old daughter, Emily), church, former teammates, and community for recovering so well from his injuries. He also said being in excellent physical and mental condition played a crucial role in his fast and successful recovery. “I think it was a combination of factors; it came together the right way.”

Currently, due to family commitments and work time constraints, John has limited time in the pool. He’s hoping to increase his training this spring and summer. As he explained, “There is still some learning what my body can handle—what it can handle physically, what are some things where maybe I can’t go as intense as I used to. It’s funny. When you have bone and metal in your neck in places where they aren’t supposed to be naturally, and your muscles have been used to never being there, there are little things that used to always be ok that aren’t necessarily always ok anymore—I’m still going through some learning things. It will all shake out eventually.”

“Ironman and half-ironman stuff is dead to me at the moment. I would like to do a sprint or super sprint type race at some point. I haven’t really gotten back on the bike yet. Biking was my last add to do triathlons. Swimming and running were fine, and biking was the addition. It was because I was scared of what might happen, and it did, so there you go; but, I’m hopeful... Right now, I’m just trying to work through the neck and shoulder stuff... The frustrating thing at times right now is that I have to sit back, relax, and realize that, truthfully, I’m way ahead of the game, considering what happened. I really can’t complain.”

“I’m going to play it day-by-day... If I can be back in the top 25 or top 50 for my age group nationwide, that’s a great goal...” John is hoping to accomplish that goal in the 400 IM, but he doesn’t know if his shoulder will be able to handle the fly portion of the race. If not, he would like to achieve that goal in the 100 IM as well as in some freestyle races, depending on how his shoulder responds. He also

hopes to get back to being able to make USMS National Qualifying Times as he did in all of his races prior to the accident.

Meanwhile, John is just happy to be back swimming with his Southside Seals teammates. When asked what he enjoys most about it, he replied, “To the extent there is a team aspect to it, I enjoy going and working out and being [given the workout] and having the interaction with teammates—and the encouragement aspects that come with it. That’s fun; and, I just enjoy being in the water. It feels natural; I guess I’ve done it for so long at this point. I like the feel of the water as I’m swimming...”

As we wrapped up our conversation, John had some great advice for all of us: “There are going to be hard times in life, [but] just believe in yourself, rely on community around you, and don’t quit. Just put in the work and power through it. You will get there eventually.