



COMPETITION IN THE CARIBBEAN

Medley of Racing and Fun
by Susan Dawson-Cook • Photos by Allison Tolpa



A winning combination of waving palm trees, bright sandy beaches, a sapphire Caribbean Sea and fast swimming ruled the USMS Summer Nationals in Puerto Rico. Despite the temptation to lounge on the beach, competitors at the event broke 17 individual national and 10 world records. Four national relay records were upended, and many swimmers hit the wall with personal bests.

Churning the Puerto Rican waters at this Monday-through-Thursday swimming venue August 9-12 were 632 athletes, including Olympians, members of the International Swimming Hall of Fame and the International Masters Swimming Hall of Fame – plus USMS national and world record holders from 28 U.S. states and five countries.

Many swimmers, such as Martina Hannon, of Las Vegas Masters and John Beaty of the Chattanooga River Rats, competed for the first time in a USMS nationals event.

Veteran swimmers Bumpy Jones, Yoshi Oyakawa, Laura Val, Richard Burns, Rich Abrahams, Jon Blank, Carolyn Boak, Laura Koch Davis, Laurie Ditommaso, Matthew Eisenhuth, Jeff Erwin, Meg Gill, Jack Groselle, David Guthrie, Caroline Krattli, Jody Smith, Diann Uustal and Francine Williamson introduced newbie competitors to the excitement and the camaraderie that reigns at such events.

The Natatorium of San Juan, modeled after the 1996 Atlanta Olympic facility at Georgia Tech, is a world class swimming facility. A rooftop arches over the pool, protecting swimmers from the intense sunlight. Open sides usher in tropical breezes and enable spectators to watch races while catching views of the surrounding city.

An infusion of sounds reverberated beneath the natatorium roof: encouraging claps, cheers and whistles for team-



Top: PAIGE DEAN and DEANNA DOYLE of the Sarasota YMCA Sharks enjoy the deck between events. Middle: JANE KATZ of Asphalt Green Masters shows her San Juan spirit. Bottom: JANEY MAYVILLE-ARMAS of Fort Lauderdale Aquatic Masters helps cheer her team to victory.

mates; the “beep” of the starter; drum rolls of thunder announcing impending storms; and speakers booming out Latin music one minute and Earth,

Wind and Fire the next. The high-energy atmosphere elicited a skin-tingling, “I’m really here competing in Summer Nationals” style of excitement.

Many competitors traveled to this tropical locale “to make a vacation out of it,” says USMS Executive Director Rob Butcher, and that group included Jill Gellatly, one of 25 Woodlands (Texas) Masters swimmers who competed.

Although Gellatly is a regular at USMS Nationals, she tends to choose her meets. “I came for the location – to combine the swim meet with vacation,” she said. She started the meet with a bang, winning the 1500 freestyle, and kept her momentum, besting her seed time in every event.

“I think it’s really a great idea to bring Nationals somewhere where they [swimmers] can enjoy the beach,” Gellatly added. “I like the sun; the tropical climate. I’m glad it’s a small meet – we’ll have time to do other things.”

“This is the most fun national meet I have been to,” said Phil Sundahl, 46, a Woodlands swimmer who took up Masters swimming after an 18-year hiatus following the 1988 Olympic trials. In Puerto Rico, his third Masters Nationals, he won all three backstroke events for his age group.

Sundahl spent most of his out-of-water hours sightseeing, however, and estimates that as many as 20 other swimmers accompanied him on tours around the island. Dinners in Puerto Rican restaurants were a big hit. Sundahl says he and his companions sampled mofongo (mashed plantains with seasoning and meat or vegetables), and other comida and criolla – local cuisine influenced by the native Taíno Indians, the Spanish conquistadors and African slaves.

A former history major, Sundahl says he relished exploring the corridors and light-house of Fort San Felipe del Morro, and was particularly captivated by this World Heritage Site, constructed by the Spanish in 1539. Occupied by the American military after Puerto Rico became a U.S. ter-



MARK PALACE, KITTEN BRAATEN and TERRY SUE GAULT of Virginia Masters share a laugh on deck.

ritory in 1898, El Morro later became an observation post to watch for German U-boats during World War II.

A nighttime kayaking trip through the Laguna Grande bioluminescent lagoon in the northeastern part of the island near Fajado was Sundahl's favorite excursion.

"If you put your hand in and move it back and forth, it turns the fluorescent color of the plankton," Sundahl said, adding that the exotic glowing plants in the movie "Avatar" came to mind when he saw the site. "This is the most unique experience I've had in the water. I kept thinking how neat it

would be to swim and see the shapes of our bodies."

A HEALTHY WAY TO VACATION

Sawtooth Masters swimmer Jeff Erwin, 46, won the 800, 400 and 200 free, and was the overall winner of the 1500 meter open water swim at Laguna del Condado. Erwin took vacationing as seriously as his swimming, spending dry land time sightseeing with his family.

"The family's here, the kids are here," he said. "The meet keeps me motivated. I'm not one of those guys who can show up to work out. I lose motivation in a hurry. I think it [competitive swimming] keeps me halfway healthy."

"I'm having the time of my life," said Martina Hannon, 39, in a poolside interview. Hannon uses swimming to minimize arthritic discomfort. "I like being with healthy people and challenging myself this way. I'm so glad I got involved."

Joan Waldbaum, 79, of Colonials 1776 Masters, who won the 50 fly and 200 IM, took up swimming at age 68.

"I started to swim for the physical benefits," she said. Waldbaum competed for the first time a year later and discovered she had a knack for swimming. "When I started to do better, I had more incentive. I've met wonderful people – it's extended my world. It was a lifesaver when my husband was sick and I could get away to swim."

Waldbaum's week of swimming culminated in a trip to the El Yunque rainforest, rife with splashing waterfalls, towering bamboo stalks and a canopy of trees.

Virginia Masters swimmer Kitten Braaten, 55, enjoyed being back in Puerto Rico after having competed in the Pan American Games there three years ago.

"The people are friendly and I love the beach," Braaten said. A former age group and col-

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lege swimmer, she left the sport until “I got fat and decided I needed to go back to swimming.” Keeping her commitment to a lifestyle of fitness, she’s been competing since 1996.

Suzanne Cuda, 50, of Masters of South Texas, worked as an army physician for 26 years. Now working as a civilian, she is helping to create two outpatient clinics at a local hospital. Running and triathlons kept Cuda fit before she took up swimming to reduce damaging impact on her body. Cuda improved her times in every event she swam.

Some participants are so passionate about racing they jetted straight to Puerto Rico from the FINA World Championships in Sweden. MOST swimmers Diane Wheatley, 77, Betty Kight, 69 and Georgia Goggin, 81, were among those swimmers. Despite their exhaustion after the 25-hour flight, they swam all their races,

many of them faster than their seed times.

A DIFFERENT PACE FROM THE STATES

Life in Puerto Rico is decidedly different from the rest of America. Swimmers renting cars found themselves in for a jolt. Local directions used landmarks instead of street names. Signs, written in Spanish, were often hidden behind leaves. And lanes merged without warning. With 4 million people driving in an area the size of New Jersey, traffic was crazy.

Brigid Bunch of Arizona and Frank Lorge of Arkansas drove in circles trying to find the pool the first day.

Only locals and a professional driver like Hubie Kerns, 61, of Ventura County Masters, could nod their heads to reggae music while navigating in Puerto Rican traffic. During the weeks preceding the meet, Kerns performed driving stunts for the movie “Fast and

Furious 5.” Swimming keeps Kerns fit for the job and helped him to rehabilitate a serious injury he sustained during a stunt accident.

Most swimmers chose the meet shuttle over the rat race of Puerto Rican traffic, however. On the bus, swimmers made new friends and reunited with former friends.

“You can tell I’m on vacation,” said Hermine Terhorst, 52, coach of the Santa Rosa Masters, clad in a red swimsuit and a belly dancing skirt with shining bangles. She pulled out a ball of yarn from her bag, crossed her legs and started knitting.

A ROMANTIC DESTINATION

Jeff Roddin, 41, chair of the Championship Committee, and his wife Julie, 34, were among several recently married couples that traveled to Puerto Rico to compete and sightsee together. Although Roddin, a seasoned



Local musicians turn the mezzanine level into a dance floor after the last race.

competitor, says he has been to “15 or 20 Masters Nationals, this was the best atmosphere of all of them,” he said. Jeff won the 50 and 100 fly, while Julie won the 400 IM. The Roddins visited old San Juan and the rainforest, running into fellow Masters

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The start of the women's race at the Laguna del Condado Open Water Challenge.

swimmers at both locales.

"It was nice to see other people took advantage of the destination. Every time you go to a meet, you extend your circle of friends," Roddin said.

Like the Roddins, Tom and Carolyn Boak of Woodlands Masters met at a swimming venue.

"We fell in love and got married," says Boak, 67. "Swimming is our passion, something we do together."

Meet directors for a prior national event in Texas, the Boaks demonstrated their enthusiasm for swimming again in San Juan. Numerous other married couples swam together at the meet, including Jillian and Adam Orton, and Jennifer and John Carlson of Reston Masters, and Ross and Laura Davis from The Woodlands.

Perhaps the scent of chlorine and the excitement of competition is an aphrodisiac. "The couple we traveled with in Puerto Rico [Molly Grover and

Jeff Strahota] plan to get married next year," says Roddin, adding that he and his wife also met at a Masters event.

VICTORY CELEBRATION AND OPEN WATER CHALLENGE

A poolside celebration followed the last heat of the final event, the 100 freestyle, on Thursday afternoon. Florida teams were the big winners when the points were tallied - Fort Lauderdale Aquatic Masters, Gold Coast Masters and the Sarasota YMCA Sharks Masters swept the first three places in the local division team scores. In the regional clubs division, North Carolina, Colorado and Georgia took the top three banners home.

Swimmers broke their tapers salsa dancing to live music and enjoying roast pig and rum drinks. The party continued that evening at the Courtyard Marriott with salsa

dancing lessons and more socializing.

Despite the late-night partying, about 150 swimmers turned out for the 1500-meter Laguna del Condado Open Water Challenge the next morning. A splash of bodies hitting the water marked the beginning of the men's start, followed by the women's start 45 minutes later. Jeff Erwin of Sawtooth Masters won the men's race, in spite of colliding with a kayak on the race course, and Eney Jones, 50, Sarasota YMCA Sharks Masters, took the women's event.

Summer Nationals recap videos were produced each day and are available at usms.org/comp/1cnats10/.

Meet Directors Mark Gill and John Perez, the USMS staff and the hundreds of volunteers who helped with the pool and open water events, put on an amazing show.

>>> Susan Dawson-Cook is a freelance writer from Tucson, Ariz.

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