

THE GREATEST GENERATION

Masters Swimmers on the 'Orange' Lap

by Dick Guido

EDITOR'S NOTE: Their friendship began poolside some 60-plus years ago. World War II interrupted, and Max von Isser, Dick Guido and Harry Liber each spent four years in the service, returning to finish college (but not swimming) and then carving out successful careers in civilian life. Eventually, Masters brought them back together. The friends have kept in touch, sharing memories of college swimming and the war, and also cheering each other on in Masters competition. To date, Max, Dick and Harry have collectively captured well over 75 national titles in Masters swimming. Max and Dick plan to compete in USMS Short Course Nationals in May. This retrospective shares their story—and that of a generation of swimmers.

Harry Liber and Dick Guido, collegiate swimming buddies, were watching a late-season local semi-pro football game. Hank, City College swim team star in the 150-yard backstroke, was thinking ahead to a career in engineering. He had gone undefeated in intercollegiate competition for two seasons in his event, and could push his freestyle team members in the 220 and 440 freestyle.

Dick Guido, a founding member and former president of the Metropolitan LMSC in New York, retired from a career in advertising and public relations, but continues to swim and write from his home in Glen Cove, N.Y.

Dick was optimistic about his prospects for the next

intercollegiate swim season. The team captain and star at Brooklyn College was graduating, and Dick would be the lead 220- and 440-yard man next season. Another swimming buddy, Max von Isser, a full-of-beans guy, was already in the Army, inducted in early '41. Max had swum for the New York Athletic Club (NYAC) team—top dogs around the metro area. In 1940, he had won the Senior National AAU Championship in the 200-meter breaststroke. Now, Max was at Lowry Field in Colorado, doing highly classified intelligence work in a special photography unit. His swimming days were over for the duration—plus.

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Pearl Harbor—an island in the Pacific, but no one thought much about it. Dick had a date that evening with his steady

Now and then: Collegiate swimmer, World War II veteran and Masters competitor, **DICK GUIDO.**



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AP Photo/U.S. Army, Wever

girl. They were heading for a night out with a friend who'd just gotten his Army Air Corps wings at nearby Mitchell Field. Later, driving home from the game, Hank and Dick learned that their lives were soon to change drastically. The date was Dec. 7, 1941, and much of the American Pacific fleet lay on the bottom at Pearl.

The three friends were caught up in the forefront of a military tidal wave that would swell to 12 million men under arms in the U.S. military alone, and sweep away all hope of competitive collegiate swimming careers. Within weeks, Dick was in GI khaki, just like Max; Harry was soon to follow—his engineering skills put to use in an arsenal.

They were among the millions of the men and women, often referred to as the “greatest



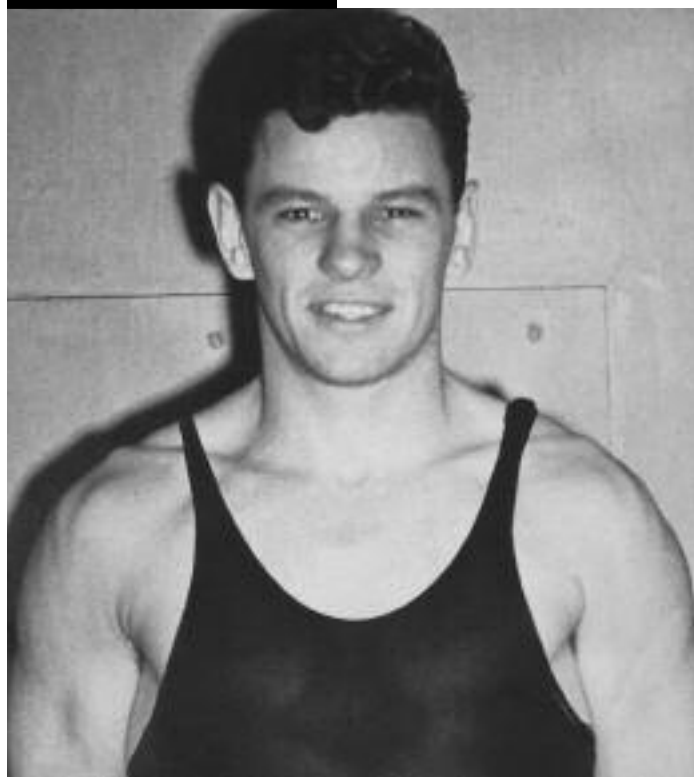
AP Photo/U.S. Navy

In the pre-war years, the New York metropolitan swimming scene had been gradually building, despite the fact that the national economy was still mired in the doldrums of the Great Depression. For many schools and clubs, swimming pools were luxuries you did without. Often, the only swimming was at the YMCAs and the Boys Clubs. Trained coaches were a rarity.

generation,” facing the critical challenge of their times. There was a generation born in the “roaring ’20s”—an era of bootleg booze and the Charleston dance step—who grew up during the Great Depression, with few jobs and sparse opportunity during their youth, only to segue into a world at war as young adults. But those who came home helped rebuild a wounded world, ushering in a national era of prosperity and world dominance.

Busy with careers and families, it was 50 years before

Undefeated in his event in intercollegiate competition, backstroke **HARRY ‘HANK’ LIBER** was with Dick Guido at the moment of the Pearl Harbor attack. Like Guido, Liber went on to serve in World War II.



the three friends would meet again poolside at a swim team reunion in New York. Max traveling from Green Valley, Ariz.; Hank from Cleveland, Ohio, and Dick from Glen Cove, N.Y. It was a reunion that took the friends back in time.

The pre-WWII swim scene. Two of the hot prospects in New York swimming in the late 1930s were Gene Rogers and Mike Priano. Rogers was a powerhouse in the 220 and 440 freestyle and winner of national AAU titles, while Priano was a tough national-level competitor in all strokes. Both had bright hopes for an Olympic team berth—long shots for the ’40 Olympics, but good prospects for ’44. Both Olympics were cancelled because of the war. Rogers, a bit past his best,

made the ’48 Olympic team, only to be passed over at the London games for a younger team member. Meanwhile, Priano returned from three years of military service with a wife and a pressing need for a job. Swim careers had ended for thousands of swimmers of that generation.

In the pre-war years, the New York metropolitan swimming scene had been gradually building, despite the fact that the national economy was still mired in the doldrums of the Great Depression. For many schools and clubs, swimming pools were luxuries you did without. Often, the only swimming was at the YMCAs and the Boys Clubs. Trained coaches were a rarity. The high schools fortunate enough to have pools usually had “shower teachers” in charge, typically more oriented to discipline than to swimming instruction.

Kids who wanted to compete had to have innate talent and the drive to stick with it. They would cluster at the Y’s and the Boys Clubs—swimming incubators that developed team activities for most age groups, midgets, juniors (9-12) and seniors (13-18), the age when the better swimmers tried out for their high school teams. At that level, team openings were comparatively few since many New York City high schools did not have pools. A few ambitious high school coaches took their swimmers to nearby public pools or sought time in club pools, just to keep them competitive.

The New York Athletic Club fostered such stellar swimmers as George Fissler and

1940 Intercollegiate Swim Meet

- 50-yd Free
- 100-yd Free
- 220-yd Free*
- 440-yd Free*
- 150-yd Back
- 200-yd Breast
- 400-yd Free Relay
- 150-yd Medley Relay**
- 300-yd Medley Relay**
- Diving (6 dives or 11)

* Rope finish line
** Fly not an official stroke

Today’s NCAA Swim Meet

- 50-yd Free
- 100-yd Free
- 200-yd Free
- 500-yd Free
- 1000-yd Free
- 1650-yd Free
- 100-yd Back
- 200-yd Back
- 100-yd Breast
- 200-yd Breast
- 100-yd Fly
- 200-yd Fly
- 200-yd IM
- 400-yd IM
- 200-yd Free Relay
- 400-yd Free Relay
- 800-yd Free Relay
- 200-yd Medley Relay
- 400-yd Medley Relay
- 1m Dive
- 3m Dive

Peter Fick, who went on to the Olympics; and the Spence brothers, Wallace, Leonard and Walter, who starred in national competition and swam a family medley relay.

The Dragon Club, whose Brooklyn home pool boasted gold-tinted glass walls and saltwater, was another hotbed of swimming, along with several of the more active YMCAs and Boys Clubs—Brooklyn Central Y and West Side Y in Manhattan, and the Flatbush, Downtown and Kips Bay Boys Clubs. Kips Bay had three swim teams, averaging 100 boys, ages 8 to 18. A 20-meet schedule season was not unusual.

As swimmers continued their careers in college, the typical meet schedule from that era

would likely seem strange to today's competitor (*see sidebar*). The big new thing—the butterfly stroke—was born in the late '30s, when some swimmers and coaches read the fine print defining breaststroke, and dared fight the system by exercising innovation. A few brave hearts started their breaststroke with one lap of “over water recovery” and were promptly disqualified. The squabbles went on for years, even as swimmers built the strength and skills to “fly” for longer distances, eventually swimming entire breaststroke events using fly.

Swimming during the war. As WWII spread throughout Europe and Africa in the early '40s, the United States military, anticipating eventual U.S. involvement, began to generate programs to attract athletes. The United States Army had ROTC (Reserve Officers Training Corps) at many colleges, producing a considerable number of second lieutenants with some military training. Early on, the Navy formed special programs to recruit college-level athletes, giving them non-commissioned ranking while they finished school, and eventually bringing them into the Navy as midshipmen.

Naval Training Stations at Great Lakes (near Chicago), Bainbridge, Md., and Samson, N.Y., attracted top athletes from every field, including top swimmers of that era. Among them were Adolph Kiefer, renowned backstroke; Walter Ris and Bill Smith, both great freestylers; and breaststroke ace John Higgins.

Higgins competed in Masters some years ago, and a story, perhaps apocryphal, was told about an incident when he swam in the '36 Olympics in Berlin. While Higgins was talking to the German breastroker in the locker room, Adolph Hitler marched in. The German sprang-to, stiff-armed a Nazi salute and uttered, “Heil Hitler.” In introducing Higgins to the

Nazi dictator, the German athlete was appalled to see Higgins casually extend his hand to shake hands. A momentarily surprised Hitler paused, then extended his hand as well.

Like Americans from all walks of life, the swimming community was an integral part of the war effort. Navy Cmdr. Joe Ruddy, NYAC water polo champion, was awarded the Navy Cross and the Distinguished Flying Cross; Lt. Col. Frank Kurtz, an Olympic diver in '32 and '36, earned a Silver Star, the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal; and Capt. Taylor Drysdale, a '36 Olympian backstroke, received the Legion of Merit. Legendary swim coach and star breastroker “Doc” Counsilman, an Army Air Force pilot, was shot down over Yugoslavia and led to safety by the local partisans. Surely there are many others who deserve special mention for valor in action.

World War II ended more than 60 years ago, and may seem ancient history to many younger swimmers. But it is seared in the memory and the lives of those who lived through that period of history, when just about every family in the nation saw a relative, friend or neighbor go off to war. According to the *New York Times Almanac*, more than 16 million men and women were in the armed services of the United States. Some 671,000 were wounded, and 291,557 were killed in action. In one single campaign, the battle for Iwo Jima, some 6,800 Marines lost their lives. Yet even these figures are a fraction of the total casualties of all the nations involved in World War II.

Then, Johnny comes marching home. For America, and Americans, the end of the war came as a huge release—the guns went silent, the bombers and fighters were grounded and the Naval armadas began to ferry the guys



Inducted into the Army in early 1941, **MAX VON ISSER** had been a star swimmer for the New York Athletic Club. Like Guido and Liber, von Isser is now a Masters swimmer.



and gals home. By the boatload, trainload and planeload from both sides of the world, they came pouring home—be it back to the farm, or to an apartment on the fifth floor.

But the “Johnny” who came marching home was no longer the kid who went away, just as the world to which he was returning was a different place, with even greater changes to come. The young man once preoccupied with his splits in the 440 now had other, more pressing priorities—securing a future, starting a career and a family. The rah-rah of team, college and long laps in the pool were gone, or indefinitely postponed.

Swimming was far down on the average returnee's list of priorities. For most, the tank suits and swim caps were to lie in a closet, and their latent love of competitive swimming was pushed further into the background.

But a swimmer is...well, a

swimmer. Many veterans took to being summertime swimmers; others made it to the Y's and athletic clubs to get in their laps. Dads became swim coaches for their kids, passing along their skills to the new generation. But for most guys in their late 20s and up, there was no place to go—no outlet for the competitive urge.

Post-war swimming innovations. Nevertheless, the end of hostilities opened the doors to new thinking about competitive swimming, aided by growing national prosperity and the need to rebuild much of America's infrastructure. Veterans were putting new lives together, starting families, buying cars and houses, and

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intent on building a better life for themselves and their families. Swimming shared in that growth. New communities included public swimming facilities. New schools—more

often than not—included swimming pools. Growing awareness of the value of health and fitness got people back into physical activities. Swimming gained in importance.

Coaches and swimming officials, always on the alert to enhance the sport, had *change* on their minds. The most sweeping changes came in the early 1950s, when the butterfly was declared an individual event apart from breaststroke, and the breaststroke itself drastically changed—an evolution that continues to this day. The pre-WWII breaststroker swimming the 200 often swam the first two lengths underwater, could switch to fly at will (still using the breaststroke kick), and finish in the traditional style. Underwater and fly had practically eliminated the original breaststroke.

Other changes came fast: no-touch freestyle turns permitted flips that “shortened” the lap, backstroke soon permitted flips and rotating onto the stomach for the turn stroke, higher starting blocks, turbulence-quelling lane lines and other basic pool innovations enabled the swimmer to shave seconds off each lap. The wartime development of plastics made swim goggles a common accessory, transforming training by increasing laps, thereby improving stamina and strength. These were the first of many innovations that were to allow contemporary swimmers to post times faster than their predecessors and to rewrite the record books. Better and faster pools were built, better-trained coaches became available, and the contemporary generation of swimmers made the pre-WWII swimmers look pretty sad. Maybe, maybe not—all things being equal (*see sidebar*).

Then along came Masters. By 1970, when Masters

swimming was founded, the average WWII vet was pushing 50 years of age, but the latent urge to swim competitively—especially for those whose college swimming had been cut short—was emerging. Max, Dick and Harry were among them. “Old guys swimming against other old guys,” Dick mused. “Another chance to compete again—to have an incentive to swim hard. A great idea! But I made every mistake in the book. I swam my first meet in 30 years at the ’72 Nationals, in an event I’d never swum before. I was 55 and fat—and came out last! I entered five events, and sat around the International Swimming Hall of Fame pool for four days in the hot sun, got sunburned and came home dead tired. But I earned a medal, and loved every minute of it. I was hooked for life.”

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At the extreme cutting edge of defining human potential are the oldest age groups—those swimmers 75 and above—who step up to the blocks in the earliest heats at meets, who hang in despite shrinking physical capacities. USMS reports that in 1994 (the earliest statistic available), there were 575 men and women members in the 75 to 100-plus age groups. In 2005, that number has risen to 909, along with increased participation of older age groups at competitions, including a 90-plus relay, capable of respectable performance.

Among these are the hardy stalwarts of the greatest generation—those who survived the war for freedom and democracy and helped build a stronger America. When the starter says, “Swimmers...take your mark...,” they are ready. <<<

How They Compare Then and Now

••• 1946 National AAU Swimming Records (25-yard pool)

Yards	Time	Swimmer
100 Free	:49.7	Ford
220 Free	2:06.2	Smith
440 Free	4:38.5	Smith
100 Back	:56.8	Kiefer
150 Back	1:30.4	Kiefer
100 Breast	1:00.6	Hough
200 Breast	2:21.0	Verdeur
300 IM	3:23.9	Kiefer
400 Free Relay	3:24.5	Kerschner, Kos, Burton, Smith
300 Medley Relay	2:50.81	Michigan: Holiday, Hayes, Pattent

••• 2006 American Short Course Yards Records

Yards	Time	Swimmer
50 Free	:19.05	Tom Jager/Anthony Ervin
100 Free	:41.62	Anthony Ervin
200 Free	1:32.08	Michael Phelps
500 Free	4:08.60	Peter Vanderkaay
1000 Free	8:44.11	Chris Thompson
1650 Free	14:26.62	Chris Thompson
100 Back	:44.60	Ryan Lochte
200 Back	1:37.68	Ryan Lochte
100 Breast	:51.86	Jeremy Linn
200 Breast	1:51.74	Brendan Hansen
100 Fly	:44.72	Ian Crocker
200 Fly	1:39.70	Michael Phelps
200 IM	1:40.55	Ryan Lochte
400 IM	3:36.26	Michael Phelps
200 Free Relay	1:16.49	Stanford (Bal, Marshall, Schnell, O’Bryan)
400 Free Relay	2:49.80	Texas (Dusing, Crocker, Hannan, Rauch)
800 Free Relay	6:18.00	Texas (Goldblatt, Dusing, Kenp, Rauch)
200 Medley Relay	1:24.00	Longhorn (Piersol, Hansen, Crocker, Walker)
400 Medley Relay	3:02.94	Longhorn (Piersol, Hansen, Crocker, Walker)