

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



I recently had the chance to catch up to Dawn Nakanishi, SCSC alum from the 1960's and '70's. Her thoughtful responses to the questions below are as timeless as they are inspirational. I continue to be amazed at the indelible impact swimming at SCSC has had on so many people, even decades after their experience here.

Q: What has swimming meant to you?

Dawn: Swimming competitively has meant so much to me. It has been a great teacher by challenging me physically and mentally. Swimming has taught me the importance of patience, hard work and the value of practice and mastery. Through swimming, I learned how to focus, think positively and the value of never giving up. I utilize those skills today,

and they have assisted me in my life and my career as an artist and educator. Twelve years ago I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I spent mornings after radiation floating in the pool to cool off the burn of treatment. I would swim and meditate on getting better. I did recover but three years later the cancer returned. I was very sick this time, but I did not give up hope despite having 3 tumors in my lung and one in my rib. With the power of love, faith, determination and technology, my tumors disappeared in 8 months and my rib has completely re-grown. I believe my past experience as a competitive athlete assisted in my complete and rapid recovery. As a post cancer challenge to myself, I entered the Alcatraz open water swim. I swam in 64 degree water without a wetsuit and placed in the top three for women 40-49. I continue to swim regularly with the master's group at The Simpkins pool in Santa Cruz. I swim for different reasons now. Swimming is an integral part of my psyche and well being. I swim for fitness, to meditate and for pure enjoyment. You always feel better after a good swim, no matter how bad you feel before you get in. Today I am an art instructor at Cabrillo College. I use swimming as a metaphor to teach my students how crucial practice, hard work and faith in your self are essential keys in attaining life's goals.

Q: When you think of your personal experience swimming at SCSC, what comes to mind?

Dawn: I learned how to swim at age 5 and was notably successful at winning races at our local Fairbrae Swim and Tennis club in Sunnyvale. My family joined Santa Clara Swim Club in 1964. I was 6 and Dad had Olympic dreams for his three daughters. And why not?! George Haines had just returned to Santa Clara from Tokyo with his amazing team of Olympic gold medal champions. His team practiced right in our back yard! Don Schollander, Donna de Varona, Pokey Watson, Dick Roth and Mark Spitz were all members of the club. It was quite something to share the pool with these stars. Not long after I joined the team, my freestyle stroke caught the eye of George and he had me come over from the "Baby Pool" to the "Big Pool" to demonstrate my stroke to the senior group. That was quite an honor to demonstrate in front of all those Olympians as a 6 year old! Santa Clara provided many "larger than life experiences" during my childhood. My first plane ride was with SCSC to LA airport at age 6. Our team of age groupers competed at the Riverside Invitational in Southern California. I still remember how exciting it was to be part of a team that flew us to swim meets! So many opportunities evolved from being at Santa Clara. At age 10, I held 10 national records. One was a medley relay record with Dana Denmark, Karen Kinnamon, and Kathy Sudol which held for over 15 years. In 1969 I was invited to compete in Tokyo, Japan where I won my two races and broke the Japan National Age Group record for girls 11-12. My visit to Japan later resulted into friendships that took me back to assist in coaching and American style stroke training. I enjoyed being at Santa Clara because of the families and fellow team mates. We would go to meets and hang out with kids who came from all different parts of the Santa Clara Valley of the 1960's. I enjoyed competing everywhere in California: Sacramento, Mill Valley, Berkeley, Redding, Los Angeles, Fresno, Alameda, Long Beach, San Diego, and Santa Barbara to name a few. There was always a sense of pride to wear the blue and gold, SCSC sweats, we felt like winners, and we were winners. It was magic belonging to a club which had the depth to enter multiple relay teams from the letters of A

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through D. Things I remember fondly are: going to the meets with my family, training with my team mates, getting to know kids from other teams, seeing my dad and mom officiate at the meets, workouts at the War Memorial pool, winning high point awards, the sense of accomplishment after doing a great race, winning relay races by a 25 yard lead, the Club's annual family bar-b-que and potluck, flying as a team with George to a competition, San Leandro Relay Races, free cookies and ice cream after the Aqua Bears meet, the sense of pride in hosting the Santa Clara International Swim Meet with my dad, Jim Nakanishi as International Invitational Meet Director. When I think of Santa Clara Swim Club, I am grateful to the dedicated parents, the coaches and the swimmers who all made it a warm and safe place to grow up.

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

Dawn: I did have hopes of going to the Olympics. It was a part of both my father's dream and mine. I had performed consistently well as a national age group champion, but I didn't transition well into the senior group. I was placed in George's group at age 11 with high expectations from George and my dad. There was a definite pressure to make nationals and go to the Olympics. I qualified to represent California at the National Junior Olympics held Colorado Springs. It was exciting and an honor to represent our state. I continued to swim until my senior year in high school. I retired from Santa Clara the year George left the club, in 1974. It was a natural time to leave as I was starting to think of college and plan my career in art. Swimming scholarships for women were just starting to be offered at the time. I competed for De Anza College and swam consistently for recreation at San Diego State University. Swimming relieved the stress of graduate school and enabled me to focus on my studies. Most people would not think of academia as being a competitive environment, but my experience in swimming enabled me to attain my tenured position. Though my swimming career did not result in a spot on the Olympic team, the lessons of dedication, practice and hard work have assisted me in attaining my goals as a professional artist and educator. Looking back, I fondly recall the excitement and satisfaction of being the fastest swimmer in the pool. For all the sacrifices made by myself, my parents and siblings, I wouldn't trade my years at Santa Clara and pursuing an Olympic dream for anything.

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

Dawn: Know Thyself. Have fun, work hard, and believe in yourself. Learn from your mistakes. Be prepared. Plan for long term goals. Think positive, you have nothing to lose by doing so, and you may surprise yourself! Always do your best and strive for excellence by going that little bit more. While disappointments will happen all through life, know there is always another race, another day to do better. Life is a gift, live it well.

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