



Georgia Masters Newsletter

Swimming in Georgia

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Swimmer Profile – Sally Newell

By Elaine Krugman



Thirteen individual All-American Honors, 479 individual Top Ten swims, Ten All-American Relay Honors, and 97 Relay Top Ten swims. Those numbers speak for themselves. Sally Newell has achieved all of these in the past 26 years!

Oh, and by the way, did I mention Sally's 86 North Carolina and 27 Georgia State Records? Ask her about any of these numbers, though, and she wouldn't have a clue. I had to dig them up myself, because Sally is too humble to keep track. She did, however, admit to being honored six times with the "Outstanding Female

Swimmer of the Year" award by North Carolina Masters Swimming. In addition, she was proud to tell me she was honored by the American Cancer Society with a plaque in 1995, "For many years of outstanding contributions to the Swim for Cancer program." Her contributions included raising \$4500 – \$5,000 each of the ten years she swam 5-6 miles for the annual fundraiser.

There is only one swim statistic number this accomplished swimmer knows for sure: 1. It represents the World Record she earned at the age of 59, while swimming the breaststroke leg on a 200 short course meters relay (240-279 age group), along with three of her North Carolina Masters teammates. The year was 1996, just four years after Sally took up swimming and joined Masters; and, eight years after surviving breast cancer. To this day, that World Record swim, (a blazing 43.66 for 50 meters of breaststroke!), was the highlight of her Masters Swimming career.

Sally doesn't take personal credit, though. Instead, she gives it all to her relay teammates: Jeannie Mitchell (backstroke), John Korthecher (butterfly), and the late Dick Webber (freestyle). That's just how Sally rolls. About her own swimming, she says quite modestly, "I don't see myself as being that good... I just don't think about being that good, even if I am first in the nation in an event."

Sally is good, though, and she got that way by attending Terry Laughlin's Total Immersion Swim Camp to learn proper stroke technique for the four strokes. She did this shortly after starting to swim again, when Sally joined her daughter's previous swim partner, Nancy Clark, for regular swim workouts. Since her only other previous coached swimming was with a club during her childhood summers, Sally wanted to make sure to learn the strokes correctly.

Not long after, Nancy asked her new swim partner to join her for a competition. “She was going to go to the Charlotte meet, and she suggested that I go. Oh my gosh, was I nervous! I swam breaststroke, and it was funny. I have a male friend who said, ‘You should not be allowed to swim breaststroke because you only have one breast!’ (referring to her mastectomy following breast cancer). Breaststroke became my favorite event—the 50 breaststroke,” Sally laughed.

At the time, Sally and her husband lived in Greensboro, North Carolina. When her husband became seriously ill with cancer, they decided to move to Atlanta to be closer to their daughter as well as excellent medical care.

Sally started swimming at the Dynamo pool following the move; however, until this past September, she only swam there in the summer during long course season, opting to swim at the YMCA during the winter months. “My husband died three years ago, and I continued swimming at the Y, but I just wasn’t into competing. Just a year ago, I decided I would compete again... I have four children, and they were very happy that I went back to competing. My husband wasn’t an athletic man, but he really put me on a pedestal when I would go to these swim meets. He was very proud of me.”

This past short course season, she decided to swim exclusively at Dynamo, under the coaching of Maria Thrash. “This is the first time I have stayed with it year-round. I need the discipline; I just wouldn’t be doing it on my own. [Maria’s] really good for me, and I said to her once when I got out of practice, ‘I wouldn’t have done that if you weren’t here.’ She said, ‘That’s right; that’s why you swim on a team.’ I am really benefiting from it. I really look forward to going swimming now, because I have a coach on deck. And, I think she appreciates my success. This past year in short course, I have had a fabulous year, and I owe it to Maria Thrash. I really do.”

Sally continued, “I don’t think at my age you’re going to get faster. But I tell you what. since I started swimming at Dynamo with Maria Thrash as my swim coach, every once in a while, she’ll say something to me and I’ll think to myself, ‘That’s what I am paying for. Just these little suggestions on her part that I never would have thought of swimming on my own. This past year, it has been amazing for me. My times have really been good, and I owe it to her—and, I got a new suit, too.” Sally swims at Dynamo on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, during lunch-time and averages 2,500 yards per workout. She especially enjoys the creative sets that Maria assigns. “You just don’t think of those things on your own, but of course, I’m finding that it’s up to you to make those sets work. She doesn’t know if you’re making your intervals; and, I really don’t pay attention to the intervals, because I think an eighty-year-old can write her own rules!” Sally added with her usual easy laugh.

Although Sally’s best stroke is breaststroke, she said, “I have started swimming distance. I am finding that I don’t do very well in the 50 free, but this last summer, I was first in the 400 free. Distance doesn’t intimidate me anymore. I used to do the 200IM and 100 IM, but I’m having issues with a shoulder. I also do well in the 200 back. I do well in the 200, because most of my competition is starting to get tired, and I’m not getting tired. It’s easy for me to speed it up for the last 50.”

Now that Sally is back to competing again, you will find her thoroughly enjoying racing at her favorite venues: Georgia Tech, UGA, Auburn, Columbia (South Carolina), and at Dynamo, of course! Nationals may be in her future, again, too. “I like going to Nationals and seeing friends from across the country that I don’t normally don’t get to see. But, I get nervous leading up to the event. I’ll get nervous leading up to the one-day meet at UGA, and I have no competition in my age group. But, you’re racing the clock,” she explained. “I enjoy being part of Masters, and I’m glad that I returned to it. I think that’s it’s really good for your body, and I just can’t imagine my life without

swimming. I really do love to swim,” she said, adding about competition, “If I wasn’t good, I don’t think I would want to do it. I can’t see going to a swim meet and not having some success. It would be like going to a tennis match and losing all the time. I just don’t know what keeps some people going. I don’t know why I’m so good. Maybe I’m just a natural, I don’t know.”

If Sally is a natural, she is also either a natural (very!) cold water swimmer—or, just crazy! As she explained, “I have a daughter who lives in Ireland, and this will be the third year I go over and swim the Liffey River that runs through the middle of Dublin. (In 2016), I was the oldest participant.” Why? The water is 39 degrees, wetsuits are not allowed, and the race is 2,200 meters down the river! Brrr!

“I will push off from the steps, and I have to swim at least ten strokes fast before I can come up and get a breath,” she explained about dealing with the shock. “Men and women swim separately; the men go first. Before each group swims, they’ll sing this song, ‘Molly Malone.’

“I went over one time to watch Amy do it, and then I said I’m going to do it next year. I’ve done it twice, and I’m going to go back this year and do it. It’s fun!”

To read more about Sally’s participation in the race, The Atlanta Journal Constitution featured her in a story: <https://www.ajc.com/news/localeducation/sunday-conversation-with-sallynewell/0DftBC9QQZI2tiXrqVONGL/>

“People say to me, ‘I want to be like you when I grow up!’” Sally said when I conveyed that exact sentiment at the end of our interview. Naturally, I wanted to know what her secrets to success were. Sally’s reply? “You know Elaine, I don’t have any secrets. Just get out there and do it!” Sally, if anybody in Georgia is going to break Anne Dunivin’s 100-104 age group records, it will be you!