

# WHAT DRIVES JIM McCONICA

**J**im McConica has just emerged from the pool, body christened with chlorine. His breath is a rush, and there's a thrill in his voice. He's just bagged another national record. It's late January at the Ventura Community Aquatics Center in southern California, and McConica has just clicked off the USMS one-hour postal event where swimmers cram in

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as many laps as they can in 60 minutes. "I'm really kind of excited because

I had a pretty good swim," says McConica, his words tumbling out. "Last year I set... 1:06.7 [per 100] for 5,425 yards and that was a national record. This morning I averaged 1:06.1 [per 100], which is really pretty quick for me, and I went 5,440 yards. McConica beat his own 2006 record by 15 yards and the previous record, set in 2003, by 430 yards.

McConica will add this record to his lengthy list of swimming accomplishments, which includes such remarkable entries as "longest workout—a straight 32,000 LCM swim in 8:04 hours, in 2004;"

"longest set—100x200 SCY on 2:30 in 1988;" and "most yardage in the month of February—616,000 in 2004."

McConica's excitement is almost exclusively for swimming. Even among diehard swimmers, his exuberance seems unusual, and admirable. He is one of Masters swimming's elite, known among the fastest swimmers as tough competition. At 56, McConica has amassed more than 60 Masters swim records, all during the span between his 49th and 56th birthdays. At the Nationals in Coral Springs, Fla., last May, McConica set records in the 200 free, where he came in at 1:50.85; and the 500 freestyle, a grueling race in which he beat his own seed time of 5:01.47 with a 4:59.74.



Although the 200 free is his forte, in more recent years McConica has stepped up his long distance swimming. He has swum the English Channel once and Catalina three times (he's gunning for a fourth). This kind sustained interest in and love of the sport is not always true of swimmers who come from the competitive arena. Many coaches lament that competitive swimmers sometimes burn out and never return to the sport.

McConica was a six-time gold medal winner at the NAAs, and a five-time Pan-Am Games competitor who set a world record in the 800 free relay in 1971. He also was the second person in the world to shatter the 1:40 in the 200 free. The first was Mark Spitz. In the swim



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# A?

## How Much Time Do You Have?

by Amy Wu >>> Photos by David Balch



universe, McConica is so well known he generates speculation from the pool deck about his legendary aquatic feats: “McConica does triple workouts,” and “On weekends, this human shark propels himself through twenty-three miles of water from Los Angeles to Catalina Island just because the island has a great omelet place.”

What is truth? What is fiction?

One truth, McConica says, is that his starring role has not come easily. Others agree, including Mike Shaffer of Ventura County Masters, who has swum with McConica for the past 15 years. Shaffer says McConica is a workhorse. Besides his Ventura County Masters membership, McConica also is a member of the Buenaventura Swim Club and USA Swimming. Unlike most Masters’ swimmers, he practices with the kids from the swim club, in part because the workouts are more intense and he wants to inspire younger swimmers.

“What really puts him over the top is his work ethic. He will be at workout every single day,” says Shaffer, a seasoned swimmer and triathlete. “He’ll even do doubles during peak swim times. My nickname for him lately is ‘my shoulder hurts but I just did 15,000 yards’ McConica.”

Since selling his family-owned automobile dealership, McConica Motors, in 2004, McConica has had more time for swimming.

At 5 a.m. on a typical day,

## Q&A with Jim McConica

••• **If you weren't a swimmer and money was no object, what sport would you pursue?** I can't imagine not being a swimmer. It is such a big part of my life. I love the ocean, so maybe something there, or it could be something very challenging, like climbing.

••• **What junk food can you say no to?** I love most all junk food. I am a poor example of proper eating habits. Eat way too much ice cream, potato chips, chocolate, candy, sugar kids cereal, etc.

••• **What is your most embarrassing moment in swimming (competition) Please share for us novices?** When I was a little kid, I missed a final after qualifying.

••• **What is the best thing about Masters swimming?** Masters swimming is great for many reasons. I love the competition, the training, pushing limits of my body, the social aspects. There are a lot of great people who are Masters swimmers. It is always fun to see them at Nationals. During my training, I get to train with the high school kids from many local schools. The kids are great. We have fun every day. Love cheering for them at meets and seeing their faces when they do a best time. They are my young buddies.

••• **Describe your dream or ideal pool?** We have my dream pool in Ventura. After years of work our city built one of the best facilities I have ever swum in. We are all spoiled and know it.

••• **Divulge a deep dark secret of yours to SWIMMER readers?** Not sure of any big secrets. Some of my best swimming was just after I became single in 2000. I was swimming mad. It was a great time swimming wise but not great otherwise. Some have asked if I have ever done any drugs. I never have. I don't even drink coffee. I love milk plus my junk food. I smoked a couple of cigarettes as a kid maybe 8 years old and never did it again. I seldom drink.

••• **Do you have a special diet you are on? What do you eat before a race?** My diet is just poor, as I have said. It needs work.

McConica is on the deck of aquatic center tackling lane line duty. Ventura County Masters swimmers describe McConica as down-to-earth, encouraging the slower swimmers and motivating the teenagers. "He's a wonderful role model for the kids," says Steve Witcher, coach for Ventura County Masters and the Buenaventura Swim Club. On many weeks, McConica averages 50,000 yards.

Friends who have known him since college days say McConica's biggest strengths are his laser-sharp focus and drive to succeed. Soon after he left the daily rat race for what might have appeared to be an early retirement, McConica decided to try out for a position as a Los Angeles County beach lifeguard.

Out of the 300 applicants—many of whom were half his age—he was the first to get out

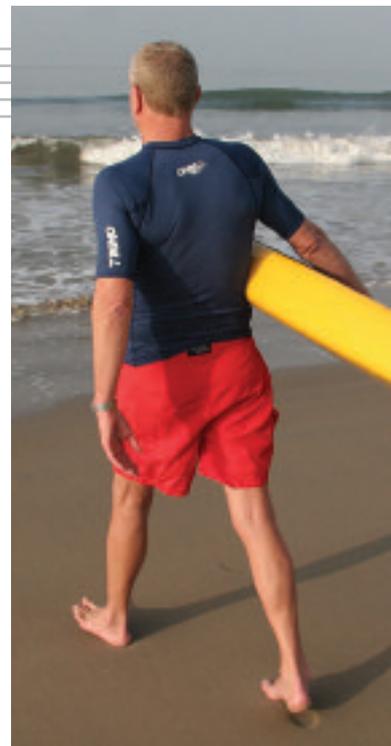
of the water in the 1,000-meter swim, and also had the fastest time. Larry Raffaelli, a fellow beach lifeguard and a long time friend and a Masters swimmer, said that McConica's defied odds by doing this. "His physical and mental toughness allows him to excel," says Raffaelli. McConica passed the lifeguard test with flying colors, and today is one of the oldest members of LA's beach life-guarding team.

The drive could come in part from unfulfilled dreams, McConica says. In fact it is the subject of the latter that takes McConica's usually enthusiastic voice to something more subdued.

McConica nearly made the 1972 Olympics team, missing by only a tenth of a second in the 200 free. At the trials in Chicago, he competed against a group of athletes that included Mark Spitz, who clocked in 1:53.58 for the trials and later took home seven gold medals at the Olympics.

"I was right beside the guy who made the team," he says of Fred Tyler, who came in at 1:54.90. "That was one of my key disappointments in swimming. I was one of the ones considered a reasonably good shot to make the team."

McConica's second biggest disappointment is that USC never won any NCAA titles as a team while McConica was swimming there. McConica believes some Masters swimmers, especially those with competitive backgrounds, often participate in Masters



programs to fulfill a desire they never quite satisfied earlier in their careers. "It's kind of like unfinished business. It's also a lifestyle."

Friends say that the dashed Olympic dream seems to have fueled his competitive streak.

"If you have three months to live what would you do? He says, 'I would train real hard and try to break as many records as I could and make them as fast as I could so no one could touch them,'" Shaffer recalls. "Some people would say go on a cruise, quit my job, and Jim would say, 'I'll train real hard and break as many records' as he could."

McConica seems to confirm this by saying, "I am 56 years old, I'd like to push down records of the 55-to-59 age group so it might be more challenging. I want to be the oldest person to swim the English and Catalina Channel. I'd really like to be able to swim in the 150 age group.

"I want to live until 150, I'm dead serious. I can't do anything recreationally swim-wise. I have to be challenging myself, pushing limits, trying to beat people or do something where I have to reach down and get it done.

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That was one reason why I didn't perform well at trials."

When McConica returned to USC's pool after the Olympic trials, he had lost some of his love for swimming. After graduating, he stopped swimming altogether, partly because of family and career, and he stayed away from the sport for nine years. After graduating from USC with a degree in business, he was intent on a career in finance. He admits that he could have tried again, but he was busy making a living and focusing on his young family. "My chance was in '72 and I missed my chance in '72," he says.

With a young family to keep him busy, McConica says he no longer had time for marathon workouts. He earned his MBA at USC in 1975, and his first job out of USC was at the Bank of America. After several years as a banker he joined the family business, the car dealership that his grandfather started.

Then, when he was in his early 30s, McConica returned to swimming, after being recruited for a relay race by Sandy Nielsen-Bell, a friend who coached a swim team and was rounding up some adult swimmers for the relay. McConica recalls going to the locker room and throwing up after doing 5x100 on 1:30. The last time he had tried the same sets, he could do them on 1:10.

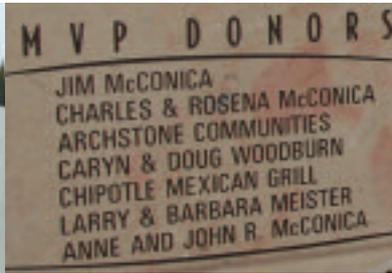
McConica enjoyed the relay so much, he joined the Ventura Masters Swim Team. He gained

I don't just do something. That's not within my mentality."

Swimming has always been a part of McConica's life. A native of Ventura County, he started swimming along with his brother and sister when he was 10. The turning point in his swimming career was his senior year, when the high school team won the California Interscholastic Federation championship. Later, McConica says, he thrived at the University of Southern California under USC's veteran coach Peter Daland. He spent his freshman year trying to keep up with the faster swimmers. "At first I just got crushed. I really trained hard. I'm a competitor. I love to race," McConica enthuses.

In fact, one of his biggest strengths was also one of his biggest downfalls. In races he is fueled by the drive to do well for the team. "I was always a great team swimmer. I performed at a very high level when I was doing it for my team," he explains. He reflects back on the Olympic trials in 1972. "I have trouble when it's individual motivation versus doing something for the team, or something for my high school.





confidence in local swim meets with Masters. "The key was having the other people, and that's the wonderful thing about Masters swimming," he says. "I train with all of these other people and they feed off of me. It makes for a very positive situation. If I had to do it alone, I couldn't do it."

McConica says he enjoys competition a lot more this time around, and will regularly compete in nationals and worlds. He is still concerned with records. "I am motivated by breaking records, yes," he says. "I like to try and do it and do what I can to push and make it a little harder."

What drives McConica? "I think success drives him," says Steve Witcher, who has been coaching the Ventura County Masters for the past year and a half. "I think he likes to be successful and swimming in an area where he is extremely successful."

Obsessed, crazy? His friend Shaffer laughs, saying McConica is the man encouraging the swimmers in the slow lane to try their best, and keep swimming. McConica readily shares one of his favorite quotes from Aristotle with his fellow swimmers:

"We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence is therefore not an act but a habit," he cites. "That's why everyday in workouts I try to make it effective."

McConica says he does have a life outside of the pool. From

1978 to 2004, he worked at McConica Motors, and for many years ran the company on his own. At the dealership he was known to be a good listener, and always accessible to employees.

"He was more of a coach, which goes kind of hand and hand with the swimming," says Tim Donoghue, a long-time employee of the Ventura dealership. The staff and customers knew that swimming was an important part of his life. Customers gave him nicknames such as flipper. "He talked about swimming all the time, but he's also a very private guy. I don't think any of us ever went to any of his meets," Donoghue says.

McConica, divorced but now with a girlfriend, likes to spend time with his two grown daughters, Jill, 27 and Jenny, 30, and his seven-month-old granddaughter, Carly.

He's also a community activist. One pet project has been the building of the Ventura Community Aquatics Center, a sprawling four-pool facility that opened along with a community park in 2005. McConica has worked on the project for 15 years, and in the last four years he raised \$1.2 million for the pool and park. He attended countless city council meetings to lobby environmentalists and community leaders for the project.

"He's a very successful business person. He has local roots

... [and a] swimming background," says Jenise Wagar, civic engagement manager for the city of Ventura. McConica played an important role in the design of the pool. "I think our complex is better too, since he's a world-class swimmer he knows what kind of complex we need."

He wanted to make it perfect for serious swimmers. Ventura didn't have a community pool since the 1920s, and the Masters team did not have a place where it could exclusively swim, he says. Now they do.

Now McConica can be found on Zuma Beach. He works as a beach lifeguard as needed during the year, and will be full-time this summer. But he also has his mind set on the Catalina swim again. "One goal is to be the oldest person to swim the Catalina, and English Channel," he says. "I don't see any reason why I wouldn't be able to do that."

McConica also has his eye on USMS short course nationals in Federal Way, Wash., come May. But he says he may not do as well as he would like this year. At the end of February,





McConica was cramming for an EMT (emergency medical technician) test, preparing himself for the three week, 10-hour-a-day marathon courses. He has since completed the tests, and is now working towards taking the national certification test.

Is this new interest? A new passion? No. "I want to take this so I can be a more qualified beach lifeguard," he says. "I love being a beach lifeguard, plus I love the beach." McConica put swimming on hiatus for three weeks. "There's this 1,200-page book I have to read. This is going to be an important focus for me. I might be out of the water for a full three weeks. It would be the first time I didn't swim for that long since I quit swimming" after the Olympic trials, he says. "Yes, it's something I've chosen to do," he says, but for the first time there is a hesitation in his voice.

"It's rare, but knowing him, I'm sure he'll try something," Witcher says.

Indeed, as soon as he could be, McConica was back in the water. <<<