

Swimmer Profile –Bruce Johnson

By Elaine Krugman



Before writing one of my Swimmer Profile features, I typically request an interview via e-mail and conduct the interview by phone. I have a list of questions as a framework for the interview, and they often lead to other questions once the interview is underway.

In the case of Bruce Johnson, he offered to “put together a summary of ‘facts’ and send it” to me, so I would have some idea of his background. Three and a half pages (2,249 words) later, I had a complete “Swimmer Profile” on my computer screen! I could have easily sent it off to Bob Kohmescher as is, canceled the interview, and been done! That would have been too easy and no fun, though. My favorite part about doing these profiles is getting to know my subject better; so, I forged ahead, conducted the interview, and asked a few questions during our delightful conversation

that he hadn’t thought of first.

As it turns out, Bruce Johnson earned a degree in Journalism, worked as Managing Editor for Water Polo Scoreboard magazine, and Editor of Khamsat, a quarterly journal about desert-bred Arabian horses. He was also a technical writer at the nuclear plant where he worked.

Here, then, is Bruce Johnson in his own words, and in mine...

Bruce started his swimming career by learning how to swim in the late ‘50s at the Green Spring Valley Hunt Club, in Owings Mills, Maryland. “You learned to be fast since the pool was spring-fed with the water entering at what I was told as 48 degrees! We were kids and didn’t know better, thinking all pools were like this!” He doesn’t remember many adults lollygagging in the water for very long.

It wasn’t until Bruce’s family moved to Newport Beach, California, in 1962, that Bruce got any formal swim training. During the summer before entering high school, he participated in a city swim league that was coached by the new Newport Harbor High School swimming and water polo coach. Bruce had planned to try out for the football team, but after school started, he was spotted by his summer swim coach who asked why he wasn’t at water polo practice. Bruce replied that he was trying out for football, and the water polo coach said, “Not any longer! Be at the pool tomorrow [afternoon].” Being a high school freshman, Bruce did what he was told!

The freshman ended up playing water polo and competing on the swim team for all four years of high school—the last three coached by a different coach, Bill Barnett. During Bruce’s senior year, he started for the varsity water polo team. They won the California Interscholastic Championship and were ranked the #1 high school water polo team by Water Polo Scoreboard magazine. Coach Barnett ultimately went Water Polo Team to a Silver Medal, in 1988, and a fourth-place finish, in 1992.

Following high school graduation, Bruce attended and swam at California State University Fullerton, for two years, where he earned three Division II All-American swim awards in the 1650 and 500 freestyle events. At the conference championships his sophomore year, Bruce was tasked with swimming the 200 fly, since he didn’t have anything else to swim that day of the meet. It was the first time he had ever swum the event, and he turned in a 2:10 time with no training!

Reflecting back on his high school and college swimming days before swimming goggles became available, Bruce said, “Homework was performed after workouts squinting through large fuzzy circles around every light due to the effects of the chlorine on the eyes.”

Bruce wasn’t attending college on a scholarship, so he left swimming after his sophomore year, so he could get a job to pay for his education. Bruce did play water polo for 4 years with the college team, however, which earned a third-place finish at the 1971 NCAA Championships, after defeating the defending National Champions in the first round.

During his college senior year, Bruce took an assistant swim coach job at the AAU (now USS) team at his former high school. He went on to coach both swimming and water polo at Saddleback Valley Aquatics, followed by stints at Cerritos Aquatics and Servite High School, in Southern California.

After several years of coaching, Bruce joined the US Navy where he was ultimately stationed in San Diego. During a training period there, he found time to swim and even competed in an early Masters swim meet, setting a San Diego County Masters Record for his 25-29 age group in the 200 IM. “It was funny then and now since I am the world’s worst breaststroker!” he laughed.

While in the navy, Bruce’s swimming skills came in very good use on one occasion when the navy destroyer he was working aboard was testing an exercise antisubmarine torpedo just off the coast of his hometown. The 8-to-10-foot swells were too large for the torpedo retrieval boat to get close enough to snag it, so there was a shout out for a volunteer to jump off the destroyer to retrieve it. Being the very strong ocean swimmer that he was, Bruce offered himself up for the task. A line was tied around him, he jumped off the destroyer, swam out to the torpedo, and the crew hauled him back in with torpedo in hand!

Following his four years in the Navy, Bruce’s work took him to Arizona and away from the water for about twelve years. He then returned to swimming for exercise and to lose weight. Soon, he realized that he had missed the routine and sense of satisfaction when swimming challenging sets. He met some other Masters swimmers at the pool and started competing in Arizona meets, in 1992, improving enough to enjoy multiple National Top 10’s in distance events. In all, he racked up 20 individual and four relay Top 10’s, between 1992 and 1996.

Bruce also kept very busy competing in open water with the other Masters swimmers from his Litchfield Park pool, in Arizona. The group started with a 2-mile swim in Lake Pleasant, in 1995, which Bruce won beating all of the other swimmers to the finish line. That whetted his appetite for some longer swims, including the Newport Beach Pier to Pier 1.8-mile swim, the USMS National Championship 10-mile Swim up the coast from the Huntington Beach Pier to the Seal Beach Pier, the Long Beach 3-mile Swim (“It felt like a sprint after the 10 miler the previous week!”), and the 12-mile swim around Coronado Island, in San Diego. At the 10-mile race, Bruce was told the ocean’s water temperature that day was 63 degrees, which was almost 25 degrees colder than the pool temperatures he was used to in his training pool! Bruce earned a first-place finish in his age group and a case of hypothermia when he finished!

To fit in long-distance training to accomplish those swims while working a full-time schedule, Bruce found a clever solution. As he explained, “I was able to take an hour of vacation every day, Monday through Friday. That way, I could do two-a day workouts when the pool opened at 6:00 am, [swim] until 7:00, and still be at work, which was about 40 minutes away; and, then workout in the afternoon.”

Work commitments left Bruce with little time to continue his 10,000-yard training sessions, so he transitioned his workouts to focus on fitness, and he stopped competing. He continued, however, to run the weekly swim workouts for the Litchfield Park Masters group for eight years.

Following retirement and a move to Clermont, Georgia, in 2014, Bruce stopped swimming again. “I felt that the pool was too far away to justify the time spent driving back and forth. I reconsidered this position after the bathroom weight scale started sounding alarms, so I started swimming at the Frances Meadows Aquatic Center, in Gainesville, Georgia, in September of 2016,” he said.

Describing his current swim group, Bruce said, “We have a tiny group of mostly 60+ year-old swimmers, and we call ourselves the ‘Olympic Nopefuls!’ We swim Monday through Friday for about an hour and a quarter, starting at 5:00 am. Our workouts are designed for fitness, and we do almost entirely freestyle workouts. Additionally, the words ‘kick’ and ‘sprint’ are known as four-letter words, so we never do that; although, fins are allowed in every set if you like.”

Evidently, dryland training is also something Bruce curses, because when asked if he does any to supplement his swimming workouts, he simply replied, “I mow the lawn!” which turns out includes 12 acres of pasture and woods.

Bruce does have a grueling workout that he likes to do in the pool, however, and it began as a punishment set ordered by his high school coach. As he remembered, “In my senior year in high school, I was cast in a musical, and our rehearsal ran really late. I arrived at the pool at the same time the rest of the swim team was getting out, having finished their workout for the day. Coach Barnett was really mad! He told me to warm up, and then do 20 x 200 freestyle swims @ 2:30. This was 1969, and we had never approached that level of continuous high intensity work or that short of an interval. Everyone left, and I swam back and forth alone. Fortunately, it was April, so there was enough light out, and I didn’t have to swim in the pitch-black darkness! I survived the workout, but confess I had to swim the last four as a continuous swim! Ever since then, I have used that 20 x 200 freestyle workout as a metric to test my fitness. I went back and swam that workout in the new pool at my 50th high school reunion. I also swam it successfully on my 70th birthday at Frances Meadows in April; although, for both of these swims, I added 30 seconds to the interval and used pull buoys and paddles as aids. “After all, that was 50 years and about 60 pounds ago!”

Bruce’s goal going forward is to keep swimming that 20 x 200’s set on the 3:00 interval for the next ten years! You have to really like swimming to do that type of a set, and Bruce says, “...Challenging yourself to do some really hard workouts to see if you can still make them” is what he enjoys most about being in the pool.

The camaraderie of swimming with his fellow “Olympic Nopefuls” is his favorite thing about Masters. “I also appreciate the yard-tracking (Go the Distance) aspect of the [USMS.org] website, so I can keep track of whether I am doing better or worse than at the same time last year.” As of this writing, Bruce has enjoyed logging in a lot of yardage in the Go the Distance Fitness Log. Currently, he is ranked 5th of 39 Georgia swimmers registered on the site.

Keep up those 20 x 200’s, Bruce!