

Out of the Blue : Sharing insights and positive perspectives about the sport of swimming from those that have lived the experience. By Cynthia Owens



She was a teammate of mine in the early 1970's. I remember her well as a humble young lady with a ready smile...and an awesome backstroke.

Nancy Kirkpatrick got a late start in competitive swimming at the ripe old age of 13, but through her dedication, hard work and commitment, she quickly emerged as a champion. Among her many accolades, she was a National Age Group champion in both backstrokes and she finished 9th at the 1972 Olympic Trials when she was sixteen. During her swim career she was ranked in the top 10 in the world in both the 100m and 200m Backstrokes from 1971-75, and in the top 3 in the world for 1973-1974. In addition, she was a four-time gold medalist at Senior Nationals as a member

of the SCSC 400 Medley Relay, and earned a new American Record each time, as well as a ten-time Senior National finalist in the individual backstroke events.

A graduate of UCLA with her degree in Kinesiology, she went on to compete as a Masters swimmer, where she earned the title of World Champion three times. She enjoyed a twenty year career as a Vice President of Sales & Marketing with Blue Cross of California.

Nancy is now an award winning Masters Swim Coach for Simi Aquatic Masters with 300 athletes, including national champions, top-ten Iron-man finalists and professional athletes. I recently had the opportunity to catch up with Nancy and talk about her swimming experience.

Q: What has swimming meant to you?

Being a part of swimming has given me something to be very proud of. I'm thankful to have achieved so much through the sport; an education at UCLA, lifelong friends, travel throughout the world with SCSC and USA Swimming, strong values, (dedication, respect, honesty, integrity), and a lifelong love of the water. As an adult, I'm retired from the corporate world and I'm a full time Masters Swim Coach and just recently named SPMA Masters Coach of the Year. I'm Aquatics Director at our local YCMA in Southern California. I have reunited with so many swimmers from my teenage years through Masters. I'm doing what I truly love to do, coach swimming, and I owe it all to my days swimming at SCSC.

Q: When you think of your personal experiences growing up at SCSC, what comes to mind?

My first exposure to swimming was the 1st Annual International Swim Meet in the newly built International Swim Center in 1967. My family lived very near the pool and we went as spectators. My father thought it would be a good sport for his four girls after watching that incredible, star-studded meet. From then on swimming played a major role in my life and my entire family's life. Our family did not take vacations back then; our vacation involved packing up the Ford station wagon with a couple other SCSC kids and driving up to Redding on 4th of July weekend for a swim meet! It was so exciting when we got to stay in a hotel.

As a swimmer I looked forward to going to practice to see my friends. In my early years, 8th and 9th grade, I was not focused on the training. The motivation for swimming was "fun" and my friends were there. Let's face it no one joins the swim team to swim endless laps in the pool! It's all about the people and the coaches. I remember enjoying going to swim meets and improving my times. But again, the memorable part about swim meets was hanging out on my sleeping bag with my friends and playing card games like Spit and Slap Jack! I learned a lot about getting along with others, team work, supporting your friends, humility, helping others on the team whose parents could not take them to meets. I believe I learned a lot about citizenship in those days.

Out of the Blue (continued)

Q: Did you always dream of making the Olympic Team? Why or why not is having that dream important?

I began to develop very quickly at SCSC I was promoted as a 13/14 years old to the Senior team (the top group at that time) with George Haines. I was awestruck by all the famous swimmers in this group Spitz, Pokey Watson, Jan Henne, Linda Gustavson, Mitch Ivey, Brian Job, John Hencken, and so many more. I was now swimming with Olympians. It was amazing how George made me feel just as important as those super stars. At this point my Olympic dream became a reality thanks to George.

Having the *dream* of making the Olympic team gave me a long term goal to focus on. I had short term goals along the way; making Nationals, making finals at Nationals, making a US National Team Trip, setting age group and senior records, winning the 4x100 Medley Relay at nationals, setting American Records, all those were steps to an Olympic Dream. I think looking back on it those goals kept me going through good swims and bad swims. I believe it is very important that we set *high* goals not *mediocre* goals, and that we then strive to achieve them.

SCSC had the best coach in the world so we were not swimming to be good; we were all swimming to be *great*. We were not swimming to make Olympic Trials we were swimming to make the Olympic Team. We were not trying to be great in soccer and swimming were we dedicated to one sport and achieving the highest possible success.

Unfortunately I did not make the Olympic team which, at 16, was devastating to me. I cried behind my block with Coach Haines, he cried too. For weeks when asked about Olympic Trials my family said my eyes would well up with tears. It was not my best meet but I came back and continued to swim, set some new goals, and ended up having the best year of all my swimming years that post Olympic year. Had I quit I never would have had that year. I met some of my closest friends in swimming that year and traveled around the world swimming and competing. I began my public speaking career at the age of 17 after being on an ill fated USA Swimming Trip to Chile in which their revolution occurred. Upon my arrival home I was sharing that story at local high schools and the annual SCSC swimming banquet. Because of that experience, my entire adult life has included public speaking as part of my career.

Q: As a coach of the best swimmers in the world, what advice do you have for our SCSC swimmers who are just beginning their quest?

New swimmers: learn good technique early and build friendships on the swim team. Set short term and long term goals, so you can have success along the way with your short term goals while working toward the long-term DREAM. Visualize your dream!

Swimming requires a lot more dedication and time training than other sports. This is why your pool friends are so important; you are working toward a common goal and they can relate to how hard and how much time it takes to be great! Do you know Michael Phelps did not miss a workout for something like 8 years, not even his birthday or Christmas!

Know that swimming is the greatest sport there is and what you put into it will come back ten- fold. It may not come back in ways you imagine as an age group or senior swimmer but you will find out later in life you have gained far more than a personal best time. What you will learn over the course of your swimming career will give you skills for life!

Out of the Blue is a regular monthly feature in our club newsletter to showcase stories of inspiration, motivation and humor from those who have strong ties to our great sport.