

AUSTRALIAN MASTERS

by Jeff Commings

Although they talk differently, live on the opposite side of the world and bask in the sun while we bundle in winter coats, there are plenty of similarities between Masters swimmers in Australia and the United States.

Like us, they are a diverse population, ranging from 20-something beginners to the 95-year-old who dutifully shows up every day for workout. Each team in Australia has swimmers training for competition, swimming to stay fit, or just looking for a place to meet new people with similar lifestyles.

It should come as no surprise that swimmers in both countries share the same basic traits, since the folks Down Under modeled their organization after USMS when they noticed how successfully the American organization was run in the 1970s and 1980s.

But during the past two decades AUSSI, or the Australian Union of Senior Swimmers International, has branched out to become a unique entity with programs that cater to swimmers of all speeds and sizes. The good work has caught the eye of FINA, which has given Australia its second shot at hosting a Masters world championships.

Twenty years after the 1988 championships in Brisbane, the 2008 XII FINA Masters World Championships will be held

April 17-25 on the country's western coast in Perth. The organizers hope to replicate Brisbane's successful run, which at the time boasted the largest number of swimmers ever converged in one place for competition.

Those planning to cross the Pacific Ocean next spring are likely to encounter a host country excited to put on the best possible show for visitors.

"We think this is going to be a lot of fun and it's going to be a real big deal for us," said John Lynch, the meet's media coordinator.

Adult swimming in Australia had been organized for at least three decades before the country officially started a Masters program in 1975. But the age groups stopped at 50 years old

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STEVE RAYNES (above and right) is coach of the Perth City AUSSI team. Raynes hopes his success at passing the 6 million-meter mark in AUSSI swimming will inspire others to enter open water events, such as the 2006 Western Australia Open Water Swim (above, right).



AUSSI Encourages Members to Swim for Fitness and Compete



and women weren't included. Races were no longer than 50 meters, and almost always freestyle.

When United States Masters Swimming began in 1970, a few Aussies had their eyes on what was happening on the other side of the ocean. They noticed that not only were men and women organized under the same name, but they had a listing of the top 10 swimmers in each age group, they swam much farther than 50 meters and swimming wasn't limited to those under 50.

One of those intently interested in the status of USMS was Gary Stutsel, who would

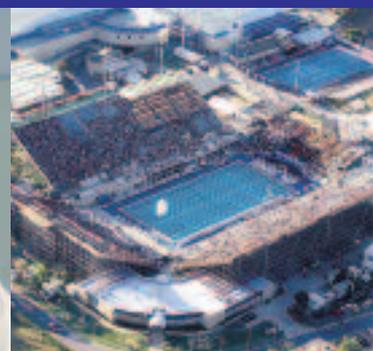
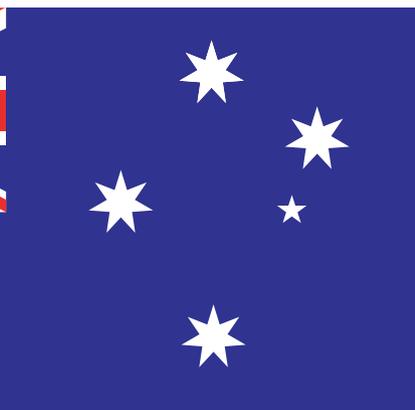
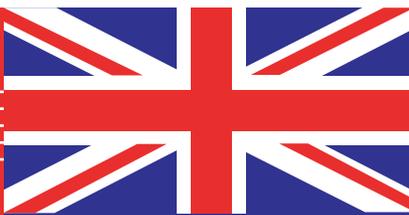
be one of the guiding forces in making AUSSI what it is today.

"The thing that really got our interest was the Top 10 because that gave us the opportunity to compare our times with others in the United States," Stutsel said.

Stutsel is essentially the Ransome Arthur of AUSSI. Not only was he one of the 10 who voted to form the Australian Masters Swimming Association in October 1974, but he suggested a name change to get rid of the negative connotation of the word "masters."

"Using the word Masters made us sound too elite," he said.

Thus, AUSSI was born in an official vote on Sept. 22, 1975,



GARY STUTSEL (above) was a founder of AUSSI (the Australian Union of Senior Swimmers International), and has helped win worldwide recognition for Australian Masters swimmers. Australia will host the 2008 XII FINA Masters World Championships, April 17-25 at Perth's Challenge Stadium (above, right).

using a play on the nickname for the country's residents.

At the end of 1976, only 228 people were members. The first clubs were formed in 1977, and branches were soon opened in all six Australian states, as well as the Northern Territory and Australia Capital Territory.

Stutsel served as the AUSSI national secretary from 1975 to 1981, and those years saw a dramatic growth in membership as word spread about the new organization that gave adults over 20 the opportunity to get together and swim.

"The whole thing has become more professional, better managed and better run," said Stutsel, now 68.

Through the years, AUSSI and USMS continued to share ideas. From the beginning, Stutsel worked with one of the founders of USMS, June Krauser, who was giving Stutsel new ideas through her newslet-

ter, "Swim Master."

Stutsel and others weren't content to hide out in their island country through the 1980s. Stutsel worked with other delegations to form Masters Swimming International, which was the governing body that helped create World Masters Championships and started keeping world records.

Certainly, Stutsel's work in making AUSSI internationally recognized was part of the reason Brisbane got the nod to host the second World Masters Championships in 1988, which saw more than 4,000 swimmers attend, a record at the time.

"It was absolutely fabulous," Stutsel said. "There was a whole buzz around the pool and I think a lot of it had to do with the sheer numbers."

It took some time, but AUSSI began to blossom in the late 1980s, and membership grew quickly before reaching a plateau in the 21st century. As of 2006, 6,500 swimmers were enrolled in 141 clubs, and it is estimated that AUSSI will have almost 8,000 members by the time the world championships event begins.

AUSSI's motto is "Fitness, friendship and fun."

Anyone who has been around an Australian knows they like to have fun and they make good friends, so the last two-thirds of the AUSSI motto is almost a no-brainer.

Most clubs in Australia focus more on the social aspect than training for a big meet or churning out the maximum distance possible.

They take that to heart every day, especially the fitness aspect.

Chances are you don't keep track of how far you swim during each workout, much less keep a record of the distances you swim at every meet.

It's a common practice in Australia, where thousands of Aussies keep dedicated logs of the meters they swim every time they enter a pool. This

recordkeeping trend started in 1982 as a way to promote the fitness aspect of the sport, and became so successful that awards were created for those who log more than 1 million meters.

The Vorgee Million Metres Award began in 2001 as a way to recognize those members who logged 1 million, 3 million or 10 million meters in workouts or competition. In later

years, awards for 2 million, 5 million and 7 million meters were added. Depending on the level completed, the swimmer gets clothing, plaques and other items from Vorgee, which is one of Australia's major sports apparel suppliers.

The best part about the award, swimmers say, is that it does not favor swimming veterans over "newbies." No one cares if it takes a year or three years to reach one of the milestones. Everyone is equal in this program.

"I don't feel like I have to compete with anyone because we all know we have to help each other to reach the goal," said Tony Stanton, 77, recently honored for reaching 5 million meters.

Luckily, swimmers don't have to reach each milestone within a calendar year, which would require swimming 19,230 meters per week. That's a typical taper schedule for Michael Phelps, but for Masters swimmers it's not always possible. Steve Raynes, a distance swimmer and head coach of the Perth City AUSSI team, said he often fights an uphill battle when trying to convince people to start logging distances so they can be recognized.

Raynes passed the 6 million-meter mark this year, 11 years after he started recording his distances, and he said the secret is not thinking about the number.

"If you swim 3 kilometers every day, then after a while 3K is very easy," said Raynes, 43.

Raynes hopes his success will inspire others to swim more often and reach for the same goal.

"Over here, they give you a T-shirt with the (number of meters you've swum) on it, so it's nice to wear it when you're walking into training and hopefully it'll inspire people to keep up with their training," he said.

The Vorgee Million Metres Award is only one way swimmers can monitor their fitness levels.

Die-hard sprinters might want to sit down before reading this next part.

Each year, the National and State Aerobic trophies are awarded to teams that get the most points from participants who swim a prescribed set of events. Points are determined by the swimmer's times and age groups.

Here's where it gets crazy. Each swimmer must do a 400 of each stroke, an 800 of each stroke, a 400 IM and an 800 IM *five times each*, as well as a mile of every stroke except butterfly (they're not *that* crazy), three 30-minute swims, three 45-minute swims and three 60-minute swims.

That's 62 swims that have to be completed in a year. To get them all done, just about every team sets aside a certain



AUSSI swimmer **TONY STANTON** (top), won a Vorgee Million Metres Award this year for passing the 5-million-meter mark. Another Australian recognized internationally for her success is former national team member **SALLY BELL** (pictured below on the far right). The AUSSI Seaside Pirates team (bottom right) broke a Masters world record in 2006 for the women's 200-239 4x50 freestyle relay, (left to right) **CATHY CODLING, TRACY MCGUIRE, ROBYN MILLER-WALTON** and **PAM HUTCHINS**.



workout each week specifically for the distance swims.

Stanton said his team does a distance swim every Wednesday night, and the competition is often intense.

"It's great to have some incentives like that to keep up," he said.

A few times every year, special meets are held to give people more opportunities to complete their distance swims. It is at these meets that people can try to break national records for swims 400 meters and higher.

Sally Bell, 45, swam a 1500m back (long course) in 21:16.14 at a meet in her hometown of Perth in August. To put that time into perspective, the time would have ranked Bell fifth in the USMS 45-49 age group for the 1500m freestyle.

"I find it excellent training because you'd do things you wouldn't otherwise do," said Bell, a former member of the Australian national team in the 1980s and a former 200 back Masters world record holder in the 45-49 age group.

The Sunshine Coast Club in Queensland has won the National Aerobic Trophy for seven consecutive years, but there's no secret to the team's dominance.

"It's something that everyone can compete in regardless of how good or bad they are," said team member Anne McKenzie. "They can work up their level of fitness gradually."

Those who don't feel the need to compete in regular meets find it is a good way to contribute to the team.

"I think also we've got a lot of older members and a lot of us are retired, so we have more time to do these things," she said.

Anyone who has been around an Australian knows they like to have fun and they make good friends, so the last two-thirds of the AUSSI motto is almost a no-brainer. Most clubs in Australia focus more on the social aspect than training for a big meet or churning out the maximum distance possible (despite their love of the aerobic program).

"People who join AUSSI are passionate about swimming, but at the same time ... some are in it for the social side," said Raynes, the Perth City head coach.

He said the average age of his team is in the mid-30s, and while he has found that many of them are there to get fitter, others have discovered that they enjoy the non-swimming aspect more.

"I would say some of our club dinners are more well-attended than our competitions," he said. "We get maybe five people to come to a meet, but at our dinners, we have 40 people."

For three-time Olympic gold medalist Shane Gould, returning to the pool after a 25-year absence meant forgetting about the cutthroat mentality she had as a teenager at the 1972 Olympics, where she broke three world records.

"It was a steep learning curve for me entering Masters (in 1999), which was part of the challenge and satisfaction," said Gould in an email interview. "It took some humility to drop the ego and begin as a rookie."

What she found in her short career in AUSSI — where she briefly held the Masters world record in the 200 IM in the 45-49 age group — was that the competitive side of swimming was decidedly taking a back burner to everything else among the adults she met.

"I don't think Australians are as serious about the competition as U.S. Masters swimmers," she said.

Bell said her team does have a good group of swimmers with a strong focus on fast swimming, but because her team, Claremont Masters, only trains four times a week, it's obvious to her that swimming isn't everything.

"There's a real camaraderie, and a lot of that isn't about swimming," she said. "The times when we have a club night and just hang out after training are some of the best times I've had." <<<

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