

*Guest editorial by John Craig*

PHOENIX, Arizona, December 24. FOR the people who read *Swimming World*, but are not involved in Masters swimming, that branch of the sport probably seems a pretty silly offshoot. Viewed from a certain angle, it is. There is absolutely nothing tangible at stake: no college admissions or scholarships, no Olympic glory. Nothing.

But that's exactly what makes Masters swimming so much fun: the lack of pressure. When you're swimming in high school, you may have a college admission hanging in the balance. In college swimming, you have a team depending on you. So failure is something that often can seem scary.

In Masters swimming, the only failure is not showing up and doing what's healthy for you. Right now, you're probably thinking, once I'm out of school, that's it for swimming, I'm on to the next phase of my life, no more of this mindless drudgery. But once you've been out of school for a while, after you've been making a living for a while, the idea of performing a labor of love with like-minded people just for the fun of it will seem infinitely more appealing. In the business world, the subtext of every handshake and every smile is, how can you help me make money? At Masters meets, no one wants anything from you. If people greet you warmly, it's because they're genuinely glad to see you.

If you happen to miss practice for some reason, no one gets angry at you. (The very idea is actually ludicrous.) Very few people over train in Masters swimming. Yet you'd be surprised how many ex-college swimmers find themselves doing best times, at least in the sprint events, in their late 20s and even early 30s, off of much less yardage.

Swimming eight thousand plus yards a day for six days a week is a job. Swimming three thousand yards a day three times a week is a hobby. Hobbies are fun. Jobs, unless you really love them, are, well, jobs.

The Masters meets themselves are great fun. There's very much a cocktail-party-by-the-pool atmosphere, at least at the larger meets. The difference is that it's healthy: you're fueled by endorphins rather than alcohol. You swim your events, then loosen down and hang out and socialize. Maybe you get a little nervous before your event, but after the catharsis of an all-out effort, you can just relax and bask in the natural high. (And if you swim poorly, the only person you'll disappoint is you.)

The following exchange I had at the recent New England Masters championships is typical:

Me (approaching a couple of strangers): Excuse me, but I don't see any familiar faces nearby, so I'm afraid I have to ask a complete stranger for a zip. (I turn around.)

Stranger: I don't know, I really feel as if I ought to get to know you better first.

Bystanders: (laugh)

I know, there's no reason that type of exchange couldn't have taken place at a non-Masters meet, but somehow it just seemed more typical of a Masters meet.

Masters swimmers tend to be a friendly, likable group. The kind of adults who get a kick out of doing fast times -- one of the more innocent pleasures available -- are by and large people you can trust. This isn't the same crowd who cause mischief and even mayhem elsewhere in the world. You often hear parents saying that one reason they're happy their kids swim is because it keeps them out of trouble; it soaks up their excess energy, and keeps them away from drugs and drinking, as well as various other kinds of trouble. Well, it can keep adults out of trouble too. (Once we're grown up, we have to be our own parents.)

There's no reason to be intimidated by the thought of joining a program, either. Masters swimmers are not all super-competitive ex-collegiate stars trying to recapture their glory days (though there is an element of that). The atmosphere is much more like the local 5K run, where people of all abilities compete. Masters athletics are generally about self-improvement, not victory. One of the most telling things about Masters swimming is that people usually form friendships with their closest rivals. I've seen it happen a number of times.

Another thing that's hard to miss at a Masters meet is the number of good-looking older people. Masters swimmers don't necessarily look younger (that's primarily a function of skin elasticity). But they're fit-looking, some amazingly so. When people see a good-looking 20 year old, they tend to think, ah youth. But a good-looking 70 year old is somehow far more impressive, mostly because they're so rare. But you do seem them at Masters meets.

Have you ever, upon returning from vacation, immediately started planning the next one? I've found the same thing with Masters meets; I come home and start thinking about the next one. Once my head gets out of swimming mode and I get involved in other things, the feeling fades. But the fact that my first thought upon returning from a meet is that I want to go to another one speaks to how much fun they are.

John Craig's (non-swimming) blog is [justnotsaid.blogspot.com](http://justnotsaid.blogspot.com)