

MASTERS SWIMMING AND HOW TO SURVIVE IT

A Series by Tony Pearce

John Gordon RIP:

A Life in Senior and Masters Swimming.

"Not me Guv' I was just hanging about at the time!"

All of us older British Masters Swimmers were both shocked and deeply saddened to learn of the passing of John Gordon. I knew John for a period of some six decades from when we competed against each other at Junior (U16) level. We both swam backstroke. John was champion of Middlesex and swam for Ealing Swimming Club. I was champion of Surrey and swam for (now Croydon) Amphibians Swimming Club, which was men only with Croydon Ladies Swimming Club before the merger. The word was out on John. Aspiring backstroke swimmers beware. Although he seemingly had an awful stroke technique, he was greased lightning fast.

Eventually, John made the GB Team. However, he then suffered a perforated lung in late 1962, an operational scar on his back testimony to this trauma. When he recovered and fully returned, he changed his race to individual medley, swimming competitively he swam for England in the 1966 Empire Games in Jamaica reaching the final of the 400 IM. Truly remarkable! But then again, John was a truly remarkable individual.

"You're Tony Pearce!". "Yes, I know!"

As a Senior swimmer with the famous London Otter Swimming Club, I swam along with John, Tony Jarvis (GB 1968 Olympic Games Captain) and C.J. Stewart in winning the Greater London Council (GLC) 1970 Men's 200 (4 x 50) Free Relay at the Crystal Palace National Sports Centre, just newly built.

As a senior swimmer it was just after I joined Otter from Amphibians that I formally first met John. When he introduced himself, he reminded me of Michael Caine playing the role of MI5 agent Harry Palmer in the cold war spy film "The Ipcress File". The film that was showing at that time, as a James Bond 007 take-off, which was something John certainly was not. His dark thick-rimmed glasses and deadpan look immediately reminded me of the film's star, instantly putting me on my guard before he said "You're Tony Pearce!". All I could do was instinctively reply "Yes, I know!"

Later in 1971, London Otter S.C. staged the first Masters meet in this country. At that time, as with masters swimming in the U.S., amateurs were allowed to swim against professionals.

In this particular meet, televised in black and white television, John's face appeared, obviously swimming the first butterfly leg of the individual medley. Yes, he certainly led by example did John.

The times they were a changing.

Inevitably, after the culmination of his senior swimming career, John graduated to coaching swimming. As the Head Coach of Wandsworth Swimming Club, he produced swimmers to international level.

Meanwhile, I embarked on a sabbatical to California. While there, I lived the life of the masters swimmer. I also learnt a lot from the legendary U.S swimming Coach Dick Jochums who guided the swimming career of Tim Shaw.

John was also not naive about U.S swimming coaching. While swimming for GB he was strongly influenced by the coaching philosophy of another legendary U.S swimming coach, James "Doc" Councilman, who guided the swimming career of Mark Spitz.

In 1977 John was employed by the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) as a swimming teacher for the Spencer Park School Adult Education Centre. John had already built a reputation as both a very fine teacher and coach from the beginner to refining the elite.

The Spencer Park School pool was no more than a 20-yard chlorinated watering hole surrounded by breeze blocks covered with a corrugated styled roof. From humble beginnings. It was about this time that I returned from over the U.S and met up again with John at the County Arms Pub which was conveniently just over the road from the school on Trinity Road Wandsworth. We talked about masters swimming in its entirety. Yes, maybe the U.S was the place to be. But the times were about to change.

John affiliated the Spencer Swim Team. In essence, a swimming club for adults. Both being founder members of the Spencer Swim Team I swam under John. Back then, he was not just the coach, he was the initiator of a completely new genre in British swimming.

Yet another strength of John's was that he was an excellent administrator. His record-keeping and his paper work was incredibly meticulous, as was his application to everything else in his life. Nothing got past John. This unfortunately made him somewhat unpopular at times, as did his stubbornness. But he was honest, straightforward and direct and therefore commanded great respect.

Exile from the Main Stream

It was strange combination as no two people were more opposite than John and I. But when it came to swimming, now masters swimming, we were as one.

In my opinion, that period between 1977 to 1978 was the true beginning of masters swimming in this country. We had one aim as a senior (and masters) swimming club - to compete in the 1978 U.S Long Course Nationals.

But when we competed out in the U.S it was as if we were in complete exile from the mainstream of British Swimming. Even achieving lifetime personal best times and medal placings, when we returned home it was as if we never went in the first place.

However, a trend had begun. The word was out on the street. Other masters swimming teams followed. Masters swimming in this country became a cult. Whichever version of historical research one chooses but this is how I remember it, and I was there, but as they say, the rest is history.

Respect

Looking back, in my opinion John, in reality, founded masters swimming in this country.

I don't think that there are that many masters swimmers who would disagree with me when I say:

"From all of us in British Masters Swimming.

He deserves respect.

Thanks John".

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