

GOING WITH THE FLOW

Jeff Commings on Fast Swimming and New Friendships at Nationals

by Jeff Commings >>> Photos by David Balch

The memories came flooding back as soon as I walked onto the deck of the Weyerhaeuser King County Aquatic Center.

The year was 1991, and I was in Federal Way, Wash., for the USA Swimming spring Nationals. I had the meet of my life there. I got best times in every event I swam, even in the 200 breast,

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an event that was—and is—worse than any other event on the swimming menu. In addition

to personal bests in the 200 breast and 200 IM, I placed third in the 100 breast, which put me on the national team and earned me a trip to the Pan-American Games in Havana, Cuba, that summer.

So the pool and I have history. And for the three days I attended the 2007 United States Masters Swimming Short Course National Championships in May, I hoped to extend the good vibe I had with the water. And I wasn't alone.

Since this was the fourth time

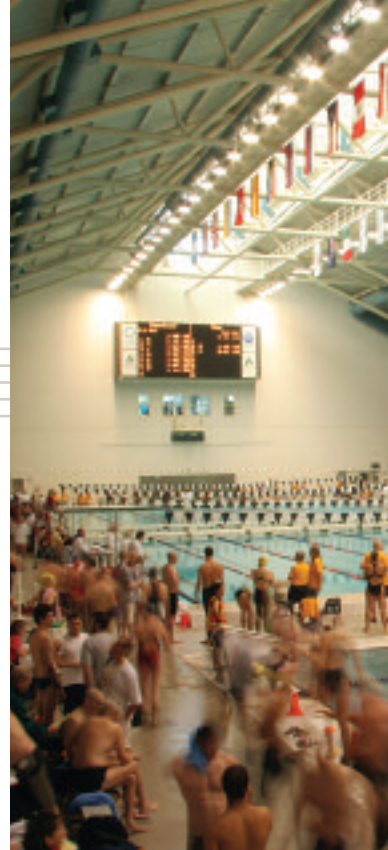
the pool was host to a Masters national meet, others had high hopes to swim as well as they did in their last visit to the Pacific Northwest. And there were many experiencing the joys of swimming in the super-fast pool for the first time. After the elated reactions I heard after the meet, it won't be the last.

Day Two

Heather Hageman, who also went to the Pan-American Games in 1991, was grinning from ear to ear after swimming the 50 breast.

"I just swam a lifetime best time!" she screamed. She told me it was her first official 50 breast race in many, many years, so she had nowhere to go but up. But to see her excitement over swimming a time that got her seventh place in the 35-39 age group made me happier

The author of this article, **JEFF COMMINGS**, 33, set national records in the 50 breast (25.78) and the 100 breast (55.85).



... to see her excitement over swimming a time that got her seventh place in the 35-39 age group made me happier than I felt after my own swim.

I had just broken one of the oldest short course records in Masters, and the relief of finally getting it after three years of oh-so-close attempts washed over me the second I saw 25.78 on the scoreboard.



U.S. Masters National Record Setters: Women

At press time, these records were still being verified. For updates and complete results—including record breakers who did not set the new record—visit www.usms.org.

50 Free

45-49	Karlyn Pipes-Neilsen, 45, IM	split, 24.69
55-59	Laura Val, 55, TAM	25.58
60-64	Carolyn Boak, 62, WMST	28.27
65-69	Beth Schreiner, 66, VMST	30.42

100 Free

45-49	Karlyn Pipes-Neilsen, 45, IM	52.97
55-59	Laura Val, 55, TAM	54.83
60-64	Carolyn Boak, 62, WMST	1:03.74

200 Free

45-49	Karlyn Pipes-Neilsen, 45, IM	1:55.35
55-59	Laura Val, 55, TAM	2:00.50

50 Back

45-49	Karlyn Pipes-Neilsen, 45, IM	leadoff, 28.00
55-59	Laura Val, 55, TAM	29.09
70-74	Betsy Jordan, 70, SDSM	36.91

100 Back

45-49	Karlyn Pipes-Neilsen, 45, IM	1:00.00
70-74	Betsy Jordan, 70, SDSM	1:22.08

50 Breast

30-34	Katie McClelland, 30, DAMM	29.20
45-49	Caroline Krattli, 45, SDSM	30.17
50-54	Leianne Crittenden, 50, WCM	33.38

100 Breast

45-49	Caroline Krattli, 45, SDSM	1:06.01
50-54	Karen Melick, 50, TYR	1:13.93
55-59	Barbara Hummel, 55, NEM	1:17.15

200 Breast

45-49	Caroline Krattli, 45, SDSM	2:25.76
50-54	Karen Melick, 50, TYR	2:40.34

50 Fly

45-49	Traci Granger, 49, LAPS	26.78
55-59	Laura Val, 55, TAM	split, 29.27
60-64	Carolyn Boak, 62, WMST	31.95
65-69	Barbara Frid, 65, OREG	34.01

100 Fly

55-59	Laura Val, 55, TAM	1:02.43
60-64	Carolyn Boak, 62, WMST	1:13.06

100 IM

45-49	Karlyn Pipes-Neilsen, 45, IM	1:00.10
55-59	Laura Val, 55, TAM	1:05.21
60-64	Carolyn Boak, 62, WMST	1:12.31

200 IM

45-49	Kim Crouch, 45, CMS	2:18.48
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400 IM

55-59	Charlotte Davis, 57, PNA	5:20.36
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than I felt after my own swim.

I had just broken one of the oldest short course records in Masters, and the relief of finally getting it after three years of oh-so-close attempts washed over me the second I saw 25.78 on the scoreboard. David Lundberg

was a major idol of mine growing up, and his Masters records seemed untouchable. Eventually, someone would break them, but as I inched closer to the end of my stint in the 30-34 age group, I started to believe it wouldn't be me.

Hageman and I were celebrating different achievements, but our emotions were almost identical. That's what I see all the time in Masters that isn't always evident in age-group and senior swimming. A Masters

CAROLINE KRATTLI, 45, of San Diego Swim Masters set national records in the 50 breast (30.17), the 100 breast (1:06.01) and the 200 breast (2:25.76).

Ninety-nine percent swam their races and went home without much fanfare. Anthony Ervin had no chance of being one of those people. How could the 2000 Olympic gold medalist swim six races without being noticed? Certainly the arms covered in tattoos didn't help him blend in, nor did the Olympic rings on his back.

competitor might not win a race, but 90 percent of the time, that swimmer is overjoyed that some aspect of the race went right.

Unlike most Masters meets, there were long stretches without the announcer proclaiming a new national record. The dearth of new records relative to previous years had nothing to do with the pool. Most of the records were simply too fast, which made the new record-holders—Karlyn Pipes-Neilsen, Laura Val, Erik Scalise, Carolyn Boak, Graham Johnston and others—almost godlike in their efforts.

My 50 breast was the second of three back-to-back-to-back events on my first day. I swam the 100 fly for the first time at a championship meet, which I told myself would be a way to step out of my comfort zone and risk a little humiliation. I didn't exactly "go vertical" on the last 25, but it hurt enough for me to realize that I should only do butterfly at the start of individual-medley races.

Gloria Stupfel, however, is a dynamo butterfly. As I waited to cheer on a teammate in the women's 400 IM, I watched Stupfel, the only swimmer in

the 80-84 age group attempting the event, swim in the first heat. It was obvious she wasn't after records, but her swim was nonetheless inspiring. Her technique was perfect through the entire race.

People often approach me after races and tell me they enjoyed studying my races. "You were putting on a heck of a swim clinic out there," one woman told me after my 50 breast.

I wonder if anyone studied the perfect stroke patterns of Gloria Stupfel.

Day Three

On a cold day this past April in Pleasanton, Calif., Margery Meyer swam a very aggressive 100 back in the Pacific Coast Masters Short Course Championships. As she exited the pool, her heart stopped briefly because of a health condition she has.

In Federal Way, she told me she was being "cautious" this time and negative-split her race. Her time was slower, but at

least she was able to talk about the experience hours later. For some people, getting their hand on the wall is the only objective.

I enjoyed listening to veteran swimmers such as Meyer tell stories of past Nationals and memorable swims. It was almost like hearing war veterans talk about their tours of duty.

While Meyer was an old pro at Nationals, many were coming to Federal Way as first-timers. Ninety-nine percent of them swam their races and went home without much fanfare.

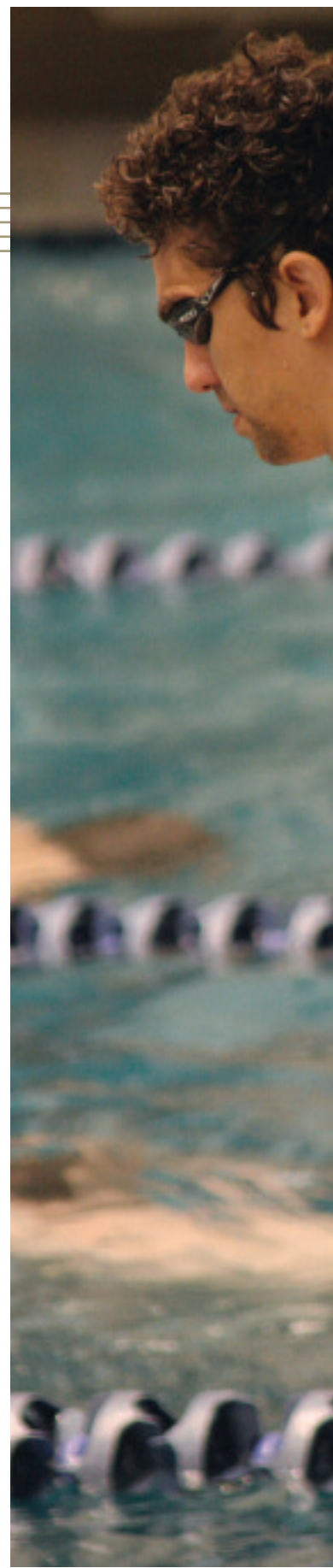
Anthony Ervin had no chance of being one of those people. How could the 2000 Olympic gold medalist swim six races without being noticed? Certainly the arms covered in tattoos didn't help him blend in, nor did the Olympic rings on his back.

I got the impression Ervin wasn't trying to stand out at the meet. Even though I saw him walking around the deck for most of the first day, a lot of people apparently never saw him.

"Have you seen Anthony Ervin here? I don't want to miss him swim," a couple of swimmers told me not 30 minutes after Ervin swam the 50 breast the first day.

On Saturday, he was swimming the 100 free, one of the events he swam in the 2000 Sydney Olympics. Everyone knew it, and they gathered around the pool to watch what they hoped would rival the show put on by Gary Hall Jr. in 2004, when he broke USMS records in his preparation for the Athens Olympics.

Ervin didn't win the race, but when I hung out with him for a few minutes afterward, he didn't seem to care much about



MARGERY MEYER, 84, an old pro at Nationals, was being "cautious" this year, but her stories are worth a medal.



GLORIA STUPFEL, 81, didn't break any records, but her solo swim with perfect technique was truly inspiring.





Wins were elusive for **ANTHONY ERVIN**, 26, but he appeared to enjoy his return to Masters swimming nonetheless.

finishing in second place.
“I haven’t been training very hard,” he said with a shrug. Fast times, it seems, weren’t his top priority at the meet.
He’s reunited with many friends from his college and high school days, including Trent Holsman of the Olympic Club, whom Ervin has raced since high school. Holsman

took both sprint freestyles in the 25-29 age group.

"He used to kick my butt in high school, and then I beat him in college," Ervin said. "Now, he's back to beating me again."

No matter. Ervin, who has moved back to the San Francisco Bay Area, took the opportunity to soak up the Masters atmosphere and found the social aspect to be a major draw.

"It (swimming) is the commonality," he said. "It just brings everybody together for a good time."

Mike Hinnen, who at 65 was returning to swimming after almost 50 years away, agreed that the social component is what makes attending Nationals so much fun.

"It's such a thrill to sit in the stands and watch all these fast people," said Hinnen, who earned four top-10 finishes at the meet.

No one will argue that Gloria Stupfel is fast, and she had me speechless during her heat of the 200 fly. Not only did she swim the race alone, but she breathed every other stroke for the entire race and used a dolphin kick, even though it was perfectly legal for her to

use the breaststroke kick.

If there were an award for the swimmer of the meet, my vote would go to Stupfel.

For the Happy Coincidence Award, I'd have to share the honor with 25-year-old Gary Marshall, who swam the exact same time as I did in the 100 IM. And we did it in separate heats about two minutes apart. That race was a perfect argument for seeding races by times, not by age. I'm certain we would have gone faster if we were in the same heat. I talked to Marshall in the warm-down pool afterward, and he agreed that it would be funny to watch two breaststrokers flounder to the wall on the freestyle leg.

I'm certain our races will not be the catalyst for a rule change, but this is my third Nationals, and in the past two I have participated in too many virtual races with guys in other age groups. How exciting it would be for the crowd to have the eight fastest swimmers in an event together. I doubt 45-year-old Dennis Baker would mind swimming the 200 fly against Scalise, who just turned 29.



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U.S. Masters National Record Setters: Men

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50 Free	
70-74	Jeff Farrell, 70, SBM 24.79
100 Free	
70-74	Jeff Farrell, 70, SBM 56.24
200 Free	
75-79	Graham Johnston, 76, MOST 2:21.77
500 Free	
45-49	Dennis Baker, 45, OREG 4:39.10
55-59	Jim McConica, 56, VCM 4:57.82
60-64	Paul McCormick, 60, CMS 5:21.61
65-69	Tom Landis, 65, OREG 5:37.64
75-79	Graham Johnston, 76, MOST split, 6:34.15
1000 Free	
40-44	Jeff Erwin, 42, SAWS 9:37.46
60-64	Paul McCormick, 60, CMS 11:09.94
65-69	Tom Landis, 65, OMS split, 11:41.40
75-79	Graham Johnston, 76, MOST split, 13:26.07
1650 Free	
55-59	Jim McConica, 56, VCM 17:11.12
60-64	James McCleery, 61, PNA 18:49.29
65-69	Tom Landis, 65, OREG 19:16.25
75-79	Graham Johnston, 76, MOST 22:21.61
100 Back	
50-54	Philipp Djang, 52, RHMS 57.26
200 Back	
65-69	Richard Todd, 65, TCAM 2:25.65
50 Breast	
30-34	Jeff Commings, 33, USF 25.78
100 Breast	
25-29	Gary Marshall, 25, TOC 54.92
30-34	Jeff Commings, 33, USF 55.85
65-69	Richard Todd, 65, TCAM 1:10.58
200 Breast	
25-29	Gary Marshall, 25, TOC 1:57.46
65-69	Richard Todd, 65, TCAM 2:36.30
50 Fly	
65-69	Cappy Sheeley, 65, HIMA 27.36
200 Fly	
25-29	Erik Scalise, 29, SNM 1:47.62
45-49	Dennis Baker, 45, OREG 1:51.97
100 IM	
60-64	Richard Abrahams, 62, CMS 1:00.13
70-74	Jeff Farrell, 70, SBM 1:07.17
200 IM	
25-29	Erik Scalise, 29, SNM 1:49.11
45-49	Dennis Baker, 45, OREG 1:58.92
400 IM	
25-29	Erik Scalise, 29, SNM 3:52.43
45-49	John Kenny, 46, DAMM 4:22.71
65-69	Tom Landis, 65, OREG 5:19.23

Day Four

Sometimes when you touch the wall and look at the time on the scoreboard, the tons of lactic acid that weighed you down in the last few yards of the race suddenly disappear. The arms you didn't think could get through those final three strokes are pumping the air in jubilation and you can't stop smiling.

Ten minutes later, of course, the endorphins wear off and you

The dearth of new records relative to previous years had nothing to do with the pool. Most of the records were simply too fast, which made the new record-holders—Karlyn Pipes-Neilsen (left), Laura Val (below left), Erik Scalise (below center), Carolyn Boak, Graham Johnston (below right) and others—almost godlike in their efforts.



have to sit down or jump into the warm-down pool before you pass out from the pain.

That's how I felt after my 100 breast on the meet's final day. And what a way to end the meet. When I saw the 55.85 on the board, I knew I had not only broken my own national record, but it was my fastest 100 breast in Masters.

There were some people who swam faster this year in Federal Way than they have in previous years, but some were just struggling to keep their times stable.

Jared Walkenhorst, who's also in my age group, looked dejected that he was swimming the same 100 breast time for the past three years. I told him he should be happy that his times are staying the same as he gets older, but I think it offered little comfort. I could relate.

Though I swam faster times in my breaststrokes, my 100 back and 100 IM times have held steady since my first Nationals in 2003. I felt like I could go faster this year, but it didn't happen. When you touch the wall, you are certain you

swam faster than ever. Then you see the time, and there aren't enough endorphins to dull the pain.

But one thing most Masters swimmers are able to do is shake off bad swims, go back to the camaraderie of their teams, cringe at the sight of belly flops and plan for the evening's social activities.

I think the majority of the swimmers left the Northwest happy with their performances. Sometimes work and life get in the way of our pursuits for excellence, and we're simply happy that we swam the best race possible on that day. Take Hageman, for example. She was swimming pretty fast in Federal Way, given that she had just given birth and was recovering from an auto accident.

The looks on the faces in the awards room, a virtual mob scene after the meet, proved

that so many people were able to leave the Weyerhaeuser pool satisfied.

Jeff Roddin and his dad, Hugh, left Federal Way with a repeat performance of their first Nationals together in 1992. Jeff, 38, won the 100 fly. Hugh, 65, took the 50 and 100 back, as well as the 200 fly.

"It would have been great if my dad won the 100 [fly], but it was still great that we both won something," Jeff said.

In the middle of the crowd collecting their labels for the mixed freestyle relay, the Pacific Northwest Masters 55+ team was happy to see that they got 10th place. A lot of people needed two hands to carry all the medals they won.

And as old friends said goodbye for another year, I heard one common sentence echoing throughout the facility: "See you in Texas!" <<<

U.S. Masters National Record Setters: Relay Teams

At press time, these records were still being verified. For updates and complete results—including record breakers who did not set the new record—visit www.usms.org.

Women 200 Freestyle Relay

55+ J Blackburn, S Welch, S Dillon, C Davis, PNA 2:01.59

Men 200 Freestyle Relay

75+ F Piemme, D Hubbard, D Webster, K Kimball, SDSM 2:08.37

Mixed 200 Freestyle Relay

45+ K Crouch, K Garnier, R Abrahams, M Johnston, CMS 1:36.76

55+ R Burns, R Meyerhoff, L Shoenberger, L Val, TAM 1:46.37

65+ M Freshley, J Little, G Clifford, B Best, SDSM 1:59.75

Women 200 Medley Relay

55+ S Dills, S Dillon, C Davis, S Welch, PNA 2:15.54

Men 200 Medley Relay

75+ D Webster, P Lowry, F Piemme, K Kimball, SDSM 2:34.66

Mixed 200 Medley Relay

55+ G Clark, S Peterson, C Davis, S Dillon, PNA 2:02.70