

SHORT COURSE NATIONALS

by Bill Edwards >>> photos by Jim Quaschnick

U.S. Masters Swimming at Its Best







Mark Hepworth was feeling pretty good this past October about his chances in the 2009 Short Course Nationals. Hepworth, 54, a Masters swimmer for Team Ridglea in Fort Worth, Texas, was under the impression that he would age up to 55-59 and be competing against swimmers who were mostly older. He started calling his four sisters, three of whom live within driving distance of the meet in Clovis, Calif., so they could be there to watch him bask in his glory.

Those phone calls ultimately transformed Mark's dream into what might be described as an ideal case history for U.S. Masters Swimming. It's a story about how the Masters program has inspired a whole family to re-embrace the sport they have always loved.

As Mark made contact with Jeri Hepworth, 56, Linda Hep-

worth, 55, Tracy Hepworth Murphy, 53, and Jodie Hepworth Sanchez, 51, his idea began to undergo a metamorphosis. The Hepworth sisters also have an illustrious swimming history. They competed 41 years ago as an all-sister relay team in a Westchester County, N.Y., age-group swimming meet.

Because of other important family events in their sizable extended family, the Hepworths had missed an opportunity in July 2008 to celebrate their mom's 80th birthday.

What if, Jeri suggested, they took a whole team of Hepworth swimmers to Clovis to compete in the Nationals? They would all be in one spot together for a belated birthday celebration for their mom, Lynn Bull of Unionvale, N.Y. The girls could reenact their 1968 relay race. And they all could be there to bask in glory after they competed in their

respective individual events.

"Really, the main reason we did it was for Mom," Jodie says. "She had done the swimming mom thing way back before soccer moms were even around, and her commitment gave us this love of swimming that has stayed with us always. She was always there for us, for years and years."

Mrs. Bull, who divorced the Hepworths' father when their children were in their teens and didn't remarry until the 1980s, was largely responsible for managing her children's age-group swimming careers. With five born during a span of five-and-a-half years, she says she spent more than seven years as a swim mom, from 1966 to 1973.

Because the Hepworths had an in-ground pool on their farm in New York, she made sure all of the children could swim as soon as they could

walk. Then, Jeri became enamored with the 1964 Olympics, when the United States won 13 gold medals in 18 events. She began taking a bus to nearby Poughkeepsie so she could work out with a swim team, and by the time the Hepworths had moved to Orlando in 1966, Linda was the only holdout among the aquatic Hepworths. All the other children were competing in the pool.

Linda took art lessons for a year, then gave in and became a swimmer, Mrs. Bull says. After that, Mrs. Bull spent much of her non-working time at practices and meets, sometimes just watching and knitting, but eventually assuming a more active role. She was a judge at meets in Florida. By the time the family returned to New York, settling in the White Plains area, she also worked as a scorer at events attended by her children's team, the



White Plains YMCA Middies.

Swimming stayed a big part of the Hepworths' lives through college. Jeri did not compete at the University of Florida in Gainesville because the school had no women's team, but she swam with the school's synchronized club. Mark was a long-distance specialist at Texas Christian University, Tracy swam at SUNY-Albany, and Linda swam breaststroke and IM for SUNY-Brockport, near Rochester, N.Y.

"I'm not into distance swimming, or open water," Linda says, "but I did swim across the Erie Canal in January 1973 (a college dare). They drain it in the winter, so it was only about 6 feet across, but it was very, very cold."

Like many adults, the Hepworths allowed other activities to compete with their sport as they grew older. They swam periodically for fitness. Jodie

did laps around the pier in Santa Cruz, Calif., and a few triathlons. Jeri kept fit through swimming but did not compete. However, none were Masters swimmers until five years ago, when Mark decided to get back into shape and went to a workout with Ridglea under Coach Chuck Burr.

"I took a beating for a while," Mark says, "but it was so much fun to get back into the water. Now, I consider it the best possible way to start the day. I work out between 5:30 and 6:30, then I drive to work and watch other people in their cars, and think, 'I wish they could feel as good as I do.'"

For several years after that, Mark tried unsuccessfully to recruit his sisters into Masters swimming. Then in October 2008, they came up with the idea of competing in the Short Course Nationals. The Hepworth children formed a competitive team un-



The Hepworths from Team Ridglea are **MARK HEPWORTH**, 54; **JERI HEPWORTH**, 56; **JODIE HEPWORTH**, 51; **TRACY HEPWORTH MURPHY**, 53; and **LINDA HEPWORTH**, 55.



JULIE HEATHER (above) of the Southern Pacific LMSC was presented with the Ransom Arthur Award. Oregon Masters swimmer **JEFF KUYKENDALL**, 39, (right) discusses strategy with Columbia Gorge Masters Coach **PAUL JONES**.



der the auspices of Team Ridgelea, and started practicing individually for their events, reporting their progress to each other and trading workouts and drills by phone and email.

"We didn't know what to expect," Tracy says, "so we just decided to dive into the pool to see what we could do. I was scared. The last time I had

competed, they were still using a gun for starts. I had never dived off the blocks with goggles on." But Tracy did better than she thought she would, qualifying for SCN in the 50 back, 100 back and 100 IM.

For Jeri, who has continued to swim almost every day throughout her life, Masters came pretty easily. She joined a club in Connecticut that works out at the Mansfield Community Center and swam in a meet this past December to help prepare for Nationals. She also qualified in three events. For Linda, who says she probably swam the least of all the Hepworths since college, the transition to Masters took longer but perhaps was more profound. "Oh, I definitely got the bug," Linda says. "I'll be a Masters swimmer for a long time."

Ultimately, all five Hepworths recorded times that would qualify them for this SC Nationals. Team Hepworth was respectable. It wasn't exactly a "superclub," there were no "ringers," but they had no reason to be embarrassed either. It would be a team that was recognized at the meet for its competitiveness, its sense of humor and its enthusiasm.

At one point during the event, the Hepworth women donned 60s-style floral bathing caps and all five teammates

wrapped themselves in polka-dot towels like those their mother had made during their youth. At another point, the women emerged wearing se-quined dresses and performed a Tina Turner-styled dance revue. Mark joined in, wearing a 70s-style hippie belt around his head.

"This became such a joyful and inspirational event," Jeri says of the meet. "That's not just because we were there together either. The people who hosted the event were incredibly kind and well organized. They were so enthusiastic about us and very supportive."

In a conventional sense, the team's results were mixed. Jodie arrived at the event to discover she was improperly registered, and so officials had to disqualify the Hepworth women's relay team. Mark discovered he would not be aging up to 55-59 until Long Course Nationals in August, and so faced some stiffer competition than he expected.

The Hepworths did record four Top-10 finishes, however. In the 50-54 age group, Tracy finished fifth in the 50 back (35.10), and eighth in the 100 back (1:20.89). In the 55-59 age group, Jeri finished sixth in the 500 free with a time of 6:51.48, and ninth in the 200 free with a time of 2:30.99. All of the team's individual times are available on the USMS

website at www.USMS.org/comp/scnats09/. Event officials also gave the Hepworth team permission to swim in their relay events.

There were other benefits as well. Formation of the Hepworth team added four new swimmers to the U.S. Masters Swimming membership. The Hepworths have agreed to stick with it, and already are formulating plans in connection with the 2010 Short Course Nationals in Atlanta. There also is some rumbling among the Hepworths about recruiting their mother, who spent much of this year's meet with a pen and pad in hand recording splits.

"Old habits die hard," Mrs. Bull says of her swim mom behavior. "It was really an honor to be there, and I am still excited about having gone. Now the kids want me to find a pool. I am an Esther Williams kind of swimmer. I keep my head above the water. But I would consider the possibility of competing in the backstroke because I wouldn't have to put my face in the water. I'm not saying it will happen, but I am not pooh-poohing it either."

Backstroke competitors in the 80-84 age group should be forewarned. <<<

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The Numbers

2009 Short Course Nationals

Clovis, Calif.

- 1,583 swimmers
- 213 clubs represented
- 7,038 individual events

Splashes

- 147 new records
- 67 individual men's records
- 45 individual women's records
- 14 individual records by splits
- 21 relay records
- 69 DQs
- 737 scratches
- 80 relays
- 24 relay DQs
- 0 relay scratches