

IT TAKES A VILLAGE TO BUILD A TEAM

Thriving on Community Spirit

by Amy Wu >>> Photos by Ted Washington and Scott Campbell

“It takes a village to raise a child.”—African proverb.

There are swim teams that are blessed with auspicious beginnings. Sometimes there is instant chemistry between swimmers and coaches, successful meets to showcase from the very start, and ample pool space.

And then there are teams like The Woodlands Masters.

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Founded in 1987 in The Woodlands, Texas—a burgeoning bedroom “village” just 25 miles north of downtown Houston—

The Woodlands Masters was painstakingly built through hard work, a love for swimming and a few stubborn streaks among its members.

The story behind the success of the team starts with Tom and Carolyn Boak. This husband and wife team swims, competes and coaches together. They spearhead their team along with five other coaches and seven other board members.

“It’s a whole lifestyle,” says

Tom Boak, 64, who credits swimming to changing his life. “I’m fit and healthy and high energy and positive. It became a whole lifestyle.” He found love in the swim lane too. The Boaks met each other at a USMS convention in the early 1980s.

Tom Boak builds homes for a living, but he builds teams too. Since 2005, his life outside of the office has been consumed by The Woodlands Masters, and by preparing the team to host the 2007 Long Course Championships. (See result highlights throughout this story.)

“It’s like having two fulltime jobs,” says Boak, just weeks before Nationals. “But I’m a multi-tasker, that’s my personality; I’m very good at keeping a bunch of balls up in the air at one time. I’m probably a workaholic, but it doesn’t feel that

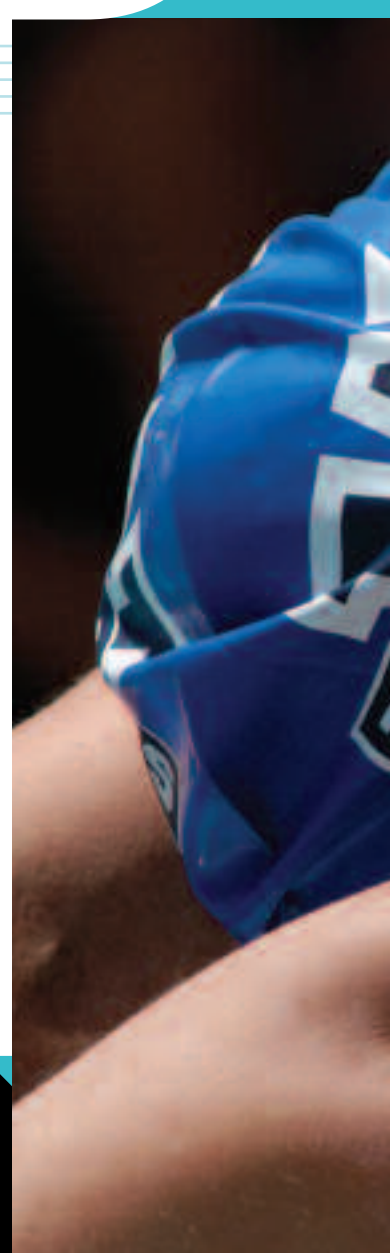
way because I love what I do—building homes and swimming.”

The Woodlands Masters Swim Team in many ways is Boak’s baby. In 1987, he and a handful of other local swimmers founded the team at The Woodlands Aquatic Center (WAC), the largest aquatics center in the community since it opened in 1975.

The team has come a long way from its rough and tumble start. As recently as 2001, it was struggling with a dwindling membership, conducting only four workouts a week, and maintaining a revolving door for coaches. Competition was a foreign term.

In 2002, however, the team undertook a dramatic makeover, when the Boaks and some other dedicated members decided once again to take

THE WOODLANDS MASTERS SWIM TEAM has a long history of hosting or co-hosting national competitions. This WMST swimmer (near right) puts her head down to prepare for a start at the Long Course Nationals in The Woodlands this past August. The group photo (top right) shows about 60 of the 126 WMST members who competed in the LC Nationals. This scene (bottom far right) is a bird’s eye view of the outdoor pool at The Woodlands Aquatics Center.





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U.S. Masters LCN Record Setters: Relay Teams

At press time, these records were still being verified. For updates and complete results visit www.usms.org. (N) = USMS national record, (W) = world record, (NW) = USMS national and world record

Mixed 200 Freestyle Relay

72-99 L Lyons, G Wright, D Jason, H Lee, FLAQ 1:47.25 (N)

Men 200 Freestyle Relay

72-99 P Bullock, H Lee, L Lyons, C Bullock, FLAQ . . . 1:40.10 (N)

Women 200 Medley Relay

72-99 R Vogel, V Nichols, L Baker, K Muller, WMST . . . 2:09.87 (N)

Mixed 200 Medley Relay

72-99 D Jason, G Wright, L Lyons, H Lee, FLAQ. 1:59.72 (N)



Photos: Ted Washington



things into their own hands.

They became their own coaches. They added noon and Sunday workouts, forged a closer relationship with the aquatics center's age group swim team (better known as TWST), and competition became a part of The Woodlands' fabric.

Since 2002, membership has climbed from some 30 to more than 250 today, and the number of weekly workouts has gone from a handful to over 14.

"A team needs a core of competitive swimmers to instill pride and to make it grow," says Scott Campbell, the team's unofficial photographer, who joined The Woodlands Masters in 1993. In 2006, more than 40 members competed in the FINA World Championships at Stanford University.

In August, the group saw a record 126 Woodland swimmers participating in the Long Course Nationals meet that drew 910 attendees.

At the same time the future

of The Woodlands Aquatic Center hangs in the air, with a real possibility that the facility may close in 2008. While the local school district is building a new natatorium and a committee is looking into pool alternatives, swimmers in The Woodlands Masters say that the center carries the team's history, and is where the team has survived and thrived.

The Woodlands

No one denies that aquatics are an important part of The Woodlands community.

Although there are YMCAs and community pools, The Woodlands Aquatics Center is the largest pool facility in the area. Families have moved to The Woodlands just so their children could swim with TWST, a nationally ranked age group team. The center's decorated history includes a world-class diving team where 2000 Olympic gold medalist Laura Wilkinson trains.

The Woodlands Masters

WMST's **CAROLYN BOAK** (bottom left) swam in her typical aggressive style, setting a new USMS national record in the 100 fly (60-64 age group). **TOM BOAK** (center left) congratulates **KELSEY MULLER, RANDI VOGEL, VALERIE NICHOLS** and **LESLEY BAKER** after the relay team's victory in the women's 200 medley (72-99 age group). Two WMST members (top left) start their race. **CAROLYN BOAK** (facing page, top) discussing relays with Candace Nelson-Wulff. **TOM BOAK** (facing page, bottom) prepares for a race.

team has evolved both in and out of the pool. Swimmers describe the team as a family.

The team's membership roster boasts 20 couples (some like Charlie and Nancy Schuber, who met in the facility's swim lanes), two sets of brothers and sisters, six sets of mothers and daughters, one set of in-laws, one father and son, one father and daughter, and three families (one family of three generations).

"We've added a lot of people. It was a small team until around eight years ago, and then it started growing and the team got really big," says Sandy Cattarin, 68, a longtime member. "Most of it is because most of us are so supportive of everyone else. I think there's a special bond among swimmers."

The Woodlands Aquatics Center and Tom Boak also share a special bond. Turn the clock back to 1973. Boak was

one of the contractors who worked on the blueprint to construct WAC. That year he met Dick Smith, the Olympic diving coach and a consultant for WAC, to brainstorm about ways to build the aquatics program there. They became fast friends, and at Smith's urging, Boak began swimming laps to get in shape in 1977.

Boak started to swim with the Lone Star Masters, the umbrella organization for swimmers in north Texas. A year later, he got hooked on swimming after taking home several ribbons from Short Course Nationals in San Antonio, Texas.

Boak also got hooked on USMS. In 1981, he attended his first USMS convention in Utah, and was appointed chairman of the Championship Committee. The next year he debuted as a meet director at the 1982 short course event hosted at the WAC. Meanwhile,



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he continued to swim with the age group team, or on his own.

In 1987, he and a group of other swimmers decided to start their own team.

The Lone Star Masters group was fine, but "people in The Woodlands thought it would be fun to have their own team made mostly of people whom they saw everyday," says Carolyn Boak. However, the team was plagued with chronic challenges, such as finding a coach and getting pool time.

"There was a long evolution. We went through a series of coaches who were not a good fit," Carolyn Boak recalls. At the same time "there is a natural conflict between age group and Masters because we all want space in the water, time in the water. We were dependent on the age group team to provide us with a coach, they would bring in a coach, some would be good and then they'd leave to go off and do other things. We had a series of coaches after 1988 who would sit on deck and give us a workout with no driving force, and no real enthusiasm.

"By 2000, we had a situation where our program deteriorated to thirty-something swimmers. We had four workouts a week, and it wasn't working out at all. That's when all of the big changes began to occur."

The Boaks have the "if you build it, they will come" attitude, and that's how they created the club. The couple and fellow members Cindy Andrews,



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Nancy Crecelius, Greg Tharp, Steve Breeding and Dick Bower all coached.

They added noon workouts and a Sunday workout, popular with working professionals and stay-at-home parents. They went after triathletes who were keen on sharpening their swimming technique. More recently, they added in practices for novice swimmers and Pilates sessions for strength conditioning.

"It was something that evolved and as it evolved it fostered tremendous growth," Tom Boak says.

The board created a punch-card system, and overhauled

U.S. Masters LC Nationals Record Setters: Women

At press time, these records were still being verified. For updates and complete results visit www.usms.org. (N) = USMS national record, (W) = world record, (NW) = USMS national and world record

50 Free		
45-49	Susan Walsh, 45, NCMS	27.44 (NW)
55-59	Laura Val, 56, TAM	28.84 (NW)
85-89	Margery Meyer, 85, TOC	48.76 (N)
100 Free		
45-49	Susan Walsh, 45, NCMS	1:00.16 (NW)
55-59	Laura Val, 56, TAM	1:02.02 (NW)
200 Free		
85-89	Margery Meyer, 85, TOC	3:56.11 (NW)
400 Free		
85-89	Margery Meyer, 85, TOC	8:14.05 (NW)
50 Back		
45-49	Susan Walsh, 45, NCMS	31.85 (NW)
55-59	Laura Val, 56, TAM	33.96 (NW)
100 Back		
45-49	Susan Walsh, 45, NCMS	1:09.66 (NW)
200 Back		
45-49	Susan Walsh, 45, NCMS	2:34.80 (NW)
50 Breast		
30-34	Katie McClelland, 31, DAMM	33.61 (NW)
65-69	Bonnie Pronk, 65, MSBC	42.75 (W)
100 Breast		
30-34	Katie McClelland, 31, DAMM	1:13.46 (NW)
65-69	Joann Leilich, 68, WMST	1:36.29 (N)
50 Fly		
45-49	Susan Walsh, 45, NCMS	29.84 (NW)
55-59	Laura Val, 56, TAM	31.83 (NW)
100 Fly		
55-59	Laura Val, 56, TAM	1:10.21 (NW)
60-64	Carolyn Boak, 62, WMST	1:24.97 (N)

Boak is a veteran when it comes to running meets, having run the 1982 Short Course Nationals, and 1987 and 1990 Long Course meets at The Woodlands. At the end of the 1990 meet Boak realized “we needed to build the organization if we were going to run Nationals again.”



WMST stalwarts **LEN** and **JANE GERLOWSKI** (bottom left). Jane, a cancer survivor who says her teammates were a valuable resource during her treatments, debuted as a competitor in the LC Nationals. WMST competes in the annual Dragon Boat race at The Woodlands (left center). In the bow is **NANCY CRECELIUS**, past president of WMST and one of the team coaches. Team members **MARGARET ALLEN, LEN GERLOWSKI, CHARLES HENDRICKS, JIM THAYER** and **NANCY POLICASTRO** (top left) replace the pool cover after a morning workout. More WMST competitors start a race (facing page, top). WMST teammate embraces **LAURA KOCH** (facing page, bottom) after her win in the 200 fly (30-34 age group).

Photos, Scott Campbell

the salary scale for coaches. The coaches began to encourage competition. **Tharp, (Tom)** Boak and **Becky Buckner** started traveling to meets within Texas. In 2003, the revamped team took a group of 15 swimmers to Short Course Nationals in Tempe, Ariz.

There was good chemistry among the coaches, Boak notes.

“I guess in another situation, you could have the same arrangement we have, but the personalities wouldn’t mesh and that could be very difficult. We all buy into the same program, and we seem to be successful in pulling it off,” he says.

The team’s leaders also practice what they preach. For example, when Boak isn’t swimming, he’s coaching. He gets plenty of help from his wife, a nationally ranked competitive swimmer. Swimmers on The Woodlands Masters Team have affectionately nicknamed Carolyn Boak “Sergeant” for her no-nonsense style.

“Tom and Carolyn are real upbeat. They were able to get some of these people to enter these meets,” says Gary Schatz, a five-time USMS All-American who swam for Auburn University. “They just worked up people’s interest, and made them realize it could be a fun experience for everybody.”

Being a member of The Woodlands Masters changed Kimberly Hager’s life in and outside the lane. Hager, a triathlete and Ironwoman, joined the team in 2001 because her daughter swims with TWST.

“I honestly don’t enjoy swimming by myself, because I don’t have a swimming background, but beyond mere fitness the organized workouts were helpful, and just having people to work out with,” Hager says.

Hager launched her competitive swim career with a 1,500-meter race a few years ago. “The team spirit was infectious. I was nervous as I’d be in any other race, and it’s really cool that the coaches

cheered you and took the splits,” says Hager, comparing the difference between swim meets and triathlons.

Members say the team has taught them that swimming is more than the sport; it’s about the people. Team members cooked meals for Jane Gerlowski, and her family when she was going through chemotherapy treatments for breast cancer.

Gerlowski, who recently completed six months of chemotherapy and two months of radiation, made her competition debut at Long Course. “The people are the team’s greatest asset,” she says.

Besides The Woodlands Masters Christmas party, other popular social events are the annual autumn Dragon Boat races, and 100-mile swim fundraisers where Masters partner up with TWST to swim through the night.

Building a Meet

The Woodlands Masters team has cultivated its relationship with Tim Bauer, the coach for the age group TWST. Boak teamed up with Bauer and co-meet director Eric Amundsen of TWST to host Long Course Nationals because TWST needed another fundraising event on its calendar.

Boak is a veteran when it comes to running meets, having run the 1982 Short Course Nationals, and 1987 and 1990 Long Course meets at The Woodlands. At the end of the 1990 meet Boak realized “we needed to build the organization if we were going to run Nationals again.”

But the TWST folks convinced him to change his mind. “I said we would be willing if the (age group) swim team would run the meet on deck. I wanted them (The Woodlands Masters) to experience the competition part of it, and not try to run the meet, too. This is a three-way partnership, and this one is no dif-



Ted Washington



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ferent. In this one we're using it as a fundraiser for their team," Boak says.

Under Boak's leadership, the group has mustered plenty of troops, including his co-director, Bauer, and dozens of volunteers. It has been a two-year process to get ready, not just logistically, but getting the team psyched up.

"It was an opportunity to really focus our team on a specific event, and use it as a tool to build enthusiasm, camaraderie. We'd be on the deck coaching, and ask 'Have you picked your events?' Boak says telling the swimmers, "If we're going to do this, we're going to win Nationals."

Just days before the meet, Boak, exhausted from swimming, house building, coaching and two years of preparation, said, "Am I worn out? Yes, but it's a blast."

Preparing for Long Course Nationals has changed the team. The lanes are packed on any given practice night, and there's growing team spirit. On the weekend before the event, the team held a goody bag stuffing party where at least 50 team members gathered to help. The event was also a reunion for The Woodlands community, where friendships have remained strong.

It gave Ellen Considine an opportunity to return to her home team to swim. Since moving to Washington, D.C. last summer, she's tested the

waters with a few of the teams, but has chosen to keep her membership at The Woodlands.

She waxes nostalgic about the quartet of women at The Woodlands whom she befriended and swam relays with. She misses the Boaks, whom she calls "parental units" for the team. She keeps the "seven favorite workouts" that Carolyn Boak sent her after her move.

"It was hard, I'm a good mover, but I came away from a team that I had helped really build up, and that was very hard," she says. "I swim by myself now. It's kind of sad but I miss the team."

After the pool is cleared and the cheers from the races die down, practices will resume, and there will be more meets to enter. The future of a facility is never certain and even the best natatoriums decline over time, but The Woodlands Masters swimmers would agree that the lives changed in the pool will always remain. "For Tom and me, we're both close to our regular families, but this is like a third family," Carolyn Boak says.

Tom Boak, the house builder, has learned a lot about team building.

"You have to have a driver. I'm a driver but I'm not the only one. Nancy is certainly a driver. Carolyn is a driver. A car doesn't move forward without someone at the wheel."

But his seriousness gives way when he thinks about what swimming has given him.

"It has to be fun. The one ingredient is time in the water. You have to feel good about yourself when you get out of the water." It is a reminder of why he laid his foundation here in the first place. <<<

U.S. Masters LC Nationals Record Setters: Men

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100 Free		
50-54.	Dan Stephenson, 50, MICH	55.11 (W)
200 Free		
50-54.	Dan Stephenson, 50, MICH	2:00.34 (NW)
400 Free		
18-24.	Hyun Seung Lee, 21, FLAQ	4:04.68 (N)
50-54.	Dan Stephenson, 50, MICH	4:16.61 (NW)
50 Back		
45-49.	Steve Wood, 47, RIDG	28.71 (NW)
60-64	Hugh Wilder, 60, PALM	31.54 (NW)
75-79.	Clarke Mitchell, 75, NCMS	38.08 (N)
100 Back		
18-24.	Leif Lyons, 21, FLAQ	58.92 (N)
60-64.	Hugh Wilder, 60, PALM	1:10.72 (NW)
75-79.	Clarke Mitchell, 75, NCMS	1:26.00 (NW)
200 Back		
65-69.	Richard Todd, 65, TCAM	2:51.11 (N)
50 Breast		
50-54.	Doug Malcolm, 50, GAJA	31.88 (NW)
200 Breast		
65-69.	Richard Todd, 65, TCAM	3:03.47 (N)
100 Fly		
18-24.	Hyun Seung Lee, 21, FLAQ	56.16 (N)
200 Fly		
18-24.	Hyun Seung Lee, 21, FLAQ	2:08.62 (N)
200 IM		
40-44.	Lorenzo Benucci, 40, AWJ	2:14.75 (NW)
400 IM		
75-79.	Graham Johnston, 76, MOST	7:13.14 (NW)