

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



This month's article is very special. Our story features an SCSC alum who became a real life hero and served our country with great honor. For me, one of the most compelling parts of his story is that it all started in his formative years as an SCSC swimmer!

Jeff Freeman was the last of 4 kids in his family to join SCSC. He was just 6 years old when he tried out for the team, in the "little kid's pool" at the old Santa Clara High School with others who would become good friends for many years to come. He swam for SCSC until he graduated from high school 12 years later.

Jeff attended Cal Berkeley, from which he'd earned full scholarship. After graduating, he entered the United States Marine Corps Officer Program and was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant in 1982. From there he graduated from the US Naval Flight School, and was selected to fly the CH-53E tactical assault support aircraft. Jeff was promoted to Captain and flew combat missions in support of Desert Shield/Desert Storm in '91, and then to work in flight operations as a Major, supporting President Clinton in Uganda, Africa in '98.

By 2002, Jeff was flying anti-terrorist support missions in support of Operation Enduring Freedom - Djibouti, Africa, Horn of Africa/Persian Gulf, and had been

promoted again to Lieutenant Colonel. He continued to serve by flying combat missions in support of Operation Enduring Freedom in Bagram, Afghanistan, in '04, as a Lieutenant Colonel/Colonel.

Today, Colonel Jeff Freeman, United States Marine Corps is the Safety Professional for Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, Livermore, CA for the United States Department of Energy. He is happily married to another SCSC alum, Janet Wiemken, and they have two grown children.

Recently I had the opportunity to catch up with Jeff and ask him about his thoughts on swimming.

Question: What has swimming meant to you?

Competitive swimming is what made me the person I am today. To define yourself by what you did early in life may seem a bit uncommon. But, we swimmers share a very unique experience. We start as age-groupers, bonding and learning from our coaches and mentors just what it takes to work hard, set goals and we learned about not stopping until you've reached those goals. As we transition to being young men and women, our goals are set higher, and our self-confidence in achieving those goals increases to match. There truly is no limit to what can be attained. For me, being involved in swimming since the age of 6 has taught me many things - all of which I bring to bear in my daily life. Goal-setting is just one of the tools in my "swimming bag." After an average age-group swimming experience, I was able to focus more on stroke technique and using the skills that I was born with, both mental and physical, to move beyond "average" in high school.

I had wonderful coaches in George Haines and Mitch Ivey, both of whom knew how to motivate and capitalize on the talents of each and every swimmer. Wonderful men. I ended high school as a world-ranked breaststroker and with a full-ride scholarship to UC Berkeley, and had a very successful college career under the guidance and skill of Nort Thornton. During college, I was ranked in the top 10 in the world each year, won Nationals, was the member of 2 NCAA championship teams, traveled with the US Swimming Team and went to World Games. All of this would not have been possible if I did not learn from the best, and have the best possible examples of leadership and physical and mental toughness when I was a young kid at SCSC.

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How could you not want to excel with all those Olympians in the pool with you? To this day, I rely upon a vast array of "lessons learned" from my swimming days for success in my daily life. Success means different things to different people - for me, it is simply accomplishing what I have set out to do, in the best possible manner. It just so happens that if you were a kid swimming at SCSC, throughout your life, your goals tend to be set higher than the average person.

Question: When you think of your personal experience at SCSC what comes to mind?

There is not a day that goes by that I don't remember some element of my days at SCSC. The friends you had, the swim meets you went to, the smell of the over-chlorinated pool during a hot summer workout, GET-OUT SWIMS!!, the long waits before a prelim swim at Nationals...the sixties and seventies were a unique period at SCSC. The team had many accomplished swimmers and many Olympians, and many stars among the Olympians. Being a part of that heritage was a fantastic experience, one that I would never trade for another. That experience is what shaped me.

Question: Did you always dream of making the Olympic team? Why or why not is that important?

I always knew that SCSC had special swimmers. One of my earliest memories was while swimming at the Santa Clara High School pool (the War Memorial Pool) and seeing the big white record board at the far end fence. Names like Mark Spitz and Brian Job were listed with their pool record times. I knew that they were Olympians, and wondered if I could ever be that good. Then, when the International Swim Center was finished, and we walked in through the main lobby entrance, those enlarged photos of the SCSC Olympians were there to greet you, as if to say, " We did it...now it's your turn to carry the torch." I took it as a challenge, and did what I had to in order to be a better swimmer. It became important to me to try and be the best. When I was finally capable of winning at the national level of competition, the dream of being an Olympian seemed very close. Unfortunately for me, the boycott of 1980 kept me out of the Olympics. I did, however, make the 1978 World Games Team after winning Nationals, something of which I will always be proud. It was important to me to at least make my mark in the swimming world, after all those years in the pool. Being an Olympian should always be at the top of your list - even if you don't quite get there, the journey will have proved worth it in many other ways.

Question: What advice do you have for swimmers just beginning their journey?

Have fun! Swimming is all about having fun. That doesn't mean that it is not hard work, and you won't get tired, but, ask yourself this...how much fun do you think Michael Phelps had winning those 8 gold medals at the 2008 Olympics? I bet lots! Listen to your coaches. Trust plays an important role in swimming. It's also a two-way street - a good coach will also listen to their swimmers. Learn to set goals that can be attained at your level, and then set them higher next time - this is age-old advice, but it stills works! When you feel like slacking off a bit in the pool, just look over at the rest of the swimmers and ask yourself if *they* are slacking off. If you can work just a bit harder, it will show the next time you take the blocks at a meet. You will know others that are not as capable or as fast as you - try to build them up, encourage them. In the process, you will improve yourself. One of my favorite memories is the feeling that I would get when "SCSC" was displayed on the score board in the number 1 position, or "SCSC" was announced over the loudspeaker. SCSC has always had a huge sense of camaraderie and of being the best. It will only stay that way if you add to the spirit of all those who have gone before you. Have fun, work hard, and one day you may have your picture on that lobby wall.

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.