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AMERICAN

■ *By Tom Slear*
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Underpinning competitive swimming in the United States is a system of community summer swim leagues that captures boys and girls when they are young and propels the more serious ones to USA Swimming clubs.

The torch passed from one generation to the next, and it only got hotter. In the early 1970s, Caroline Miller started her competitive swimming career with a community summer league team in Montgomery County, Md. The experience was all positive.

"Those were some of my happiest memories," says Miller, who went on to swim for the Northern Virginia Aquatic Club and then Harvard University. "Summer swimming instilled a life-long love of the sport."

Miller's three children now swim in the same league that she did and have found the experiences even more enjoyable.

"I just love summer swimming," says Haywood Miller, who will swim for the University of Maryland this year. "It's fun, it's low pressure. By the time I was 10, I was swimming with Curl-Burke and I was top-16 (nationally) in breaststroke, but I never lost my interest in summer swimming."

Caroline's sister, Liz, recalls her years with summer swim leagues so fondly that she moved temporarily three years ago from the Boston area, where the community leagues are rare, to Montgomery County so that her son, Max, could benefit from the experience.

"It's a low-risk, fun way to start swimming," she says. "I wish he could have done more of it. He ended up joining a USA Swimming team, but it was too soon. He needed more summer swimming. Lap after lap at such a young age ruined it for him, and he quit."

A COMMUNITY STAPLE

Summer swimming is a phenomenon unique to the United States. There is no central clearing house, so historical records on the national level are mostly verbal and anecdotal. The word-of-mouth consensus is that as community-based private and semi-private outdoor pools started to pop up around the country in the 1950s, the idea of starting competitive swim teams to enhance interest and boost membership soon followed.

In some areas of the country, such as Montgomery County, northern Virginia, Atlanta, and Houston, the concept flourished beyond what anyone imagined, as middle and upper class families filled the suburbs with money and children searching for summertime activities. Developers quickly understood what pools did for local property

values. Pools became as much a staple of new developments as access roads.

(Don't mistake community pools, where membership fees are relatively modest, with country clubs, which typically include golf courses and restaurants and the fees are substantial.)

The Montgomery County Swim League is approaching its 50th birthday and stands as one of the largest and most entrenched summer swim leagues in the United States. The league consists of some 90 teams divided into 15 divisions. The competition is fierce. Former swimmers include a number of Olympians, most prominently Mike Barrowman, the former world record holder in the 200-meter breaststroke and the gold medalist in that event in 1992.

Michael Raab, a member of the 2005 U.S. World Championship Team, managed to set only one league record during his 10-year career with the MCSL, and not until he was 18. The record lasted one season. An international swimmer staying with a summer league team until he went off to college seems curious, if not bizarre, but as Raab explains, "There is a lot of loyalty. Some of my best friends to this day were at that pool. Some of my best times in swimming were at that pool, and swimming had taken me to a lot of places."

BREAD AND BUTTER

But while special, the Montgomery County Swim League is not unique. The extent of participation nationwide in summer leagues is hard to determine because there is no national organization that compiles membership data. In his 2001 book "Gold in the Water," P.H. Mullen estimated that as many as a million boys and girls participate each summer, which is four times the membership in USA Swimming.

Brian Basye, Speedo's team marketing and sales manager, indicates a much higher number when he points out that during the first half of each year, the sales emphasis at Speedo is summer swimmers.

"It's the bread and butter of the business," Basye says. "The pure volume of the summer swimmers makes us tailor toward that market for the first half of the year. USA Swimming has 250,000 members, and they buy maybe four suits a year for a total of one million suits. There are four million recreational swimmers in the United States. Even

if they buy just 1 1/2 suits on average, that's six million suits."

Whether one million or four million, the number of summer league swimmers dwarfs that of club swimmers. Some of the reasons are obvious. The demands of summertime community swimming are relatively modest – perhaps an hour a day for six to eight weeks and two or three hours each Saturday for a meet. The schedule is carefully tailored to ensure only teams of equal ability compete against one another. After each season in the Montgomery County Swim League, a sophisticated computer program incorporating the swimmers' best times stages a virtual competition of each team against every other in the league. The top six go into the top division the following summer, the next six into the second division, and so on.

But there are plenty of other reasons. Though less obvious, they are just as important to the swimmers. The meets pit one neighborhood against another. The competitors very often know each other. The guy or girl on the starting block in the next lane is not some nameless club swimmer whom they might never see again, but a classmate from the adjacent neighborhood who sorely wants bragging rights. The races take on a distinctly personal feel.

"The meets are short, they are intense, and they are fun," says Sue (Pitt) Anderson, a former world record holder in the 200-meter butterfly who grew up in New Jersey swimming in summer leagues and subsequently coaching summer league teams for 20 years. "They have a lot of appeal." (Anderson is USA Swimming's resource development specialist.)

BIG STAGE

The summertime swim team format is unique among sports in America, with 6-year-old boys and girls scoring points for teams that include 18-year-olds and every age in between. The teams have enough swimmers to cover all strokes and relays for all age groups. A 10-and-under will have over 100 swimmers and parents cheering during his race.

"That's a big stage for an 8-year-old," says Raab. "At a soccer game, there might be 10 parents in the stands for each team and maybe 15 players. There's a huge difference."

Then there's added comfort of camaraderie. In this respect, summer league teams take on the texture of high school



sports with the teammates identifying with each other not because they happen to be on the same team, but because they come from the same community. The day before a summer league meet might consist of practice in the morning, hanging out with teammates at the pool in the afternoon, and enjoying a pre-meet meal/pep rally in the evening hosted by the swimmers' parents, who, in turn, build a sense of camaraderie of their own.

"It can capture the heart of a swimmer regardless of their talent level and commitment," says Miller. "It's open to all comers. It's so American."

It's also a boon to club swimming. Chris Davis, the long-time owner and head coach of Swim Atlanta, estimates that there are some 35,000 summer league swimmers in the greater Atlanta metropolitan area, and he pursues them aggressively. The summer leagues are the perfect primer. The swimmers have been schooled to one degree or another in all four strokes, and they have experienced competition.

However, Davis does not kid himself about their motivation. Do they want to make sectionals cuts? To swim in the junior nationals? To become an Olympian?

Hardly.

"They want to get better so they can romp and stomp the next summer," Davis says. "Just about all of them initially want to be next summer's county champ."

Davis doesn't call what he does recruiting. Instead, he uses the euphemism "education." The process is subtle. While he stands on the deck of a summer league pool during a competition, members of Swim Atlanta approach him. Others wonder why

many of the best swimmers in the league are talking to him.

"He's the head coach at Swim Atlanta," those in the know answer.

"Swim Atlanta? Will that do me any good?"

"You bet."

At that point parents and swimmers alike are intrigued because Davis offers the possibility of accelerated improvement. This summer's runners-up, next summer's champions.

"That's what they want, what you can do for them right now," Davis says. "In 1988 when Doug Gjertsen (Swim Atlanta by way of summer league) made the Olympic team, I thought we had arrived. I said that you would never see Chris Davis at another summer league meet. But our numbers went down that year. The swimmers didn't care about our Olympian. They only cared about what we could do for them at the next meet, or the next summer."

THE PERFECT FEEDER SYSTEM

Summer leagues have usurped the swim lessons of years past at the local YMCAs and the town pools. These leagues capture athletes when they are young, process them through the lower levels of competition, and then deliver the more talented ones to USA Swimming club teams. The leagues are, as Anderson says, "the perfect feeder system." The NFL, the NBA and to a lesser extent major league baseball, have the colleges. USA Swimming has the summer leagues.

In "Gold in the Water," Mullen chronicled the ups and downs of numerous swimmers who strove to make the 2000 American Olympic team. He described summer swim

leagues as "the starting point for nearly every serious competitor."

The morphing from summer league to club swimmer is slow and symbiotic, according to Raab. Though swimming is not a mainstream sport when stacked up against football, soccer and basketball, it's a vital part of the athletic fiber in a community that has a pool with a team that competes in a league.

"You were odd if you didn't do it," Raab says. "But it was different for club swimming. Though there were plenty of good clubs in the area, I couldn't see myself going directly to club swimming without the summer league first. After a year or two at the summer team, you hear about club swimming, and you want to do it once or twice a week over the winter so that you will do better in the summer.

"The shift comes when you are 11 or 12. You want to do well at the club level just like in summer swimming. Then you get to a point where you realize that there is a higher level of swimming. You have goals that go beyond summer swimming."

"But I never left summer swimming," Raab adds. "I still go back to watch the meets. I catch probably 80 to 90 percent of them."

Looking at summertime swim leagues some 50 years after their birth causes one's head to shake in disbelief. There was no national design and no regional planning, yet a system evolved that is simple, functional, and enjoyable. The leagues continue to flourish despite the lack of a management bureaucracy or financial benefactors.

Against all odds they continue to grow and prosper and *that* is what makes them so American. ♦