

MASTERS STARTS AT

What Are Gen-Y Swimmers Seeking?

by Raena Alexis Latina

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Sometimes called the Internet Generation or the Digital Generation, Generation Y is generally thought of as those born between 1980 and the mid-1990s. Some 57 million people fall into this category, according to On-Point Marketing.

Within USMS, the Generation Y 18-24 age bracket represents only 5 percent of the association's 42,000 registered members, according to National Office Administrator Tracy Grilli. Swimmers in the 25-29 age bracket account for 9.5 percent of USMS membership.

A free-lance writer living in Indianapolis, Ind., Raena Alexis Latina did not swim for a high school or college team; she joined the Noblesville Adult Swim Team Inc. (NASTIs) in 2002 at the "old" age of 31.

How then, does USMS and its affiliated LMSCs and teams attract and retain this youthful group, and what are Gen-Ys looking for in return? Understanding the unique challenges that face twenty-

somethings and using tricks of the trade from successful teams can help draw—and keep— younger swimmers in Masters.

Lowering age limits. USMS officially got its start in May 1970, when Capt. Ransom J. Arthur, M.D., orchestrated the first National Masters Swimming Championships. Yet, even 20 years later, competition was still limited to those 25 and older.

Michael Collins, 1990 USMS Coach of the Year and current head coach for Nova Masters Swimming in Orange County, Calif., worked on a committee in the late '80s and early '90s to add the 19-24 age group to Nationals competitions.

"Back then," he notes, "you could swim on Masters, but you couldn't compete in Nationals." In fact, this rule directly affected Collins, who joined Masters and began coaching at age 22, on the heels of a competitive swim career at Santa Monica College. "I could coach," he

notes. "But I couldn't compete. It didn't make any sense!"

Marissa Wong, 26, had a similar experience. "I learned about Master's swimming when I was a lifeguard in high school," she says. "I saw the scope of swimming at all ages. Perhaps it's because I started competing later than most kids—age 14—but I knew that this was something that I wanted to keep doing."

Wong spent part of her freshman year on the women's swim team at the University of California-Davis (UCD). She joined Davis Aquatic Masters (DAM) the day after leaving the school team. "Funny though," she notes, "I was 18 at the time. I had to be a USS-registered swimmer because of my age. It wasn't until I was 19 that I could register and compete with Masters." In 2005, USMS lowered the eligible entry age of a Masters swimmer from 19 to 18, responding to interest from more younger swimmers.

"There are high school swimmers who graduate at 17 and 18," Collins says. "They may not want to continue with the demands of a collegiate program, or they may not be of the caliber to compete at that level. Perhaps the college doesn't have a swim team. Or perhaps they didn't go on to college, but they may want to swim in some regard. They shouldn't have a forced 'down time.' Additionally, we want to attract younger swimmers who may be complete novices."

Ryan McVay/Photodisc Green/Getty Images

Acknowledging time and money constraints. About 20 percent of the Nova Masters are swimmers age 30 and younger. "For us, it's hard to get this group to compete," Collins notes. "They may hate being slower than they used to be, or they're new to the workforce, and time and money are tight."

Colorado Masters LMSC registrar Marcia Anziano also notes that the Gen-Ys on her team, the University of Denver Masters, tend to be less competitive as a group, but Anziano sees a trend with younger swimmers: price breaks

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seem to help participation.

“Luckily, as an undergrad, my parents paid for my athletic endeavors,” says Wong. “Most students I knew were scraping by financially, so monthly fees were unmanageable. I represented DAM at a few booth fairs on campus, and all the ‘no’s’ were for monetary reasons.”

Valerie Greenough, treasurer of DAM, also believes that time and money are the main constraints facing this age group. “We see a lot of our students ‘disappear’ during finals week,” she notes. In response, DAM instituted an “on-leave

program,” allowing students to pay a \$2-per-month inactive fee, instead of regular monthly dues. They then pay \$5 per swim during that duration. Additionally, DAM offers a “New Member Special,” giving swimmers who join in January a reduced rate on their first three months of membership.

Arlington Ageless Masters in Northern Virginia lives up to its name. “The twenty-somethings are the strongest component of our team,” says Kathie Mailey-Masthae, team secretary. “But paying and attendance are issues for some,” she acknowledges.

“They’re working hard at new careers, and they don’t necessarily attend all the practices. We moved from monthly dues to a punch card method, where swimmers can purchase a 12- or 36-session card. It can last two weeks or a year.” Because of the high number of participants, the overall finances of the club did not suffer from this approach, Mailey-Masthae notes.

Promoting the thrill of a race. Andy Nonaka, 26, is self-described as “ultra-competitive.” As a teenager he was aware of the Masters program, occasionally seeing the Walnut

Creek Masters team working out at the pool where his high school team trained. But Nonaka didn’t realize the scope of Masters until 2001, when a teammate at the University of the Pacific (Stockton, Calif.) brought him up to speed a few days after their last collegiate meet. Within weeks, Nonaka began swimming with an “unofficial” Masters group of about 15 swimmers who met every day at noon and created workouts.

“At that point, I figured I might as well use competitions to help keep myself motivated, he says. “So my immediate



couple of swimming classes in college. “I remembered how much I loved swimming when I was younger,” Kalaf says. “I remembered the Masters swimmers were the adults who got into the pool after we got out.”

She concedes that she’s never been a terribly fast swimmer. “But it’s always fun to swim well in a meet. It is also entertaining to fall off the block and into the pool sideways like I did at Long Course Nationals last year! It was embarrassing, but I was able to laugh at it—a bit. It wasn’t graceful, but I still dropped my time, so that was

exciting. It can be intimidating to swim against recent collegiate swimmers, but it comes with the territory.”

Like Kalaf, Christine Andersen was not a collegiate swimmer. A member of the Noblesville Adult Swim Team (NASTI) in Indiana, Andersen, 28, learned about the local Masters team from a co-worker. “I find that I get bored with working out at a gym,” Andersen says. “In Masters, the competitions are fun but not overly competitive. Each year I try to enter in at least one more meet. Now I’m up to three a year. And one of the best parts of competing is meeting afterwards for a social event.”

Swimming is the exercise of choice for Andersen’s teammate, Lindsay Longest, 24. Longest attended an Illinois high school that didn’t have a swim team. She and her sister created a “makeshift team,” practicing with a nearby club in Terre Haute, Ind. Longest competed at the collegiate level for Metropolitan State College of Denver. When she left school in



Clockwise from above: **MICHAEL COLLINS** of Nova Masters, with new daughter **BROOKE**; **CHRISTINE ANDERSEN** of the Noblesville Adult Swim Team; **ANDY NONAKA** and fiancée **MARISSA WONG**, who met through Davis Aquatic Masters; and **NATHANIEL DEAN**, a “commuting” member of Noblesville Adult Swim Team.

interest in Masters was both due to wanting to stay in shape, and to compete.” He moved that summer and joined the Walnut Creek Masters. After another move to attend graduate school, he joined the Davis Aquatic Masters.

This year, Nonaka is club president. “DAM is a hotbed for young Masters swimmers due to the proximity of UCD,” he says. “We get a lot of undergrads and some retired college swimmers here.”

Working the fitness angle. Niki Kalaf, 23, also of DAM, swam as an age grouper, but not during high school. She joined Masters after taking a



Colorado for Indiana State, swimming was not a collegiate sport, so she worked out on her own. She graduated, got married, moved to Indianapolis and found a Masters team. "I basically joined for fitness," Longest says. "Running hurts my knees, and I do not enjoy lifting weights."

In addition to regular fitness and competitive swimming, many Gen-Ys eagerly embrace other ways to stay in shape. Nova Masters, for example, supports a big triathlete population. "So now, especially in the younger age groups, we're seeing those with no swimming experience who want to improve their skills," says Collins. "We have a technique-based program that attracts new swimmers."

Collins's team also hosts a six-week introduction-to-Masters program at a special fee. The once-a-week classes include drills and videotaping that prepares novices for team membership. Participants also spend time on "swimming lingo," reading a pace clock and lane etiquette. Collins believes that the class also helps retain new swimmers, as they can then function better in a workout and more quickly assimilate with lane mates.

Making it social. Several factors help Arlington Ageless Masters retain its large Generation Y participation, including proximity to Washington D.C., where a lot of young professionals migrate for first jobs. "We're centrally located," says Mailey-Masthae. "Also, we have a huge singles population. It's as much of a social value as it is a physical value."

Davis Aquatic member Nonaka says he really enjoys "getting others involved in competition" as well as the team aspect of Masters swimming. Another big benefit: he met his fiancée, Marissa Wong, through Masters swimming.

"My course differs somewhat to Andy's, but the end-point eventually culminated to

where we are now," says Wong. "For me, Masters is socially way fun. Our coach always encourages us to introduce ourselves to people in the lane, and we make introductions or start conversations that help bridge any age gap."

Nathaniel Dean, 28, agrees. "I was in Dallas, Texas, shuffling between two jobs. I needed a place to relieve some stress. I found a pool that was run by a Masters team. To be honest, I expected them to be a bunch of 'old farts.' But it turned out that the group was a lot younger—both in spirit and chronologically—than I expected."

After moving to northern Indiana, Dean joined the local YMCA, and became an "unattached" Masters swimmer in order to compete at the 2004 Fall Classic Masters meet in Indianapolis. While there, he met a husband and wife swim couple, Peter and Beth Schubert, who introduced him to the Noblesville Adult Swim Team, and asked him to join, which Dean did a few months later when the Schuberts followed up with a second invitation.

Dean points out that swimmers don't necessarily need a nearby team to belong to USMS. "All you need is a local pool with open swim and your own personal dedication," he says. "There are lots of web sites that publish practices, tips about stroke mechanics, places to find meets and teams to pair with, even if you're geographically challenged for regular team workouts, as I am."

Keeping it fun. DAM capitalizes on the enthusiasm of its Gen-Y swimmers, as four of its seven board members are age 26 or younger. "These members have really stepped forward to contribute," says treasurer Greenough. "They offer a new outlook with fresh ideas, which is vital to the team." One successful idea from the "younger crowd" was to offer more unusual practices, such as midnight swims. "I love Masters because you

don't have to do what the coach says—most of the time," says Wong. "As long as you don't interrupt the people sharing your lane, you can swim other strokes, go easy or go hard. If you want to get out, you get out. You don't have to ask permission to go pee!"

Notes Indiana swimmer Andersen, "I enjoy the laid-back atmosphere and friendly people. The NASTIs are very team oriented. We will all swim events that we have never swam before, including every relay possible, to ensure more points for the team. It's about being a team and a part of something bigger and fun."

Of course, the social aspects are nice, notes Longest. "When I was new to Noblesville, it was a way to meet people. And our team hosts summer barbecues, canoe trips, holiday parties and more."

"Above all," says Mel Goldstein, head coach of Indy SwimFit in Indianapolis, "what coaches in USMS need to do is to create an atmosphere where people want to participate. Coaches need to work just as hard off-deck as on."

When younger swimmers on the team approached Goldstein with the idea of having more fun, Goldstein agreed to institute special "relaxed" practices followed by dinner at a local restaurant. "We've had seven or eight marriages from people who've met in the program," he notes.

Perhaps an unexpected benefit of Masters swimming for Gen-Yers is the opportunity to network with older swimmers. "I can't tell you how many resumes are passed around," Goldstein says.

Swimmers of all ages become friends in Masters swimming. "This is a sport, and a way to build relationships for a lifetime," Goldstein says. "It's not all about competition, even for those of us who are competitors. It's about so much more. After all, we're all as young as we want to be!" <<<

>>> STRETCHING

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is treating inflammation.

Chronic soft-tissue injuries can be easily treated if caught early in the injury/repair cycle. Typical treatments for soft-tissue injuries include non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medication, rest and ice. As Wren says, "Ice is your friend."

As onerous as it sounds, there is a time to see the doctor. Pain during stretching is a clear signal, as is constant and/or lingering pain. "Night pain is a red flag" for which physical therapist Day suggests immediate medical intervention. Thompson adds the words "severe, sharp, stabbing, acute." Wren notes that when shoulders or body parts are making noise ("clicking, popping, clunking"), or if a joint shifts out and back "that is not a good sign."

Dedicated swimmers abhor time off from training, but there comes a time when discretion should prevail. Thompson advises one to five days of easy activity after a hard workout that has caused pain. For muscle tears, think up to six weeks, and possibly longer for older folks. "The timetable slows for people with metabolic issues," says Wren.

Day acknowledges that most doctors recommend conservative interventions, generally physical or occupational therapy. Some states do permit direct access to physical therapists without a doctor's prescription, but most insurance companies require the prescription for reimbursement purposes, she says.

Many swimmers can make life easier by simply devoting more time to stretching, which will help increase flexibility and possibly prevent injury, as well as increase strength and speed.

And what Masters swimmer wouldn't want that? <<<