

## A History of Ambitious Projects



> **T**he Holmes Lumber Jax have never felled any trees, but the North Florida swim team did clear a forest of obstacles that stood in the way of some inner city kids who were afraid of the water. Created initially to send a group of U.S. Masters swimmers to the 1988 Masters World Championships in Brisbane, the Lumber Jax returned from Australia determined to teach young people in their hometown how to swim.

The goal, to make “Every Jacksonville Child a Swimmer,” was never fully realized, but organizers of the program did succeed in teaching basic swimming to thousands of children. Many of those kids “never would have stuck their big toes into the water,” says Rogers “Tiger” Holmes, one of the team’s founders.

Holmes, 87, recalls that he and a few other Masters swimmers from Florida, including Orlando dentist Jack Beattie, were hanging out on deck at Nationals around 1984 when they decided to put together a team for the second Worlds.

“From that point on, the idea kept getting bigger and bigger,” Holmes says. “We got all kinds of Masters swimmers involved. First we had 40, then 60, then

80, then 100, and we finally ended up with 170 who were actually committed to making the trip.”

Named after its sponsor (the lumber company) and headquarters (Jacksonville), the venture attracted swimmers from all over. Holmes says the roster for the event ultimately included eight Olympians.

Brisbane may not have been ready. The Holmes Lumber Jax team was the event’s largest registered group – so large it engaged a travel agent to handle the logistics. This agent pitched a circus tent on property adjacent to the pool, to provide team members with a place to have meetings and catered meals.

The Holmes Lumber Jax won lots of races. One of the most successful members at the Brisbane event was Holmes’ own daughter, Mary (Holmes) Roebuck, a former Auburn University swimmer who came in first in her age group (25-29) in the 50, 100, 200, 400 and 800 freestyle races. The team also won 29 of the event’s 36 relays.

“The Australians really didn’t like us very much,” Holmes says. “They said we were too competitive, that we should have cared more about socializing and having a good time. But the

truth is that we were there mainly to have fun – and it was great fun.”

Some U.S. Masters swimmers accused the Floridians of creating a “mega-team” just so they could win big. However, history indicates the group may have made its biggest mark not on Masters swimming scoreboards, but rather by what it has done to improve the sport.

Holmes says excitement over building a team for Australia helped focus attention on the lack of opportunities for swimming in Jacksonville. Too many kids in the city were afraid of the water because they didn’t know how to swim, and there were too few people to teach them – at least until the Holmes Lumber Jax returned from Australia.

“People started coming out of the woodwork to help after that,” Holmes says. “Parents, swimmers, everybody.”

Using outdoor municipal pools, club members and additional volunteers taught beginning swimming from May through August for three years in the early 1990s. More than 12,000 kids learned how to swim.

“There is no greater pleasure in the world,” Holmes says, “than to take a kid who’s scared of the water, give him about 10

### ROGERS HOLMES

Rogers Holmes swam for the University of Florida and was the Southeastern Conference 50-yard free champion in 1942. After serving as a pilot in the U.S. Army Air Corps during World War II, he graduated in 1948. Holmes focused mostly on his business and family until 1982, when heart problems brought him back to swimming.

>>> For his health, he became a Masters swimmer, won quite a few races and has led numerous efforts to improve the sport. “Whatever it takes to help swimming,” he says.

>>> In 1989, the College Swimming Coaches Association of America gave Holmes the Charles McCaffree Award for outstanding contributions to swimming. Holmes also served for more than a decade on the board of the International Swimming Hall of Fame.

good swimming lessons, and then later, you can’t get him out of the pool.”

Lessons in outdoor pools also made the swim teachers more aware of the need for an indoor public pool. This led the Holmes Lumber Jax to its most recent project.

For years, Holmes and the Lumber Jax have been working to get a public indoor pool in the city, raising private funds to supplement the city’s budget for the project. So far, the goal has been elusive, and the project was put on hold because of the budget. Holmes says the city may not be able to fund the project until better economic times.

Meanwhile, Holmes has been concentrating on his technique. He trains regularly with four other seasoned Jacksonville swimmers. The youngest in the group is 84. <<<