

SWIMMER Web Feature
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Q & A with Victoria Chidester

Victoria Chidester, 51, of Colorado Masters trained for this year's USMS Short Course Nationals with no illusions about breaking national records or winning gold medals. Her highest finish was 14th in the 50 back, and she also had season best times in her other two events, the 100 and 200 back.

Chidester arrived in Austin seeking something much more significant than medals or records. She wanted to participate because she wasn't sure if she would have the opportunity again. Chidester is in stage-four treatment for colon cancer and is terminal. Despite her serious health battle, she is upbeat, positive, and has empowered herself with swimming. SWIMMER Magazine recently caught up with Victoria Chidester to learn more about her.

How did you first start swimming?

I first started swimming on an age group swim team in Las Cruces, New Mexico at the age of nine. My grandmother sought out the team, talked to the coach, and signed me up. She thought I was beginning to get a little chunky and wanted to get me into a regular exercise program.

How did you first start Masters swimming?

When I first moved to Denver in 1992, I visited a local Recreation Center pool and read a Masters swimming team brochure on the bulletin board. I showed up at an evening practice and haven't stopped practicing since.

Where do you swim, how often, and what types of things do you do in the water?

I swim at Wheat Ridge Recreation Center in Wheat Ridge, CO, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 5:00 am with several other swimmers, including Ray. Since we lost our coach about two years ago, the other swimmers asked if I would develop the workouts and help them with their swimming technique. (Ray had told them I had been a high school girls' swim coach for three years.) For a while, I would deck coach every other Thursday when I was hooked up to the portable chemo pump and couldn't get in the water. Other times, I was too fatigued to get up that early on those Thursdays. The rest of the time, I'm in the water with them.

We swim for about 75 minutes. The first 30 minutes are warm-up, various technique drills, and kicking and/or pulling sets. The rest of the workout is "the main set." This may be sets of 50s, 100s or 200s or pyramids. Sometimes, I'll mix up kicking inside of the swimming sets, like every fourth length is kicking on a 500 swim. Sometimes, I'll do a broken 1650, starting at 275 yards, rest 10 seconds, decrease the distance 25 yards (250 yds) rest 10 second and so on down to 25 yards. Sometimes, we do 500 yards drafting off of each other and switching leads at every 100. I try to mix things up for variety and tailor the intervals to the swimmers' speed.

I promised the swimmers that when I got back from Nationals, I would focus on helping them to improve their strokes. I had been developing workouts to prepare me for

competition and they went along with that. Incidentally, they were getting faster, but only in freestyle.

When were you diagnosed with cancer?

I received the official diagnosis of colon cancer on October 31, 2006 (Halloween). It wasn't until after my surgery on November 11, 2006, in the recovery room, that I learned that the cancer had spread to my liver. The original colon tumor was removed along with 1/3 of my colon and 26 lymph nodes. Some weeks later I learned that the colon cancer was classified Stage IV; incurable and inoperable. The liver metastases are inoperable, because of their number and location on the liver.

How did you break the news to your family?

My husband and mother were at the hospital and the surgeon gave them the news. My mother told my father and all our extended family. I told my siblings (three brothers and sister) over the phone. I also told my children over the phone because they both were attending out-of-state colleges. My husband told his two sons.

The most difficult was telling my son and daughter. They wanted to immediately come home. I told them that the best thing they could do to help me was to stay in school. So, my son surprised me by coming at home at Thanksgiving to visit even though he wasn't scheduled to come home until Winter Break. My daughter drove home over a weekend to visit me in the hospital when I had surgery.

What have the doctors told you most recently?

My oncologist, Dr. Stephen Frank, told me yesterday that he is very impressed with the way that I am living my life. And, that it is remarkable that I am so active and competing given what treatment regimen I am undergoing. When I told him that I might be in the Swimmer magazine, he said he would like several copies so that he could put them in his waiting room to inspire his other patients.

I started my regular chemotherapy treatment schedule yesterday. As I'm typing this, I am receiving chemotherapy through a portable pump at home. I will be finished with this round tomorrow afternoon. I have four more rounds of the same spaced a week and half apart before I get what my doctor calls "a drug holiday". Sounds like a trip to the mountains with some high quality marijuana, doesn't it? It means I get a 3-4 week break from chemo before I start the 5 round regimen again. And, so it goes, until something better comes along.

What role does swimming play in your life today?

Swimming is as much a part of my therapy as the life-saving drugs that the doctor prescribes. Being in the pool takes me to a place where I am separated for a while from the world of medicinal smells, prognostic statistics, lab coats, IV bags, and biohazard symbols. I feel strong and healthy as I slip through the embrace of the water even when I am fatigued from the treatments. The rhythmic sound of the water calms the mental commotion in my mind. My teammates are a constant source of support and encouragement. Swimming is the counter-balance to the cancer.

What swimmers at Nationals inspired you most?

This was my first Nationals, and I don't know many of the swimmers or their stories. So, I would have to answer this question based superficially on what I saw from a distance. I am always amazed at the abilities and speed of swimmers, but especially those who are still swimming so well in their 80s. It is a testament to perseverance. I've been inspired in the past by those swimming with physical disabilities like blindness or a missing limb, primarily because of the daily challenge they face that goes beyond the physical disability that people see.

USMS has a slogan: “Swimming for Life” – what does that phrase mean to you?

As I mentioned earlier, swimming is as much a part of my therapy as the life-saving drugs that the doctor prescribes. Swimming is more than recreation. It is integral to my quality of life as I live with cancer and the specter of a premature death.

At Nationals, swimmers organized a cancer survivor’s forum. Did you attend the forum? If so, what was your impression? If not, what do you think about the concept of swimmers creating a forum for cancer survivors?

I did see that a cancer survivor's forum was scheduled and, unfortunately, missed it. I fell asleep in the afternoon and woke up too late to attend. The concept of creating a forum for cancer survivors who are Masters swimmers sounds like a positive one. I'd be interested to hear what those attending thought about it.

Here is my dilemma: Am I really a cancer survivor if I still have cancer? How do I talk to people who are basically done with chemotherapy and are trying to move on and put it behind them? What cancer survivor wants to hear about someone who is on chemotherapy for life? I'm somewhat of an anomaly. A good one, at this point, but hard to relate to; or so I've found from other support groups I've attended. Even so, I was open to attending the forum at the Nationals to see if that would be different somehow.

Who's your all-time favorite athlete and why?

No one person popped into my mind when I read this question. There are so many amazing athletes. So, I did a little research on some top female swimmers through the years. Aileen Riggins Soule stood out to me for her foundational contributions and achievements in swimming and her lifelong participation in swimming in a number of capacities, including setting world records as a Masters swimmer later in her life.

I admire that she overcame challenges of discrimination and poor training conditions in her pursuit of Olympic excellence in two water sports. She started swimming on a swim team to recover from influenza, which I can relate to, since swimming is my therapy as well as my recreation. And, she won her Olympic swimming medal in backstroke, which is my competitive stroke.

In recent years, there has been a lot of talk about club scoring at Nationals. How did club scoring factor in to your experience at the meet?

It was more an item of curiosity than of impact, especially since I was not contributing to the team score. I was able to participate on a relay, but it was organized more for the experience than for racking up any points.

Attending Nationals was a big goal. What was your overall impression of the experience?

Heady stuff! The venue is so grand...the place where Aaron Piersol, Ian Crocker, and Brendan Hansen workout. The event where Olympians and collegians from all over the country compete, and, yet, still an atmosphere of fun and camaraderie that I didn't expect. It is the closest I've come to feeling like a legitimate athlete. The experience was even better than I anticipated.

What's your favorite sporting activity outside the pool?

My son's passion for basketball has fueled my interest in college basketball. I love to watch my son play basketball. Now that he is away at college, it's been a great way for me to stay connected to him, especially during March Madness. Watching or reading about basketball always reminds me of him.

What would you most like other Masters swimmers to know about you?

I love the water; the look of it, the feel of it, and moving in it. I love swimming in all its forms and locations. I love watching swimming, coaching swimming, and learning more about swimming. I love to hear swimming stories and receive coaching. Because of all that, I am grateful to all the people, past and present, locally and nationally, who contribute their time and energy to organize, inspire, teach, lead, train, coach, and generally share their talents to promote the sport of swimming, especially Masters swimming.

Finally, my hope is that if people attribute strength or courage to me that they will remember the One who is the source of all strength and comfort. It is the God who sustains me.

Interview by Bill Volckening