





THE VIEW FROM THE TOP

New USMS Executive Director Shares History and Vision

Interviewed by Bill Volckening >>> Photos by David Balch

SWIMMER magazine sat down poolside with Todd Smith at the Short Course Nationals in Federal Way, Wash., in May to talk about Smith's background and his new role as executive

Bill Volckening is a Masters swimmer and the editor of SWIMMER.

director of United States Masters Swimming. Smith joined USMS earlier in the month as the organization's first full-time, salaried administrator.

Smith has a long history in the world of aquatics, including extensive experience as an executive, coach and competitor. He was executive director and CEO of USA Diving Inc. for 25 years, and during that period increased the

group's membership and budget significantly—utilizing strategic planning and innovative technology to shape USA Diving into one of the world's leading sports membership organizations.

A Minnesota native, Smith was a multi-sport athlete whose diving talent was recognized in high school. Coached by Ron O'Brien at Ohio State University, Smith was a three-time NCAA All-American and 1972 NCAA national champion on the 1-meter springboard. He continued to compete through 1976 as a member of the U.S. National Diving Team. Smith recently won the International Swimming Hall of Fame's Paragon Award for his service and devotion to diving.

SWIMMER: When you look over the pool from the diving platform, what do you see?

Smith: I see a community. I see a group of people who enjoy each other, enjoy what they're doing, and enjoy being a part of what other people are doing. I'm impressed with this community. It's quite unique to hear, "Go Mom! Go Dad!" and to see parents and children swimming together. Sitting in the stands and watching people, it's really great to see athletes who care about how other athletes do. They're enjoying the swims of other people, and wishing other people success, and they enjoy that moment just as much as when they're doing well themselves. That's special.

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SWIMMER: Tell us a little bit about your background as an athlete. What led you to swimming and diving?

Smith: I grew up in an athletic family. I have two older brothers, and they played football, baseball and did some swimming. I got involved in swimming just because I had a natural talent and loved the water. The swim coach put me in diving events because he had seen me play Follow-the-Leader with the older kids, and I could do some of the tricks. He needed some diving points, and I did that for a number of years. My parents

provided some coaching in diving, and I progressed in both tracks. I love both sports. In addition, I played a lot of football. I was the smallest and slowest fullback in the Lake Conference as a senior in high school, but I was so short and had very strong legs, and could run below the linemen.

SWIMMER: Diving is a beautiful, but sometimes risky sport. What was your biggest challenge as a diver?

Smith: I had a number of painful incidents. One was when I slipped off the diving board, and the board came up and scraped

my shin. I took 44 stitches, and remember distinctly being underwater and looking at my leg, seeing blood, and feeling the exposed bone. That was very painful and took a while to heal. The most risky thing is, of course, the diving platform. It's a tough sport, and it's only for those who can overcome their fear. On three different occasions I landed completely flat, had the wind knocked out of my lungs, and passed out from a lack of oxygen. It's always interesting to wake up from one of those. It's probably the hardest hit I've ever had, and that includes football. Good coaching helped me overcome my fears. I decided I either had to get back up there again or give up the sport, and I wasn't ready to give up the sport.

SWIMMER: How did your athletic endeavors lead you to become executive director and CEO of USA Diving?

Smith: My father always told me to pursue something as an occupation that I would enjoy and feel passionate about. He was a very good athlete, and played varsity football for the University of Minnesota. He

was the starting guard, and they won two national titles. He also won a national title playing hockey. But when he graduated, World War II broke out. He was gone in the Pacific for about five years, and when he came back he had a wife and a child and took the first job he could get since jobs were hard to come by. He really wanted to be a football coach, but never could do that. So he always told me to find something I would enjoy. When I found out about the opening with USA Diving, it was about seven days after they had filled the short list. I called some people, wouldn't take "no" for an answer, got an interview and got the job.

SWIMMER: What was your vision for USA Diving? How did that vision ultimately influence progress?

Smith: It was a very small organization from the standpoint of financial resources. There were three staff members, and they had just opened the office about a month before I took the job. There was an administrative assistant, an office manager, and I came in as management. It was a matter of trying to establish what the mission of the organization would be. Strategic planning in the very beginning was done with the board of directors and myself. We established a few major core values, what needed to be done, and mainly tried to grow the membership and raise the money to get more international experience for athletes. As we progressed, we started branching out into coaches' education, education for the athletes, and we evolved over time. I found out you have to walk before you run.

SWIMMER: How did USA Diving build its membership?

Smith: One way was through success in the sport. During the '80s and early '90s, there was a lot of broadcast TV for the sport.

We had some great athletes who were marquee values. That brought a lot of attention to the sport. People would see the great athletes and look at them as role models. In the sport of diving, we attracted a lot of kids who were willing to take calculated risks. These are the kids who end up at the top of the jungle gym on the playground. The first person I ever hired was a media person, and we worked at placing stories in the non-athletic magazines such as *Reader's Digest*. Coaches' education also played a significant role.

SWIMMER: How can coaches help build the membership of U.S. Masters Swimming?

Smith: Coaches are a key to what goes on. They are really the glue that holds everything together, and can make the difference in having a good experience or a bad experience, no matter what the activity. Good coaches are hard to come by. The more you have, the better you're going to be—not just in your competitive performance, but in your enjoyment of the experience. Clubs can become your social life, and you do build up a sense of community and camaraderie. If growth is an objective of this organization—and I think it is—coaches are a key element of that.

SWIMMER: How did you develop corporate identity and branding?

Smith: Finances are always part of the equation. As we went through the years—I think it was probably around 1994—we made a real effort to try to brand the sport. The original logo was developed on a napkin in a restaurant, so we changed the logo. We needed something that was a little more fresh and reproducible. We tried to develop consistency with our use of the logo and color scheme, and we did that with all our press releases, stationery and business cards.

Mostly, we wanted to make sure the identity was consistent across the corporation. It wasn't a problem as far as things the corporation controlled, but it was more work to have our efforts reach the grassroots level.

SWIMMER: Which athletes have inspired you?

Smith: When I was growing up, the athlete I admired most was Jim Thorpe. I remember reading a book about him, and thinking how great an all-around athlete he was. I love sports, and tried as many as I could. Lou Gehrig is another, because he wasn't the most talented athlete in the world, but he made himself into a great baseball player. What I like about him is that he came to the field every day and was consistent in his training. In diving, three of the athletes I have admired most are Phil Boggs—who I competed against—Greg Louganis and

Cynthia Potter. Phil and Cynthia were two of the greatest competitors I've ever seen. They were very tough mentally, and did all the things you have to do to be a great athlete. Greg Louganis—I coached Greg for a couple of years—and coaching Greg was pretty easy because he is so talented he could make a correction after hearing it once. I would describe him

less as a competitor and more as a performer. His grace, style and strength were unique to the sport, and nobody combined those elements as well as he did.

SWIMMER: So, you recently became a grandfather. Tell us a little bit about your family.

Smith: My wife, Patty, and I have been married 31 years, 32 in August. We have two children,



SWIMMER: Fill in the blank: “The most important thing I’ve recently learned about US Masters Swimming is ...”

Smith: That the people have good hearts. It’s a combination of the observations I’ve had for the past twenty-plus conventions, and the Masters swimmers I do know As I’ve gone through the interview process and met people, what stands out is they all feel passionate about the sport and what they’re doing—and they’re all doing it for the right reason. To me, that means they have a good heart.

both boys. One is 28 years old, and was a football and hockey player who played varsity hockey at Ohio State. I’m a Buckeye, and of the choices he had, that was the one he liked the best. He’s now married and had his first child, a boy, on May 15th. That’s why we have so many Smiths. We always have boys. I’m one of three sons, my father was one of two sons, and my brothers have four sons and a daughter between them. My younger

son is a senior in high school, and played football and baseball, but concentrates on hockey. He plays for the Indiana Ice, which is a Junior A Team in the United States Hockey League.

SWIMMER: What’s your favorite thing to do during the weekend?

Smith: I enjoy being involved in youth hockey, and have been involved for years with my kids. During the winter I’m

usually at hockey games. I do play a little bit of golf, not very well, and I do a lot of reading. I read to relax. It’s something I do to get my mind off things, and I like books that have a lot of historical background.

SWIMMER: What is your earliest impression of Masters swimming?

Smith: It would have to be at a USAS (USA Swimming) convention, and it would be one of the Ransom Arthur

Award presentation skits. I don’t remember how many years ago it was because I’ve seen so many. I’ve always considered it the highlight of the banquet. It’s great to see people enjoying each other so much, and not taking themselves so seriously. When you’re dealing with Olympic athletes all the time, there’s a lot of pressure. Masters swimmers are so relaxed and able to have fun, and that’s one of the things I look forward to with this job.

SWIMMER: You’ve had a unique opportunity to mingle with the fifteen hundred or so swimmers in Federal Way. What surprises you most about the USMS National Championships?

Smith: How quick they run the events. It’s very impressive the way the event is organized, and how they stick to a schedule.

SWIMMER: U.S. Masters Swimming is a diverse

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community. How do you see this diversity contributing to membership growth?

Smith: Diversity makes things fun, and having a diverse community gives us access to a diverse group of people out there who could join U.S. Masters Swimming. Getting along with other people, working as a team—there's nothing like team sports. If you were working with just one segment of the population, you'd probably be confined to that segment. Diversity just gives you a lot more places to go in terms of meeting new people and attracting them to the sport.

SWIMMER: How would you characterize the people you've met this week?

Smith: I think I've already answered that, in a couple different ways. But I think enthusiasm is what I really see—people who are enthusiastic about what they're doing.

SWIMMER: What would you like to accomplish in your first year with USMS?

Smith: Online registration is a key component that needs to happen sooner rather than later. I need to get a consensus about how to achieve that. It's something I'm probably going to work on first. Online registration will provide a better service to the membership; access to membership registration data will be beneficial; and hopefully, the volunteers won't have to work quite as hard. I think bringing technology to the organization, using it to make things easier for the volunteers, and providing a quicker and more consistent service to the membership is important.

I would like to see a strategic plan put together for the next three years. A strategic plan for the membership will help us set some objectives and meet those objectives. If I'm going to be part of the leadership of this organization,

I want to make sure I'm leading in the right direction.

SWIMMER: Perceptive, thoughtful and resourceful are a few words I would use to describe you. What words would you use to describe yourself?

Smith: Patient. I was never a patient child or young adult, but I have learned patience. It's important not to jump into things before you learn. The first president of USA Diving, Dr. Ray Hain, taught me this. Dr. Hain was a very thoughtful man, very patient, and always gathering facts to make informed decisions. I really took a lesson from him. For an executive director in a national governing body, I think it's a trait that helps you survive.

SWIMMER: Fill in the blank: "The most important thing I've recently learned about U.S. Masters Swimming is..."

Smith: That the people have good hearts. It's a combination of the observations I've had for the past twenty-plus conventions, and the Masters swimmers I do know. That gave me the impression that they could relax, that they were passionate about what they were doing, and fun-loving. I've known Mel Goldstein for years, and have been involved in the USAS Board meetings, where there is always a representative of Masters swimming. They have always been well advised, intelligent and considerate about what's going on. As I've gone through the interview process and met people, what stands out is they all feel passionate about the sport and what they're doing—and they're all doing it for the right reason. To me, that means they have a good heart. Masters swimmers are also always there to help. Volunteerism is a lost art. Certainly, U.S. Masters Swimming has many great volunteers. Without them, the organization never would've been able to evolve to where it is now. <<<

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