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A New Day Has Dawned

When an injury kept Dawn Musselman from competing in the 1932 Olympics, she lost her taste for swimming, but 46 years later she is setting records again

Dan Levin

They called her Babe. Her real name was Dawn, which came to mind that morning in 1932 when she lay soaked in perspiration at five o'clock, unable to sleep in the summer heat of New York City. Dawn Gilson of Seattle was 19 years old and she held five American swimming records and shared a world record and she was going to the 1932 Olympics in Los Angeles. But first there were the Olympic Trials in New York. So that morning she mopped her face, already pink from the sun of the day before, and watched the sky brighten. Later, when the stores opened, she decided to buy a hat. If she had not... but then there might be no story to tell.

She went to a tiny shop in Times Square and, while leaving, stumbled and twisted an ankle. It always had been weak, and now the doctor made it look like a gauze-wrapped cantaloupe. Despite the injury, the next week she gamely swam her heat of the 100-meter backstroke and finished a non-qualifying sixth. Two months earlier she had tied the world record. Eleanor Holm broke that record in the finals and went on to win the gold medal. After the trials, Babe boarded a train for Seattle, alone. Back at the Washington Athletic Club, her coach, she said, began ignoring her and after two more frustrating years, she walked out of a meet, in April 1934, weeping. Her bitterness ran deep—it was 41 years before she would find redress for it—and her life started downhill.

Dawn Gilson Musselman now lives in Puyallup, Wash. with her fourth husband, Bob, in the Twin Flags Mobile Home Court. From their living room window, on clear days, they can see Mount Rainier looming 60 miles away. But the backyard view is marred by a nearby elevated freeway. The whole scene—Mount Rainier, tantalizing but distant, the freeway and the sameness of the mobile homes—suggests that the people in the trailer park have had to forget a lot of their dreams.

"I was discouraged the way it ended," Musselman says. Now there is no bitterness, or none that shows, though sometimes she wonders aloud in what ways her life might have been different had she won an Olympic medal. But when a friend tells her, "Babe, you might have traveled, met famous people, married a maharajah," she grins and says, "Oh, golly, no."

The bad times are over now for Babe Musselman, and she rarely talks about them. But in the 40 years between 1934 and 1974 she underwent 10 serious operations: among them a cesarean birth that almost killed her, a hysterectomy, removal of a leg tumor and an intestinal obstruction, correction of an inner ear problem, repair of a ruptured biceps and a torn knee cartilage. Swimming had been her life, yet not once in all those years did she swim so much as a lap in earnest. She says, "Maybe I went to the beach a few times."

She had three husbands; two died and a third she separated from in 1970. Three years of divorce litigation left her emotionally spent. "I couldn't seem to straighten my mind out," she said. In 1974 she married Bob Musselman, a retired Army officer, and one day a year later he said to her, "Babe, maybe you should go back to competitive swimming." She was 62 at the time.

Babe Musselman thought about it for a while, then went to a 25-yard neighborhood pool and started swimming laps, 20 or so a day, two days a week for six weeks. On Jan. 11, 1976, she entered a Pacific Northwest Association Masters swimming meet, in the 60 to 64 age group.

In her first event, the 100-yard freestyle, she got water in an ear, started bumping into lane dividers and wound up walking. Her second race was the 50, and her 37.8 set a PNA age-group record. Three weeks later, in Portland, Ore., she established an American Masters record of 43.2

for the 50-yard backstroke, and she later broke it by one second. In May she went to her first national championship, in Mission Viejo, Calif., and set four American Masters records in five events: 33.42 in the 50-yard freestyle; 1:19.51 in the 100 freestyle; 1:31.08 in the 100 backstroke; and 3:30.79 in the 200 backstroke.

Those records were set in a 25-yard short-course pool. In August she went to the long-course, 50-meter nationals in St. Louis. She swam in five events and set five more American records, in the 50-, 100- and 200-meter freestyle, and in the 100- and 200-meter backstroke. The record for the 100-meter free had been 1:33.8. She swam it in 1:25.86.

Since then she has broken 11 of her own American records and now holds a total of 12, and although it is tempting to compare her feats with those of her youth, they are not truly comparable. Four of her old records came as a result of swimming on record-breaking relay teams. But in 1932 she did tie the world record of 1:20[3/5] in the 100-meter backstroke; her Masters record for the same distance, set last year, is 1:44.68.

Musselman works out at the Tacoma YMCA, where few know she is a Masters swimmer. One morning this spring a woman rushed to poolside, so excited that she almost fell in, and said, "You must have been a national champion. I've never seen such a beautiful swimmer." Musselman, whose favorite line about herself seems to be, "I never had a swelled head," climbed out of the pool and told the woman, "Yeah, I like to swim a little now and then."

A little is right. The word for her workouts is leisurely. She does three a week in the Y's 25-yard pool. With a Styrofoam float between her legs she does 10 laps freestyle and 10 backstroke. Then she holds a kickboard and does the breaststroke kick for 10 laps. Occasionally she swims 10 laps freestyle. That amounts, at most, to a half mile a day with her arms, less with her legs. "When I'm tired, I'm tired," says Musselman, "and I quit." Recently she has begun wondering if maybe that is why her old coach began ignoring her years ago. But a former Washington Athletic Club employee recalls, "She didn't have to work at it. She was a natural, with the most beautiful style, and she was fast."

"Yes, she is a natural," sighs Maxine Merlino, age 65, who holds 27 national records in the 65-69 age group. Merlino swims five times a week, a quarter mile of butterfly, a quarter of breaststroke, a quarter of backstroke and a quarter of freestyle without stopping. She formerly held 17 records in the 60-64 bracket, but Musselman, who turns 65 in June, now has all but five of those, and Merlino freely admits that her 65-69 records will be short-lived, even if she begins working out every day.

At a recent PNA short course meet, in Sumner, Wash., Musselman arrived wearing a T shirt that read, OLD AGE AND TREACHERY WILL TRIUMPH OVER YOUTH AND SKILL. She took it off and won all five of her races.

Though she did not know it, a young YMCA coach was analyzing Babe's technique. He said she swam the "old style,"—she did not bend her elbows enough, and as a result she was getting very little help from the muscles in her forearms. "A few small changes," he told her afterwards, "and you'll have even better times." Musselman said she would try to get over to see him, but she did not seem enthusiastic. "How many more races can I win?" she said.

The Musselman's mobile home is much larger than most of those around it, so much so that it seems immovable. Out back is a small greenhouse, where Babe spends an hour or so every day in the winter, working in her garden; she spends more time there in the warm months. She belongs to a women's bowling league, and likes to make necklaces and little shelf decorations from pieces of rock, bone, driftwood and shell she finds on the beaches. When company comes, she plays the electric organ in her plant-bedecked living room, and sooner or later the scrapbooks come out, the early ones, full of pictures of a grinning, frizzy-haired blonde in a bathing suit. In the new scrapbooks, she has a slightly wrinkled face and about 15 additional pounds around the hips, but the grin is the same as it was in 1930, open and infectious. There are no scrapbooks, though, for the years in between. The only good memories from that time are of two daughters,

Carole, now 41 and the mother of five, and Louise, 37 and the mother of three. Babe Musselman's expression was different then. There were fewer grins. For many reasons.

"Shall we tell him?" Babe Musselman asked her husband one day recently. Bob looked at her and weighed the question, then said, "Yes, it's about time. What difference can it make now?" She hesitated, then began. "In 1932, after I'd been home from the Olympic Trials for three or four days, I drove to Los Angeles with a couple of friends and got a room across from the Olympics swimming area. There was a wholesale bootlegger on the floor, and down the hall were three fellows from West Virginia with two kegs of corn whiskey. I'd been training for many months, having to be in bed by nine every night, and now we were going out with these guys from West Virginia and having a ball.

Lots of other guys were after us, too, and then one afternoon I got a phone call. It was a woman from the U.S. Olympic Committee in New York City. She said that one of our girl swimmers had appendicitis and that she had the authority to select a swimmer to take her place and had thought of me. 'I knew you'd be thrilled,' she said, 'and I wanted to get to you right away.' I didn't say anything for a long time, and then I said, 'No, I'm sorry, I'm having too much fun, doing things I haven't been able to do in a long time.' I was a slave to swimming as a girl.

"I've never told this to anyone but Bob, and I've never forgiven myself; to this day it is the one decision in my life I would most like to make over. What a shame! My mother sacrificed so many things to help me..."