

ON THE SHOULDERS OF AN ATHLETE

How Nancy Ridout Found Her Healing Waters

by Bill Edwards >>>

Nancy Ridout is a remarkable yet ordinary person. A swimmer since early childhood, Ridout has an array of victories in Masters swimming, including more than 50 first-place finishes and more than 70 second-place finishes in national competition between 1993 and 2005, and more than 20 world records. She still

holds eight USMS pool relay records. Not only that, Ridout has actively supported Masters since 1972 (two years after the Masters program was formed), serving as USMS president from 1998 to 2001. She has been registrar for Pacific Masters (USMS' largest local Masters swimming committee) for the past 21 years. For her dedication to the sport, USMS presented Ridout with the Ransom J. Arthur Award in 1994, and the Dorothy Donnelly USMS Service Award in 2005.

Despite her distinguished record, Ridout was feeling more ordinary than remarkable this past November as she was preparing for her first swimming competition in more than

a year. Ridout was recovering from an injury—a tear in the labrum, the ring of cartilage that surrounds the ball and socket shoulder joint and normally allows the wide range of motion that competitive swimmers need to perform their strokes efficiently. Ridout's labral tear was serious enough to require surgery, and her surgeon had told her the procedure not only would require a long and cautious recovery, but also that she might not be able to compete again.

"This past year, I've had more time than I ever wanted to think about things," Ridout said. "I don't believe I ever would have slowed down enough to think, had it not been for my shoulder injuries, so this long period of injury has been in ways the best part of my life."

Shoulder problems are the bane of many high-performance swimmers. A recent study of Canadian swimmers reported that injured shoulders are the most common physical problem for aquatic athletes. Sports medicine publications often offer advice on how to cope with "swimmer's shoulder," apparently

the only swimming injury to acquire its own nickname.

So, how did Ridout come to view her shoulder problems as something positive in her life?

For more than three decades now, Ridout has been a fierce competitor in the realm of Masters swimming. The 65-year-old Novato, Calif., resident is a member of the Tamalpais Aquatic Masters, a USMS club that makes no attempt to hide its orientation toward competitive swimmers—evidenced by a statement on the team Web site's "About Tam" page: "Because of limited pool space, TAM is not able to accommodate novice swimmers."

Ridout makes no apologies for TAM's position on competition, but after pondering her own career as a swimmer, she sees her passion for racing in a different light.

"After I began to win races and set records," she says, "it became a challenge to keep improving. Ultimately, it grew to be a heavy burden to keep winning. My motivation to perform well was fear. Swimming has always kept me balanced and feeling whole...but along the way the reasons I started to

swim faded, and accomplishment became a stressful priority."

Ironically, Ridout's competitive drive may have contributed to her injuries, and to her recovery. Her surgery last year to repair the labral tear is the fourth shoulder procedure she has endured since October 2001, when her doctor installed some screws to stabilize her left shoulder joint. In February 2002, doctors removed some bone spurs in the right shoulder, and in 2003, they went in to repair a torn tendon on the right side. During the past several years, Ridout has been working toward recovery with two Marin County practitioners: Steve Thompson, a physical therapist, and Scott Boyle, a sports psychologist.

"We've been working to redefine how Nancy views swimming," Boyle says, "trying to understand what's at stake. She was very much a typical competitive athlete when we started. She would say to herself, 'This is the way I have to train because it has worked for me, and I have won races.' That's what led her to her first surgery ... thinking that she could just work through the pain of

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her shoulder injury until it went away.

“At the same time, it has been her drive and resiliency that have helped her recover. I don’t think there are many people out there who can go through what’s she’s been through, and still get up every morning and train. Once we started working together, she became very open to different ideas about how to deal with injury. She’s been willing to reflect and change.”

Thompson agrees. “We’ve been adjusting her technique to try to protect her shoulders,” he says. “Nancy’s drive is really what has kept her moving toward recovery. She listens. If I tell her to get out of the water for the sake of her shoulder, she does it. She has learned to listen to her body. She’s better able to control herself, but she still has the desire to compete.”

Ridout’s desire for aquatic challenges goes back pretty far. The Toledo, Ohio, native recalls being sent to the YMCA for swimming lessons at about age 7, a strategy Ridout’s mother implemented mainly to prevent her daughter from drowning. The family vacationed at Long Lake, a resort in central

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Michigan, where there were plenty of opportunities to get wet. “Wherever we went, I would end up in the water,” Ridout says. “I would either fall in, or get in on my own.”

Although Ridout dutifully took her swimming lessons, she paid more attention to her brother’s aquatic pursuits. Jerry Wager (Wager is Ridout’s maiden name) was five years older than Nancy, and thus qualified to be on the YMCA’s swim team. Nancy was intrigued by swim racing from the start. When she reached 10, she was allowed to join the Y team, and by 13 was competing in age

group events around Toledo, riding the bus from school to the YMCA for practice three times a week, and doing her homework during the bus ride and while waiting for practice to start. The workout environment was a bit primitive, but Ridout no longer needed to pretend to trip and fall into the water.

“Our swimsuits were cotton and very heavy,” she says. “There were no goggles and no lane lines. When I was around 13 or 14, we started wearing nylon suits, but the AAU still required women’s suits to have skirts.”

By the time Ridout entered

secondary school, she was already thinking of herself as a competitive athlete, a role that was not out of tune with her family history. Her father, Arnold, had been a five-sport letterman at Hillsdale College in Michigan, and played AAA baseball with the Toledo Mud Hens, then a farm club for the New York Yankees. Her brother gave up competitive swimming to become a Greco-Roman wrestler. He was a collegiate star at the University of Toledo and an Olympic team alternate in his sport.

Ridout recalls joining a group of classmates who approached school officials with the idea of creating a girl’s track team at her high school. “They told us to stick to our cooking and knitting,” she says.

Undaunted, Ridout pursued all the competitive swimming opportunities that were available to her at that time. She showed interest in the swimming program at Purdue University, but her coach, Peg Seeney of the Toledo YMCA, steered her in the direction of the University of Michigan, which had no official swim team for women, but encouraged female students to compete via the Ann Arbor Swim Club.

As a club swimmer at Michigan, Ridout built up a respectable record of wins in meets against teams such as the Vesper Boat Club of Philadelphia; Indianapolis Riviera Club; the Cleveland Swim Club; the Hamilton, Ontario, YMCA; and the Etobicoke Club of Toronto. This past fall, she was one of about 60 women athletes honored by her university at the Early Women in Athletics Celebration.

After graduating from college in 1964, Ridout laid off swimming for a while. She went to New York City to pursue a master’s degree in theology at Union Theological Seminary, where she met her husband-to-be George Ridout. After marrying and starting a family, the

two young theologians bought a Studebaker Lark for \$75 off the street in New York, and headed for sunny California, settling in the San Francisco Bay area so George could work on a Ph.D. in education.

For the next few years, Nancy focused on family and community. She was raising their first child, Joe, and then had a second son, Josh, in 1971. She always has been involved in community activities, and today directs a children's choir at the family's church. After Josh's birth, however, Ridout was hoping to get back in shape, so she started going to the local YMCA to swim for fitness. In November 1971, she saw a story in the local paper about the Masters program, clipped the article and saved it. By early 1972, she had decided to start working out with the group.

"At first I could swim only about three times a week, for 40 minutes at a time," she says. "George supported me. He would keep the kids while I worked out."

By April, Ridout's teammates had started to take notice of her talents. They asked her to swim butterfly with them in a team relay at a regional event. Ridout has been competing as a member of TAM ever since. She has become legendary in the Masters community for getting better as she got older.

Ridout says her longstanding goal as a youth was to break a minute in the 100 freestyle. At age 34, she accomplished this feat, and at 42, she recorded her best time ever: 58.2. She also continued to train and compete relentlessly.

"I was the kind of person who liked to train and stick to the routine," Ridout says. "I was like that because, up until I was injured, the routine worked. I was winning races. So, if something hurt, I figured I could just work through it until it stopped hurting. That's not a realistic approach, especially not for older athletes."

Ridout took her first dose of

reality in 1994, at the V FINA World Masters Championships in Montreal. When she left the block and hit the water during the start of the women's 50 fly (an event she won at the IV FINA in 1992), her left shoulder subluxated—the medical term for a partial dislocation. She says she didn't think of stopping, and managed to make it to the end of the pool and her race. Ridout was out of the competition, and says she laid off for a week or so until her shoulder started feeling better. Then she resumed training and competition as if nothing had happened.

Ridout suffered through the nagging pain, experiencing another subluxation doing the backstroke in an individual medley event a few years later. By the summer of 2001, the pain had become a regular part of her swimming life. She recalls spending most of her time at the Long Course Nationals event that year with ice packs on her shoulder. After an MRI, her doctor started talking surgery.

After each surgery in 2001, 2002 and 2003, Ridout resumed training and competition rather quickly. But during her recovery from the third operation, she started working with Boyle, who was finishing his master's thesis in sports psychology at John F. Kennedy University in the San Francisco area. Boyle says he began urging Ridout to take a more realistic approach to her training, and to pay closer attention to how her injuries were impacting her swimming.

"We started looking for things she might do differently in the water, and in her life," Boyle says. "She was very receptive, and honest, like an open book, so that made it easier, and we have been working together ever since. Now we meet for an hour, once a week. We go over how her swims have gone during the week, and our conversation leads to the action she decides to take. We make a checklist of things she needs to work on.

Steve (her physical therapist) has to make sure she can handle the activities physically, and her coaches are there at the practices to spot any mechanical flaws that she might need to correct."

More than anything, Ridout credits Boyle with helping her focus again on the joy and excitement of swimming—the two elements of the sport that made her want to trip and fall into the water when she was a child just starting her swimming lessons.

"Today, I've regained the positive elements of my passion for swimming," she says. "That is an important success. Physical successes have been harder to come by, but my dreams of being able to compete with the best are still alive. I'm about to start again with the first step on what will be my final journey toward being the swimmer I want to be. If my shoulders don't hold up this time, I'll have some soul-searching and adjustments ahead of me. But for now, I'm ready to take that first step, to look ahead with confidence, and to enjoy every step of the journey."

The race Nancy Ridout was preparing for this past November was the Southern Pacific Masters Short Course Meters 2007 Championship in Long Beach, Calif.

"This meet was a first step toward getting able to swim competitively again," Ridout said the day after returning home from the race. "It was a success. I have no idea how those times will hold up. But the numbers aren't that important. The risk was worth the reward. When I stood up there on the block, I had the biggest smile on my face. I was just so happy to be there." <<<

>>> **Editor's Note: Readers who wish to see Ridout's times may go to the Southern Pacific Masters Web site at www.spm.net.**

NANCY RIDOUT stands atop the podium (opposite page, top) at her first-ever nationals event, the 1973 Masters Short Course Nationals in Santa Monica. Ridout, who traveled to Sydney in 1981 for the first Pan-Pacific Masters Championships, is seen here leaving the starting block in lane 4 (opposite page, middle). Ridout relaxes poolside after an event in the early 1980s (opposite page, bottom). In the photo below, Ridout shows one of her medals from the XI FINA World Masters Championships in 2006.



David Balch