

Obituary: Albert M. Wiggins Jr.

May 27, 1935 - June 1, 2011

Al Wiggins, a champion swimmer from Pittsburgh who set world records and appeared on the cover of Sports Illustrated in 1956, died on June 1, after suffering a tear in his aorta following his morning swim.

He was 76 and split his time between homes in Ligonier and Shadyside after retiring from a 40-year career as a respected tax and estate attorney.

Inducted into the International Swimming Hall of Fame in 1994, Mr. Wiggins was regarded as one of the nation's greatest collegiate swimmers throughout the 1950s. Mike Peppe, his coach at Ohio State University and the 1952 Olympic coach, called him the "greatest all-around swimmer I ever coached."

Mr. Wiggins was unusually versatile in the water, winning five Amateur Athletic Union national titles in three different strokes: butterfly, backstroke and freestyle. His last competitive meet was the AAU nationals in Philadelphia in 1957, where he won the butterfly.

A powerhouse at 6 feet, 4 inches and 205 pounds, Mr. Wiggins led Ohio State to eight national swimming championships and set three world records in the butterfly. In 1956 he was regarded as the world's best individually medley swimmer, but that wasn't a recognized event in the Olympic Games. At the 1956 Olympics in Melbourne, Australia, he finished seventh in the 100-meter backstroke.

"I put everything I had into swimming and was deeply satisfied with what I got out of it," he told Sports Illustrated in a 2002 retrospective. "Once you realize the reward of doing the best you can in sports, you develop an attitude that carries over to everything else you do."

That seemed to hold true for him. He was methodical and disciplined in all that he did, from his practice of law to his golf game.

"Detail-oriented? Precise? Rigid? It's in my nature," he told the magazine. "There is a right, and there is a wrong."

His wife, Hollis Wiggins, said a story from his youth illustrates his basic nature. When he was 13, he started swimming at Longue Vue Country Club and saw a trophy that was given at the end of the summer to the best swimmer that year.

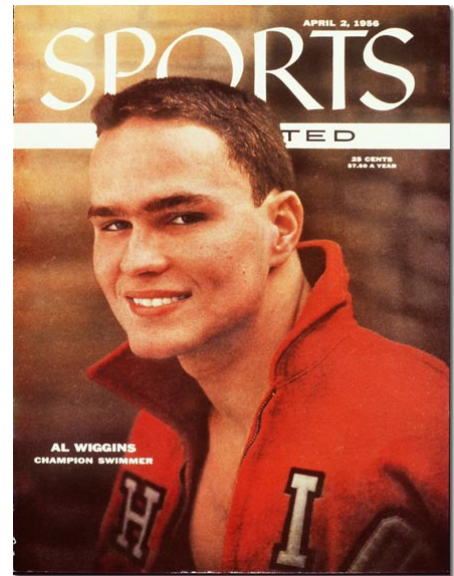
"He said next summer he was going to win that trophy," she said, and he did.

"He was very competitive. If he was going to do it, he was going to do it right."

The attitude stayed with him his entire life. He continued to swim regularly at his home into his 70s, but he would not enter competitive masters' events because he didn't want to compete halfway.

"I would need to do one year of serious weight training, and I would not be content unless I won my age group," he told the magazine. "I couldn't stand on a starting block and then finish last."

Born in 1935, the son of a Westinghouse Air Brake vice president, Mr. Wiggins attended Allderdice High School, where he chose swimming because he felt the glasses



he wore would hinder him in contact sports, according to a 1955 account in The Pittsburgh Press.

He set numerous swimming records while earning high honors. He also trained under local coaching legend Jacob "Jack" Morris at the Young Men's Hebrew Association in Oakland, whom he credited with sparking his swimming career. He had scholarship offers to many colleges but chose Ohio State because it provided the tax law and accounting courses he wanted. On the swim team, the dominance of Yoshi Oyakawa, an Olympic champion in the backstroke, induced him to perform in other events and develop his versatility.

He led the team to eight college and Amateur Athletic Union national championships in the 1950s while preparing for a law career at Harvard. By the time he was in law school, his competitive swimming days were over. He wasn't particularly upset about retiring at age 22. In a 1958 column in The Pittsburgh Press, he admitted elite swimming was a grind.

"Nobody realizes it, but most of the time it was drudgery," he said. "And besides, you're a has-been when you are 22 years old."

After Harvard, he returned to Pittsburgh to join Reed Smith Shaw & McClay, eventually becoming a partner. His first marriage produced two children but ended in divorce in the early 1970s, and he married Hollis, an associate at Reed Smith, in 1979. The two have a son, David, who lives in Columbus, Ohio.

Mr. Wiggins left Reed Smith in 1983 and formed his own firm with his wife in the Bigelow Building. She eventually concentrated on running her family's series of nursing homes in Ohio and Pennsylvania while Mr. Wiggins focused on his main client, the Heinz family.

He retired in 2001. In recent years, the couple spent most of their time at their retirement home in Ligonier, where Mr. Wiggins swam regularly in his pool. After his workout there on Wednesday, he felt weak and went to Westmoreland Hospital. He was flown to UPMC Shadyside, where he went into cardiac arrest and died. In addition to his wife and son, he is survived by two daughters, Susan Wiggins of Gilbert, Ariz., and Rhiana Wiggins of Seattle; and a sister, Marge Hanley of Green Valley, Ariz.