

## First Masters Meet Disproved Skeptics



Photo courtesy of Ken Kimball

**KEN KIMBALL, RANSOM ARTHUR and RICHARD RAHE** were part of the U.S. Navy team competing in the first Masters swim meet in 1970.

> Times were changing in 1970. Women and war protesters marched in Washington, Simon and Garfunkel topped the charts, bell-bottoms were fly and a group of “old” swimmers in their late 30s and 40s decided they could still compete.

Held in Amarillo, Texas, May 2-3, 1970, the first Masters swim meet was the confluence of several like-minded swimmers: Ransom J. Arthur, M.D., a U.S. Navy captain in San Diego (now deceased); Ken Kimball, a dentist who recruited Arthur for the Navy swim team; Richard Rahe, M.D., a Navy psychiatrist and Arthur’s assistant; and John Spannuth, president of the American Swimming Coaches Association (ASCA).

Although driven by varying reasons—research, fitness and a love of competition—each was an ardent supporter of adult swimming, envisioning increased interest in the sport. Working in neuropsychiatry, Arthur had published research citing swimming’s role in

ameliorating coronary artery disease and medical evidence that “swimming represents the most healthful form of exercise in older age groups.” Kimball, who had already hit on the idea of adult age-group swimming, urged Arthur’s support for a national push. Meanwhile at ASCA, Spannuth formed a new committee for older swimmers and named Arthur chairman.

Armed with 2,000 copies of Arthur’s paper, Spannuth set out to “sell people [on swimming] all over the country,” he recalls. “I wanted to get Ransom excited about the committee, and I said to him, ‘Why don’t we have a meet,’ and he said, ‘Sure.’”

Spannuth, coaching for the Amarillo Aquatic Club, had just overseen construction of an indoor 25-yard, eight-lane pool that was ideal. “We brought our Navy team—five doctors and a dentist (Kimball), and we had a great time,” Rahe says. “It was very casual; people fell off the blocks, so there was a lot of laughter.”

“We had about 45 men and

women in three age groups: 25-34, 35-44 and 45 and up,” says Kimball. “We had our Navy team, people from New England and a smattering of people from the Rocky Mountain states.” Rahe, a breaststroker, recalls having to enter every event to make up a field. In addition to swimming, the medical team was busy drawing blood and taking blood pressures to see how older swimmers fared under stress. The short answer—just fine.

Kimball recalls a fabulous reception the first night of the meet. “Though I was aghast at how much some of the competitors drank,” he says, laughing. Stopping at a half glass of wine, Kimball, a backstroker and freestyler, captured seven plaques. “The meet was just such a joy,” he says, “especially for all of us because we had been working on it so hard.” <<<

### MASTERS ORIGINS

>>> Records of the first Masters meet in Amarillo, Texas, vary but by some reports there were 45 contestants (31 men and 14 women) representing 11 teams. The events were 50-100-200-400yd freestyle, 100-200yd back, 100yd breaststroke and 100yd butterfly, individual medley, and relays.

>>> A vigorous workout for the U.S. Navy team in the late 1960s was one hour a day, five days per week, reports Richard Rahe, M.D. “We swam at lunch and our training meal afterwards—everyday—was a stop at Jack in the Box, where we ate a double Jack with cheese, followed up with a triple scoop of ice cream at Baskin-Robbins. We didn’t gain weight.”

>>> Following that first Masters meet, Ransom Arthur, M.D., then 45, wrote: “The medical studies indicated no ill effects from the rigorous competition on any of the participants. All the individuals studied were extremely fit and responded to the exercise with a moderate drop in blood pressure. There were no deleterious affects whatsoever.”

>>> Ransom Arthur passed away in 1989, just before his induction into the International Swimming Hall of Fame in 1990.

>>> John Spannuth is president and CEO of the United States Water Fitness Association Inc. in Boynton Beach, Fla., a past winner of the USMS Ransom Arthur Award and an international speaker on aquatics.

>>> Richard Rahe, M.D., 69, published a dozen studies on older swimmers and is a “failure at retiring.” He is currently a consultant for the U.S. Army Medical Corps on treatment approaches for servicemen from Afghanistan and Iraq suffering from combat stress.

>>> Ken Kimball, 75, swims for San Diego Swim Masters and is looking forward to competing when the World Championships come to Stanford in August.

**Sources:** *History of Masters Swimming 1970*, by Hamilton H. Anderson, national masters historian; [www.usms.org/hist](http://www.usms.org/hist)