

LUCKY IS AS LUCKY DOES

And Irrepressible Masters Swimmer Lucky Meisenheimer Does a Lot

by Christine Ennulat >>> Photos by Tom Reid

In the old tale of the blind men and the elephant, one man perceives the elephant as resembling a wall. Another likens it to a spear, and another, a snake. It's impossible for them to experience the whole elephant.

When people encounter John "Lucky" Meisenheimer, some see Dr. John Meisenheimer, dermatologist.

Others see Coach Lucky, coach of the Orlando Special Olympics swim team and, until a few years ago, Team Orlando Masters.

Many see Lucky from his dock on Lake Cane hosting Lucky's Lake Swim. Others identify a filmmaker. Still others see a world-renowned yo-yo collector and expert. Community activist. Writer. Husband. Dad.

But when Lucky Meisenheimer looks in the mirror, he sees a swimmer, and he can trace nearly all the odd rabbit trails his life has taken back to that fact. He started at age 10 or 11... and never stopped. "My pillar throughout my life has been the swimming," he says. "When I started I was the asthmatic, out-of-shape kid, and I guess I overcame a lot of physical conditions to be able to swim." The competitive Meisenheimer

went on to become an NCAA Scholar Athlete at Eastern Kentucky University. He is among the few Masters swimmers who have never left and then refound the sport, and he's a past Masters national champion and world record holder. He's taken swimming with him wherever he's been...or it's taken him.

During college, swimming took Meisenheimer into the annals of Ripley's Believe It or

He wrapped a sock around his toe and bit down, swam and had a friend snap a Polaroid, which Lucky ran in the small newsletter he published for his team. Its headline proclaimed new world record for swimming with foot in mouth. Friends suggested he send the photo to Guinness. "So I thought, well, maybe I could." He worked up to longer stretches swimming his new stroke. A publicity stunt took shape.



Not—for swimming a half-mile with his foot in his mouth. He describes it as "one of my early accomplishments"—and I put that in quotes."

One day, while stretching on the pool deck, he pulled his foot up close to his face, Lucky remembers, "and some kid goes, 'Oooo! Don't swim with your foot in your mouth!' And so I immediately thought that I could."

"One thing I've learned in my life," Meisenheimer continues, "if you ask somebody far enough in advance, they'll agree to anything, even a personal hanging—'In three years, could we hang you out on the front lawn?' 'Oh, yeah, yeah, sure, three years, no problem.' So I asked my coach about six months in advance, 'Hey, on February the 14th, could I swim half a

Christine Ennulat is a contributing writer for *SWIMMER* and a member of the Virginia LMSC in Richmond.





mile with my foot in my mouth and set a world record?"

"Yeah, Meisenheimer, fine, fine."

Meisenheimer kept practicing. "I invented a little toe snorkel so I could breathe," he says. Teammates posted fliers around campus, landing the event in the local paper.

The moment arrived, heralded by the opening strains of "Thus Spake Zarathustra" (think *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the monolith music) as the caped aspirant, lightning bolts painted on arms and legs, waited in the wings. The coach, with no inkling that Feb. 14 was anything more than another practice day, was flummoxed.

"We filled the stands," Meisenheimer remembers. "We had more people at that event than we'd ever had at any swim meet." The coach was so happy he paid for the 20 pizzas the team had ordered in his name. A local television station filmed, and local radio stations broadcast; the AP wire picked up the news, then Paul Harvey, then Ripley's Believe It or Not. "The one thing it didn't get into was Guinness," says Meisenheimer, explaining that the process for

that is much more complex.

Meisenheimer supposes the stunt may have been the impetus for his later interest in TV, if not his penchant for the over-the-top, which permeates his core. He acknowledges that his unusual childhood also may have something to do with it: growing up in Richmond, Ky., dressing up in frontier garb and shooting flintlock rifles competitively with his father; appearing in the fishing section of the local paper holding a big octopus instead of a bass, like other kids; swimming with the original Flipper at Florida's Theater by the Sea.... "I experienced a lot of weird things growing up," he says. Perhaps inevitable for the son of an organic chemistry professor who offered bonus points to students for dressing up as their favorite chemical reactions.

Young Meisenheimer also spent many hours roaming nearby fields and streams, catching snakes and other fauna that the biologist down the

LUCKY MEISENHEIMER moved to Orlando for the sake of his medical practice, but it's not bad for swimming, either. His lakefront home, "Aquatica," features a lap pool and an aquatic basketball/volleyball court.



block would help him key down and identify. President of the science club at the Model Laboratory School (“Think about what comes out of *there*,” he quips.) and perennial science fair winner, he earned a biology scholarship to Eastern Kentucky and graduated pre-med in 1979. In his fourth year of University of Kentucky med school, he settled on anesthesiology. “If it hadn’t been for swimming, I wouldn’t be a dermatologist,” he recalls.

In Meisenheimer’s world, that apparent non sequitur makes perfect sense: “There was a dermatologist in my home town, so I called him up and said, ‘Listen, I’d like to do a dermatology rotation, but I’d like to be done early enough so I can work out with the swim team while I’m there.’” Meisenheimer laughs a sly, deep laugh. “That was very brash.... But he was a great guy, and he said, ‘Sure, come on in.’

“By the second day I was

there,” he continues, “I knew I wanted to be a dermatologist.” Two weeks later, as they drove to an outlying clinic, Meisenheimer told his mentor of his plans, whereupon the man ran off the road. “We’ve been friends ever since,” he says. Dermatology, he notes, has been “a good fit. I still love my job—I’m a skin cancer surgeon, and I love doing that.”

Why Orlando? “Because of the aquatic center,” he answers. “I love Florida, and my interest was in cutaneous oncology, and I wanted to do skin cancer surgery, so you go where the cancer is, which is Florida.” To narrow down further, Meisenheimer mapped out the location of every dermatologist in the Sunshine State (“I’m very obsessive-compulsive,” he admits.) and found a spot in central Florida that had none, about a mile from the relatively new Orlando International Aquatic and Fitness Center (now the YMCA Aquatic and Family

Center). “And I’m saying, if this is not a sign from God, I don’t know what is.” Now, 18 years into a busy, high-tech medical practice, “I’m a dinosaur—still a solo practitioner,” Meisenheimer says. “I see all of my patients. I’m a firm believer that if you’re going in to see the specialist, you ought to see the specialist.”

Meisenheimer is absolutely serious about his work. Despite all appearances, in fact, he’s absolutely serious about everything he undertakes; it’s the undertakings that are less so. Like yo-yos.

Soon after his 1987 arrival in Orlando, he began swimming with “whatever team would let me get in and swim with them,” including the small Masters group. Which led him into—or back to—yo-yos and ultimately into his enthusiastic collecting. In the early ’70s, he says, “I picked the yo-yos up like anyone else, and, being a little obsessive-compulsive, I got a little better at playing than the average kid.” He put the toy down and forgot it until med school, when he happened across a yo-yo and an old trick book and began practicing tricks to relax between classes and entertain kids on rounds in the pediatric ward. Meisenheimer realized—and other people noted—that he had become “about as good a yo-yo player as I’d ever seen.” But he never thought about the history of the yo-yo until he began traveling for events like the Masters nationals and open water swims, which have a lot of down time. “So I would go to a lot of antique shops, and just on a whim I started picking up yo-yos. And I started finding these wooden ones, and I’m going, ‘What’s up with that?’”

Thus did Lucky Meisenheimer enter into a whole new world of yo-yo history. “I just became fascinated,” he says. “It was this huge rite of passage for young boys from the ’30s to the ’60s—the yo-yo man would come in the spring, and they

Lucky’s yo-yo collection—including “yo-yo man”—is the largest in the world. The cabinets in the background are filled with more than 5,000 of them.

would have yo-yo contests and all these awards, and different varieties of yo-yos, and I was just astounded.” Eager for more knowledge, Meisenheimer began writing to some of the older demonstrators and collectors, turning himself into a repository of arcane yo-yo lore gleaned from his many interviews, undertaken simply because he was curious. He began writing small articles for the newsletter *Yo-Yo Times*. “Then I sent out to the collectors a color copy of what I had for trade. And nobody had ever done that before.” Driven as he was, and with a collection that now numbers more than 5,000 yo-yos, he became the pre-eminent national authority on yo-yo collecting and served on the board of the American Yo-Yo Association from its inception in 1993 through its first few years.

“Somewhere along the line I decided that I was going to write a book on collecting,” says Meisenheimer. “I thought it would take about six months.” He finished *Lucky’s Collectors’ Guide to 20th Century Yo-Yos*, “pretty much the bible of yo-yo collecting,” he says, four-and-a-half years later. Soon after, his collection entered *Guinness World Records* as “Largest Collection of Yo-Yos,” with a listed total of 4,251, the point at which he’d tired of cataloging them. And he’s slowed his collecting, demonstrating a healthy perspective despite appearances to the contrary: “If I did add a yo-yo to the collection,” he begins, then stage-whispers, “no one would know.” His most expensive item? On eBay, a boxed set identical to one Meisenheimer traded for—did not purchase—just sold for \$6,500. The largest expenditure on one of his yo-yos is a \$300 gift from his wife, Jacquie.

Three guesses how

AD





LUCKY MEISENHEIMER with his wife, **JACQUIE**, and their three sons, **JOHN VII**, 10; **JAKE**, 7; and **MAXIMUS**, 5.

Meisenheimer met Jacquie.

In 1989, when the Masters team at the aquatic center lost its coach, Meisenheimer was the only one around with coaching experience. He took it on in 1989 and, “being the obsessive-compulsive type” (no, no echo here), built the program from a couple dozen to a 200-member-strong powerhouse that boasted several national champions and USMS Top 10s. Along the way, Meisenheimer also achieved ASCA’s Level 5 coaching certification, served as president of the Masters Aquatics Coaches Association and worked hard to promote the sport locally and nationally.

When Jacquie, a triathlete looking to improve her swimming, joined in 1993,

coach and new member caught each other’s eye right away. Despite Meisenheimer’s policy never to date his swimmers, they married in 1995, and started their family immediately. They have three boys, John VII, 10; Jake, 7; and Maximus, 5. (“You don’t get pregnant during the time that *Gladiator* has been released,” explains movie buff Meisenheimer.)

Jacquie, a pretty, soft-spoken brunette, has a master’s in exercise physiology and worked as a medical sales rep—and occasional swim coach—until taking on full-time parenting. The Meisenheimer household is a high-traffic area, not only with kids but also with the innumerable people who pass through for the daily 1K lake swim, especially on Saturday

mornings. “I never thought...,” she begins, and then chuckles, “that I would ever be amidst all this, because I’m kind of, you know, private.”

If she wasn’t sure early what she was getting into, the marriage proposal, involving an elaborate treasure hunt—and fire ants—should have been a clear sign.

Asked what has surprised her most about her husband, she answers not with some wacky “Lucky”-type antic, but with this: “How he can say he’s going to do something, and then accomplish what he does. People say a lot of things—they don’t really ever do them. He just does.” Jacquie knows a thing or two about that quality herself, having been the first female runner at the University of Central Florida. Recently, she started piano lessons for the first time—a challenge if ever there was one, in that house.

Although Meisenheimer’s capacity to make things happen has stood him in good stead, it’s been eminently valuable to others, as well. When the aquatics center went under and closed its doors in 1992, he and other community leaders had a fight on their hands.

“They literally chained the

doors,” Meisenheimer recalls, and tells of how local hotelier and Masters swimmer Harris Rosen, “a very powerful person here in town,” went for his workout one day and found one of the Special Olympians also standing at the locked door. “He looked up at Rosen and said, ‘Did we do something wrong?’ ‘No, you did not do anything wrong.’ ‘Can you get them to reopen the pool?’ the youngster asked—not knowing that [Rosen] was probably the one person in the entire city who actually *could* do something, and he said, ‘I’m going to.’”

Meisenheimer mustered grassroots support while Rosen “held the big club—he had enough power to bring in congressmen.” After a six-month fight, the center reopened, as a YMCA.

Lost in the shuffle, though, was the fledgling Special Olympics program, which was now without a coach. YMCA leaders came to Meisenheimer and, reminding him that the tiny Special Olympics program had been a highly touted reason for keeping the center open, asked him to coach. Unable to say no, he signed on for one year. “Now, 11 years later...,” he laughs.

“We have one of the largest, if not *the* largest, Special Olympics teams in the country,” he says. “We have a group of fantastic volunteer coaches who come in and work hard,” and 50-plus athletes ranging in age from 8 to 42, some of whom swim for their high schools and even in Masters events. Seven of them, Meisenheimer exults, have done Lucky’s Lake Swim. “I tell their parents, ‘Your children are now in the top one percentile in the world as far as swimming accomplishments. They may never be in the top one percentile in anything in their life except for that, but

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they have that to wrap their arms and legs around. And that makes a difference.”

Although no longer coaching Masters, Meisenheimer continues to tirelessly promote swimming and the aquatic center, which has led him into yet another career, as filmmaker. Over the years, various TV shows had filmed segments about his famous yo-yo collection, and one day Jerry Rose, a soundman from one of the shows, came into Meisenheimer’s office with eczema on his hand. “You don’t forget this guy,” says Rose of his meeting with Lucky.

At that time, Meisenheimer was working with the local cable station on a series of weekly

commercial spots honoring local swimmers (and plugging the YMCA). Rose, meanwhile, had been looking to expand into videography. A change at the station opened the way for the two to collaborate on the project. So began Lucky-Rose Films, with Rose’s wife, Jennifer, also at the helm.

The commercials they made went over well, and the trio’s next project presented itself when the world yo-yo championship came to town. Quite a few other projects have followed that documentary from PSAs on drowning to *The Finger*, a spoof on 1950s monster movies, to medical informational videos for Meisenheimer’s practice, to

funny short pieces (starring Meisenheimer and assorted family members), one of which won a prize at an underground film festival. Their latest release is *Yo-Yo Kings*, distributed by Fogware Publishing, and featuring yo-yo champions as well as instruction for newbies and a look at Meisenheimer’s collection. All the work is done in-house, with Meisenheimer writing and directing. “Doc comes up with the initial idea, and we all kind of take it and run from there,” says Rose. “He just runs a little farther.”

Lucky-Rose’s current film project is also the vehicle for Meisenheimer’s latest crusade, enlisting his filmmaker, coach

and activist components. The documentary chronicles a season with the Special Olympians working toward the state meet... and the heartbreak when swimmers don’t get to go because of limited slots in that meet. “Through the years, I’ve had to tell about half of our athletes, who’ve qualified for state meet, that they can’t go,” protests Meisenheimer. “How do you do that? You’ve got kids crying, you’ve got parents crying—*how* do you do that?” After talking to the organization from the local level to the national, the answer he’s gotten is, “That’s just the way it is.” Meisenheimer’s response: “It doesn’t have to be.”

“His attitude, his motivation never stops,” says Rose of his friend, “and that’s what carries you, too, his motivation, his belief in how far this thing can go. And he’s right. He’s a no-guts-no-glory kind of guy. If you don’t buy the Lotto ticket, you’re not going to win.”

Jacque puts it simply: “He’s got such a big heart, such a heart for people.” Thanks to that, as Meisenheimer has shown again and again, just about anything can happen. <<<



Lucky Sites

- www.luckyrosefilms.com
- www.orlandoskindoc.com
- www.teamorlando.com
- www.yo-yos.net

Go Jump in a Lake

Lucky Meisenheimer rarely knows who’ll show up mornings at his Lake Cane dock (right). Since 1988, beginning with a small group of folks a couple times a week, that’s been the site of Lucky’s Lake Swim, a 1K course across the lake and back.

In 1999, just for fun, Meisenheimer designated a blank wall on the back of his house as the Wall of Fame (above), which anyone who completes the swim can sign and get a patch. Recent signers include Meisenheimer’s mother and his two older sons. “We swam one on each side of the 6-year-old,” says Meisenheimer. “There are gators in the lake—not a problem for an adult, but a 6-year-old might make a tasty little breakfast.”

Members of the newly instigated 100K club get a hat. See www.luckyslakeswim.com.

