

SPEED AND GRACE

by Raena Alexis Latina-Lawson >>> Photos by David Balch

There are four main categories in the world of aquatics: swimming, diving, water polo and synchronized swimming. Most of us are happy to splash around to some degree in just one. But Charlotte Davis chose two of these rigorous sports. And she doesn't just participate, she excels.

Davis, 57, grew up in the Seattle area and has spent most of her life there. Taking to water at an early age, she was an age group swimmer before treading her way to "synchro." When she was younger, this sport held great allure. "You

would teach me what they knew," Davis recalls. But, she notes with a laugh, "Water ballet is a showy thing, and synchro is competitive." She also recalls that it was a lot harder too.

Davis competed in synchronized swimming with a team in Santa Clara, Calif. While in high school, she was part of the U.S. Nationals winning team in 1970, and went on to an international competition in Japan where the group placed second in the team division.

By then, Davis's competitive streak was in full gear. "Later, I started my own synchro team," she notes. "To be any good [at synchro], it seemed like everyone had to move to California. I wanted to *compete against* them!"

national team director. She led the 1988 Olympic solo and duet teams to a silver sweep in Seoul, Korea, and served as the Olympic team manager in 1992 for the Barcelona games in Spain. That same year, she was inducted into the USSS (U.S. Synchronized Swimming) Hall of Fame. She also directed gold medal efforts at numerous international events, including the World Cup, World Championships, Pan American Games and Goodwill Games. Under her guidance, the United States was ranked No. 1 in the world from 1987 to 1996.

Although some of her personal skill and coaching success comes naturally, there is also a lot of hard work involved.

Raena Alexis Latina-Lawson is a freelance writer and Masters swimmer from Indianapolis.



got music *and* costumes," recalls Davis. "It was more fun and more interesting [than swimming]."

Sheer sibling rivalry also helped spur her interest. Davis's two older sisters, Janet and Susan, both did water ballet and performed at water shows. "I thought it was fun, and they

She served as founder and head coach of Seattle Synchro from 1970 through 1979. In 1984, synchronized swimming became an official Olympic sport. Davis coached both the solo and the duet team that won gold medals at the Los Angeles Games.

In 1985, Davis became the

Davis cites a good feel for the water, and a lot of drill work, as keys for success when participating in synchronized swimming. The drills include sculling, which is also done in regular swimming, and egg-beater kicks, as in water polo.

Synchro also involves a lot of power moves, such as upside

Charlotte Davis is a Master of Synchro and Racing



down thrusting and propulsive combinations. Those with technical proficiency can shoot out of the water above the waist, as well as sustain the legs above the water surface. “In swimming, we ride the surface, but in synchro we try to get above it,” Davis notes.

Oh, and then there’s that whole thing about staying under water. “It’s not so much the length of time that you’re holding your breath, but it’s all the work you’re doing,” Davis muses. “It’s moving your body from one position to the next. That’s what becomes so difficult. And it’s not like sitting at the bottom of the pool doing nothing ... try running as fast as you can for 20 to 40 seconds while holding your breath the whole time—that’s more like synchro.”



Other challenges are in technically perfecting each movement, coordinating the movements with other people in the group, and then timing it all to music.

Davis officially retired in 2000, but remains coach emeritus with U.S. Synchro. She was the recipient of the International



“Fishing” for a Cure

Charlotte Davis is quite fond of her new puppy, Fisher, named in honor of Brian Collela, who suffers from Facioscapulohumeral Muscular Dystrophy (FSHD), a type of muscular dystrophy that initially affects the muscles of the face, shoulders and upper arms. Collela rowed crew in high school, and his team qualified for nationals his sophomore year. Although he dreamed of competing in the Olympics (his father, Rick, was a bronze medalist in the 200-meter breaststroke in the 1976 Montreal Olympics, and his aunt Lynn was a 200-meter butterfly silver medalist in the 1972 Munich Olympics), Brian was stricken with the disease when he was 16.

FSHD causes a progressive weakening of the muscles, and degeneration of muscle tissue that can spread to other areas as well. Symptoms may develop in early childhood, but are usually noticeable in the teenage years. Ninety-five percent of FSHD victims manifest the disease by the time they are 20. In serious cases, victims may become permanently disabled and must use a wheelchair. Some of those affected by FSHD are unable to lift their arms for more than a few seconds, and some lose the ability to show any facial expressions, experiencing serious speech impediments. Other symptoms can include hearing loss, vision impairment and abnormal heart rhythms.

>>> For more information, visit www.fshfriends.org.

“It’s not so much the length of time that you’re holding your breath, but it’s all the work you’re doing,” Davis muses. “It’s moving your body from one position to the next. That’s what becomes so difficult. And it’s not like sitting at the bottom of the pool doing nothing ... try running as fast as you can for 20 to 40 seconds while holding your breath the whole time—that’s more like synchro.”

Swimming Hall of Fame Paragon Award in 2001. She is quick to share credit for her numerous success and awards with others.

“Any time you are honored,” she notes, “you just feel that there are so many other people who are so involved who have been with you and made it possible: We have the athletes who are working their butts off, the assistant coaches, the administrators, the trainers, the doctors, the sports psychologists ... you realize how much you depend on all these other people. Like my husband being the backbone at home ... it makes you really feel humble. They all should have been up there with me.”

Davis’s husband of 36 years, Glenn, was and continues to be a strong supporter of his wife’s endeavors.

“He is a great sounding board for me and a great supporter of what I do. He helps me with hard decisions. Especially when I was the Nationals coach, he helped me through stressful times,” Davis says.

Glenn was able to attend the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles, but his wife had to stay in the Olympic village with the athletes. Glenn did not have the credentials to accompany her there. As she traveled, he also stayed home with their two sons while working at Boeing.

“That was a huge stress for me—to have two kids at home but to be on the road, and Glenn made it possible,” Davis notes.

Davis remains active in the Amateur Swimming Union of the Americas (ASUA), which includes Masters swimming and synchronized swimming. This continental association covers all FINA federation countries from North, Central and South America. Davis also is active with the Synchronized Swimming Technical Committee. She received the Lillian MacKellar Distinguished Service Award at the USAS banquet this past fall. Although synchro does have a Masters counterpart, Davis prefers to consult for





more than 60 individual USMS Top 10 times. She was an All-American in 1996, 2001, 2004, 2005, 2006 and 2007, with numerous first-place finishes in individual and relay events. She currently holds several USMS national records in the women's 55-59 age group.

For her amazing successes, Davis again credits her NEO coach, Robin O'Leary.

"I was a sprinter, and she talked me into doing the 400 IM," Davis recalls. "I really do have to pay tribute to her. She was the one. I was not a breast-stroker, ever, and she really helped me. Robyn qualified for Nationals in every single event (every distance in every stroke) in 1974. I think this is why she is so great at teaching and perfecting all the strokes."

O'Leary's help certainly paid off. Among her numerous record swims, at the 2006 FINA Worlds held last summer in Stanford, Calif., Davis won the women's 55-59 400-meter IM with an astonishing time of 6:07.72. This smashed the previous record by almost seven seconds.

Davis also owns a series of first place swims from the 2006 short course yards season, including the 50, 100 and 200 free; 50 and 100 fly and the 100 and 400 IM. Her performance in the 400 IM was good enough to earn her yet another honor—the USMS 2006 David Yorzyk

A Fabulous 400 IM

Among Davis's many awards is the David Yorzyk Award, which has been presented annually since 1986 to the swimmer who performs the most outstanding 400-yard individual medley at the Short Course National Championships. Masters swimmer Manny Sanguily founded the award to honor the son of his friend Bill Yorzyk, who was a 200-meter butterfly gold medalist in the 1956 Olympics in Melbourne. Yorzyk's son, David, died in a car accident at 19.

"The 400 IM is just too tough for me," says Sanguily, who had shoulder surgery two years ago. "I am a breaststroker. But this is a way to honor David. David was like another child to me, and this has very strong emotional ties for us." The David Yorzyk Award is an official USMS award that is privately funded.

USA Synchro, and not to compete in that sport.

"I have gotten so involved in my Masters swim team that I don't want to switch to synchro Masters," Davis notes. "Since I'm still so involved in the synchro coaching, it's nice to have a different outlet. And synchro takes many, many hours to perfect. I just don't want to spend so many hours any more. I love our Masters swim team (the North End Otters, NEO). We are social as well as athletic."

Initially, Davis was attracted to Masters swimming as a fitness sport.

"One day, I just decided to get in shape," she recalls. "I was swimming with some of the kids I coached for synchro as part of their aerobic conditioning. Robyn [O'Leary, NEO Coach] saw me swimming and invited me to Masters. She urged me to 'Just stay and do our workout.'" And the rest is history—record book history.

Since becoming a Masters swimmer, Davis has amassed

Memorial Award. This award is presented annually to the swimmer who performs the most outstanding 400-yard individual medley at the Short Course National Championships (*see sidebar*).

Of the 400 IM, Davis says, "It's truly a love/hate relationship. I love it ... when I'm done! It's a grueling event, but I do love to see how I compare to my other performances. I know some people compare themselves to their age group times—then they just get depressed. I have nothing but a few years to compare, so I think that gives me a new freedom in the way I approach my times."

One trick Davis shares about the 400 IM is learning how to swim the fly slow enough without burning out, but fast enough in order to get stronger and improve her times.

"It's challenging, but fun," she notes.

The 100 free and 50 fly are other event favorites.

"That breaststroke," Davis laughs, "is still a tough one!"

Davis also competed in the 2007 Short Course Nationals held in Federal Way, Wash., this past May.

"We had a wonderful time, and the meet ran very smoothly. There is a group of us who love to travel together. For Nationals in Florida last year, we had 10 people in one house. It was great fun, but this year we didn't have to do that since we weren't traveling. It was practically in my backyard this year."

By the end of the 2007 meet, Davis had three firsts (50 fly, 200 IM and 400 IM) and three seconds (50 free, 100 free and 100 IM). Her 50 free, 100 IM and 400 IM swims surpassed the previous records. She also had three relay firsts in the women's 200 free and medley, and the mixed 200 medley—all three of which set new records.

"I think my 400 IM was the most surprising to me,"

Davis notes. "It was my all time personal best time, as well as bettering my

National record from two years ago by four seconds. I was really surprised, although I felt pretty good while swimming it. I felt in control of the race, rather than it controlling me! At the end when I



AD

looked up and saw my time, I was extremely happy.”

Her best moment, Davis says, was on Sunday during the 200 IM, however. Her husband, son and daughter-in-law brought her three-and-a-half-year-old grandson, Beckham, to see his grandmother swim for the first time. Davis led the first length and continued to lead her heat throughout the race.

“After the first 25 yards, Beckham told my son, with great excitement, ‘Look, Grandma won!’ Then after the second 25 he said with the same enthusiasm, ‘Grandma won again!’ He proceeded to tell everyone around him the same thing after each length—I guess he really got his money’s worth out of that race!”

In addition to her grandson Beckham, Davis enjoys a new granddaughter, who was just born a few months ago, as well as her two sons, Lucas, 33, and Carl, 28. And outside of the water, Davis and her husband enjoy walking their two dogs, a six-year-old golden retriever named BJ, and a new golden labra-doodle puppy named Fisher, who got her name through swimming.

Davis was attending an auction for a dear friend of hers, Rick Collela. She swam with his sister Lynn as an age grouper. Rick’s son, Brian, has a disease called Facioscapulohumeral Muscular Dystrophy (*see sidebar on FSHD*), and there is no cure. The youth was diagnosed in 2003 at age 16. The auction was a benefit for FSHD called “Fishing for a Cure.” The puppy was one of the auction items.

“I started bidding on this puppy,” Davis recalls, “and I won! So, the puppy is named in Brian’s honor.”

After children, grandchildren, dogs and swimming, Davis’s other passion is cooking. Davis and her husband owned a restaurant together in the

1970s, The Old Town Café in downtown Seattle’s Pioneer Square. Specialties included homemade soups, salads and pizzas.

“We also had a great prime rib and king crab leg combo!” Davis says. They have since sold the restaurant, “but we love to cook,” Davis says. “It’s truly a passion. Beckham loves to cook too. We spend time in the kitchen together and love to bake cookies. He is a real helper in rolling out the dough!”

Davis now operates a business with her sister, Janet, on the Olympic Peninsula called The Northwest Cuisine Cooking School.

“We bring four to six people to the beach place, and we harvest clams, oysters, squid, Dungeness crab. We collect what to eat, and then we cook it,” she says. The guests stay for the weekend. Even Glenn, who recently retired from Boeing, assists with some of the prep work, like making the soup stock and sauces. Davis is proud of the fact that everything is from scratch.

And when she’s back in the pool?

“Right now, I’m really focused on my stroke,” Davis notes. “We’re concentrating on turns, efficiency and technique as well as speed. My turns are not an asset—that’s another reason why I love long course,” she laughs. Davis, who is 5’ 3”, mentions her lane mate: “He’s 6’ 3” or 4” and we swim equally, but he can just kill me on the turns!”

Davis again credits her lane mates and teammates for part of her success.

“I just really want to say ... [they] are just really fun,” she says. “We help out each other. My lane mate can tell me to keep my chin down on a turn. Our team is so complimentary and they help you get through a tough workout. I couldn’t do this if I didn’t have a team. I’d lose interest too fast.” <<<