

Swimmer Profile – Jan Johnson

By Elaine Krugman



At the last St. Nick's meet at Georgia Tech, I had a relay request: Put me on a team with Randy Russell. He was my relay teammate (and 50yd Freestyle gold medalist) at the 2019 National Senior Games, where we won a bronze medal in the mixed medley relay and barely squeaked by for another bronze in the freestyle relay. It was a blast!

Lucky for me, I got a two-fer when Ted Hammond was assigned to our relay. While interviewing him for the August 2019 newsletter, he was a hoot, and we talked about how much fun it would be to swim on a relay together.

To complete our relay team, Randy wanted his Calhoun workout group swimmer, Jan Johnston, to join us. He spoke very highly of her swimming abilities, and I realized that I would, once again, be the proverbial "anchor" of the team, weighing us down with my lack of speed.

As it turned out, Jan was the official anchor of our 400m Mixed Medley Relay team, and she lived up to Randy's glowing assessment as our freestyler. Following Randy's zippy 100- meter backstroke, I swam the breaststroke leg and Ted flew through his fly, leaving Jan to bring it home. Not only did she land us in the Georgia State Record books, but the fast freestyler also secured us the 3rd place spot in the USMS Top Ten!

Although Jan says, "I just don't have enough confidence in my swimming ability," the 63-yearold ranked in the top 20% of 50-yard freestylers in her age group, following the Spring Splash meet! That's impressive, especially since she had only been in Masters for a few months, swam just three times per week, and had competed as an adult in just that one meet.

About her limited pool training schedule, the North Georgian explained in our interview, "I blew my knee out and couldn't run anymore. Believe me, I would choose swimming over running any day; I much more prefer it. But, all you need to run is to strap on a pair of shoes and go out and run. With swimming, you need to have that access to an aquatic center, and Cartersville does not have that. We live in Kingston, which is between Cartersville and Calhoun, and we live out on the Etowah River.

I drive to Calhoun. I only swim three days a week, because it's a good distance. It's a 45-minute drive one way." In addition to swimming, the retired art teacher takes a Body Pump weightlifting class twice per week, which has contributed tremendously to her strength in the pool. She also walks her dogs 3-4 miles per day and kayaks 2-3 times per week in the summer. "We have kayaked the whole (Etowah) river," she said, adding that she and her husband kayaked the 164 miles of the river in increments. A few years back, before her knee injury, Jan competed with her daughters in the Savage Race, a 5-7-mile running race with 27 obstacles. She is proud of the fact that she was able to scale the massive wall at the age of 60.

Since Jan's time in the pool has been limited since joining Masters in February 2019, I wondered how she could have gotten to be such a good swimmer in a relatively short amount of time. What I learned

about Jan is something she has in common with most of the fast swimmers I have profiled or met during my ten years in USMS: Even though she hadn't trained in the pool for many years, she swam competitively as a child.

The native Georgian grew up in Dekalb and swam with the Dynamo Swim Club along with her brother and sister. But, less than a year later, her brother's near-fatality in the pool ended the family's swim club experience. As Jan explained, "We were on Dynamo maybe a year—I don't think we were there for a whole season. My older brother had a seizure in the pool, and it was horrible. We were in Northside hospital in our swim suits while they were trying to revive him. We had no idea he had epilepsy. And, if it hadn't been for the last kid... he saw my brother on the bottom of the pool. They pulled him out, and at the time, they thought he had hyperventilated, but in actuality, he had a grand mal seizure. When that happened, my mom pulled us off [the team] and said, 'That's it!' It wasn't Dynamo's fault; it was just a freak accident."

Jan had developed an excellent swimming base during her short time with Dynamo, though, so she was able to build on it during her stint in high school summer league swimming. "As a kid, I was pretty good as a summer leaguer," she said, adding that she won the county in butterfly and freestyle. It turned out to be Jan's only other swimming experience before quitting and switching to running, following high school graduation. Then, two years ago, after her knee injury, she joined the Calhoun Aquatic Center. After one year of swimming on her own, Jan joined USMS when Randy Russell formed a Masters workout group there.

The new Masters swimmer hadn't intended on returning to competition, but, "I was kind of talked into it by Randy," Jan said with a laugh about participating in the 2019 Spring Splash, at Georgia Tech, and then returning to the same pool to swim at the St. Nick's meet.

Even after Jan's swimming accomplishments, the fast freestyler still feels she lacks the confidence in her abilities, though. "I have really never been trained because in summer league high school, they don't train like USA (Swimming) does. You're trained under USA year-round. They're going to assign your strokes, train the right technique, and I never really got that. I'm really lacking in back and breast. I just don't have it. I know I'm legal in what I do, but I don't have the technique that you need. I don't have that muscle memory that you need for the right technique... When I started getting back into [swimming], I was like, I'm not good; I suck! And now, I'm like, well, I'm just going to do the best I can do," she said.

"Part of me thinks, I wish as a kid I had swum [USA Swimming] all my life; I would be so much better. But, it is what it is. I enjoy the sport, and that's what matters."

Jan especially enjoys swimming freestyle and butterfly, the two strokes that have always come naturally to her. As she says about the other two competitive strokes, "I want to get a decent breaststroke, and I want to try and get a decent backstroke, even though I hate not looking where I'm going. I want to have a nice stroke."

As Jan works towards her goals, the determined swimmer gives credit to Randy Russell for the strides she has made. "Randy has helped more than anything. Having a coach telling you what you're doing wrong and what to work on."

Time constraints, though, prevent Jan from progressing as fast and as far as she would prefer. "I don't think I have enough time to put into being as good as I would like to be. It's a commitment. I'm the kind of person that if I'm going to do something well, I need time to put into it."

Jan is enjoying the time she is spending in the pool, though. What about swimming does she like the most? "I can eat all I want!" she laughed. "And, I like the way I feel when I get out of the

water. When I get out, the feeling you get after getting out of the water is worth it. It's just kind of a natural aquatic high. You just feel so good! I don't know if it's because you use so much lung capacity, the oxygen gets going, and you just feel better because of it," she explained, adding that she never felt that good after running. "No matter how tired you are, there's just this great energy when you're done. I really enjoy the fact that I got back into it. I really enjoy the benefits physically that I've gotten from it, and I feel like physically, I'm in the best shape I've been in since I was in my 20's, because of swimming."