



## Sally Bradley Takes USMS Membership Beyond the Mark

# BREAKING 50,000

By Jim Harper >>> Photos by Ginny Daniels

**I**f swimming hosted its own reality show, a la “Project Chlorine,” what would be the grand prize? Would you win a new pool for your team? How about free trips to the World Championships and the next Olympics?

Keep dreaming. It’s not going to happen.

What is going to happen is that tens of thousands of adult swimmers will get out of the house, go to practice, put in a tough workout and get out of the pool with “that feeling” – the same feeling that drew Sally Bradley back to her pool after an extended absence.

“I still feel better when I get out of the water than anything else,” says Bradley, an art teacher and basketball coach at the Brookstone School in Columbus, Ga. “It’s not to say I really love getting up at 4:30 in the morning. It’s still tough, and probably will continue to be, but there’s nothing like get-

ting out of the water at the end of a workout.”

That’s it. That is the primary and achievable prize of swimming – it is the “swimmer’s high” that virtually everyone, regardless of age or level, can achieve.

But Sally Bradley does feel she won another kind of swimming lottery. This year, when she registered online for U.S. Masters Swimming, she got a phone message from the national office. She assumed that something was wrong with her submission or her credit card, and she armed herself with the correct information before calling back.

There was no error. It turns out that her registration represented the first time that USMS had reached the 50,000-member mark, and the executive director, Rob Butcher, wanted to congratulate her.

“It was quite exciting,” says Bradley, a Georgia native. “I’ve

never been the shopper going through the check-out at the grocery store that got the ribbons and the confetti, and that’s what it felt like – being the millionth shopper at the local Piggly Wiggly.”

Bradley’s registration represents a major milestone in the history of USMS, but she seems to be more than just a lucky shopper. Her story makes her the “Everyman” of swimming and the perfect, positive-minded example of a typical member of the organization. With member 50,000, it seems that USMS got lucky, too.

### Almost Didn’t Happen

Procrastination. It is the downfall of many would-be athletes and healthy people, and it had been keeping Bradley out of the pool even after she was mentally ready for a return. The event that propelled her into action was a chance encounter with a former team-

mate. The teammate said what any current swimmer would say to a former lane mate: “You really should come back.”

Instead of accepting this advice with good manners and mentally filing it away, Bradley decided to act upon it immediately. As soon as she got home, she jumped on the computer and registered at [usms.org](http://usms.org). No excuses, no hesitation, just – boom – do the right thing. And there she was: number 50,000. Her simple action made an entire organization very happy.

As with many Masters swimmers, Bradley had been in this situation before. She made her first comeback to swimming in 1997. Having moved to New York City, she sought some familiar territory in the swimming pool.

“On a fluke one day I decided to try the Masters workout at Asphalt Green. I showed up at the pool one day, and it was much like when I tried out as a



**BRADLEY** (left) demonstrates her butterfly technique at the Columbus YMCA, where her Masters team practices. A woman who practices many arts, Bradley (above) shows her students at Columbus's Brookstone School how to throw a pot.

## Sally Bradley

**Claim to fame:** 50,000th registered USMS swimmer

**Age:** 41

**Age started swimming:** 8

**Hometown:** Columbus, Ga.

**Current job:** high school art teacher and basketball coach

**Picture next to desk:**

Michael Phelps

kid," Bradley recalls.

The fluke paid off for the next four years. She made great friends, got into great shape, and had a wonderful

experience at Nationals in Indianapolis in 1998.

"It was really fun to be back competing again. I'm very competitive by nature, and it

was that same old nervous feeling, of butterflies in the stomach, as if no time had passed," Bradley says.

Any Masters swimmer who competed previously has had that déjà vu moment behind the blocks. Am I really doing this to myself, again?

### Step One: Don't Drown

Despite the recurring nerves and tension of competing, Bradley recalls only one really, really bad experience with swimming. It was the first time that she tried out for a team, at age 8, and she didn't realize how long 25 yards could be.

The try-outs were at a country club in her hometown of Columbus, where swimming was a relatively unknown sport in the 1970s. She knew instinc-

tively she wanted to join the new team, and she petitioned her parents to let her make the plunge. She dove in and gave it her 8-year-old all.

"I think I made it about half-way down the 25-yard pool before I started to choke and sputter, and they fished me out," says Bradley, who quickly put that failure behind her. "From that moment on, I decided it was the sport for me, and I've loved it ever since. I never questioned not doing it."

Bradley was hooked. Her confidence grew and grew, and she never feared the water again. She is very thankful to the sport for that lifelong gift of feeling secure around water. Since childhood, Bradley has been a huge fan of competitive swimming.

"My very first sports hero was Shirley Babashoff," she recalls of the multiple medalist from the 1972 and 1976 Olympics. "She was the first sports name that I knew as a celebrity."

Today her heroes are similar

to many others around the world: Dara Torres, with whom she shares a similar age, and, of course, the aquatic comet, Michael Phelps. His picture has been next to her desk since a student gave her the *Sports Illustrated* issue with him on the cover. "He's the pinup boy in my classroom," she quips.

### Jumping In Again

The biggest swimming challenge Bradley ever faced was outside of the pool. It was the mental challenge, after an extended leave of absence, of deciding to get back in.

"The hardest part is thinking about it before you go," she says. Her advice for uncommitted swimmers? "Just go and do it. I had been thinking for a few months about it when I ran into my friend. I went home immediately that night and registered."

Now the world knows that Sally Bradley just did it. And her action pushed USMS into the ranks of organizations with 50,000 members.

Like many Masters swimmers, Bradley had taken extended leaves from team training before her return in 1997 and again in 2009. She competed in high school but did not have that opportunity in college because the team at Wake Forest University folded the year before she became a student there.

She made her first comeback while still in her 20s, and her second, recent comeback was embraced while in her early 40s.

"It wasn't that difficult the first time I came back, because I was younger, and your body or mind has that internal clock. You want to fall back into the same pace," she says. "I was more out of shape the second time. It took a little longer to get back into shape."

"But it's so worth it," she continues. "Once you're back in, you get into that sense of camaraderie. It makes it much easier to get up and go to the workouts," especially now that her current workout schedule

requires her to get out of bed at 4:30 a.m.

Her team, the Columbus Hurricanes, works out in the city's only pool suitable for training, located at the YMCA. Thus, the Masters team takes the early shift from 5 to 6:30 a.m., Mondays through Thursdays. Afternoon practices are reserved for the age-groupers. Area schools also use the facility.

The Hurricanes Masters has that hard-core group, as so many teams do, of very committed swimmers and triathletes. It also features that familiar range in age and ability from "former college swimmers to people who knew barely how to swim when they came in," Bradley says. The ages range from 18 to 80.

Adult swimming at the YMCA was loosely organized until last year when new coach Brian Jennings joined the Hurricanes. The group joined USMS officially and quickly grew into the largest Masters workout group outside of Atlanta.

Jennings says that nearby college Columbus State had filled in their pool years ago and many swimmers traveled to Auburn University for pool time. With an invigorated Masters group, he sees many of those swimmers returning to practice in Columbus.

The school where Bradley teaches does not have a swim team, and she believes that a deficit of sufficient pools is the primary reason.

"I've been campaigning for a team for a long time," says Bradley.

"We just don't have enough pools." She has one idea to raise the funds for a new pool, but it hasn't worked out yet. "I've played the lottery, but so far the only thing I've won is being the 50,000th member of USMS."

Coach Jennings says that the City of Columbus recently voted to approve a \$13 million bond for the design of a world-class natatorium, but he cautions that its realization will be years away.

### Sally Bradley's team: The Columbus Hurricanes

**LMSC:** Georgia

**Coach:** Brian Jennings

**Number of registered Masters:** 54

**Practices per week:** 5

**Practice start time:** 5 a.m.

**Youngest swimmer:** 18

**Oldest swimmer:** 80

**Noteworthy:** Affiliated with USMS in 2008, it grew quickly into the fourth largest Masters team in Georgia.

### Lane Wisdom

Although she coaches basketball instead of swimming at her school, Bradley keeps repeating the lessons from swimming to her students. Set goals. Work hard. Be dedicated. Make the necessary sacrifices. As she likes to say, "Nobody is given anything in the pool."

Achievement in the pool, as in all arenas, has to be earned.

Bradley is quick to point out that Olympic fame is not the only kind of achievement available to swimmers. Anyone who finishes a hard work-

out and gets out of the pool has earned "that feeling." Anyone who sets a goal and achieves it deserves that thrill. Whether the goal is competing in a new event, breaking a minute for the first time, or aging up into an octogenarian age group, it produces the same effect for everyone.

"The satisfaction is no different than elite swimmers who are achieving their goals," Bradley says. She proudly remembers when she made her first AAA qualifying time as an age grouper, and now she is

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preparing for that same satisfaction. She plans to compete in the 2010 Short Course Nationals in Atlanta.

It's that certain swimmer feeling. Like many other swimmers who try to leave the sport and end up crawling, breaststroking, backstroking and butterflying their way back, Sally Bradley has not found the same euphoria in any other activity. That feeling keeps bringing her back.

### The Best Sport. Period.

Even during this year's recession, when people are letting go of gym memberships and other expenses, membership in U.S. Masters Swimming has grown 11 percent more this year than in 2008. The organization is also moving forward to year number 40, as it was founded in 1970 as part of the Amateur Athletic Union.

When Sally Bradley joined this summer, she was recommending herself as a lifelong

swimmer. It is her favorite pastime, and she credits it with keeping her mentally and physically fit as well as keeping her life well balanced. With age, she recognizes that the clock offers an evolving challenge, but being part of a team remains the same invigorating experience.

"Expectations change, but it's such a great experience to be with a group. Absolutely fantastic," she says. "I think it's the greatest sport in the world."

Swimming didn't have to pay her to say that. In fact, she paid U.S. Masters Swimming \$40 to become a member. She got the chance to say that because, as luck would have it, she was number 50,000.

With the sport of Masters swimming continuing to grow, it may not be too long before someone gets that call for lucky number 100,000.

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

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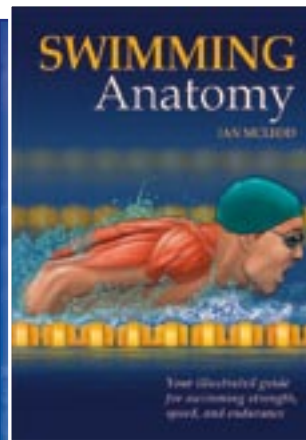
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