

FOSTERING YOUTH FITNESS

The Swimming Antidote for an Inactive Generation

by Zing Allsopp

Barely out of junior high, 13-year-old swimmer Tyler Clark is already comfortably convinced that swimming and family togetherness go hand in hand.

After all, everything in his experience so far has led him to believe that the family that

Zing Allsopp, a free-lance writer and musician, swims with Fort Bend Masters in Sugar Land, Texas.

swims together sticks together and stays fit together. With some solemnity, he declares,

“Swimming is not so much a sport or athletic activity to us; it’s our family’s quality time.”

Not all youngsters are so inclined toward an active lifestyle and many lack fitness opportunities. But for inactive children, the toll can be high: childhood obesity, early-onset diabetes, mood swings, poor self-image and lack of self-confidence.

“Today’s youth are considered the most inactive generation in history, caused in part by reductions in school physical education programs and unavailable or unsafe community recreational facilities,” according to the American Obesity Association.

Among youth age 6 to 11,

the prevalence of obesity quadrupled from 4.3 percent (for boys) and 3.6 percent (for girls) between 1971 and 1974 to 16 percent and 14.5 percent, respectively, between 1999 and 2000. In tandem with this alarming trend, the incidence of obesity-related chronic diseases—hypertension, diabetes, orthopedic complications, which used to be more prevalent among adults—has also escalated among young people.

Such problems are a direct result of “an increase in caloric intake and a commensurate decrease in activity,” points out Ira Klein, USA Swimming’s director of field services and sport consultant for the Eastern Zone.

The numerous hours adolescents spend in front of the TV, computer and video games are “helping to create the least healthy generation in our country’s history,” he says. Klein finds it particularly perturbing that children told to “go outside and play” are more likely to take their Game Boys outdoors and “sit there for hours.”

Boys are particularly susceptible to the couch-potato syndrome associated with computer and video games. And when they do choose to play sports, basketball, football and baseball

almost always trump swimming. Within USA-S, there are nearly 54,000 more female than male swimmers registered. “Only in our 19 and over [age group] are there more boys than girls registered,” Klein notes. He also points out that in high schools throughout the country, there is greater opportunity for ball sports than swimming.

But regardless of preferred sport, the important thing is to “*get moving*, literally,” says Klein. “Get today’s youth out of the chair, off the couch and into movement—aerobic exercise. Decrease sedentary time, eliminate fast-food stops, increase movement and watch the outcome,” he says. “Super-size your exercise, not your meals.”

There is evidence showing that obese youngsters are at higher risk of becoming obese adults,” says Jacqueline Viteri, spokesperson for the American Obesity Association. “Starting healthy behaviors early may help to curb obesity in adulthood. Creating an active and nutritionally healthy environment for youngsters sets the stage for those behaviors to become natural to them, habits that they can in turn pass along to future generations,” she notes.

Driven by a passion and an



Photo: Henry Clark

appreciation for the sport, most Masters swimmers are only too happy to pass it on to the next generation. Tyler Clark’s parents, who themselves had swimming parents, are working hard to instill those healthy habits into their children.

Henry Clark, 39, and Shannon Clark, 37, attended college on swim scholarships and met on the swim team at Ohio University in Athens. By the time they retired—or so they thought—from competitive swimming at 22, Henry had made ninth place in the 200m fly at the 1988 Olympic trials while Shannon held school records.

Burnout set in afterward, and a 13-year swimming hiatus followed as Henry and Shannon married and chased their careers. Then, five years ago, they initiated their children into swimming, and they were hooked all over again—



this time as a family.

Today Henry, an accelerator physicist and project manager at Texas A&M University's Cyclotron Institute, serves as the meet director for the Aggie Swim Club while his wife works as the club administrator and coaches swim practices as well.

Tyler's sister, Haley, 11, is also a member of the Aggie Swim Club. Described by her father as "very competitive," Haley finds swimming the perfect outlet for her personality.

Of course, not all children appreciate competition or the rigors of athletic training, especially when it means a 5 a.m. wake-up call. For the Clarks (and Tyler's grandfathers, aunts, uncles before them), their USA-S teammates and other youth across the country, the pre-dawn pool call is an acquired taste.

And yet, pre-dawn practices may not be the only underlying

deterrent for youth swimmers. In the case of Sarah Harper, 22, daughter of Fort Bend Masters coach Jane Harper, 53, it was the pressure and the "ultra-competitive" atmosphere of her team that turned her off. Her mother recalls that by the age of six, Sarah could do all four strokes, which made her a coach's dream.

But Sarah didn't care for the attention or the pressure. By middle school, she had lost whatever enthusiasm she might have had, and although she swam occasionally after that, "it wasn't fun anymore." Described by her mother as a "classic fitness swimmer," Sarah understood and supported her mother's swimming fervor. But she was much happier pursuing other sports, her mother recalls.

Now recently graduated from the University of West Florida, Sarah is making her



Courtesy of the Clark Family

way back into swimming, practicing with the team her mother coaches and hoping to do a triathlon soon. "I'm thankful that I swim now. It allows me to do something that other people have to work so hard for. In hindsight, I'm glad that I swam [as a child]."

Perhaps, Hobie Huston, 11-year-old son of Rice University's

Pool time is family prime time for **TYLER CLARK**. Tyler and his sister, **HALEY**, are members of the Aggie Swim Club. Their mother, **SHANNON**, serves as club administrator and practice coach, while their dad, **HENRY**, serves as meet director.

L to R: Masters swimmers **BOB HOPKINS**, son **KEVIN HOPKINS**, his wife, **MARIA**, and family friend **JIM CURD** made up "Team Hopkins" at the SCY National Championships in Hawaii in 2002.

swim coach Seth Huston, will echo similar sentiments years from now. In the meantime, though, he would sooner choose a more sedate activity such as reading, a "spectator sport" or video games.

"That's just his personality," says Seth, 40, quite matter-of-factly. "He is not real competitive and doesn't really enjoy sports as a whole. [But] he has to participate in a sport for physical activity. He begrudgingly picks swimming, but he would begrudgingly pick any other sport."

Obviously, as the son of a Masters swimmer and swim coach, Hobie sees much more swimming than the average child. "He is used to tagging along with me to practices and events, but he usually plays his Game Boy, reads or explores. If he swims when I swim, it is usually make-believe play of



Photo: Maureen Hopkins

water animals," Seth adds, somewhat bemused.

Aside from requiring a sport for physical activity, Seth and his wife, Amy, don't pressure Hobie or his sisters (Hanna, 9, and Eli, 5) into developing athletic prowess. Just because dad is a swim coach and a competi-

tive swimmer himself does not mean the children have to swim. Inactivity, however, is not an option.

"For us adults, the best way to lead is by example," says Klein of USA-S.

Henry Clark calls it "carrying the torch." When he returned to the pool at 35, even young Tyler recognized that it was "to encourage us [to see] that swimming is a great lifetime sport."

Take Tom Considine, 78, and his wife Fran, 77, for instance. Originally from Buffalo, N.Y., the Considines grew up during the Great Depression. Short on money, but not on pool access—there was a great public pool not far from where their families lived—they took advantage of

the facility, both developing into avid lap swimmers.

"My father still swims a mile a day," reports their daughter, Ellen Considine-Miller, 41, a Masters swimmer with The Woodlands Masters in Texas and a certified tennis professional at The Woodlands Athletic Center. A leading breaststroker (see USMS Top-10 listings at www.usms.org/comp/tt), Ellen, however, considers her mother the "real champ."

At 75, Fran swam a Top-10 200-yard freestyle relay for the Arizona Masters in 2003. The team was ranked fifth in the USMS Top-10 listings for the women's 65-plus 200-yard relays that year.

In May, Fran and Ellen will both compete at the USMS Nationals in Fort Lauderdale. Fran has also qualified for the



Lower Photo: Helen Bayly / Left Photo: Scott Campbell



Known fondly in Texas as the "Miller Meet Machine," this swimming family includes **ELLEN CONSIDINE-MILLER** and daughter **ELLEN** (far left), who credit their love of the sport to Ellen's parents, **FRAN** and **TOM CONSIDINE** (near left), with Arizona Masters.

2005 Senior Olympics to be held in Pittsburgh, June 3-18.

Says Ellen, "My kids get a real ride out of their grandmother swimming. I can still hear my daughter Allison telling her grandmother over the phone (when we were in Tempe for the Short Course Nationals in 2003), 'Swim fast, Grandma!'"

Just as Considine picked up swimming from her parents, her four children (ages 15, 13, 11 and 8) have picked it up from her. "I think the fact that I stay so fit in the pool has been a great example for my kids," she says. "My kids might not choose swimming as their primary sport, but they can see that the sport is for life and it will always be a great way to stay healthy."

Inspiration obviously goes both ways: from parent to child and from child to parent. The mother of two successful teen swimmers, Susan Holland, 49, who is a member of Cy-Clones Masters in Houston, says that she returned to competitive swimming—after a 20-year hiatus—when her sons started swimming about 10 years ago. They are now 16 and 18 years old, and All-Americans to boot. She wishes she could say that she motivates her boys, but concedes "they sure do motivate me."

Bob Hopkins, 63, a member of the New Jersey Masters, says his son, Kevin, now 36, was an age-group swimmer and "that resulted in me starting to swim for exercise and joining Masters in the mid '70s." Bob now holds several places in the USMS Top-10 lists of individual swims and 27 New Jersey state records. Kevin, a Masters swimmer since 1992 and now a member of the New England Masters, has also recorded Top-10 swims in 11 USMS events since 2002, established seven New Jersey state records and was recently inducted into the Sussex County (New Jersey) Sports Hall of Fame for his accomplishments in swimming and baseball. Like father, like son.

Whereas Hopkins joined a

Masters team early in his son's life, Michael Lumsden, 55, a Masters swimmer in Lake Jackson, Texas, started swimming a good deal later: he was 42, and his older daughter was 10.

Like other parents, Lumsden wanted to encourage his daughters in the sport. He thinks that his participation helped them "better understand the need to be an active adult...even if they didn't always appreciate my need for a Speedo," he quips. He reaped personal benefits as well. "I am now 55 but most people think I am in my mid-40s."

JOY MAUE is all about swimming, thanks to the gentle encouragement of her mom, **KRISTY**, and her dad, Duane, a Masters swimmer with H2Ouston Swims.

Do swimmers beget swimmers? These stories of family and shared pursuits underscore the validity of leadership by example, and the effectiveness of parents walking (or swimming) alongside their kids. A balanced approach to fitness and fun may well help an inactive generation get off the couch and on the path to healthier lives. <<<



Photo: Duane Maue

ADULT SUPERVISION REQUIRED

Just as passivity carries an enormous price tag, so too does overzealous physical exertion.

In the case of youth swimming, overuse and overtraining of the body can lead to joint laxity, rotator cuff tendonitis, loose shoulders and other muscular problems.

"Although many shoulder injuries associated with swimming are due to technique—probably just as many are due to simple overuse," observes David Bernhardt, M.D., professor of pediatrics and sports medicine at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

"I have never understood why swimmers need to train as many hours as they sometimes do for races that take less than one minute to complete," muses Bernhardt, who is a member of the American Academy of Pediatrics' Committee on Sports Medicine and Fitness.

Admittedly, swimming is regarded as an excellent all-around sport, and somewhat kinder to bones, muscles, and tendons because the buoyancy factor reduces impact and loading on the body. "But too much of anything can be stressful to the body," he points out.

Joel Brenner, assistant professor of sports medicine and adolescent medicine at the Medical College of Georgia and director of pediatric and adolescent sports medicine at the college, expresses similar concern for children in rigorous physical programs. "Parents need to be their child's advocate," he says. In other words, they need to recognize when a child has overextended or exceeded his or her body's quota of physical exertion. The recommended dosage, he notes, is only 30 minutes of physical activity a day seven days a week.

Henry Clark, a Texas Masters swimmer whose children swim in a year-round USA-S program, says that he adopted a "wait-and-see" approach concerning "how much we do and how hard we push."

He understands that not all children are ready emotionally and physically at the same age for physical rigors, so he and his wife have been careful to watch for the "green lights" (and the red ones, too, for that matter). "When we were younger, we knew of swimmers who quit early because their parents pushed too hard and too soon," he says.

If children are to remain in a sport or in any fitness program for a length of time, the "emphasis should be on fun, the social aspects of the sport, technique and skill development—and less on competition, faster times and winning," advises Bernhardt.."

Masters swimmer Duane Maue, 38, who is the father of Joy, 8, and Dillon, 2, prefers not to use the word "workout." That's because "once a sport becomes 'work,' performance deteriorates and quitting is not far off," he says. Maue, a member of H2Ouston Swims, is adamant that "you have to enjoy your training for it to be a constant in your life."

Training only for short-term goals also may be counterproductive, he notes. "The problem with short-term goals is that once you have achieved them, there is no purpose for going on. It is much healthier to think of training as an integral part of your life and of who you are," says Maue, a triathlete with three Ironmans under his belt. "I think the point is that people need to know what drives them and the driver must be measurable, self-propagating (each goal met leads to another goal to achieve), and it should fulfill some want/need," he says.

Encouraging children in a sport should follow similar principles, too. But if they're too young to know their "drivers," adult supervision is essential. The best participants in any sport are those who enjoy it.