

SWIMMER PROFILE: SAMY NAGUIB

By
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If you have been to any swim meets in the region over the past eight years, there is a good chance you came across Samy Naguib on deck or in the lane next to you. This 68-year-old loves to compete!

It didn't start out that way as a child; competing was more out of necessity. As Samy explained, "When I was [a 12-year-old] in Egypt, the reason I started late in swimming-- I went to the coach at the club and said, 'I would like to swim.' And, he said, 'Jump [in] and [let me] see,'—and, then he said, 'No, son, I think you should go play basketball.' Very reassuring and encouraging words!" Samy said with a laugh. "I hated it, because the motive and the reason behind my swimming in Egypt really was an economic

thing. Even if you are a member of the club, you still have to pay money to go to the pool. But, if you are on the swim team, you swim for free... They changed the coach for some reason, and another coach came and he did the same thing. He said, 'Jump. Let me see...' And, he said, 'Oh, I think I can do something with you.' I was glad, this was wonderful!"

Little did Samy know that years later, that first coach would become the motivation for this passionate swimmer to teach others how to swim, after he moved to the U.S.A.

Back to life in Egypt, Samy continued swimming for the club team throughout his school years, because the schools in Egypt do not offer swimming. All competitive swimmers in Egypt compete for private club teams.

In addition to the swim team, Samy was recruited to play goalie for the water polo team, because he was a good breaststroker and could tread water for long periods of time. As it turned out, that first coach was very wrong about Samy's potential, because he went on to swim at the national level in his native country.

Military service is required in Egypt, so Samy swam for the military team and spent most of his service time training. Following the military, he landed a job with an American oil service company and worked at the Gulf of Suez.

Meanwhile, at his club pool, Samy was meeting a lot of foreigners who were visiting Egypt. One day, he met an American girl from Atlanta while he was swimming. Sylvia was in Egypt visiting her grandparents at the time, and the two stayed in touch after she returned home to Atlanta. She came back to Egypt again to visit her grandparents, and Samy knew this was the girl he wanted to marry. "I proposed in the pool, because I spent more time in the water than I did on land," he said.

Following Sylvia back home to the U.S.A., Samy moved here permanently in 1980. They lived in Texas where he worked for his company in Houston. After a move to the company's Louisiana location, they later decided to relocate to Sylvia's hometown, Atlanta. At that point, Samy quit working for his company and went back to school to earn a Master's Degree in International Risk Management.

To earn money to help support Sylvia and their young son, Samy taught swimming at Swim Atlanta. "I thought there is no way somebody could make a living out of swimming, because swimming was always a luxury for me. I liked it, because I tried to do what another coach did not do for me," Samy said, reflecting back on that first coach who told him to go and play basketball.

It wasn't until 2015 that Samy joined U.S. Masters Swimming. "It was really a wonderful way to extend the competition in the sport... If you [still] want to swim competitively, Masters is the only outlet; and, I wanted to do that." Samy wasn't familiar with Masters before he joined, but when he returned to Egypt to visit, his swimming friends who were still competing in swimming told Samy that he could join a similar organization in the U.S.A. and compete again. They encouraged him to check it out.

"I train on my own, so [the Masters website] is a wonderful tool for people like me. It has workouts and tips about how to do this and how to improve that. Of course, we cannot put coaches out of business, because I am one," he joked.

"[Another] one of the benefits of Masters is that you meet a whole new set of people. They are not related to [your neighborhood], they are not related to work; they're just a whole different group of people who also love swimming. It makes it very interesting."

Although Samy no longer teaches at Swim Atlanta, he does give private swim instruction at the Community Wellness Center that is associated with the Second Ponce de Leon Baptist Church.

“Everything meaningful that has happened has happened in the water and around the water. First was the [marriage] proposal. I’m a part of an inner-city ministry around the former Turner Field in the Summerhill community. It’s one of the oldest black communities in the city. When [some] people find out that I know how to swim and I can teach swimming, they come to Buckhead and I teach them swimming. I teach for the enjoyment of seeing someone who is terrified of the water become somebody who likes the water,” Samy explained, telling the story of one of his swim students who worked at Georgia Aquarium. His student had an opportunity to advance from being an usher to working with the dolphins. The teenager was terrified of the water, though, which prevented him from taking the promotion. Samy knew the boy’s grandmother from his work in the community, and she asked Samy if he would be willing to teach her grandson how to swim. The grandson brought along his sister, and Samy taught them both. “It was really meaningful to help make this happen for him,” he said.

“I got certified to teach adults, too, which opened a whole other segment of the market,” Samy explained, adding that one of his students was an 85-year-old woman. “That was another meaningful thing that has happened. I was reluctant to work with her, but it turned out to be a wonderful experience.”

One of Samy’s most rewarding experiences almost didn’t happen—until he was convinced to take on the challenge. As Samy explained to me, he has a friend who travels frequently to Africa and wanted to start a summer camp for disadvantaged kids. The friend approached Samy about teaching swimming; however, he didn’t want to go and questioned whether there would be any interest or need. “I told him, ‘Who wants to learn swimming? We are about to go to Africa to teach people swimming. I mean, that cannot be right!’” As it turned out, his friend had found a hotel willing to rent a lane in their pool, and he convinced Samy to go. “It was really a wonderful experience for me. That was in 2003, and I returned and taught for 15 consecutive years [until the pandemic].”

When Samy is at a meet, you will find him racing the breaststroke events. He also likes the 500 freestyle. “For me it’s like a foreign language, because I do mostly breaststroke. It’s a long distance *and* it’s not breaststroke!” he remarked. The Southside Pentathlon is Samy’s other favorite competitive event, and he goes all in

doing the Ironman (200-yard events of all four strokes and 400 IM). “I enjoy very much these two events. They seem like a punishment. I mean, one would not do this for the fun of it... I did the Ironman two times. It was great! [The Pentathlon] coincides with my birthday—a day before or a day after; my birthday is September 11... so, I go and reward myself with an Ironman. I tell you; I finish that ironman—I do not argue, and I do not sign any legal documents. You don’t want to make any commitment to anybody!” he joked about the exhaustion he feels after completing the difficult challenge.

This competitive swimmer enjoys racing the 500 freestyle, because there is the opportunity for strategizing, unlike the all-out 50 freestyle. “The 500; it’s like watching a car race. The first now is not the first after; they keep changing positions. I like that!” he said, adding that his goal is to improve his times in the 500 as well as the Ironman Pentathlon events.

The competition is what Samy enjoys most about his own swimming, but he gets so much more out of the sport than that. “I like to be competitive. This is for me as far as a swimmer. For teaching, I like to see a person or a child that was at the pool, because his mom told him he has to go. But then, later on, that would change when you see that child running into the pool to swim because they *like* it. Not everybody is going to be an Olympic swimmer, not everybody is going to be competitive; but, everybody should enjoy being in the water. You cannot enjoy being in the water if you are not safe. All these floaties; the ones on the back and the ones on the arm; you’re going to a war, not to go swim!” he joked. “I like to see that (enjoyment) very much, especially after a long, long time ago, somebody told me, ‘Son, you go and play basketball.’ Even in my mind, if I see that a child may not be a swimmer, I’m not going to say that. But they enjoy the water and play in the water, but play safe. They can go to birthday parties without being afraid, or without the parents being afraid and not sure what’s really going to happen. So, I like that; I like that very much. I have taught a lot of kids. These kids are now married, and they have their own kids. It shows how ancient I am now, but they bring their own kids to me.”

“God gave us gifts, and we need to use these gifts, to share it with others, to help others, to be a good influence as a human being. I learned this from my experience when my friend wanted me to go and teach swimming in Africa. I said no, because I didn’t want to go; but, it turned out to be a wonderful ministry. It was a great thing. For those people who know how to swim, and they have the skill— you don’t need to be a teacher, but if you see somebody who can take some instruction

to improve, and you provide it; I think there would be less drowning incidences and more people who are attracted to the sport of swimming.”

“I hope to swim as long as I can, even if I don’t win medals. I know myself; I’m very competitive... I don’t want [winning] to be the motivation. There are stages of life, and even if I don’t win as many [medals] as I win now, I want to have it be the same motivation, the same time in the water to practice—the same thing as if I am going to win. I hope this will happen.”

“Swimming has been in the fabric of my life. So much of everything that is worth mentioning or important to me has happened around the pool.”