



Georgia Masters Newsletter

Swimming in Georgia

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Swimmer Profile – Nei-Kuan Chia

By Elaine Krugman



Best 100 freestyler in Florida as a high school senior. Two-time all-ACC (Atlantic Coast Conference) at Florida State. 5-Time Taiwanese National Champion. 1996 and 2000 Olympian for Taiwan. Top 100 FINA World Ranked butterflyer (2000-2003). USMS Record Holder in the 50 Meter Butterfly (2000). Seven USMS All-American Honors. 114 Individual and two relay USMS Top Ten Achievements. Eight FINA

Masters Top 10 Rankings. Three gold, one silver, and two bronze medals at the 2018 Asian Swimming Championships.

Nei-Kuan Chia accomplished all of that—and more—after nearly drowning at a water theme park at the age of eleven because he didn't know how to swim. The very next day, his mother signed Nei-Kuan up for a swim team, even though he had a fear of the water.

At his first swim practice, Nei-Kuan stood nervously at the edge of the dive well while watching kids half his age swim effortlessly back and forth. He wouldn't get in the water, so the swim coach shoved him from behind into the pool. Nei-Kuan sank to the bottom and pushed

off to get back to the surface. From there, he figured out on his own how to get to the side of the pool. The rest, as they say, is history.

By the end of summer, Nei-Kuan competed in his first swim meet at a local YMCA invitational. He made the top six in his age group and proudly won a ribbon—a memento he still keeps to this day.

As a senior in high school, Nei-Kuan returned to his native country of Taiwan, where he lived until age five, to compete in their national championships. He made the national team and competed in the 1996 and 2000 Olympics, and then hoped to return for the 2004 Olympics. Unfortunately, the hard-working swimmer injured his shoulder and was forced to retire from the sport.

It wasn't until eight years later (and sixty pounds heavier) that Nei-Kuan returned to the pool. As he explained, "In 2012 I went through a painful divorce, and through that process I became really depressed and went to the doctor to get checked out. They did all the blood work and a general physical. [My doctor] said I was on the verge of having massive heart disease, kidney problems, and potential other problems, because I was so

unhealthy.” Nei-Kuan’s resting heart rate was in the 90’s, and his blood pressure and cholesterol levels were extremely high due to his poor diet and lack of exercise.

“My doctor prescribed \$500 worth of medications that day and said I had to get on those medications ASAP. I had gone to medical school after Florida State, and I knew that starting on medication meant a lifetime of medication,” Nei-Kuan said. Not wanting to spend the rest of his life taking massive amounts of drugs, he asked his doctor if there was anything else he could do. She told Nei-Kuan he would have to change his lifestyle habits quickly, otherwise it was “life or death.”

Hearing that frightening diagnosis motivated Nei-Kuan to return to the exercise he knew best: swimming. After a few weeks of daily swim workouts, the rededicated swimmer lost twenty pounds. In nine months, he lost a total of forty-five pounds.

By 2013, just swimming laps became boring for this former competitor, so he took the recommendation of a friend to rejoin USMS and compete in swim meets. The Marist SCY Developmental Swim Meet was his first one, and he described being very nervous, just as he had been for the Olympics. Nei-Kuan didn’t sleep well, and he was unable to eat breakfast. Getting up on the blocks for his first race, he was jittery and unsure of himself. All of that disappeared, however, when Nei-Kuan clocked a blazing 22.89, which would have ranked him 27th of 387 swimmers in his 35-39 age group. I watched that race, and I distinctly remembered turning to my husband, Bruce, and saying, “Wow! Did you SEE that guy?!”

As the speedster described it, “I was pleasantly surprised how fast I was, so that kind of got the ball rolling. I decided to keep doing it after that. Once you start, the passion and desire come back, and I realized that swimming has been and will always be a part of who I am... Swimming is one of the main things that saved my life.”

Reflecting back, Nei-Kuan believes if it hadn’t been for the events of his life that led up to his serious health issues, he would have never returned to swimming. “What I found out about myself through all the pain and suffering... There’s an appreciation for life and an appreciation for swimming that I never had. Before, the first time around, swimming was a business.”

Having a scholarship to Florida State, Nei-Kuan was under pressure to live up to the expectations and demands that went along with that scholarship. After college, he was a sponsored swimmer, and swimming at that level gave him the opportunity to perform on the international stage. These were all things that Nei-Kuan looks back and realizes he viewed from a selfish perspective. It was all about winning and what he could gain from that.

Now, the appreciative swimmer says, “Swimming is so much different for me. Swimming is something that is almost an escape from reality, where you’re not burdened with the problems of the world. You can go somewhere that’s a sanctuary; it’s just you, the water, and your ability to have control. I have a new appreciation for swimming that I never had before.”

The swimming paid off for Nei-Kuan’s physical health, too. In 2016, his blood work and other health markers were back to 100%, and he received a perfect score at his company’s annual physical. “That felt like I had just won the lottery! More than anything else I had ever done in my life, that was the one moment where I really truly felt like I did something. If I had to say what one of my greatest achievements was, that was it. It was a long process; sixty pounds in total (lost). I ended up changing what I ate, cutting out a lot of stuff I shouldn’t have been eating anyway. It was holistic. More than exercising, it was nutrition and stress management. It gave me my life back.”

Nei-Kuan continued to compete, progressing from a developmental meet to a local Atlanta meet, and then on to USMS Nationals and the 2014 FINA World Masters Championships, in Montreal. “I didn’t have goals at first. As I kept swimming, I kept testing myself at a different level.” It took about one year to get comfortable with racing again.

It appears that this Masters swimmer has been quite comfortable with racing over these past four years, because his race times consistently place him in the Top Ten for all of his events. This past short course meters season, Nei-Kuan was the fastest in the country in the 100-meter butterfly; and, finished top 3 in the 50-meter free, 50-meter fly, 100-meter backstroke, and 200-meter backstroke.

To get back to that high achievement level, the sprinter has worked hard in the pool, swimming doubles six days per week during alternate weeks when his seven-year-old son is not staying with him. Otherwise, he swims one workout per day, six days per week.

Nei-Kuan concentrates on quality over quantity, though, training smart rather than swimming massive amounts of yards. In addition, he has adapted the Japanese way of training into his own routine based on advice from his Japanese swimming friends. He focuses on flexibility and doing a lot of stretching, saying that as we age, it's not about pure strength. Everything centers around powerful, efficient movement and maximizing every stroke. The Japanese swimmers feel that maintaining strength, flexibility and balance should be the goal as you age, with flexibility being most critical.

Since September, Nei-Kuan has been doing a customized elite athlete functional training program that Exos/Bridge Athletic designed specifically for his swimming events. The program helps him decrease injury risk in addition to building strength and power. He also is on a special nutrition program recommended by the Exos program.

This summer, the 41-year-old will put his Exos and Bridge Athletic training program to the test when he competes at the FINA World Masters Championships in Gwangju, South Korea. Winning his races won't be his primary focus, however.

"I honestly try not to focus on results anymore. I was so results-driven and results-oriented my first time around that my happiness totally circulated on how I performed. I promised myself this time around that I wanted a purpose. How I live my life now is really about finding what my purpose is and doing things based on that. My purpose now that I swim is that I wanted to give my son an opportunity to see his dad swim. Hopefully, I'm still at a level where it means something. When I grew up, my dad worked out of town and was only home on weekends, and he worked so hard that he didn't have time for other things. I really don't have a lot of defining memories of my dad doing things he loved. So, I wanted to give my son something to always remember his dad by. Swimming for me is such a big part of my life and helps define who I am, and I always want my son to remember that long after I'm gone," Nei-Kuan explained.

"My other purpose is that swimming now—I feel it's an opportunity to give back in a sport that has given me so much. What the sport has given me, I feel like I owe it to the sport to give something back. I'm involved with Swim Across America and helping through that. I help other swimmers and triathletes by coaching for free—especially kids."

"If I had continued on the track I was on before, I would probably not be here right now. I never appreciated it the first time. Everything was so, 'I need to win, I need to win,' all the time... It's a little bit cliché, and I heard this a few years ago, but it's really about the process and the journey that we should be relishing and not just the results; because, the results we can't control. We can only control every day what we put in. It's the daily life lesson, the daily workouts, and the ability to show up sometimes; that's what we have to relish. That's what we learn from. It's hard sometimes not to be results oriented, but really, it's about that process and the journey."

Nei-Kuan's journey since returning to the pool has been a successful, fulfilling, and memorable one in so many ways. When asked about his favorite memories, he replied, "My favorite memory was this past summer. I got a chance to go to Japan (for the Asian Swimming Championships), and that was always on my bucket list. I got to meet and spend a lot of time with a group of people who were really fun. Two weeks being around the same group of people—that was a special memory. I could say that about a lot of things, but that was a unique one, just because of where I got to go and all the people I got to meet who have now become really good friends.

The other really fun memory I have was down in Florida in St. Petersburg for a swim meet. There was this awful weather, and they actually ended up canceling part of the meet. We sat there for hours, just hanging and spending time with folks just talking. I listened to a man who was in his mid-90's sharing stories about the days of going to war and coming back and learning how to swim. All those memories that he shared, and his life experiences; those are the cherished memories of Masters swimming. The winning is fun and good, but life is about the people you meet and relationships you develop; and, Masters Swimming uniquely gives you that opportunity."

Summing up his feelings about swimming, Nei-Kuan ended our interview with this final thought: "Do something you love that gives you a purpose. Life without purpose is not really a life, and swimming for me, in general, is a life-saver."