

SWIMMING IN UNFAMILIAR

A Women's Team Inspires Teamwork and Personal Victory

by Beth Mink >>> Photos by Peter Bick

With a flash of light and a bell tone, Sue Cosper, 58, dives off the block for the first lap of the women's 55+ 200 freestyle relay at the YMCA Masters National Championship.

Beth Mink is a freelance writer from Indianapolis.

Cosper's plunge into the IU Natatorium pool in Indianapolis is a defining moment for

four women who have worked so hard together to reach this point—and it might be a historic event as well.

When the last swimmer's

hand touches the wall, this team from the local Arthur Jordan YMCA has finished fifth in the five-team relay, a humbling three minutes behind the nearest competitors and more than three-and-a-half minutes off the USMS national record. But Cosper, Alma Coles, Lillian Davis and Connie Dumas-Coleman have no reason to be humble.

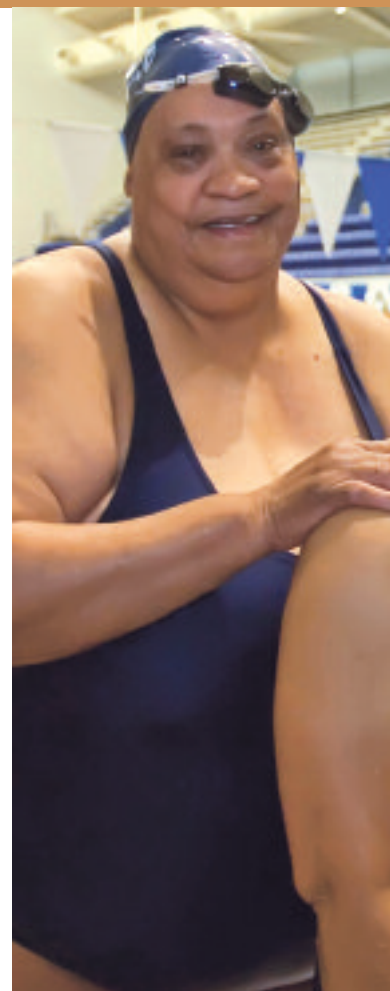
A multi-sport athlete who teaches synchronized swimming, Cosper is the only member of the team with any competitive experience at all. Cosper's sis-

ter, Dumas, has not swum since high school. A few years prior to this April 2007 competition, two of the four African-American women, Coles and Davis, could not even tread water. And just minutes before officials called the team to their event, YMCA Indy SwimFit coach Kris Houchens was still trying to help them get up the nerve to enter the 9-foot-deep, 50-meter pool.

In the locker room before the race, Houchens recalls telling the teammates, "Whatever happens now is between you and God and the water. You have already won the race." Then, Houchens gave each competitor a dozen roses.

Houchens is proud of the fact that the relay team made this remarkable transition from concept to reality in less than a year. Although the women credit Houchens with introducing them to the idea of competition, and leading them through the process, Houchens herself says their presence at this national competition is largely the result of a series of fortunate events initiated by Coles.

An Alabama native, Coles, 68, is a tall woman with dauntless spirit and a willingness to try almost anything. Some women take up knitting when they retire, but Coles took up competitive swimming. Divorced with three grown children, she began her journey two years ago in an



aquatic exercise class for arthritis patients in her YMCA pool.

"She hugged the wall with a flotation device around her waist the first few classes," says Sandy Calhoun, aqua aerobics instructor at the Benjamin Harrison YMCA in Indianapolis. But Coles progressed quickly, moving from aqua aerobics to the YMCA's adult learn-to-swim program, a series of classes that Houchens, an ASCA Level 5 Masters swim coach, took over this past year and transformed

Masters for Beginners: Spotlight 1

- **Masters Program:** Washington State University Masters
- **Location:** Pullman, Wash. (pop. 24,675)
- **Head Coach:** Doug Garcia, with 15 years experience coaching this group
- **Contact:** douggarcia@usms.org
- **Number of Members:** About 35, with typical practices averaging 15 swimmers
- **Philosophy and Practice:** The basic requirement is to swim 100 yards in 2 minutes, 30 seconds, but the club works with swimmers to get them up to speed—they turn away very few people who want to swim. The goal of WSUM is to help swimmers improve their times by helping them improve their technique.
- **Garcia's Comments:** We recruit people who want to swim, regardless of their ability. A lot of our beginning swimmers come to the sport as adults, in their 30s, 40s and 50s. As they get older, some have found they have fewer fitness options, and swimming is a good low-impact way to stay fit. These people are pretty inspirational to me as a coach. They usually have a lot of drive, and the maturity to stick with it and improve.

WATERS



On deck at the 2007 YMCA Masters National Championships, this YMCA Indy SwimFit relay team inspired spectators, coaches and fellow swimmers. Left to Right: **ALMA COLES**, 68; **LILLIAN DAVIS**, 63; **CONNIE DUMAS-COLEMAN**, 64; **AND SUE COSPER**, 58.

into “GetWet 1,” “GetWet 2” and “StayWet.”

These YMCA beginner programs are not designed specifically to create new members for Masters programs—but YMCA Indy SwimFit, a USMS program for Indianapolis—is receptive to beginners and welcomes swimmers who want to move up.

“Thanks to Mel Goldstein, YMCA Indy SwimFit has always been at the forefront of USMS programs in welcoming swimmers of all abilities and back-

grounds into our organized swim practices,” Houchens says. “The coaches and team members have built an environment of trust and support that helps individuals test their limits. These two components provide a formula that accepts people where they are ability-wise, and invests in their individual potential.”

(Editor’s Note: See sidebars for information about some of the other USMS programs around the country that have strong programs for beginners.)

The YMCA Indy SwimFit philosophy turned out to be perfect for Coles, who had decided merely learning how to swim wasn’t enough. She had begun working out in the pool to ease arthritis in her knee, but wasn’t able to ignore what was going on around her. When she saw the Masters swimmers doing their laps in the YMCA pool, she recalls thinking, “I want to be in the pool with them.”

Coles prayed, something she

does frequently. “I’m from the old school,” she says. “I raised my children to get what they need. At age 65, I fell in love with myself. People in our age group love our husbands and our children, but we forget to love ourselves. This was my time ... to do something for me.”

Having progressed from being a nonswimmer at 65 to swimming the length of the pool to celebrate her 67th birthday, Coles made it known to Houchens that she wanted to try out for the Masters swim team. The GetWet classes consist mostly of African-American women, so the two discussed putting together an all-African-American relay team for the upcoming YMCA Nationals event to be hosted in Indianapolis.

Then they started recruiting. Coles previously had talked her friend Lillian Davis into joining the GetWet program, and both women had worked together to overcome their fear of the water.

“You see, coming from Arkansas, we didn’t swim down there,” Davis says. “[Swimming] wasn’t for us. Just graduating from high school was a big accomplishment.”

Yet, together, Coles and Davis found strength. When one became discouraged, the other was there to boost her spirits. When Coles brought up the



idea of competing, Davis was reluctant, but she trusted her friend enough to give it a try.

Davis, 63, married with one grown son, is a short, well-dressed woman with a sweet smile who says she was attracted to the idea of aquatic exercise because she needed a low-impact program to help her manage type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure and arthritis.

"I cried in the doctor's office when the doctor told me I had diabetes," she says. "I didn't want to depend on any drugs, and I was afraid of losing my kidneys and my eyesight." But soon after her diagnoses, Davis babysat for a girl who takes insulin injections. She thought, "If this little girl can take the pain, I can too."

Davis eventually learned how to eat better and keep her blood sugar under control. Through her regimen of diet and exercise, she dropped from a size 16 to a size 12. When Davis went to the YMCA and started the aquatic arthritis exercise class, she also hugged the pool wall nervously—but eventually she allowed Coles to coax her into the GetWet swim classes.

"We were lonely in the water," Davis says, "so we started practicing together on the days between classes."

Davis says she also uses prayer to overcome obstacles. She virtually prayed her way through her fear of the deep end of the pool, and having



achieved that goal, was receptive to the idea of joining Coles' relay team. "I'm a shy person," she says. "I like to work in my garden and visit with my husband. But, once I make a commitment, I don't quit, even as painful as it is for me to be in the spotlight."

Whether it was the prayers or her friend who made the difference, Coles had made her commitment to compete. She decided to postpone her scheduled knee replacement surgery until two days after the YMCA Nationals meet. "My doctor wanted me to have it sooner, but I said, 'No, I didn't want to let down the [YMCA Indy SwimFit] team,'" she said.

Houchens initially had no trouble finding two other black women to sign up for the relay. In their first year, the GetWet and StayWet programs have attracted more than a dozen African-Americans (mostly women) from the Indianapolis community. The YMCA organization has supported efforts to get minorities involved in swimming, but nationwide, success in getting these groups to advance to Masters programs has been modest thus far.

"I have been with Y Masters for 25-plus years," says Claudia Multer, YMCA Masters national meet director, "and I have seen very few minorities of any kind. This year was my first year to see an all-black relay. The fact

that they have just learned to swim, and are competing, is really exciting."

The pressure of competition and training took an almost immediate toll on the group. The two most-recent recruits dropped out, one professing a continued fear of the water and the other finding the training schedule a bit too time-consuming. Consequently, Houchens was pleased when Sue Cosper accepted the challenge. Cosper competes regularly, and is one of the first African-Americans to judge synchronized swimming at a national level. Houchens had coached Cosper for more than nine years and felt this swimmer could become an integral part of the relay team.

Cosper, who is married to a public school administrator, started synchronized swimming at 34 "because I was getting fat," she says. "I'm lazy and I don't like to work that hard—I didn't know how hard it was." Despite her "laziness," Cosper swims for 75 minutes each weekday morning with YMCA Indy SwimFit, starting at 5:30 so she can spend a full day teaching fourth and fifth grade at the James A. Garfield School in Indianapolis, a job she's had for 38 years. In the evenings, she gives private synchronized swimming lessons, and tutors students who need help with schoolwork. Cosper also is an avid runner who has raced in

the Indianapolis Life 500 Festival Mini-Marathon each year for the past six years.

The fourth relay team member is Cosper's sister, Dumas-Coleman, who also was in the GetWet program. Widowed with one grown son, Dumas, 64, is a retired teacher who currently writes education grants and works as a Girl Scout volunteer. Prior to her return to swimming and workouts with the team, Dumas-Coleman had struggled with hypertension, type 2 diabetes, and arthritis in her back and one knee. Although she still has two

fingers so badly stiffened from the arthritis that she can't bend them, Dumas-Coleman stuck with her training, remembering her mother's advice: "Aw, just suck it up and keep going."

Dumas-Coleman and Cosper say it was their mother who insisted they take swimming lessons, despite the fact that few African-Americans were pursuing the sport during the years they were in school. Dumas-Coleman says a youth outreach worker from "the white Y" had come to her school with program brochures, and she took swimming lessons

Masters for Beginners: Spotlight 2

••• **Masters Program:** Alexandria Masters Swimming (AMS)

••• **Location:** Alexandria, Va.

••• **Head Coach:** AMS Chairman Ray Novitske, a former high school competitive swimmer who helped found the club in 1997

••• **Contact:** rnovitske@usms.org

••• **Number of Members:** Approximately 100, 15-20 per session

••• **Philosophy and Practice:** AMS doesn't teach people how to swim, but if you can swim about a lap, the club will welcome you. New swimmers get a welcome package with the club's history, organization and procedures. AMS sponsors a popular annual swim meet, Tropical Splash, with standard competitive events plus the "Coconut Relay," a fun race that gives beginners and elite swimmers a chance to swim together. New participants in the Splash get a flyer, "My First Meet," with information on how to compete in a race.

••• **Novitske's Comments:** We try to have a little more fun. Our member retention rate is the same for beginners as it is for elite swimmers. I don't think beginners would keep coming back if we didn't offer what they want. The biggest worry new swimmers have is "Am I going to be too slow and not fit in?"

Masters for Beginners: Spotlight 3

- **Masters Program:** Chicago Blue Dolphins
- **Location:** Chicago
- **Head Coach:** John Fitzpatrick, a Masters swimmer with more than 25 years of experience as a competitor and selected “Best Swim Instructor” in *Chicago Magazine* “Best of 2006”
- **Contact:** fitz@chicagobluedolphins.com
- **Number of Members:** 250, average 15-30 swimmers per session
- **Philosophy and Practice:** The Blue Dolphins require new swimmers to go through a stroke clinic, and dedicate one lane in each practice session for stroke practice. Fitzpatrick’s philosophy is that if people embrace the idea of improving their technique, then they will improve overall, and they will keep coming back to more practices.
- **Fitzpatrick’s Comments:** We believe in developing technique first, then distance and then speed. Plenty of people come in here off the street with no competitive experience. Our objective is to, first, provide a place for them, and then, provide a place for them to go up. As swimmers progress in ability, they move up in the lanes to higher and higher levels. We also believe it’s very important to give people feedback on their performance.

Masters for Beginners: Spotlight 4

- **Masters Program:** Davis Aquatic Masters (DAM)
- **Location:** Davis, Calif.
- **Head Coach:** Rick Powers, former competitive coach with 35 years of experience (Southern Illinois University and national teams for six countries)
- **Contact:** rpswimmer@hotmail.com
- **Number of Members:** 670, approximately 200-250 new members annually
- **Philosophy and Practice:** With a high turnover rate among its membership, which Powers attributes to Davis’ being a college town, DAM focuses on the fitness aspect of Masters swimming, emphasizing low-impact workouts that can be accomplished by swimmers at a variety of levels. DAM also includes social events on its Masters calendar. DAM does have some high-intensity workouts—and encourages members who want to race to enter competitive events—but elite swimmers are not the main focus.
- **Powers’ Comments:** If people can swim 25 yards, then we can work with them. Swimmers in the slow lanes always get more attention than the seasoned swimmers, at least at first. I get as much satisfaction from working with a novice as I do with a veteran competitive swimmer. It’s joyful to see anyone improve, regardless of where they start.

during her senior year of high school. That year was the last of swimming for Dumas-Coleman until August 2006, when Houchens saw her in the arthritis swim class and signed her up for GetWet, and soon after, the relay.

At this writing, it is not clear exactly where these women fit into the history of swimming, but there is no doubt the four USMS members are a rarity in the sport. All four say they encountered at least some discrimination in relation to the sport of swimming while growing up, and records indicate they

were probably not alone.

Prior to the Civil War, because swimming was considered a potential means of escape for slaves, blacks were discouraged from learning to swim, according to “Black Splash: The History of African-American Swimmers,” an article published this year by the International Swimming Hall of Fame. Author Lee Pitts, who founded a Fort Myers, Fla.-based swimming school for blacks, writes that African-Americans were excluded from swimming pools and beaches throughout the first half of the

20th century, resulting in “a cultural disconnect between the black community and swimming.”

During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, blacks began to protest this discrimination by staging “wade-ins” at public beaches that excluded them. Although separate YMCA facilities had existed for African-Americans since the 1850s, few had pools or offered swim lessons for members.

“These ladies are role models, particularly for African-Americans who want to learn to swim,” Pitts says. “Doctors

tell patients swimming is the ideal non-impact fitness sport for people with chronic conditions, but blacks often don’t have experience in the water, and that has prevented a lot of them from participating in fitness programs they really need. Swimming is a beautiful sport.” Pitts’ program is directed mainly at younger nonswimmers, but he says it’s never too late to learn. “I am really excited to hear about this accomplishment. To my knowledge, they are the first all African-American women’s relay team to swim in Masters competition,” he said.

Today there are no legal obstacles. The segregated YMCA facilities that existed up until the 1960s have been abolished, and by teaching more African-Americans and Hispanics to swim, pioneers like Pitts are hoping to turn around the alarming statistic that minorities still suffer a disproportionate number of the drownings in the U.S. each year. Gradually, these new minority swimmers are being

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attracted to competition.

Because of their lack of experience, Houchens considered waiting another year before entering the relay team in competition, but she decided the four should go ahead while they were willing to try. This year, the meet was being held in their home town, and Houchens felt it would be easier to get them to do a relay at home than to get all four to travel to Florida, where the meet will be held next year.

"Some things you do because you know they must be done," Houchens says. "This is one of those things. In order for things to progress, people need to know there are opportunities now that may not have existed before. But, until you get someone to actually do it, it's pointless to say these opportunities exist."

The team began working out regularly with the YMCA Indy SwimFit Masters. They entered a few local and regional competitions to prepare for the YMCA Nationals, taking third in their age group in a relay at a Greater Indiana Masters Swimming (GRIN) State Championships.

Dumas-Coleman, who was the finishing swimmer in this event, slipped on the pad at the start, but says she had a little trick in reserve to restore her stroke. She started singing "Holy, Holy, Holy" to herself to feel the rhythm. "We all had different challenges," she says. "I was taught to kick five times between strokes. Also, when I kicked off from the wall I was losing four seconds just getting in position to swim. They set a coach there at the relay to tell me when to go."

Houchens says the attention of their coaches has been an important factor in keeping the new YMCA Indy SwimFit relay team motivated to improve their skills. She credits YMCA Indy SwimFit coaches Goldstein, George Quigley, Annie Schnieders, Sally Hasbrook and Tammy Huehls for their contributions, and

says many Indy SwimFit swimmers, including Joyce Davis, Barb Kirk, Barbara Kin-Pinney, Sue Pollard, Fran McAree and Russ Desserich, also helped these women prepare for their events.

"We hope these four women can finally beat a path wide enough for many more to follow," Houchens says. "It is not the young ones; they understand the changes happening in our society. It is the older adults who didn't have the opportunity. They deserve to finally experience what it is like to compete in a physical activity where goal setting and competing can bring such a rewarding experience unlike anything else."

Today, the four swimmers spend more time worrying about their future competitive events than they do about missed opportunities. But they are willing to admit that their accomplishment has an impact that extends beyond the personal satisfaction of swimming in a national competition.

The official recorded time for the YMCA Indy SwimFit Women's Relay Team in the 55+ 200 freestyle relay at the 2007 YMCA Masters Short Course Nationals was 5:29.85.

It all happened because Alma Coles had dreamed a dream in quiet dignity. Her new friends followed her inspiration. They rose in obscurity and kept stroking through. They never quit. And the 200 yards they covered in the pool is nothing compared to how far they have come.

"Next year won't be the same as this year," Dumas-Coleman says. "This year is special, the one time we crack the door open for those who will follow. Kris cracked the door open for us as black people, as women and as retired people. We just can't say enough about how we appreciate and admire her and Mel Goldstein for inviting us to compete. They could have just put us in as an exhibition, but they allowed us to be with them." <<<

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