

Age doesn't slow down champion swimmer, 64

E.B. man swims for health, and the love of competition

BY MARY ANNE ROSS Correspondent

Maryland may have Michael Phelps to brag about, but East Brunswick has Jim Dragon.

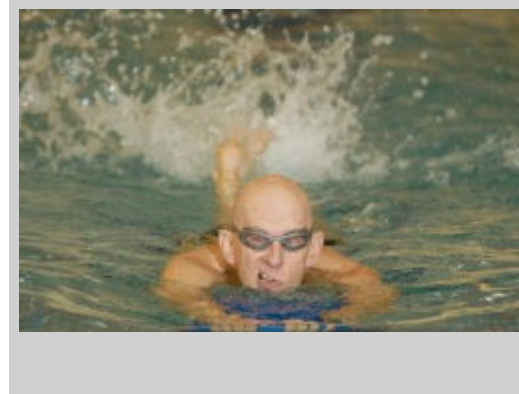


PHOTOS BY CHRIS KELLY Jim Dragon of East Brunswick goes through his regular swimming practice at the Middlesex County College swimming pool on a recent morning. Dragon has been ranked No. 1 or in the top 10 in many swimming categories for the 60-64 age group.

Dragon, 64, is ranked No. 1 in the world in 2007 for his age group in Masters swimming in the 50-meter butterfly stroke, where he competes in the 60- to 64-year-old category. This isn't the first time he has held the title.

Dragon was ranked No. 1 in 1996 for the freestyle relay; in 1999 for freestyle and the butterfly stroke; in 2000 for the breaststroke; and in 2005 for the butterfly stroke. Since 1986, he has consistently been in the top 10 swimmers worldwide with the exception of 1992. He also broke world records for speed in 1996 in freestyle, and in 1999 for the butterfly stroke.

The rankings for 2008 are not yet completed, but no one would be surprised if he is No. 1 again.



To earn the world title, he doesn't have to leave the state. Dragon belongs to an organization called the United States Masters Swimming (USMS), which provides organized competitions for adult swimmers. The group has 48,000 members. As long as a pool and competition is sanctioned by USMS, the time is considered official. The USMS is part of the Federation de Internationale Natation (FINA), which oversees all swimming competitions, including the Olympics.

Dragon learned to swim when he was 10, and started competing when he was 12. He continued in high school and in college at the University of Minnesota. In 1962 he became that state champion in the 200 freestyle and 200 freestyle relay.

After graduating with a master's degree in physics, he joined the Peace Corps. He taught at the University of the Philippines Agricultural School and coached its swim team on the side. He also got married.

"My wife and I met in graduate school. One day she sold her car, stored her things at my mother's and bought a ticket to Manila," he said.

When Dragon came back to the U.S., he transferred his competitive spirit to running. He ran in 10K marathons and half-marathons in New York and Philadelphia. He also earned an MBA in finance at the Wharton School of Business.

"Running started hurting my knees. My boys were the right age for swimming, so we started going to the YMCA in Parlin," he said. Soon, Dragon was competing again.

Dragon swims for an hour and 15 minutes twice a week and lifts weights three times a week.

"I like the competition. Instead of doing the same thing day after day, every few months I compete."

Dragon has passed along his love of swimming to his two sons, Charles and Tony. Charlie is a swimming coach in Charlotte, N.C., and Tony lives in Fairfax, Va., and competes in master swimming.

Jim's wife, Audrey, took up recreational swimming at age 40.

"She comes with me to the pool. She's always been so supportive, I couldn't have done what I have without her," he said.

Dragon has been swimming at Middlesex County College's physical education center since 1994 and is a big fan of the school.

"The water is warmer than some of the other university pools," he said. "My son went to Middlesex and it was great for him. From there he went onto NYU, graduated Phi Beta Kappa and magna cum laude and earned a master's degree in history," Dragon noted.

"The pool at Middlesex County College is open to residents for a minimal fee," said Thomas Peterson, director of marketing for the college. "It's really just one of the many services and programs we offer to the community."

Dragon will turn 65 this year and will move into the 65-69-age category. He has no concerns about age slowing him down in the sport.

"Swimming is great for people as they get older because it's easy on the joints," he said. He recalled going to a competition in Montreal and watching Thomas Lane, who was 100 at the time, competing.

"My brother saw Thomas when he was a 101," Dragon noted. "Swimmers' bodies stay in pretty good shape. Even if they are not thin, they are able to move more easily."

Aerobic activity such as swimming is not just good for the heart and lungs, it's good for the brain, according to geropsychologist Steven Sohnle, assistant professor of psychiatry at Robert Wood Johnson Medical School and clinician administrator of the Comprehensive Services on Aging Institute for Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders at University Behavioral HealthCare-UMDNJ.

"There is evidence that this type of exercise can actually preserve or enhance cognitive functioning and may even increase brain volume in older adults," Sohnle said.

The United States Master Swimmers, founded in 1970, is a nonprofit corporation that offers stroke and technique clinics, opportunities to compete, friendship and camaraderie. For information, visit www.usms.org.