

THE SEA DOG AND THE MERMAID

How Do Cav and Debbie Cavanaugh Swim So Fast, Joined at the Hip Like That?

by Christine Ennulat >>> Photos by George Olsen

Asked how they're different from one other, about the best Cav and Debbie Cavanaugh can come up with is that he's a little bit country and she's a little bit rock 'n' roll.

Cav offers, "She mows the lawn and I trim the hedges. She doesn't eat breakfast, I eat breakfast."

Debbie: "Um, he's a boy and I'm a girl?" The couples' 22-year age difference—

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he's 69, she's 47—doesn't rate an initial mention.

Sometimes they seem to channel each other; in separate interviews on separate days, each says, with the same intonation and inflection, "I just loooooove my swimming." When asked their favorite set, both say, "Oh, 10 100s," although Debbie gets more specific, adding, "on the 1:30." Both are national-caliber Masters swimmers. Both have been teachers and coaches. Both started in the water early, and both hail from swimming families. "It's like we were all born with gills," Debbie says. "When we don't swim, it's really weird—like my skin doesn't breathe or something."

Their common code is very

simple—to do what they love, because they can. Among their loves are swimming, competing, sailing the Caribbean aboard their sloop *Debi Doll*, and, very obviously, each other. Cav likes to say, "We're a joined-at-the-hip pair."

Cav's inner coach comes through loud and clear when he talks about challenging himself in the water: "The only way you're going to get better is to make your own game." He ought to know. After more than two decades of coaching swimming and water polo, followed by a 14-year swimming hiatus while he pursued a new career as a yacht captain, Cav, then 60, burst onto the scene at the 1996 YMCA nationals with first-place wins in the 50 and 100 free and the 100 IM, scoring national YMCA records in the freestyle events. He followed that up at the USMS short course nationals in California, with wins in 50 and 100 free as well as 50 fly. At the long course nationals at the University of Michigan that year, Cav pulled a five-gold feat, winning the 50, 100, 200 and 400 free, plus 50 fly. "I think all the fast guys weren't there," he quips. Apparently they were also absent for the two-dozen-plus national number-one

swims he's racked since then, or the numerous world records he's broken (*see page 18*).

Although not quite as splashy, Debbie's performance has been more than solid—in 2003, at 45, she hit several of her best Masters' times ever and a personal lifetime best in the 100 breaststroke. "I really had a super year that year. I impressed myself," she says with a laugh. She also dropped about 20 pounds in the course of training and won her first national title—the 100 backstroke at the LCM championships at Rutgers. "I thought I'd have to be at least 80 before that happened," she exclaims. It was her proudest swimming moment, despite the fact that she tied another swimmer to the exact hundredth.

"Cav's my inspiration," Debbie notes. At their five-times-weekly workouts, the Cavanaugh's typically cover 2,000 to 2,500 yards—"on a good day, 3,000," she adds, "but that's the rare occasion."

Their favorite 10-hundred set is often part of the equation, and they do it as a descent set, with each hundred getting faster. "Cav will start out slower than me, but by about number seven, he's right with me, so I have to work my butt off to stay ahead of him. And every now



and then I will stay ahead of him, but usually on the last one he beats me," she says.

"At my age," Cav admits, "the intervals are getting longer. But I like that set because it challenges me to get faster as the set goes on, and it *is* a challenge for me."

That's the game he makes for himself, and this year he's had an added challenge—recovery from shoulder surgery last June to repair his rotator cuff. "It's put me behind," he says. "I swam in one meet and my times were



stinko—good enough to be in the Top 10, but [the times] just weren't what I'd been used to. But it's coming—I'm feeling better about it."

Debbie feels the impact too. With Cav at the pool less and not swimming as fast, "my workouts lack a little," she says. Ordinarily, she notes, "I'd know he'd be chasing me down on a set, so I'd have to swim fast."

Chasing Debbie seems to be Cav's other favorite sport—at least several laps around the

anchor of the *Debi Doll*, their 37-foot Erwin sloop. These competitive bursts were one essential component of an exercise regimen that kept them both in shape through their long sojourns in the Caribbean. Just before Cav's extraordinary swimming year in 1996, they'd been on a five-year Caribbean expedition—stopping a while in the Virgin Islands, Martinique, Dominica and more, finally reaching Trinidad after two years. Next they followed the

South American coast to Panama, then traveled up the Central American coast. To finance the trip, Cav plied his yacht captain trade—"one job for a sport fisherman in Panama, one on a sailboat off Costa Rica...it was one of those things that worked out pretty nicely for us," he recalls.

Doing what one loves does tend to work out nicely, but Cav came to that ethos by fits and starts. Swimming was an early theme, starting at age 7 at the

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local Y in his native Pennsylvania. Swim teams weren't available to him as he grew up, but he always seemed to win the races at the summer pool and Boy Scout camp. "I guess I had kind of a natural talent in the water," he says, explaining how he managed to walk on to the West Virginia University swim team his freshman year.

But he felt ambivalent about his studies in engineering and dropped out, volunteered for the draft and spent two years in the military before returning to college on a swimming scholarship and completing a degree in business administration. He captained the WVU team both his junior and senior years and held all the freestyle records.

Married in his final year of

college, Cav moved to Florida with his wife and new baby, Dan, and spent the next nearly 20 years in Miami as math teacher and swimming and water polo coach, first at Miami-Dade County's Coral Park High School until 1968, then at Coconut Grove's Ransom School for Boys. Two more boys, Chris and Kevin, were born in those first few years. Cav became statewide chair of Florida's high school swimming and water polo coaches. From 1973-75, he coached the University of Miami's men's water polo team.

He also swam at the YMCA and, in the early '70s, was a founding member of the Gold Coast Masters, alongside the redoubtable June Krauser, whom Cav and many others acknowl-

edge as "the mother of Masters swimming." Cav won his first nationals at age 37, in the 50 free.

What little spare time he had began to go toward playing with boats at the local yacht club.

In 1974, Ransom and nearby Everglades School for Girls merged to become Ransom Everglades School. It was Debbie Massie's senior year there. Yes, they met while Debbie was a student and Cav was a teacher. And no, nothing came of that until years later. Cav remembers, "One of the teachers from the Everglades School came to me and said, 'I've got a girl who's a really good backstroker, and she really should come over.' So I knew who she was."

Debbie remembers Cav, with a dark black mustache, on the pool deck and "hearing him yell, 'Readyyyyy, go!'"

Debbie is that rare thing, a native Floridian. Pictures of her as a 3-year-old show her wearing "the bathing cap with the little flower on it and the chinstrap," she remembers. While never out of swimming for more than a couple of months at a time, she was also active in volleyball, softball, basketball, track, cross country and field hockey. In 2001, Ransom Everglades inducted her into its first hall of

fame for athletics. (The school honored Cav's coaching achievements with a 2004 hall of fame induction.)

When Debbie graduated high school in 1975, she headed to the University of Miami to study physical education, returning to Ransom Everglades to help Cav coach during her freshman and sophomore years, then as part-time assistant coach during her last two years. With her University of Miami degree in hand in 1979, she hired on at Ransom Everglades as a physical education teacher and swimming and water polo coach, winning the state water polo championship with her girls in her third year. "I have to credit all my water polo coaching to Cav," she says. "He's really an excellent coach."

Meanwhile, Cav had left Ransom Everglades in 1977 to teach and coach at Fort Lauderdale High, about the time his two-decade marriage ended. He got his captain's license in 1978, and in January 1979 retired from coaching and teaching and began doing yacht deliveries full time—finally pursuing his other maritime passion. He delivered boats on the east coast of Florida and around the Caribbean, "so I was gone a good bit," he says, "and swimming just sort of slipped by the wayside."

Though not completely—he kept his hand in swimming Masters, and it was at a 1981 Masters meet where Deb and Cav ran into each other again. They had lunch, sparks flew. Soon after, she came aboard Cav's boat, and they whisked off on their first extended Caribbean cruise. It was during this 1982-84 trip that Cav tentatively named the sloop *Debi Doll*, spelling the name on the hull with temporary stick-on letters. He knew Debbie was there for the duration one day when, "she surprised me with a permanent appliqué that read 'Debi Doll,' and so I was caught." The name glows big, bright and red on the stern.

They found work to support their life on the boat. Cav muses,

CAV'S RECORD BOOK

••• Long Course Meters World Records

60-64: 50 freestyle, 27.70 (1998)

65-69: 100 freestyle, 1:02.93 (2001)

••• Short Course Meters World Records

65-69: 50 freestyle, 27.68 (2000)

65-69: 100 freestyle, 1:02.41 (2000)

••• National Records in Yards

65-69: 50 freestyle, 24.76 (2001)

65-69: 100 freestyle, 55.97 (2001)

65-69: 200 freestyle, 2:06.55 (2001)

••• 22 World Record-Breaking Relays Since 1997





“When we went off in ’82, I was really poor. Then I did day chartering work down in St. Thomas, so we ended up coming back to the States after two years there with more money than we’d left with. Not a lot, but enough.”

Enough for them to buy the van that carried them on their next adventure, this time to Indianapolis to see Cav’s middle son, Chris, compete in the 1984 Olympic trials in (surprise!) swimming. They also took that van to Los Angeles to see Chris win Olympic gold in the 400-meter freestyle relay.

Home again in Florida, Debbie went back to Ransom to coach swimming and water polo, with her water polo girls winning the state championship for the next two years. Cav continued his yacht deliveries. And they swam.

But it wasn’t until the day of a national swim meet in 1989 that Cav got down on one knee and proposed. “I never expected it,” says Debbie. They married soon after and set sail on their 1990-1995 cruise around

the Caribbean. While they were gone, Cav’s son, Dan, housesat and kept an eye on things. When they returned, he stayed, so Cav and Debbie lived aboard the *Debi Doll* for another two years. Clearly, they like each other a lot.

Now 23 years into their relationship, the couple remains focused on doing what they love. And the generation gap does show up, but in a good way. Both recognize that they’re at different phases of their lives, and that’s fine. In retirement, Cav sees himself living more in the moment, enjoying what’s in front of him, doing what needs to be done, and finds plenty to do—from home repair to boat maintenance. “I’m keeping myself busy,” he says. In contrast, Debbie is at what Cav calls “a more aggressive time of her life,” a more forward-thinking, active time, which she has manifested in her position as chair of the Gold Coast LMSC for the last six years (she recently stepped back to a more low-key role as secretary), while

also serving on the USMS Championship Committee. In addition, she’s the USMS meet liaison for the national short

course championships in Fort Lauderdale this May. Lots of rewarding hours, she says, but “you definitely have to have a love for the sport to do what a lot of us do.” Cav’s there at her back.

Neither sees the generation gap affecting their balance significantly. But Debbie acknowledges that it does present the possibility that, “in another 15 years, my role with him may be a little different—he may need a little more physical care. Hopefully, swimming’s going to keep him in shape, but it’ll definitely come.” For now, both are blessed with excellent health.

Come what may, for either of them, the Cavanaugh’s enjoy looking back, forward and around them, from right where they are—in the moment. They’re involved grandparents now, and they’re also planning more cruises—a short one around Biscayne Bay after USMS nationals, then a few months in the Bahamas. In between, there is always swimming. “We just love it,” says Debbie. “I love swimming, I know Cav loves his swimming—it’s just love all around.”

As simple as that. <<<

