



TALES FROM THE

S *wim + etiquette.* A simple linking of words that is almost elegant—a courteous, if chlorinated, dance of civility—something most of us take for granted

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during a coached swim practice. But suppose you're at the local pool during open lap swim, politely propelling yourself through the crowded water with your limbs, fins or tail (if you're lucky enough to have one). All goes well until a fellow amphibian dives in and begins a wild, thrashing freestyle, successfully nailing your extremities or, worse, employs a backstroke complete with groping action.

On the flip side, maybe it's been a long day and the only time you have available for swimming is during nonpractice hours. You're in no mood for interruption, especially from

the scuba-masked individual beelining for your lane. So you forget about playing nice and break out into a beautiful, yet menacing, butterfly. Or, if you're stopped at the wall, you rattle off a long, complicated set in hopes of keeping your lane free and clear. It might be a temporary victory, but later it occurs to you that you probably could have handled it better.

It's a fact that certain situations will throw off a swim, no matter who's at fault. Such moments don't always have to end in a negative fashion, or leave you with an "us versus them" feeling. With a little patience and flexibility—and a good working knowledge of lane etiquette—it's easy to take the high road and become a role model for swimming, no matter how trying the situation in your lane might seem.

Art Hutchinson, 42, of Newton, Mass., never imagined that his trying experience would arrive in the form of a

liquored-up swimmer when he dove into Newton's outdoor Albemarle Pool for a few laps in August 2001.

The strategic consultant and founder of the Cartegic Group recalls, "I was coming up to a flip turn. Just as I pushed off from the turn, this woman dove in over me and landed just ahead of me. Had she been a foot further back or if I'd been a foot further out, she would have hit my neck, broken it, killed me or paralyzed me. I tapped her to confront her...I could smell alcohol on her breath. This was in the middle of a weekday afternoon. She was clearly drunk and got all weepy and started telling me this story about how her husband had left her and on and on and on..."

The incident, Hutchinson says, "really crystallized my thinking" about the need for a lane etiquette guide. As the program committee advisor assisting Newton's West Suburban YMCA in finding

ways to run their pool more efficiently, it was something Hutchinson already had been pondering. Drawing on 11 years of Masters swimming experience, Hutchinson wrote a series of guidelines titled "Lap Swimming Etiquette 101" (see www.cartegic.com/poole-tiquette.htm).

Despite the tense encounter in the Albemarle Pool, Hutchinson remains a huge supporter of swimming, encouraging Masters swimmers to be conscious of how they may come across to people new to the sport. He also believes that it's important to reach out to everyone in the water.

"We have to be aware of the fact that we can be perceived as intimidating, even if we have love in our hearts," he says. "The fact that we're swimming a very structured workout with a coach and being very focused about it, it's intimidating for someone who may be in there. Maybe they're rehabilitating an



THE DEEP END

How Masters Swimmers
Can Become Ambassadors
for the Sport

by Margaret Schauer >>> Photo by David Balch

injury or coming back from a heart attack—who knows?”

After several years of incurring literal and figurative scars due to swim etiquette mishaps, Davis Aquatic Masters (Davis, Calif.) swimmer Samantha Grant, 26, was also motivated to pen an article reflecting her thoughts on lane etiquette for the USMS web site (*see www.usms.org/articles/articledisplay.php*).

Grant relates a personal experience that prompted her to reflect on proper etiquette. One evening at a pool in New Jersey, where Grant was a regular swimmer at the time, a gentleman she'd never seen before hopped into her lane, even though there were three open ones. He began swimming head-out breaststroke with a very wide kick, which she says would have been fine if he'd been in his own lane or with someone of a similar speed. But the fact that this stranger had skipped over an

empty lane to join her was, well, a little creepy.

“I finally got up the nerve to say something,” she recalls. “I asked, ‘Do you think you can move into another lane? There are several lanes available here so that we can all have our own lanes.’ He said, ‘What’s it to you, do you have a problem with [it]?’”

Perturbed, Grant decided the best solution was to move to an empty lane, but the memory stays with her.

“I didn’t want to be like, ‘What’s *your* problem?’ I didn’t want to start some kind of fight. But at the same time, I

couldn’t understand what this guy’s problem was. And I felt really weirded out,” she says.

But in most instances, Grant finds kindred spirits in lap swimmers. Keeping the flow of communication open is a good practice in the water, she believes. One way Grant did this while training on her own was to talk up Masters swimming with other lap swimmers.

“A lot of places where I was doing lap swimming on a regular basis just didn’t have a Masters team, so it wasn’t so much that I could sell the team as just the idea of learning more, the idea of the sport,” she says.

Jeff Campbell, 29, aquatics coordinator for Arthur Jordan YMCA in Indianapolis and a Masters swimmer with Indy SwimFit, agrees that every swimmer should do what they can to promote the sport.

“The number one thing people can do [in the pool] is to always stay positive and do everything they can to grow the sport,” Campbell says. “The more that people know, the more likely they’ll be to become involved, and the more people who are involved, the better off we’re going to be.”

Working in the aquatics field might give him a different view,

“I was coming up to a flip turn. Just as I pushed off from the turn, this woman dove in over me and landed just ahead of me. Had she been a foot further back or if I’d been a foot further out, she would have hit my neck, broken it, killed me or paralyzed me. I tapped her to confront her...I could smell alcohol on her breath. This was in the middle of a weekday afternoon....”

he acknowledges. "I'm in it for the growth of the sport as a whole, whether you're water jogging or lap swimming. I just want to see people enjoy the water."

One way he helps people enjoy swimming is by keeping the peace when tempers flare. Campbell recalls an incident last summer between two lap swimmers, an adult and a teenager. Even though the younger swimmer was doing what he was supposed to by trying to stay out of the other swimmer's way, Campbell says, the adult swimmer became angry nevertheless.

"This gentleman was less

than happy," Campbell says of the older swimmer, "and kind of publicly berated [the teenager], who told his dad, who was even less than happy. That took some swift talking."

After going over the tenets of the YMCA, Campbell says, "Everyone walked away happy. I don't think [the older swimmer] was thrilled at the time but he's a regular here. Within a week he came in and apologized."

Another way Campbell tries to help the growth of swimming is by demystifying the secrets of good swimming etiquette.

"We actually have a one-sided sheet of paper titled 'Etiquette

for Lap Swimmers' and we've hung [copies] on the indoor pool deck," he says. "We've been known to hand them out or just point them out to people and explain those rules."

He also lauds his Indy SwimFit Masters teammates for welcoming lap swimmers and patiently explaining what a particular lane is doing, even if the incoming swimmer looks a bit befuddled.

"More often than not," he says, "people get excited about it, not realizing that swimming could be a group sport."

Perhaps nobody knows more about swimming being a group sport than a coach. Florida Atlantic University Masters Coach Phil Lustig always stays alert to the intricacies of lane etiquette, an important component in running safe and effective practices for a large team.

"I view lane etiquette as primarily the responsibility of the coach," says the 62-year-old Boca Raton, Fla., resident and

NCAA Division I volunteer coach. "The coach needs to make sure everyone knows each other...and the coach must know the swimmers—their goals, levels of physical fitness and capabilities—and then watch [the lanes] to make sure it's working. The coach has to make sure the swimmers are all aware of the rules."

Making it challenging for Lustig is the fact that his team has 14 workouts per week. "We have pretty tight lane space in our morning workouts because we have to split with the university, and in the evening we split with the club team," he says. "It's not bad if they're all the same skill level, but if you have people who are disparate in skills and speeds, it can get pretty hairy."

Lustig, who is also the Fitness Chair for the Florida Gold Coast LMSC, firmly believes it is important for Masters swimmers to be advocates for anyone embracing the

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Etiquette Tips for Lap Swimming: The 'Good Manners' for the Pool

Jeff Campbell, aquatics coordinator for the Arthur Jordan YMCA in Indianapolis, posts the following tips poolside as a reminder for all swimmers:

- Lap lanes are usually designated: Slow, Medium and Fast so you can match lanes to your speed.
- Three or more swimmers in a lane must circle swim, keeping to the right at all times.
- When entering a lane or beginning a swim, enter so as not to disrupt the continuous swim of others.
- If you change speeds (i.e., switch to a kicking set) a lane change may be necessary.
- Be aware of passing procedures. If someone seems about to pass you, or touches your toes, pull over when you get to a wall, and let them pass.
- If you are continually being passed, or passing others, a lane change may be in order.
- If you stop, squeeze into the (left) corner of the lane so that other swimmers have room for their turns.
- If you use pool equipment, please return the items to their proper storage area.

Etiquette Tips for Crowded Conditions

"Don't just get in and surprise the people in the lane, let them know you're getting in...I try to get in a lane with other Masters swimmers...it might be better to get in a lane with more people if they're going to be more your speed."

- **Meg Smath, Wildcat Masters**

"Share at all times. Circle swim almost, even if you're in a lane by yourself. If you're sharing a lane with people who aren't very experienced, you might want to keep the butterfly to a minimum or just swim one-armed as you go by someone."

- **Jeff Campbell, YMCA Indy SwimFit**

Apologize if you accidentally hit someone. "Even if you're not sure, just say, 'Whomever I hit, I'm really sorry.' That makes it a lot better."

- **Samantha Grant, Davis Aquatic Masters**

"A lot of it is common sense. It really boils down to: know the pool you're swimming in. If you're new to it, don't just plunge in; figure out what's going on...communicate with other people in your lane. I think that's where some of this breaks down, if someone's in the middle of a set, the last thing you want to do is communicate, but if it's not a Masters group, if it's not choreographed, either you communicate [verbally] or you're going to communicate physically."

- **Art Hutchinson, Newton, Mass.**

It's important for coaches to know their swimmers and get them in the right places. "When you have brand new swimmers—a person who just arrived on deck—you can talk to them all day long, but you have to see them in the water to see where they belong. You may make two or three adjustments during one practice with that person."

- **Phil Lustig, Florida Atlantic University Masters**

sport. "Even folks who are 'just' fitness swimmers are in the top 2 or 3 percent nationally, because at least they're out there doing something," he says.

"So, I think you applaud anyone else who is in the water and encourage other people. I've got a couple of swimmers who swim with us who clearly could be highly competitive in any meet and have just chosen for personal reasons not to compete. You can't judge that," Lustig notes. "That's their personal choice...it's simply a matter of communicating and letting [people] know that swimming is fun. We all talk about Masters swimmers being in the water because they want to be. I think they need to share that [enthusiasm] in the water with people who aren't Masters swimmers and with folks they meet on the street, to encourage people to try to get in."

Meg Smath, 49, a member of Wildcat Masters in Lexington, Ky., has spent more than two decades bringing people to swimming. Despite her natural proclivity for encouraging and educating new swimmers, she acknowledges that there will occasionally be moments of "lane difficulty."

Smath discovered this after attempting to explain swimming etiquette to a particularly unreciprocative individual sharing her lane at her team's old facility, the Memorial Coliseum Pool.

"I stopped the woman and said, 'We're circling. You always stay on the right side of the lane.' And she said, 'No, we'll just all have to look out for each other.' I said, 'No, that's not how you do it. You can talk to the lifeguard if you have other ideas.' She was stubborn and the rest of us—there were four or five of us in this lane—kept resolutely circling. After a while she got out and left and I never saw her again."

Smath, currently the secretary of USMS and webmaster for the Kentucky LMSC, believes her experience was an isolated situation. "Most of the

time," she says, "when you explain to people the convention of how you swim on the right, the response is, 'Oh yeah, OK, that will work.'"

It's important to share your lane and communicate with your lane mates, Smath counsels. For example, she notes, if you're near the wall and a faster swimmer approaches, stop at the wall and let him or her pass.

Smath laughingly recalls that while swimming at the Coliseum pool, she once shared a lane with Joe B. Hall, the former University of Kentucky basketball coach. "I was coming up on him, and he did stop and let me go past. I did an open turn and said, 'Thanks!' and pushed off. I swam to the other end and was done. He came swimming up and stopped, laughed, and said, 'Well, I wasn't being polite when I let you go before. I was about to lose my trunks and just stopped to pull them up.'"

It's true that there are many subtle methods of promoting good lane etiquette—and good will—including something as small as allowing your lane mate to safely pass at the wall so you can correct a wardrobe malfunction. Masters swimmers can take a number of positive steps to further the sport of swimming, whether through encouraging new people in your lane or via a slightly different avenue, such as the one Hutchinson chose by helping his neighborhood pool become a better place to swim.

"I took what I knew for granted," Hutchinson says. "I do not know a whole lot more than any other Masters swimmer out there. [The West Suburban YMCA] has an entire facility to run, and they may not be swimmers themselves. They don't spend an hour a day thinking about swimming: we do. So, get involved," he urges, "and don't underestimate the amount of knowledge that you have to share." <<<