

East Brunswick man, 64, keeps fit as he swims toward success

BY GENE RACZ • STAFF WRITER • MARCH 10, 2009

EAST BRUNSWICK — The lithe, lean frame of Jim Dragon cut a swift path down the lane at Middlesex County College's swimming pool.

At 6-foot-2, 160 pounds, there's not an ounce of fat on his body.

At 64, there are no signs of slowing down for the East Brunswick resident who was ranked No. 1 in the world in 2007 in his age group in the 50 meter butterfly.

The rankings are provided by FINA, the world governing body of swimming which holds tournaments for swimmers representing about 130 countries. Dragon participates in FINA's "Masters" divisions which oversees groups like United States Masters Swimming which provide organized workouts, competitions, clinics and workshops for adults ages 18 and over.

An investment consultant by trade, Dragon also worked for seven years in the physics department at the University of Minnesota as one of his first jobs out of college. Physicists know all about finding paths least resistance, and Dragon would tell you that the concept applies to the butterfly event — a highly-technical stroke which he's been able to improve with age.

"Swimming is often thought of like running, as being primarily an endurance sport," Dragon said. "But in reality, it's much closer to golf — it's really a skill sport. The primary skill in swimming is reducing resistance. It's heavily about technique and if you practice it, then you build your endurance and strength.

"You want to glide right over the top of the water like a canoe. That's the ideal."

Dragon grew up in a suburb of Minneapolis and started competitive swimming at age 12. He swam in high school where he was state champion in 200 freestyle and the 200 freestyle relay. He swam throughout college as captain of the University of Minnesota (Class of '66).

"I was a solid Big 10 swimmer, scored points every year I competed in the Big 10," Dragon said. "But I was not a force on the national scene at all."

Some 10 years after moving from Minnesota to New Jersey with his wife, Andrea, Dragon began swimming in the U.S Masters program. Although he was then in his early 40s, his lifelong love affair with the sport was still going strong.

"It feels great to be in the water," he said. "It's a very good form of fitness, it's very easy on the joints. Unlike practically everything else, most other activities, it's pretty hard to injure yourself swimming.

"And, a lot of people who get injured, they get sent into the pool as part of rehab."

Dragon's modest training regimen consists of two morning swims per week with weightlifting sessions about three times a week. The pool at Middlesex County College in Edison is open to the public through nominal drop-in fees. While Dragon will tell you that he is not anywhere near as fast as he was in college, he logged a world's best time in FINA's 60-64 age bracket in 2007.

He covered the 50 meter short course in 29.04 seconds.

With his wife, a former Rutgers professor, now retired and his two sons now grown and long out of college, Dragon has nothing to prove by getting into the pool except staying fit and enjoying himself. He competes about 3-5 times a year and admits that the competitive juices still get flowing.

"There's about 10 of us in every Masters event who take it too seriously," Dragon joked. "There are 43,000 registered swimmers in U.S. Masters, about half of them compete. The vast majority are just having a good time.

"It's a way to keep at a fitness activity and add a social aspect to it."