

SWIMMER PROFILE: MIKE MARTIN

By
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Last year, I profiled two members of the Olympic Nopefuls: Jay Scovill and Bruce Johnson. Now, it's time to write about the creator of this quirky crew from Gainesville.

Mike Martin coined the name for the group of Masters swimmers who get up bright and early in the morning to swim together at the Francis Meadows Aquatic Center with Bruce as their coach. He cheerfully told me during our phone interview, "I have a Facebook page, the 'Olympic Nopefuls Swim Group,' which probably has about six followers, but I decided we would name ourselves that, because that's what we are. We are certainly not hopefuls!" It helps to have a sense of humor when that alarm clock goes off early enough to arrive for a 5:00 am swim, four mornings a week...

You also have to love swimming to stay motivated enough not to rip the alarm clock out of the wall and heave it (or your cell phone) across the room, and that's definitely the case with Mike, a lifelong swimmer.

The Nopeful moved to Gainesville in 1967 as a child and joined the Gainesville swim team. "I always enjoyed swimming—I loved doing 'Superman' off the walls because I was a big comic book reader, and Superman was my favorite character." Mike wasn't a top-tier swimmer, but good enough to make the finals in competitions.

The love of swimming brought Mike back into the pool after he graduated from Emory University Dental School in 1982 and set up his dental practice (which he retired from in 2019). He joined Masters and has been swimming ever since, although he didn't compete for most of those years. After participating in a meet in 1983, it wasn't until the 2016 St. Nick's meet at Georgia Tech that he raced again, competing in three events, including the 800 meter freestyle against (Georgia Masters Board of Directors Member) Rob Copeland. As Mike described the race, "[Rob] took off, and I tried as hard as I could to stay up with him, but he touched me out by a mere 57 seconds, hardly a blink of the eye. Since there were only two people in our age group, I got second place, and Rob got next to last..."

Returning to competition after 33 years was a great experience for Mike, and he especially enjoyed meeting the other swimmers in his age group. In addition to having nice things to say

about Rob, he mentioned meeting Pat Eddy, saying, “[He] is as friendly as you can be. He cheered for me in one of my races, and I felt part of the group.”

It wasn't long after that meet that Mike had to have open heart surgery, but it only kept him out of the pool for one month. “After I got to where I could swim, (Coach) Bruce said, ‘You’re looking pretty good in the water, so let’s do a set of 5 x100’s and see how you do.’ We were both sucking wind at the time, but he’s a good coach. It has been a great experience swimming with [Bruce], Tim Erickson, Jay Scovill, and whoever else wants to sign up (for the Olympic Nopefuls).”

After five years away from swim meets, Mike swam in the St. Nick’s meet, last December. He raced the 800 meter freestyle again, this time in the 65-69 age group, and not against Rob Copeland. His 12:04.96 time earned him a Georgia Masters record. This time, he came in first AND last place, since he swam unopposed.

At the time of our interview (which took place before that meet), Mike said, “My goal this year is to match my 2016 time in the 800 meters. That’s what I’m looking for. I feel like I’m in better physical shape, but I’m five years older.” Although he didn’t match that 11:55.61 time, his record-breaking swim was quite an accomplishment. After all, Georgia Masters’ motto is, “The older we get, the faster we were.”

Training 3-4,000 yards per day, four times a week, Mike was well-prepared for that record-breaking swim, although he really considers himself just a fitness swimmer. He doesn’t swim more than that, because he feels he needs a day to recover both physically and mentally. On those off days, however, he likes to take walks with his wife Abby.

Once Mike is in the pool, though, he doesn’t like getting out. “I remember thinking I owned the pool when I was a teenager. Some of the F.R.O.G.S.—that’s what I call Bruce and me, which means fairly rotund old guy—will complain when we have to get out of the pool (for the high school team’s training session). I guess the main reason we swim at 5 am is that Jay Scovill’s wife is still a teacher (and they like to train together before she goes to work).”

In addition to training with the Olympic Nopefuls, Mike has given open water swimming a try, joining a group at a local lake. “I was able to keep up with most everybody in the group, and it was fun, but I missed the line on the bottom of the pool. There wasn’t a line on the bottom of the lake!”

He still decided to try a couple of open water competitions, though. “I’ve done the Georgia Games Open Water Meet twice, and of course, Pat Eddy won all his races. The last time I swam, I swam the 3,000 meters, and he beat me by five minutes on that.”

Mike loves those long yardage swims, so one of his goals is to participate in the 2022 *Go the Distance* event, “to see how many miles I rack up... I’m swimming 8-10 miles a week, and that’s probably more than 90-95% of 66- year-olds are exercising... I want to be in the pool until I’m 90 years old, just chuggin’ along,” he laughed.

Asked what he enjoys most about swimming the miles he racks up, he explained, “I enjoy when I first jump in, particularly in 77 or 78-degree water, I enjoy the sensation that almost takes your breath away when you jump in. I enjoy that, because I know when I swim hard, that cold water is going to soothe me on my workout. When the water is 82 or 83, I know I’m going to feel like a wet noodle. I love the sensation of flying through the water. And, I love that even though I’m 66 years old, I am faster than most of the super in shape, super intense triathletes that are in the pool, too. It really gives me a false sense of accomplishment, but just knowing that I can stay ahead of those guys... I just think of all of the things that swimming has done for me. It has definitely been a stress reliever.”

It's Masters Swimming in particular— especially the Olympic Nopefuls— that Mike loves. “The camaraderie is probably the most important thing for me right now.” The more the merrier, so he is actively working on getting swimmers he has met at the pool to join his Olympic Nopeful group.

As he further explained about his love for Masters, Mike said, “Because I don’t (usually) swim in meets, the thing I like about Masters, though, is that I belong to a large group that have an interest in swimming. I like the resource (Swimmer Magazine and USMS.org) of reading about Masters and who is showing up to the meets, particularly the bigger meets like the Rowdy Gaines meet and Auburn. I like to see who shows up, and of course I like to compare myself to the guys who show up to that.

To me, there’s always, WOW, look at them; they are great! Super! I can only dream about swimming like that. Those guys are animals, and it just makes me smile to be a small part of the group that is Masters swimming.”