



SUN
Devil
MASTERS
swim
METER'S ZONE CHAMPIONSHIPS

SWIMMING'S BEST FRIEND JUST WON'T QUIT

Dr. Swim's latest move is a shocker. Instead of trying out a new event or stroke technique, this ultimate advocate of our sport has stepped off the pool deck and onto the track. In May, at 65, Phil Whitten competed for the first time in the high jump. BY JIM W. HARPER

Is this inductee into the International Masters Swimming Hall of Fame off his rocker? Whitten was inspired earlier this year when he went to a track and field meet and saw some kids practicing the high jump.

"If those little kids can do it, I can do it, too," he says.

After Whitten tried to leap the bar set for the kids, their coach came over and fixed his faulty technique. Over the past few months, Whitten has improved from jumping 3 feet to 4 feet, and he enthuses that he only needs another half-foot to break into the national Top 10 for Masters track and field.

But don't think for a second

that this consummate swimmer and former editor of *Swimming World* magazine has turned his back on the pool. In June, Whitten competed Friday night on the field (in the javelin, shot put and high jump) and Saturday morning in the water. Even when it's out of order, swimming always comes first. The only thing that competes with swimming for his attention is Whitten's eight-year-old grandson, Stephen.

At the age when most people are slowing down, Whitten is a committed workaholic, both as a writer and as an athlete. Perhaps the track and

field thing is his version of cross training. Or perhaps he just needs a new challenge.

But Whitten's athletic challenges are a bit more complicated than for most retirement-age adults. Ten years ago, he was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease.

The conventional wisdom at the time was that people with Parkinson's should not exercise at all. His doctor, the same one treating Muhammad Ali, told him, "You won't be able to swim in three years," he recalls.

Whitten's reaction? "You're talking to the wrong guy."

Four years after his diagnosis, at 60, Whitten placed in the

Top 10 in the 200 breaststroke.

The "wrong guy" continues to defy the disease, a neurological disorder that disrupts smooth muscle movement and causes telltale tremors.

"It doesn't really affect my normal functioning at all," Whitten says. He cites two fundamental reasons for his success: "I attribute my ability to function to swimming and to my grandson."

He has another beloved grandson, Tiger, but grandson Stephen and his parents live with him, and he provides a constant source of laughter. The other housemate is his wife Donna, whom he met at a



David Balch

set of kicking. He also lifts weights once or twice per week, and for variety he throws in cycling and indoor rowing.

Whitten competes for Arizona Masters, and he hopes to break into the Top 10 again soon. His last mention in 2003 capped a total of 52 Top 10 swims recorded since 1993. Individually, his Masters races have topped the nation seven times, spanning the years from 1977 to 1995.

Even more important now than his racing times, he says, are his friendships in swimming that span the globe. Of course, this affection does not deter him from wanting to beat them all. His long-term goal? Setting a world record at age 95.

While his accomplishments as a swimmer are outstanding, Whitten's greatest contribution to the sport is his dedication outside the pool. In 1992, he left a teaching job at Harvard University, with degrees in anthropology and gerontology, to become the editor of the sport's seminal magazine, *Swimming World*. He was the first journalist to publish secret documents from East Germany that proved its history of systematic doping. Starting in 1993, he became the primary voice of similar accusations against the Chinese, and he is still working to expose inappropriate and illegal activities today.

"We have reason to believe that some Chinese swimmers were genetically doped," he says, referring to the 2008 Beijing Olympics. (Note: Gene doping involves the injection of genetic material to improve athletic performance, usually by increasing oxygen retention in red blood cells or by reducing muscle wasting.)

Whitten hopes that new leadership at FINA will follow the lead of organizations like the United States Anti-Doping Agency, which has stripped medals from confirmed illegal substance abusers such as Marion Jones. He said that cheaters can be caught well

Masters swim meet.

Although Whitten laments that he has slowed down in his sixth and seventh decades, last year he defied that trend and dropped his times in at least four events (see chart). Mind you, the 2008-2009 season was more than five years after doctors predicted he would drown if left alone in the water.

Those doctors need to know that Whitten does more than just swim. He belongs to that

class of highly motivated Masters swimmers who train on their own.

One of Whitten's greatest strengths is his mental agility with numbers. He can shock swimmers by recalling their times from meets well in the past, including splits. His head is like a running collection of meet results.

"I have a thing for numbers. I remember numbers. I don't try to make the numbers stick, but they do," he says.

He is also meticulous about keeping records of his swimming performances and workouts. His swimming log is a coach's dream: it contains thousands upon thousands of workouts completed over the past 40 years. Whitten swims five or six days a week and averages 2,000 yards per workout. He trains alone at a local pool near Phoenix, his long-time home, and writes his own workouts. A recent workout, for example, featured a ladder

after the competition, because the International Olympic Committee stores samples that can be used when more sophisticated tests have been developed. An expert on the issue, Whitten laments that some new forms of doping are very elusive.

The consummate advocate for the sport's integrity, Whitten has authored hundreds of articles and many guides and books. His 1994 book, "The Complete Book of Swimming," is a bible for many coaches. Currently, he is working on a revision.

In fact, Whitten gets up at 4 a.m. every day to start working, even though he just stepped down in May as executive director of the College Swimming Coaches Association of America. He took over that role a few years ago after retiring from *Swimming World* because of his passion to save men's collegiate swim teams. These teams have been shrinking in number since the arrival of Title IX, a rule intended to promote women's collegiate teams. Continuing his quest for justice, Whitten has plans for a documentary about the unintended, detrimental effects of Title IX.

Whitten is also planning the launch of an Internet business, and in his spare time he continues to write. A lot.

Whitten is the editor of the new book, "The History of Olympic Swimming. Volume 1: 1896-1936," published by USA Swimming and authored by coach Peter Daland. Whitten and Daland plan to publish five more volumes and cover every single race in the Olympics through the year 2012.

Whitten is also collaborating to complete a book with June Quick, the wife of Coach Richard Quick, who passed away in June from cancer and did not complete his written work.

Another major book collaboration, covering the history of black swimmers, is with Bruce Wigo, CEO of the International

Swimming Hall of Fame.

When asked about the most pressing issue facing swimming today, Whitten chooses two, but has many others in mind. The clear number one issue to him is doping.

High-tech suits are the secondary issue affecting international swimming currently, Whitten says. He also cites attitudinal challenges to the sport, such as today's youth culture that sells instant gratification instead of the steady discipline required by swimming, plus the confusion caused by a host of other sports competing for the diminishing attention spans of young people.

Masters swimming, though, has little competition in his mind, even considering his newfound obsession with track and field. To prove its superiority, he cites the recent results of a 13-year scientific study led by Steven N. Blair, professor of exercise science at the University of South Carolina. It found that the mortality rate of adult swimmers is astoundingly lower than for comparable walkers and runners.

"The message from the research lab is clear: keep on stroking, baby. You literally are swimming for your life," Whitten wrote in an email.

Whitten knows the science and the current trends of swimming, but he also knows quite a bit of its untold history – especially the steamier side



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Phillip Whitten's self-reported times, 1998-2009

"The following is off the top of my head, so the times are only approximate. I had already begun getting a bit slower when the PD was first diagnosed in 1999," Whitten says.

	50 back	50 breast	100 breast	100 IM	50 free
1998-1999 (55-56)	29.5	32.5	1:11	1:05.4	26.7
2003-2004 (60-61)	30.4	33.8	1:16	1:12.6	27.8
2004-5	34.6	34.55	1:19	1:14.6	29.2
2005-6	36.0	39.7	1:22	1:16	30.9
2006-7	36.80	41.7	1:29	1:22	31
2007-8	36.69	42.2	1:33	1:24	32
2008-9	36.59	41.1	1:31	1:21.5	32.9

*Bolded times are faster than preceding year.

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of Masters swimming. Whitten remembers the glory days when anything could happen. Unlike the well-mannered meets of today, things used to get a bit risqué.

Whitten recalls the days of "beer relays." A beer can would be waiting at the far end of the pool, and the swimmer would have to chug it before swimming back. Although it sounds absurd today, Whitten says, "Twenty years ago, I

wouldn't have to explain it."

But it gets even better (or worse, depending on your view). The nude beer relay at the 1984 World Championships in Christchurch, New Zealand, was especially memorable. Yes, you read that correctly. Nude. Beer. Relay. Whitten remembers that one Kiwi swimmer was waiting behind the blocks for his teammates, who never showed. Making the host nation proud, this naked swimmer completed the entire relay, and every beer, all by himself. "By the end, he was sloshed," Whitten recalls.

But despite the increased regulation and propriety governing Masters swimming these days, Whitten feels that USMS is on the right track.

"Masters still retains that core of youthful joy that it had from the beginning," Whitten says. "I like the direction that it's going in right now, including services to members."

His one major complaint is

that USMS is too timid about recruitment. Instead of its current roster of 45,000, he believes the number should be 10 times bigger.

Whitten's contributions to swimming as a whole have not gone unnoticed. Last year, he received the Al Schoenfield Media Award from the International Swimming Hall of Fame, and he was that institution's first inductee as a Masters "contributor."

"It just goes to show you what a devious guy I am," he writes in an email. "It was clear I wasn't ever going to make it on the basis of my swimming prowess, so I found another way to sneak in. Seriously, just to be mentioned in the same breath as those great swimmers in the hall is profoundly humbling."

Phil Whitten may feel humbled, but as the written voice of swimming for nearly two decades, he deserves every accolade.

But perhaps his most remarkable achievement is what he is doing today. He is waking

up at 4 a.m., working on an article here, a book chapter there, and waiting for the best moment of the day, when his grandson appears. Then the laughter, wrestling, and Cheerios can begin.

At noon, it is time for his workout. Is he thinking about how his times have slowed down over the years? Is he worried that the Parkinson's disease will cut him off completely from the pool?

Probably not. During his kicking set, he is most likely to be thinking about strengthening his legs. There may be more weekends coming with both swimming and track and field meets, and he says he wants to improve his performance.

Phil Whitten, Dr. Swim, is accelerating into the future, and he appears to want to jump higher than ever before. <<<

Jim Harper, a freelance writer from Miami, is a swim coach and a Masters swimmer.