

Ins and Outs of the Get-Out Swim

> “He always gave me times that seemed ridiculous – but I always did them.” So says Olympic swimming star Mark Spitz, who recalls participating in “get-out” swims during the early 1970s under legendary coach James “Doc” Counsilman, who often incorporated the challenge swim into his team’s workouts at Indiana University.

In a get-out swim, a coach or swimmer sets a target time, and if the selected swimmer beats that target time, the reward is to “get out” of practice early. Sometimes, the coach rewards only the individual swimmer, and sometimes, the whole team gets out of practice early.

“I never did the get-out swim before college,” adds Spitz, who in 1972 set the record for the most gold medals won in a single Olympiad. Spitz took

home seven gold medals from the 1972 Games in Munich.

“The get-out swim is a novelty for swimmers,” says Rich Burns of Tamalpais Aquatic Masters in San Rafael, Calif. Like Spitz, Burns also swam under Counsilman at Indiana. “Workouts tend to be repetitious. The get-out swim is a punctuation mark in a workout.”

Spitz agrees. “I didn’t like [Doc’s] workouts. So an hour into the workout, I’d ask Doc for a challenge.” Counsilman would let Spitz rest for 15 minutes, and then Spitz would try the get-out swim.

Counsilman is among the most noted practitioners of the get-out swim, but its origin is a mystery.

“Coaches have been doing it forever,” Burns says.

Kerry O’Brien, head coach of California-based Walnut Creek Masters, concurs: “As long as I’ve been swimming, for 39 years, the get-out swim has been around.”

“All I know,” shares John Leonard, executive director of the American Swimming Coaches Association, “is that some coaches have followed this odd idea for many years, as if the purpose of practice is to get out of it.”

“We don’t incorporate the get-out swim into our workouts very much at all,” O’Brien adds. “With Masters swimming, people aren’t looking to get out of the pool early. Also, Masters swimmers can get out whenever they want – they have that control.”

Burns agrees. “I don’t know how common the get-out swim is in Masters swimming,” he says. “With TAM, it’s episodic, and incorporated into the coach’s plan for the workout, usually on the weekend.”

While the get-out swim is “such a minor part of swimming,” Burns says, he points out that its use – or lack of use – in a workout demonstrates the “levity” of the coach and team.

Burns recalls his collegiate swim career with Counsilman. “Doc was always trying to do things to energize the team, and make things fun,” Burns says. He remembers that Counsilman “had a reputation for gummy bears.” Gummy bears? Burns explains:

“With a get-out swim for Doc, the main set always totaled one mile, with at least a heat’s rest. Doc’s big thing was personal records. If

GET THE DRIFT

>>> “The get-out swim provides time for Masters to interact,” Rich Burns says. “Most Masters workouts I go to, there’s not a lot of chance to talk.”

>>> While his team doesn’t use the get-out swim much, “We do have incentive swims,” Kerry O’Brien says. He recalls during the fall of 2007 when he challenged his team, “I will pay anyone \$50 if they can break 50 seconds in the 100 free, with no warm-up.” If the participants tried and failed, they owed O’Brien \$20. “Two guys did it, and one didn’t.” Though O’Brien had a net loss of \$80, “It was so worth it,” he says.

>>> “The get-out swim or incentive swim adds fun to a workout,” O’Brien says. “It gets swimmers closer to race-level speed.”

>>> After participating in the 1972 Olympics in Munich, Mark Spitz (who is Jewish) was evacuated from the city, due to a terrorist attack by the Palestinian resistance group, Black September Organization. The attack claimed the lives of 11 Israeli athletes and coaches, and one German police officer.

>>> This summer, Spitz partnered with Romanian gymnast Nadia Comaneci to launch Your Personal Best, a campaign to motivate people to take steps to feel their best. “As we age,” Spitz says, “we can do it gracefully, through our exercise, nutrition and choices.” More details: www.ypbevents.com

you set a personal record with a get-out swim, you got a handful of gummy bears.”

“I was always happy to do a get-out swim,” Spitz says. “It worked in my best interest – I got to practice [at race speed], and if I beat the time that Doc set, I got everyone out of the workout, and everyone loved me.” <<<



Left to right: Doc Counsilman, Don McKenzie, Mark Spitz and Hobie Billingsley in 1969.