

STILL KICKING: DONNA DE VARONA

By Emily Mason

Following is the complete, unabridged article on Donna de Varona. Check out the December issue of Swimming World Magazine for photos of Donna and her family. See, too, if you can answer the trivia question.

Caught lightning in a bottle--that's what Donna de Varona did at the ripe old age of 13. The American sensation never started out like the weak flame of a new candle, but a blazing streak of electricity that never died out. A cover girl for Life, Time, the Saturday Evening Post and Sports Illustrated twice, she found success at the international level competing in both the 1960 and 1964 Olympics.

In 1960, she became the youngest American to compete at 13 years old. She walked away from her swimming career with gold medals in the 400 IM and the 4 x 100 free relay to pursue a career in broadcasting that turned into a lifetime of firsts and a never-ending list of achievements.

De Varona made many friends on the pool deck. A number of them were involved in television and broadcasting, and these friendships catapulted her into the spotlight.

"They would ask me if they could put a camera in my lane," she said. Of course, technology then wasn't what it is now. There were no mechanical cameras on tracks to chase you up and down the pool, so this meant there was a "frogman" underneath you.

"I swam the 200 fly at nationals in 1964. It was the only time I ever swam it. It was short course, and I won," de Varona said. After her race, the frogman asked her how it went and she replied, "Just don't breathe when I go over you--the bubbles are distracting."

Her jump from swimming to the professional world was so rapid that she quickly earned icon status. Unfortunately for de Varona's swimming career, the professionalism trap prevented her from swimming competitively again. At the time, you could not go back and forth between a career and swimming. So by 1965, she was the youngest and first woman sportscaster. During her career, she covered 17 Olympic Games, mostly for ABC's Wide World of Sports, won an Emmy--and that's just the start.

Outside of broadcasting and television, she served five terms on the President's Council on Physical Fitness, worked with the Special Olympics since it began, and was a founding member and first president of the Women's Sport Foundation--to mention a few.

Her proudest achievements include being honored by two senators, one from each party, for her leadership involving the inception of Title IX; a Gold Medallion from the Hall of Fame, the first woman to earn one; the Olympic Order, the IOC's highest award; her induction to the Seneca Hall of

Fame for leadership; and, of course, her Emmy for producing a story on a swimmer in the Special Olympics.

The "exclamation point" of her swimming career is highlighted by her gold medal in the 400 IM. Her favorite event was the 200 IM--she never lost a race and was proud of it--but "you respect yourself for the 400 IM. It's a monster of an event," she said.

Today, de Varona lives in Connecticut with her husband, John Pinto, and her two teenagers, John, 17, a senior in high school with his own swimming aspirations, and Joanna, 16, a junior who loves softball, swims and is into acting. De Varona's sister, Joanna Kearns, is often remembered for being "the mom" on the television series, "Growing Pains," and has taken up directing. It works out great for De Varona's Joanna--she has the opportunity to go on set with her aunt to take notes.

She still swims, sometimes with her son, for the love she has for it and the exercise. "I never quit swimming," she said. No doubt she has more side projects than your everyday mom besides looking into colleges for her kids and swimming. De Varona is now on the board of the Swimming Hall of Fame, alongside Mark Spitz, which they are trying to save and restore. There are 300 films of the world's best in swimming needing to be transferred over to digital, only if they can find someone to do it. De Varona emphasizes the need for support from the swimming community to contribute what they can to save these legacies for swimmers today and tomorrow. She is still involved with the Women's Sport Foundation and the U.N.'s Right to Play Program for athletes in countries that don't have the equipment or facilities available to them. De Varona also serves on the U.S. Soccer Foundation board and the IOC's Women's Commission.

Looking back on her career as a swimmer, she feels that whether there were three or 10,000 spectators, Olympic Trials will always be the same, a combination of pressure and intensity when a "lifetime for one moment" culminates, and to her, her Olympic experience was nothing short of "magical."

Her training days at Santa Clara under George Haines still hold fond memories in her heart as well.

"George's secret was he treated everyone as an individual," she said. "We all thought we were his favorites (individually) when we all were." She remembers during the summer there would be team brunches at a teammate's house after Saturday morning workouts and world records being broken in practice. To this day, she respects everyone in the pool because she knows what it takes.

BY THE NUMBERS:

2 gold medals

18 world records and world bests

37 national titles

17 Olympics covered

1 America's Outstanding Woman Athlete

1 Outstanding Female Swimmer

1 Gracie Allen Award

Q: What was the name of the Olympic Special de Varona co-produced?

A: "Keepers of the Flame"