

OLYMPIAN, WIFE AND MOTHER

A Profile of
Susan von
der Lippe

by Amy Wu >>> Photos by David Balch

There is Susan von der Lippe the soccer mom, and there is Susan von der Lippe the swimmer. To those on the sidelines, outside the world of swimming, von der Lippe's decorated background is non-existent until they get to know her better.

Von der Lippe's typical day is defined by her family—her husband, Paul; her children, Jacob, 11, and Katie, 9; and her beloved golden retrievers, Tucker and Baxter. After she gets

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her children to school, she begins her tasks for Loveland Swim Club, where she serves as newsletter editor, registrar, bookkeeper and swim mom. Later, she becomes family cook and homework police.

Von der Lippe is cheerful and homey. She speaks softly but likes to joke around with teammates. She can be reserved. At 42, she remains fresh-faced, with a sparkle in her eyes. Family and friends call her "Susie."

Despite the unassuming personality, von der Lippe has clear priorities. "Swimming is secondary to her family," says Jenny Stein, her sister who swims with Colorado Masters, and swam with von der Lippe at Stanford.

"She's the most modest thing you'll ever meet. You'll never hear her talking about her swimming. At her house you won't see anything on the walls except her kids' artwork."

"She's a very humble person who understands that what she obtains is God-given," echoes her eldest sister, Betsy Cleary, also a decorated national swimmer.

Silver medalist in the 200 meter breaststroke at the 1984

Los Angeles Olympics, von der Lippe also made the Olympic teams in 1980 and 1988. Today, she still has a passion for competitive swimming. Three times a week, she trains with Loveland Masters under Scott Allen, who also coaches Katie and Jacob on Loveland's age group team. Her average practice is 4,000 yards, and recently she joined a gym for circuit training.



In 2005, von der Lippe, then 40, made headlines by clocking a 1:12.49 for the 100 meter breaststroke at the USA Swimming Western Region Long Course Championship in Federal Way, Wash., qualifying her for the Olympic trials. Her



time was only one second slower than her 1:11.45 seventh-place finish in the same event in the 1984 Olympics.

Von der Lippe is a member of a growing number of elite swimmers in their 30s and 40s—such as Dara Torres and

Gary Hall Jr.—who are returning to competition, some even gunning for the Olympics.

“She’ll make Masters swimmers and moms proud. It’s like, ‘Look you can compete and also have a family,’” says Paul Smith, a close friend who met

von der Lippe through Colorado Masters. “It’s fun to see the times of people getting faster and seeing someone like Susan break out and make the Olympic cuts.”

With less than a year to the Olympics, von der Lippe says

her only goal is to make the same time she did two years ago in Federal Way.

“I’m really going to enjoy the trials this time around with my deck pass,” she says. “I’m not going to embarrass myself—I’m going to try hard, but I don’t want to make any changes to my family routine.”

Is she hiding her real ambitions? Close friends and family say no. “Susan is what we call the real deal,” says Smith, a top swimmer who competed in 1984 Olympic trials. “If Susan moved in next door to you, you wouldn’t have any sense of this woman being as elite and accomplished as she is. She’s like a light switch. She’s relaxed and fun and can have a beer, and she’s not living and breathing swimming 24 hours a day. When she gets behind the



SUSAN VON DER LIPPE

(above photo, left), her sisters **JENNY STEIN** (middle) and **BETSY CLEARY** (right), swam a 200 medley “sister relay” in the 2006 FINA Masters World Championships. High school freshman Von der Lippe (right, seated on floor) poses with her family at their Virginia home. Parents Ed and Trudy Rapp sit above her, to the right. Sister Jenny Stein stands behind Ed; sister Kris Rapp behind Trudy; and sister Betsy sits with dog Scamper, with brother Bill beside her. Von der Lippe (facing page, left photo) poses with the Stanford University swim team (second row, third from right, with short hair and wearing a dark sweat-shirt). Von der Lippe (facing page, top right photo, center) with sisters Betsy Cleary (left) and Jenny Stein (right), at the National Sports Festival in the early 1980s. Today, Von der Lippe (facing page, bottom right photo) enjoys time in the pool with daughter Katie and son Jacob.

block, it's a light switch. She's so focused and so capable and so gifted."

Von der Lippe can be a fierce competitor. She often arrives at meets a day early just to get the lay of the land. Family and friends know when she will put on her race face. "She thrives on setting goals," Stein says.

Von der Lippe's journey to the 2008 Olympic Trials began in 2004 when she and her sister Betsy went to see the trials in

Long Beach, Calif. Von der Lippe's competitive fires were stoked after she tried to swim in the pool, and officials told her the warmup pool was limited to competitors.

"By then I'd been swimming Masters and I was just 2.5 seconds off the time for trials. I remember telling myself next time I want a deck pass, because it gets you into the warm-up pool area," von der Lippe says. "I wanted a deck pass. I didn't want to be treated like the outcast."

Von der Lippe won her deck pass, but friends and family say she doesn't usually talk about swimming or the Olympics. When Allen started coaching last year, he didn't know who she was until she swiftly won numerous races. Someone finally told him.

Von der Lippe's unassuming nature is hardly surprising, given that she grew up the fourth youngest of five children. Cleary says the family moved with the military from New York to Virginia and then Minnesota. Her father, Col. Ed Rapp, was a Vietnam vet, and spent 30 years in the military. Mother Trudy was a decorated marathon runner and stay-at-home mom.

Betsy (Cleary) took up swimming in seventh grade,

making Nationals at 15. Jenny (Stein) broke national records throughout high school and swam at Stanford. Susie (von der Lippe) started at 8. At first she didn't take swimming seriously. "She always goofed around. She was always in a tree somewhere," laughs Cleary. Bill, their brother, took on other sports such as football. He now works for Gen. David Petraeus, on duty in Iraq.

The sisters say Ed and Trudy Rapp were the antithesis of neurotic swim parents. "They claimed they never knew our times," Cleary says. The only rule the couple had for their children? They had to finish the season. Ed Rapp was amazed when his 15-year-old daughter qualified for trials in 1980. "I didn't even own a stop watch, and I didn't even know what times she (Susie) needed."

Von der Lippe has always been low-key about her dreams.

"Susie didn't toot her own horn. She worked extremely hard, but it was behind the scenes," Trudy Rapp recalls. "She's always been a goal setter, and she'd write her goals on her kickboard."

Von der Lippe had a stubborn streak too. When their daughter was in third grade, the Rapps

observed from a window that some of her older siblings and their friends were doing hand-springs, and told her she was too young to try.

"She went in the backyard and practiced and practiced until she could do it. She said, 'Oh, let me just try it once,' and she did it quietly and that was it. I never heard a bragging sound come out of her," Rapp says.

One of the biggest hurdles in von der Lippe's career came after she won the silver medal at the 1984 Olympics. She was 19 and swimming for Stanford, but says she felt a "giant let-down" after returning from Los Angeles.

"I had just reached the pinnacle of my sport," she says, "yet, the accomplishment wasn't fulfilling, and the excitement was very short-lived."

In part, the epiphany came from a knee inflammation. After operating on both of her knees, doctors told von der Lippe she shouldn't swim breaststroke again. The young swimmer went on a soul search that led to a spiritual path.

"The Olympics were awesome, but I definitely felt a vacuum in my heart when I returned to school to face three more years of academia, knee surgery and more competitive swimming. My biggest question was, 'What is the point of it all?'"

Teammate Kathy Smith invited her to a Bible study class on campus. Von der Lippe says she found peace and the answers she was seeking in the



Bible and books such as *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis.

"My identity from then on wasn't wrapped in how well I did at school, nor swimming, nor work, nor family—but in how I use God's gifts to glorify him," von der Lippe says. She "red-shirted" her sophomore year, but continued to train under women's head swimming coach George Haines by limiting breaststroke to 2,000 yards per week.

"(During that time) she could walk, but it was painful. At Stanford they gave her a golf cart ... I think it was extremely frustrating for her, and now I believe that in her mind, it was God telling her that swimming is not your life. When she did give her life over (to God), her knees just cleared up," Stein says.

To the amazement of her coach, teammates, family and even herself, she made the 1988 Olympic team in the 200 breaststroke.

"When she came back her senior year, she came out of nowhere. No one expected her to make it in '88," Stein says.

After graduating from Stanford, where she majored in human biology and received a master's degree in sociology, von der Lippe married. Paul and Susan moved to Colorado, where Susan's parents had retired.

The couple wanted to be closer to family and rear their own children there. Von der Lippe spent five years in marketing communications for Colorado Time Systems LLC, a

company that makes electronic timing devices for competitive pools. Paul von der Lippe worked in the engineering department. She continued to swim for fitness, and learned of Masters swimming in her mid-20s, when she ran some swim clinics.

Von der Lippe and her husband have worked closely together. He doesn't swim, but he's often at meets. The two have invented various swim-related products together, including the CTS AquaGrip touchpad texture.

Von der Lippe jokingly says she "succumbed" to joining Masters after she had her second child and was trying to get back in shape. Although she swore she would never compete, she was hooked on the social aspect of the Masters competitions.

She went to her first Masters Nationals when she was 38. This time she saw swim meets as mini vacations, brief excursions from "mommydom," and times to get together with friends. Smith says at a typical meet von der Lippe is the one who is joking around, quietly reading a book, cheering her teammates, and encouraging newcomers to compete.

At the 2005 SCY Nationals in Coral Springs, Fla., she, Smith's wife Laura, and another friend wore matching shark caps in the water.

"She's not this solo intense person by any means. When she walks behind the block and has her goggles on, she's there and she's ready to go, and she's



focused, and when she finishes a race, she just smiles and does a little handclap," Smith laughs. "What a crack-up."

Being human also means that every so often she wonders if she should spend more time training, and on her beloved sport.

"She is a real person with a real life," Cleary says. Paul Smith adds: "She had the talent to qualify for trials without making it the focus of her life. Susan has a balance in her life."

Von der Lippe is gearing up for Olympic year by tossing in more competitions, such as racing at the Southern Pacific Masters SCM Championships in Long Beach, Calif., in November.

She says she'll take a week off to go to Omaha. She credits her comeback to the elite level to the "social and lifelong physical fitness opportunities that USMS offers."

At 42, Susan von der Lippe seems content with herself, who she is and why she continues to race.

"I don't have any desire to train like I did 20 years ago, but

I am ecstatic to be able to compete with the young kids and swim at the biggest U.S. swim meet (the trials)," she enthuses. "I am probably going to be the grayest, fattest but happiest person at the pool in Omaha."

The laid-back attitude trickles down to her children. "They both have enjoyed swimming, but we try to keep the pressure very minimal," she says.

Ironically, sometimes the pressure works the other way around. "My son still says I can go to Beijing. He'll see me in a race—and I'll usually win around here—and he says, 'You can do it, Mom.' I ask him, how would he like it if Mom were to disappear for six weeks in China and Dad has to cook? He just laughs and says no, but he'll still bring it up now and then," she laughs. Might she change her mind? Von der Lippe won't say, but those who know her say that they know she'll have a blast in Omaha, swim her best and return to what means the most to her. <<<