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Volunteers Help Sustain USMS Programs

BY ELISE OBERLIESEN

With a new executive director and plans to open its first real headquarters in Sarasota, Fla., this summer, U.S. Masters Swimming is undergoing some new and exciting changes. The organization still has its roots firmly planted in volunteerism, however, and USMS club officials throughout the country say volunteers are vital for the success of their swimming events, membership recruitment activities and community service projects.

Volunteers created USMS back in 1970, and for more than 20 years, the organization operated under the direction of a group of committed individuals who worked only for the love of their sport. It was not until the 1980s that USMS began to hire professionals to take on some of its operational tasks. Today, USMS thrives under a combination of professional and volunteer efforts.

One member who has witnessed virtually all of this transition is Mel Goldstein, who has served in both types of roles. Goldstein was president of USMS from 1993 through 1996, and in 1996 he became one of the organization's first paid professionals, serving as a representative for sponsorships and head of the USMS club mentoring program, a position he still holds today. Goldstein is a vocal proponent of the combined approach.

"The organization was built on volunteerism," Goldstein says. "It was like operating the store out of grandma's shoe box. Now we're running it like a business."

The unprecedented growth that USMS has continued to see each year, with nearly 50,000 members today, has made a strong case to take the organization into new waters. By far the biggest change USMS has undertaken thus far was to hire its first executive director, Todd Smith, in 2007. Rob Butcher, the current executive director, succeeded Smith in less than a year, and Butcher, who took his

post in June 2008, already has implemented significant changes.

Because only 20 percent of USMS members are competitive swimmers, Butcher says, that means swimming for fitness or recreation alone is becoming a more popular choice – and a growth opportunity for USMS.

"We're trying to become the leading fitness organization for adults," Butcher says. "We've moved online registration even further, with more bells and whistles." With a re-branding effort recently completed in fall 2008, the organization updated its image with a new look and feel. "We formally positioned ourselves as United States Masters Swimming. We unveiled a new logo. It's much more inviting."

But despite the increasing focus on planning and business models, Butcher credits much of USMS's success to the volunteers who brought such changes. Butcher and Goldstein both recognize that improvements won't continue without the support of volunteers.

"Rob has a new vision and he's working on a fast track," Goldstein says. "People are going to be proud of the organization once it gets to where it's going."

Goldstein believes one reason USMS has had such good luck with its volunteer efforts is that being a member of the organization is a way of life. He says tactics to increase volunteer numbers must begin with good relationships, which is how he managed to attract new members to the YMCA Indy SwimFit Masters club, which he helped found at Indianapolis's Jordan YMCA. Goldstein finds ways to inject reasons for enthusiasm into all of the volunteers by getting people to "buy in" to the idea of USMS.

"Once you have ownership, your volunteerism increases," he says.

For example, after YMCA Indy SwimFit won the bid for the 2009 USMS Long Course National Championships, club

members decided to earmark proceeds from the event for a kid-friendly water feature at the Y. The idea is to offer families relief from the sweltering summers as they kick around at a new Splash Pad slated to open in 2010, Goldstein says.

The club has pledged to raise \$150,000 to turn this vision into a reality.

Whether they hand out drinks to parched swimmers on race day, or mark the prized number on a contestant's limb, volunteers in the Cleveland-based Ohio Masters Swim Club aren't afraid to get their hands wet. Nor do they fear a little extra work. Each year, the club's 350 active members sponsor six competitive meets, all supported by volunteers.

The list of events includes the Lake Erie 1- and 2-Mile Open Water Swims at Edgewater State Park in Cleveland, scheduled this year for July 25. Open water is unpredictable, so Tom Spence, club president and meet director, must be ready for any situation that comes his way. Planning and logistics for such events is complex. But this is nothing Spence and his 25 volunteers can't handle.

"If the wind is blowing from the wrong direction, or any direction, buoys can break loose," Spence says. And that means swimmers may not even be able to find the finish line.

Spence recalled the July 2005 Erie event, when gale force winds and waves thrashed at racecourse buoys. Eventually the weak link broke free, sending one buoy on its own course. With help from the U.S. Coast Guard, the meet staff was able to secure the buoy and put the race back on track, Spence says.

"The high quality of our events is because we have such good volunteers," he says.

High swimmer turnout at its events has helped the club give back to its community. "Every year we raise between \$3,000 and \$4,000," Spence says. The beneficiaries are local nonprofits such as the Arthritis Foundation, Northeast Breast Cancer Coalition and St. Malachi Center, a program that offers job coaching, GED prep and child care.

The Ohio Masters also stage an intersquad meet locally each year at Lakewood High School – the Pieter Cath Memorial Swim Meet, and Spence says having the right people in charge helps the meet run smoothly. The meet's co-directors, Tom Gorman and Kevin McCardle, handle details, including event planning, promotion and last minute tasks on race day.

"Tom runs the computer, he captures the results. Kevin handles the arrangements, getting insurance, timers and officials," Spence says.

Spence says the key to keeping a steady supply of volunteers for such events is to give each volunteer an important job, but a job he or she can handle, and also to be generous in thanking volunteers for the work they have done.

"I specifically ask people, 'Would you be interested in helping on the administrative side?'"

Sometimes he gets a yes. And when he does, it means delegating smaller tasks to the fresh recruits. Spence is flexible and accommodating because he wants these people to succeed, and to offer their continued support.

"Volunteers are busy people, I try to give them lots of time

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to get things done,” he says, adding that saying thanks to tireless workers helps spread the enthusiasm. “I want those people to feel appreciated.”

I want Northern Virginia has no shortage of Masters swimmers, and Ray Novitske, chairman of Alexandria Masters Swimming, reasons that Northern Virginia also should have no shortage of volunteers to support the club’s activities. Novitske believes in teaching by example, which is one reason he signed on as the meet director for the club’s annual Tropical Splash swim event.

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The annual meet requires generous amounts of front-end planning. And it often sends the nearly 55 volunteers from the 126-member club into a frenzy on race day. Keeping the operation running smoothly requires Novitske to accept a variety of outcomes.

Just before the event Novitske says he is “mostly pulling his hair out.” That’s because he is the go-to guy when issues arise. The year before Novitske took the post of meet director, he learned more than his share about the pool heating system. Swimmers shot out from the blocks to find themselves shimmering in an 88° F. pool.

“It was ungodly hot,” says

Novitske. “I guess it [the heater] was on overdrive.”

But that didn’t keep Novitske from taking over the following year. He simply knows to expect such mishaps.

During the event, volunteers donate baked goods for the luau hospitality room, the place where swimmers grab fresh pineapple, mangos and yummy baked goods, including Novitske’s famed chocolate banana oatmeal muffins—the ones with too much chocolate. Other volunteers hold the stopwatch, eagerly timing the races and handing numbers off to the keeper of results.

Out of the pool, the club is not shy about swinging hammers, painting walls or sprucing up rickety fences. The club teams up with National Rebuilding Together, a local nonprofit that identifies people in need of home repairs.

April is the month these Masters pull together and give back to the community.

“Most of the people are elderly; they don’t have the funds or the physical ability. Most of these people don’t have family to help them.

What is really rewarding is to see tears in the eyes of these recipients,” Novitske says.

Volunteer work deepens the Masters’ friendships with one another.

“They feel a closer connection or bond. It goes beyond the swimming pool,” he says.

The icing on top is that giving back to the community also creates a positive image for the club.

“It gives people a chance to be exposed to Masters swimming,” Novitske says.

During winter months, the club rents pool time from the Fairfax County recreation centers, including Mount Vernon, George Washington, and Lee District. In the summer, the club shares space with youth teams in Alexandria at local neighborhood pools. On hot summer days, these Masters are likely putting in their yardage at pools like Hollin Hills, Little Hunting Park, Virginia Hills and Waynewood. In exchange for using the pools, club members donate necessities to the kids’ teams.

“We don’t pay a lot to rent these pools, so we try to do something for the kids’ teams. At the end of the season we buy them something they need, like stopwatches, or a shade tent for their away meets,” Novitske says.

Planting seeds of the new swimmer generation starts by giving back.

“We help the kids’ teams because they are going to be our future members,” Novitske says.

In and around St. Petersburg, Fla., veteran Masters swimmer Margie Hutinger relies on volunteers to provide editorial content and help lay out news pages for the newsletter of the Florida Mavericks Masters club. And the hard work doesn’t go unnoticed. The club received the 2008 Newsletter of the Year Award from U.S. Masters Swimming.

Keeping all these Mavericks together isn’t easy. Some clubs have the luxury to meet in one place, but not this one. “We’re unique, we don’t have a home pool or a coach on deck,” Hutinger says.

Margie’s husband Paul fills in as coach, giving the 65 active club members a workout to remember when he is on deck. The club’s volunteer bragging rights arise from involvement with local youth swimming clubs to larger challenges such as organizing events that connect swimmers from all over the globe.

Here are a few examples: The club has donated money

to a Bradenton learn-to-swim program for the past three years. The Bardmoor Aquatic Team is another lucky recipient, whose members graciously accepted a \$200 donation in 2008. Club members raised that money from combined efforts—proceeds from the St. Pete Masters Meet in spring 2008 and a raffle later that year. The youth swim team used the proceeds to purchase a dozen stopwatches.

The Mavericks also won the bid to host the USMS 2007 1-Hour Postal Championships. It was as Hutinger sums it up, “humbongous, gigantic.” Volunteers from the Mavericks were responsible for opening, sorting, filing and recording nearly 2,100 entries that came in from throughout the United States and all over the world.

“We had entries from Japan, Australia and New Zealand,” Hutinger says. “Some did all four strokes: one hour breast, one hour back, one hour butterfly, one hour crawl.”

Some Mavericks actually swam in the event. “We had about 10 or 12 members swim at the North Shore pool,” Hutinger says.

Why do these swimmers choose to give so much of their time, in this time-starved world?

“It gives them a sense of belonging,” Hutinger says. “They feel that what they are doing is important.”

Many people have told Hutinger they feel they don’t do enough. Some can’t accept the idea that small tasks like opening mail are worthwhile. But Hutinger encourages her crew to think twice. Even the smallest tasks are details that can put Hutinger’s mind at ease, knowing she has put them in capable hands.

“You know that every little bit, no matter how big or small, is less that the organizer has to do,” Hutinger says. <<<

Elise Oberliesen is a freelance writer from Denver.