

# Championship swim team, average age 90-plus, still doing laps in pool

Swimming is no miracle cure, but "you feel a little younger"

By **Matt Soergel** Sat, Nov 8, 2014 @ 11:44 am



Bob Self/Staff Photographer

Photos by Bob.Self@jacksonville.com Four senior swimmers with competitive swimming histories dating back to their Duval County high school days still get together three times a week to swim at the indoor pool at Jacksonville Naval Air Station. The four (from left), Bill Adams, 88, John Corse, 90, Ed Graves, 91, and Tiger Holmes, 93, recently swam at a senior event where they set two world records and two national records while winning 14 total events.

The swimmers return to the water three days a week, the water that eases most of the indignities and aches of getting old, the water they believe has helped keep them alive so long.

They have not gone gently into fogeyhood.

That's clear as they traverse the pool at Jacksonville Naval Air Station, preparing

for whatever life still has ahead for them.

That could include even more swimming competitions, given that the last one went so smashingly. In October, they swam as a team at a competition in Orlando. They were in the 360-year-old age group — meaning that the ages of the four team members needed to add up to 360.

Do the math: That's an average of 90 years old.

They actually had a couple of years of wiggle room: Rogers "Tiger" Holmes is 93, Ed Graves is 91, John Corse is 90 and Bill Adams — they tease him as the baby of the group — is 88. That adds up to 362.

At the Rowdy Gaines Masters Classic in Orlando, they won 14 events while setting two world and two national records. Of course, that wasn't a crowded age group.

"We've outlasted a lot of the competition," Corse observed.

As young men, at college — Florida, Georgia, Georgia Tech, Duke and the Naval Academy — they each competed as swimmers, fast and sure in the water.

The passing decades, inevitably, have caught up with them, but that's little reason to stop: You feel good when you get through, they say. And while moving on land can sometimes be tough, while swimming you're practically weightless.

"You feel a little younger," Graves said.

Still it's no miracle cure: They each have a long list of ailments they've beaten, or at least beaten back. But Holmes, for one, figures it's a matter of life or death.

"My doc at Mayo said I'd have been dead 12 years ago if I hadn't gotten into this swimming," he said.

The four swimmers have some history together. Holmes, Corse and Graves grew up in Jacksonville and went to Robert E. Lee High. Adams was raised in Atlantic Beach, when its population numbered in the hundreds, and went to Fletcher High.

World War II interrupted them, but for the most part they stayed in the Jacksonville area, made livings and raised families. They crossed paths over the years, all of them.

In 2008, Holmes — a longtime swimming advocate and founder of lumber yards bearing his name — talked them into forming a team. Holmes Lumber Jax, they called themselves.

A pilot in the Pacific during the war, Holmes went on to be swimming captain at the University of Florida. He got in the pool again in 1982, as a way to recover from open heart surgery.

Since then he sponsored a team of more than 100 swimmers who went to a masters world championship in Australia. He led a program that taught 12,000 Jacksonville children to swim. He became a member of the International Swimming Hall of Fame. Even into his 80s, he finished up his practice with 100

yards of the butterfly stroke — a tall task for almost any swimmer.

Now in his 90s, he's a couple of decades into a mission to get a world-class aquatic center somewhere near downtown. And he's still trying to get the International Swimming Hall of Fame moved from Fort Lauderdale to his hometown. He remains frustrated, though, at what he says is a lack of interest from the people in Jacksonville who could make that happen.

Holmes says he knows none of that will happen in his lifetime. Still it's something that's needed, and he has a stubborn streak. So he's not stopping.

Not stopping is something the four Holmes Lumber Jax swimmers have in common.

Staying active — simply doing stuff — works wonders, Holmes says. He points at Corse, his longtime friend: "This guy's a great example. He looks like he's 62 years old. Well, he's 90 years old. He's our poster boy."

Corse is indeed youthful looking. He still practices some law. And he waterskied on his 90th birthday, just to show off, he said, for his grandchildren.

The swimmers figure they have to be that way or else they let the world pass them by and they have nothing to do, nothing to look forward to.

Sometimes though, people their age run out of other people to do things with.

They know they're lucky: There's nothing like the camaraderie they get from their thrice-weekly sessions, which almost invariably wrap up with lunch afterward at nearby spots.

"None of us would probably come if it wasn't for the others," Adams admitted.

That companionship — in the water, on dry land — is hard to beat, at any age.

"If I didn't have these guys to swim with," Corse said, "I'd find every excuse to quit."