

SICKIE GETS IT

UCSD Masters Coach Packs the House

by Christine Ennulat >>> Photos by John Segesta



On any given morning or evening, Ron “Sickie” Marcikic zips down the pool deck on a small electric scooter, his shock of curly, gray hair lifting in the breeze, loud aloha shirt du jour flapping behind him. If

he were wearing socks, they wouldn't match.

The head coach and

director of the University of California–San Diego's Masters Sports program arrives at the far end of the 50-meter Canyonview complex pool in time to give immediate feedback to the swimmer whom he has instructed at the start end to bring an elbow in, or to place the hand in the water just so or on some other point of technique. “The goal is, when you start someone at one end, to be at the other end when they get there, so you

can talk about what you were seeing,” Sickie says. “I want everyone to see me as much as possible, so I don't stand at one end of the pool all the time unless I have no choice.”

The scooter's predecessors have included a Razor push scooter, a BMX bike and even a tricycle. Tom Hecker, a swimmer with the program since the early '90s, remembers a “Stingray bicycle, with streamers and a bulb horn—bike bell, too.” Hecker also recalls his coach saying, “I only have one name, Sickie. Like Madonna.”

Theatrics? Real life, actually, as Sickie's wife, Dale, can attest. An avid amateur swimmer on her own at the Y before they met 13 years ago, she got to know him outside of his program for a year before he would let her anywhere near it. When he brought her home to meet his sons from his first marriage, Troy and Curtis,

then 7 and 5, she thought she'd landed in a “fraternity house for 5-year-olds,” she says. Toys everywhere, four dogs, a turtle. “Every little art project the boys brought home was stapled on the walls in a million different directions.” The collection of 45-odd Nerf weapons was above and beyond what any child would have.

He married her on the beach, wearing a salmon tie and pants covered with chili peppers, the boys at their sides.

Who Sickie permeates the three-sport program that now boasts around 400 athletes—runners, triathletes, swimmers, 300 in the aquatic program alone. The water is Sickie's bailiwick, although he oversees all three regimens and the UCSD facility. In a recent meeting, Sickie told his coaches, “When we come on deck, we are putting on a major production. The title of the production is *The Workout*,

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and when you walk on deck, you are the lead actor, you are the producer, the director, the set designer, the maintenance man—you are everything that there is. You write the script, and then the spectators and the audience and the participants are all rolled into one, and those are the people that we deal with.” Those are the people who keep coming back for more.

“It’s all about giving as much as you can to the people who are on that pool deck for you,” he says. “It’s all about the service that we provide.” That service is in support of process. “I keep telling people that there are three types of fitness,” he says. “Out of shape, getting out of shape and injured. And we struggle



with those three processes all the time, because as soon as you feel like you're in shape, you get out of shape. And as soon as you get out of shape, you try to get back in shape. That's what keeps me in business—

swimmer by his teammates. After graduating in 1971 with a degree in advertising and marketing, he headed to Hawaii for a year, ran out of money, returned to Michigan, “stayed there for one summer

rainy November ambling from San Francisco down the coast, he and his roommate arrived in San Diego, where the sun came out. They camped by the bay and surfed. “The next day, I said, ‘If we wake up and the sun’s out, we have to stay here.’ And that’s exactly what happened.”

The ensuing years of coaching San Diego age group swimmers parlayed into his fledgling Masters program in the late '70s, the first in the area, after he noticed a few adults at his pool writing up workouts and then doing them. He started with three swimmers and, within a couple of years, he was renting two pools. “What I figured out really quickly was that the adults weren’t given any time by anybody, but when they were given a little bit of time and a little bit of respect for what they wanted to do and their goals, everybody showed up and swam. It was fantastic—who knew there was a great market out there that hadn’t been tapped?”

Meanwhile, Sickie had continued to grow as a coach, learning by doing, attending clinics and grabbing knowledge wherever he could, he says, “and nobody had any bad ideas. Any idea was a fresh idea for you.” After clinics, he

would return to practice brimming with ideas, and his swimmers would wilt: “Oh my god, he’s been to a clinic.”

But his crazy drills and backwards swimming didn’t scare anyone away, and the program grew. Around the time morning and evening sessions were drawing 40 or 50 swimmers apiece, he says, the University of California–San Diego approached him about running workouts in the new pool being built. “And the next thing you know, that’s where I am,” he says. He moved both of his groups to the UCSD pool, five-year contract in hand. He’s still there, 24 years, two 50-meter pools, a running program and a triathlon program later.

“He has a huge following of guys that have been with him forever, who have come from other programs with him and stay with him, no matter where they’re at,” says Jeff Milton, UCSD’s director of weight rooms and personal wellness programs. “His 6 a.m. workout is jam-packed, and it’s a 50-meter pool,” notes Milton, who has worked and swum with Sickie since 1985. “It’s a real driven group of people, so it’s an outstanding workout—every lane is really competitive and really intense.”

Being a Masters program and located in the birthplace of the triathlon, UCSD’s swimmers range from college student to octogenarian, fitness swimmers to rough water swimmers, triathletes to world-class competitors such as Milton, who racked up three top-six finishes in this year’s FINA World Masters Championships at Stanford. There’s Mary Wilke, a noncompetitive fitness swimmer in the program since 1994. Andi Ramer, Ironman triathlete, who joined in 2002. Megan van der Burch, who started swimming three years ago, her first time since age 8. Then there’s her triathlete husband, Dano



people trying to get in shape.”

Sickie’s start in the business was coaching kids’ summer league as a high school senior in small-town Trenton, Mich. He swam all four of his years at Mid-Atlantic Conference champion Western Michigan University, where he held records in the 100 and 200 breaststroke and was voted most valuable senior

and decided, “That’s all,” he says. “I loaded up my van, put a couple dogs in there, motorcycle on the back, a couple bikes on the front, skis and surfboards on the top, came cross country and three months later ended up in California. The rule was to find a place to surf and sleep that had two days in a row of sunshine.” After spending a

Sickie’s Hit Parade of Swimming

●●● **Toughest technical issue:** “Breathing. It’s probably the biggest change that we’ve made with people across the board, from great swimmers to really pukey swimmers. ‘How do I breathe because of the water? It’s in the way!’ Well, yeah, we’re not fish. I’ve had people who have swum their entire lives that still hold their breath under water.”

●●● **Biggest mental challenge:** “A kid does exactly what you ask them to do, and adults tends to over-analyze what to do to the point where they can’t even figure out what to do. The first thing I do when I work with somebody is I say, ‘Listen, I’m going to ask you to do something, and I just want you to do it. Don’t think about what to do, don’t think about how you’re doing it, just do it. Now, swim a length of the pool, and then this is what I want you to feel.’”

●●● **Worst habit:** “Not going to workout! Once they get regular at workout, and they get tired, they get sloppy, and the arms, they start plopping. So I try to talk to the swimmers and have them place the hand in the water a certain way. You can slow down and be tired—just pay attention and place your hand in the water, just know what you’re doing.”

●●● **Greatest inspiration.** “What inspires me is the beginner swimmer coming in to try something they’ve never done before. And taking a chance, because they don’t know what they’re going to get. They come in and it’s like, ‘OK, I’ve got this guy in an aloha shirt and his socks don’t match. What’s going to happen?’”

Scanderbeg, who credits Sickie with helping him grow from recreational to professional caliber in the sport.

In 2004, swimmer Tom Hecker asked Sickie for guidance in preparing for a swim across the English Channel nine months later. “After asking, ‘Why do you want to do that?’ and receiving an answer that told him I meant it,” says Hecker, “he reached down to the deck and picked up a torn backstroke flag and started writing my training plan to get me prepared for the swim.” Bimonthly updates would refine “the Sickie Plan,” which Hecker followed and successfully completed the crossing.

Such flexibility—the ability to “bend like the willow,” as Sickie says, to give individuals the kind of attention and help they need to achieve diverse goals—would be extraordinary with a group of 30, but 300 swimmers? Still, this putative impossibility is central to Sickie’s mission. “My basic philosophy is to create an exciting atmosphere where there’s fun happening, there’s fitness happening and there’s a lot of family happening. So all the swimmers are kindred souls to each other. I know things about everybody, I know everyone’s name, all 400 of them [in all three sports]. I never forget a name. I know if they’re married, I know their kids.”



This interest is not just about being warm and fuzzy; it allows him to help his athletes toward what they need, and toward knowing themselves better. Ramer, an Ironman triathlete who has swum with Sickie since 2002, went to him recently after a fellow swimmer suggested that her kick was too strong and that she should “back off to benefit my Ironman bike leg.” Ramer says, “Sickie gets it—he knows his swimmers, he knows that I do Ironman, he knows Ironman. Sickie says back to me, ‘Andi, have you done a few races?’

“Yeah ...”

“And how did you feel in those races? Did you feel good? Bike feel good?”



“Well, yeah ...”

“Then Sickie says, ‘Keep doing what you’re doing. Your stroke is good. Don’t mess with your timing—you change your kick, you have to change your stroke timing.’”

“It’s the simple, low-stress attitude from Sickie,” says Ramer. “It’s infectious.”

Low stress coupled with plenty of hard work. Of the 21 swimming workouts available each week, Sickie coaches 13 of them but writes the training cycles for the whole program. First of all, whatever the swimmers’ individual goals, all are trained as if they will compete, he says. “We have interval training on everything, we do the drills in the format according to what is legal, the turns are all legal—everyone is

trained as if they were [competitive] swimmers, even though I think our broadest base is fitness-oriented.” With the year broken into primarily seven-week cycles, fall brings “eight weeks of concentrated drill work on all four strokes. Everybody, even the triathletes.” Sickie adds, tongue firmly in cheek, “They’re real happy about that.” The point, he tells them, is that “all the swimming muscles interact with each other, so let’s learn everything you can about swimming.”

Sickie particularly likes working with beginners. “It refreshes me and reminds me of the things that I forget from time to time that are the basics in swimming.” He has a repertoire of analogies he



likes to use to make the physics clear: the teeter-totter to teach balance, the chicken-on-the-barbecue spit to help swimmers imagine rotation. "Everyone feels things differently, so we do sculling drills so they understand feel with their hands," he says, "how to stay in contact with the water without releasing it." (See www.usmsswimmer.com for one of Sickie's fitness and beginner Masters workouts.)

Co-worker Milton observes that Sickie is a philosophically sound coach, with good stroke analysis skills and a solid grounding in physiology and conditioning, and that he makes excellent use of his resources. Everything any "pretty good coach" should have in place, he notes. But there's a difference, an "X" factor with Sickie: "His way with people *far, far* exceeds that, and is what brings everybody out," says Milton. "He brings people back just by wanting people to be there."

Of course, the snow cones might have something to do with it. Or the annual pancake breakfast, complete with take-home spatulas imprinted with the UCSD program logo. Or Cinco di Mayo, celebrated with chips and salsa and a wandering Scottish bagpiper

on deck between morning workouts. Bowling tournaments, golf tournaments. Or the weekly *E-KNEWs*, e-mails packing creatively spelled info and, says Sickie, "sage wisdom from Sickie's brain."

Maybe it's the 7-foot Gumby costume at Halloween. Or the grandma costume, or the Mr. Atlas costume he had his mother-in-law make. Or the Howard Stern getup. "One Halloween," says Sickie, "everyone dressed like me." Christmas brings Webby Claws, "from the bowels of the pool, spreading joy around, throwing candy canes and delivering gifts to people who need it."

Last spring, though, was a sober time in the Canyonview complex. In March, Sickie went in for a second hip replacement—his left was done in 2002—thinking he would be back in three or so weeks. But his condition turned grave when three blood clots shook loose from his hip and lodged in his lungs. "I survived that one, which is good, because that could have been a close call," he says.

Milton is more blunt: "He

almost died."

Terry Martin, head running coach at UCSD, says she was "panicked"—that the "thought of possibly losing him had me up at nights and scared to death!"

Dale Marcikic had to practically bar the door at the hospital, which was walking distance from the pool. "He just couldn't handle visitors, and people wanted so deeply to be there

and see him," she says. "People would want to come by before and after workouts. It's because of the kind of man he is."

Near-death experiences inevitably lead to new ways of looking at life, and Sickie's rattled the whole program. For Sickie, the experience seems to have simply affirmed what he already knew and stripped life once again down to the basics. Of his first time in the pool after the emboli, he says, "I remember diving in the water and realizing how great it felt to be submerged in the water, with it surrounding me. I stayed under as long as I could. And then I got to the other end and I went [cue sound of panting, like a hopped-up prank caller]. I thought, 'Wow, this is really hard!'"

One length at a time, stopping and breathing in between,



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