

Check out the May issue of Swimming World Magazine to read, "A True Pioneer," by Linda Hass.

The late Rose Mary Dawson was a visionary swim coach who died in 2003. The following article focuses on Mrs. Dawson's pioneering efforts for women in particular, and it uses the occasion of her club's upcoming 50th anniversary as the springboard for the story.

The Ann Arbor Swim Club officially turns 50 years old in December 2005. The club plans to celebrate this milestone, and its founder, with a huge campaign that involves banquets, an e-magazine, and the publication of a paperback memorial booklet. Their publicity campaign will begin this August in anticipation of the December anniversary.

As a brief background, Mrs. Dawson founded the Ann Arbor Swim Club in 1956 with only 60 girls. Little did she know that her club would span decades and produce Olympians.



ROSE MARY DAWSON PROFILE

By Linda Hass

When Rose Mary Dawson started a competitive swim club for girls in Ann Arbor, Mich., she had no idea that the fruit of her labor would span decades, produce Olympic caliber athletes and blaze a trail for women. But it did.

"Rose Mary was a true pioneer. She had the tenacity to create opportunities for women in a sport dominated by men," said Bob Dunkel, executive director of the International Swimming Hall of Fame.

Liz Graziano, president of the Ann Arbor Swim Club, agreed. "Female swimmers of today owe her a debt of gratitude for opening doors and eliminating obstacles so they can pursue their dreams." The club will celebrate its 50th anniversary, and Dawson, in 2006, Graziano added.

Dawson, who helped organize the first women's intercollegiate competitive swimming and diving championship in the nation, died in 2003 at the age of 81. But her legacy lives on in the lives of those she touched.

"Rose Mary was a hard task master, but she also gave us a lot of love. It was a potent combination for producing athletes," recalled Marty Sinn Catalano, Bloomfield, Mich., who swam with the club in the 1950s and early 1960s. That period was a "tough time" for women, added Catalano, who was featured in the March 6, 1964 issue of Life magazine for her marathon swimming victories.

"High schools and colleges only had swim teams for men. That's just the way it was. I considered my competitive club swimming cutting edge at the time," she said.

But the tide was about to turn. Dawson, the daughter of the famous University of Michigan swim coach Matt Mann, dove into her coaching responsibilities with gusto. Her efforts paid off when her young club went on to win six consecutive Michigan State Championships and placed second in the AAU National Championships.

After the girls swim season ended, Dawson filled the void by offering water polo training for women, coordinating polo tournaments and ultimately reviving women's AAU Water Polo. The contribution is especially significant since the sport had been dormant for 30 years, said Eric Velazquez, spokesperson for USA Water Polo and editor of USA Water Polo the Magazine.

"Women's water polo is indebted to Rose Mary and the women who followed her," Velazquez said. "To captain the revival of a dormant sport takes great courage and passion. Rose Mary was suffering from a shortage of neither. I wish more people knew about her."

Dawson's golden touch also prevailed in water polo, propelling her team to win the first three National Championships. One of her goalies, Micki King, went on to win an Olympic gold medal in diving and another goalie, Marcia Jones Smoke, won a bronze Olympic medal in kayaking.

Inspired by the young club's promise, Dawson established a women's competitive swimming program at the University of Michigan in 1958. It was a move that tested her mettle. "People didn't think women should swim competitively in those days, so they gave Rose Mary the title 'Advisor to the Ladies Speed Swim Club' rather than the

title of 'coach,'" said her husband, Buck Dawson, of Ft. Lauderdale. He is the founding director of the International Swimming Hall of Fame.

Jim Richardson, current head coach of women's swimming at U of M, praised Rose Mary Dawson's efforts and said times were indeed tough for female athletes and coaches in the early days of the sport. "There was a lot of tradition built into male sports, plus most college administrators at the time were male. For these reasons and more, it was difficult for people to understand and identify with this new thing called women's sports," he said.

But change was only a matter of time. All it took was the right person to jumpstart the process. Rose Mary Dawson was equal to the task. "With the national emphasis now placed on physical fitness, we cannot go on blindly believing that college girls do not want to compete. The competitive nature of the American way of life and the American girl make it inevitable that extramural sports for high school and college girls must come," she wrote in the January 1963 issue of *Swimming World*.

Her crusade reached a climax when she helped establish the first women's National Collegiate Swimming and Diving Championships, which were held at Michigan State University, East Lansing in December 1962. "There were a few meets for women on the college level before this championship, but they were more like club swimming than intercollegiate swimming," said Dunkel.

Dawson's team set the standard by winning the championships for three successive years, said Buck Dawson. It was the kind of success that lent momentum to the eventual passage of Title IX, he added, referring to the 1972 law that bans sex discrimination in schools.

In 1963, Rose Mary Dawson was offered the women's swimming coach position at the University of Western Ontario, Canada. She eagerly accepted, since it was closer to the girls swimming, sports and wilderness camp that she helped to run in Ontario. For more than 55 summers, Dawson worked as director of Camp Ak-O-Mak, the world's first competitive swim camp founded by her father in 1928. The camp has produced over 40 Olympians and 350 All-Americans, all coached by Dawson or her father, said Buck Dawson.

A few years after coaching in Canada, Dawson and her husband retired in Ft. Lauderdale, but her pioneering spirit never took a rest. While there, the couple worked to establish the International Swimming Hall of Fame, which includes a museum, library, and archives, among offerings. "Rose Mary did a lot of valuable work behind the scenes to get the organization up and running," said Dunkel.

She also served as stroke coach of the Pine Crest School Swim Team, Ft. Lauderdale; and she was named Florida Coach of the Year in 1976. "Stroke perfection was extremely important to mom, and her drills emphasized that," said her daughter, Marilyn Corson Whitney, Trufant, Mich. Whitney competed in two Olympics and was on the bronze medal winning 4x100 freestyle relay team for Canada.

Whitney attributes much of her athletic success to her mother. "Mom knew how to bring out the best in her swimmers at a time when women were discouraged from competing in anything but cheerleading. She was a dedicated visionary," she said.

U of M's Richardson agrees. "Rose Mary and her father were exceptional, and when you have exceptional people who see things beyond themselves, the legend that follows speaks to the quality of that person," he said.

Dawson, known for her engaging smile and tough style, is perhaps best remembered as a trail blazer. "She never thought about how posterity would view her efforts to help women athletes, or what lasting impact the first National Collegiate Swimming and Diving Championship would have," said Janice Weber of Ann Arbor. Weber, an AAU national medalist, swam with the Ann Arbor Swim Club in the 1950s and 1960s.

"All Rose Mary knew was that there was a need for this kind of a breakthrough, and she was willing to step forward to make it happen," said Webber. "It's only now, in retrospect, that we can see the tremendous impact she had."

FACTOID

For more information on Rose Mary Dawson's contributions to the sports of swimming and water polo, check out these websites:

- * www.ishof.org/hofheadlinessummer2003.pdf
- * www.holidaycup.us/history_of_womens_water_polo.htm
- * www.rewp.net/womenhistory.html
- * www.hickoksports.com/history/waterpolo.shtml
- * www.swimmingcoach.org/articles/9805/9805_1.htm

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON PEOPLE AND MILESTONES MENTIONED IN THIS FEATURE

1. Bob Dunkel, executive director, International Swimming Hall of Fame:
2. Eric Velazquez, spokesperson for USA Water Polo
3. Micki King won the gold medal in diving at the 1972 Olympics
4. Marcia Jones Smoke won the bronze medal in kayaking at the 1964 Olympics

5. Buck Dawson, founding director of the International Swimming Hall of Fame

6. The magazine in which Rose Mary Dawson is quoted is: Junior Swimmer and Swimming World (combined for competitive swimmers and divers), January 1963, Vol. 4, No. 1.

7. Camp Ak-O-Mak:
www.campakomak.com/newsitem.asp?id=11.

8. Marilyn Corson Whitney, who is studying for her Ph.D. in interior design at Virginia Tech University, won a bronze medal for Canada in 1968.

