

Bruce Wigo (on the right) and Prince Albert of Monaco viewing historical exhibits at the International Swimming Hall of Fame.





# History's Keeper

BY ELAINE K. HOWLEY

Masters swimmer and International Swimming Hall of Fame CEO Bruce Wigo has become the oracle of swimming history and a staunch advocate of water safety.

*“When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe.”—John Muir*

Just as all water is connected, so is all history. Streams of past endeavors and future generations merge and diverge, becoming tributaries of the racing waters of human history. At the source of these streams running through the history of aquatics stands Bruce Wigo.

Tall and fit, with a thick shock of sandy, gray hair, the 62-year-old Wigo cuts a handsome figure as he strides across the pool deck for the start of his 50-meter freestyle event during the 3rd Annual Rowdy Gaines Masters Classic meet held last October in Orlando, Fla.

This splash and dash is Wigo's first race since 2009. A swimmer with the Blu Frog Team in Florida and CEO of the International Swimming Hall of Fame in Fort Lauderdale, Wigo recently underwent extensive arthroscopic surgery and rehabilitation on his shoulder. Though a seasoned swimmer and accomplished businessman, Wigo admits to feeling the pressure of this return to competition after more than two years away.

“I was very nervous. I'm up there thinking, ‘Geez. What do I do?’” he smiles bashfully.

Although Wigo may have been tentative about his recent return to Masters competition, there's zero hesitation in his voice when he talks about the mission of the International Swimming Hall of Fame, the organization he's helmed since 2005.

“Studies show that everybody should be swimming, and that's the mission of the Hall of Fame—to inspire people to swim. For all the reasons: health, recreation, the 20 million things you can do from snorkeling, surfing and sailboarding that get you out and active instead of sitting on the couch,” he says. “I'm afraid that we've become a nation of spectators and beer guzzlers instead of participants. And the one thing that everybody should do is swim.”

But it's not really us Masters swimmers he's trying to reach; we are already the converted, and ISHOF has been recognizing Masters swimmers since 2003.

“More for their healthy lifestyles, not so much for their times,” Wigo explains. “You look at the people we recognize in the Masters Hall of Fame, and goodness! These people don't look



like the average American. These people are fit, in shape and have a zillion friends. That's what Masters is about."

But for the rest of the country, Wigo sees a real urgency in encouraging would-be recreational swimmers—and an even greater need to reach children in minority groups, who often don't have ad-

equate access to places to take the plunge—to start swimming.

"We can inspire competitive swimmers to be better swimmers by telling them the stories of the great swimmers, but what we really want to do is inspire everybody to swim because you live longer, you live healthier and happier."

**Bruce Wigo and his family at the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta, Ga., where eldest son Wolf Wigo (rear, center) played for the USA water polo team.**



### Early Entry

**Wigo's passion for the water** and what it can do for people stems from being an active participant in aquatics for most of his life. "I'm glad to be a swimmer. I don't know what I would do if I weren't a swimmer," he says.

Wigo started swimming at the Germantown, Pa., YMCA when he was five. His family also summered at the Jersey Shore, so being competent in the water was a safety issue. "Swimming was just a part of our life," he says.

In his teens, Wigo lifeguarded in Ocean City, N.J., alongside some of the greats such as Sid Cassidy and John B. Kelley. Wigo says he wasn't a great swimmer when he was young—though he was named a high school All-American and swam for the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He also was an accomplished diver and an avid water polo player.

Wigo first came to prominence on the administrative side of aquatic sports during his tenure as executive director of USA

Water Polo. In 1991, the organization was struggling with financial and management issues and hired Wigo to help turn things around, a stint that was supposed to last about six months but ended up as his career for the next 13 years.

During his tenure, membership grew from 7,000 to 30,000, through the introduction of better benefits and services to membership. "We had to make it about more than just joining to play. We had more events, better publications and educational materials, so that there would be a reason for people to join."

Wigo's credentials for getting the job with USA Water Polo lay in his own background in the sport and his children's interest, as well as a law degree from Widener University in Chester, Pa. "I had volunteered to be the head of the Northeast region as the zone chairman—I was a water polo dad and was involved because my kids were in the sport."

Wigo's eldest son, Wolf, is a three-time Olympic water polo



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player. Wigo's two youngest children—twins Drac and Jason—followed Wolf to Stanford, and all three were named All-Americans all four years, “which I guess must be some kind of a record,” he shrugs.

Wigo's daughter, Lauren, also played water polo, but did not continue as far into the sport as her brothers because of a lack of scholarships available to female players, Wigo says. Perhaps not coincidentally, in his role at USA Water Polo, Wigo was instrumental in having women's water polo added as an Olympic sport.

### An Aquatic Anthropologist

**Wigo's interest in** the history of swimming and the people who have shaped it emerged in the late 1970s while he was studying for the bar exam. Wigo was a member of the famed New York Athletic Club and studied in the club's library in Manhattan. When he needed a break, he'd browse the shelves looking for a bit of historical entertainment.

“I'd look at old magazines from the 1800s, and was just fascinated about what I didn't know about the history of swimming,” he says.

That interest continues to grow, and fits well with a major initiative at ISHOF: to catalog the history of aquatic sports.

Wigo has taken that directive to heart with the recent completion of a large-format pictorial history book, “The Golden Age of Swimming.” In his book, Wigo presents some potentially controversial facts about swimming's role in everything from the fall of the Roman Empire to the civil rights movement, even women's suffrage.

“The first right women won in the U.S. was the right to swim, and that paved the way for them to get the vote,” Wigo says. “We were like a Muslim country 100 years ago, with the mentality being, ‘Don't let women get out. Keep them covered.’ It took swimming to change that.”

Wigo recounts the story of Australian swimming champ An-

nette Kellerman, an early pioneer who dared sew leggings onto a man's bathing suit in an effort to adhere to the letter of the law of women's swimming attire—which required a woman to cover her legs—while still achieving some level of functionality in her swimwear. For her audacity, the antipodean sex goddess and swimming queen was arrested on Revere Beach near Boston in 1908.

Wigo's book is a treasure chest of old-time photographs, newspaper clippings, artifacts and postcards presenting the story of swimming in all its many permutations. With this work, Wigo is attempting to preserve the legacy of swimming as a cultural force, not just a sport. And he's not just focused on the memories of the fastest swimmers, either.

“Do we want to remember the ‘heroes’ like Johnny Weissmuller, who was married six times and was an alcoholic who didn't take care of himself financially?” Wigo asks, “Or is it more about cultural history? There's so much cultural history associated with swimming,” a history that spans geography and race.

“Every culture embraced swimming until some impediment came up. In the Western world, that was the fall of the Roman Empire because of the vices that went on in the baths. The church basically condemned everything to do with the baths, and for 1,000 years, Europeans lost the art of swimming.”

During this time, many Europeans came to fear the water and the display of skin that typically accompanies bathing. Victorian Era prudishness further discouraged swimming, but a few brave souls like Kellerman helped start a revolution in the sport that saw swimming steadily gain in popularity from the mid-1800s until its peak boom time in the 1920s and '30s. This growth in swimming's popularity caused a shift in culture that loosened up clothing restrictions and the binds on women, but may have added fuel to the fire of segregation.

Where gender-segregated pools had been a hub of social life in a

racially integrated way, gender-mixed facilities became strictly segregated out of fear and hate. Wigo writes, “Once whites rediscovered swimming, the thought of black men interacting with white women (and vice versa) on a beach—where erotic voyeurism and physical contact were possible—stirred up the murky waters of sexuality and popular prejudices resulting in the radical segregation of swimming in America, and, for most African Americans, the loss of their rich aquatic cultural heritage as swimmers.” Segregated swimming facilities were just another addition to the list of grievances that blossomed into the civil rights movement by the 1960s.

From reading his book and speaking with him, it becomes clear that Wigo sees swimming as a component of virtually all of the most important turning points in human history, influencing events in unexpected and underreported ways.

Take for example something as seemingly cut-and-dried as King Phillip's War, a major conflict that erupted in 1675 between several Native American tribes who overlooked their own differences to rise up together against the unwelcome British settlers in New England. According to many historical references, the source of friction was European encroachment on Native American ancestral lands.

But there's more to it than that, Wigo says, and swimming—or rather the white man's prejudices about what being able to swim said about a person—caused the ignition of the bloody conflagration that decimated both the native and settler populations in New England.

“One of the chief's wives was canoeing down the river with her infant, and some drunk British sailors stopped her and wanted to ‘see if these babies can swim.’ They tossed the baby in the river and she dived in and brought him up dead. Her husband was so angry when he found out what happened, that he went around inciting the other tribes to start King

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## Does Fabio Swim? Yes!



Though he originally intended to practice law upon graduation, Wigo found another calling that paid well. A strapping, chiseled diver, Wigo was a natural in front of the camera. His virile visage marketed products from Zest soap to Michelob beer, and he appeared in more than 100 commercials for Amtrak, Revlon, Avon and others.

“My wife likes to say I did the Fabio thing,” he says. Wigo means he posed for photographs that were then rendered into romance novel covers. “They take these photos of you wearing a costume and hugging a busty woman, and the artist modifies it. It’s

more about acting skill than modeling,” he says. Wigo fell into this unusual line of work serendipitously. “While I was in law school in Philadelphia, I was doing a deposition involving a film director who was shooting a commercial. After the deposition, he invited me to an audition. I made more money from that one commercial than I did from the whole deposition. So I kept doing it because it paid a lot more than substitute teaching.”

Once he moved to New York, Wigo had additional opportunities to model and act while practicing law part-time. When he moved to Fort Lauderdale, he had every intention of taking the Florida Bar exam after finishing with USA Water Polo, but never got around to it. For the sake of water polo and swimming, it’s probably good that he didn’t.

Phillip’s War.” And according to Wigo, this sort of thing happened with frightening regularity during the early years of European migration to the New World.

“Swimming was one of the discriminatory ideas [Europeans] held. The idea was that because animals swim naturally—you can throw a puppy in the water and he’ll swim—this shows that [Native Americans] were lower class, a lower order of species. Everyone knew Europeans had to be taught to swim,” and it was presumed that Indians knew how to swim instinctively because they were so good at it.

But that story line changed over time as whites rediscovered and came to dominate the sport and access to swimming venues. “We pushed the Native Americans off their beach-side properties onto dusty reservations. And we pushed African Americans into inner cities with no swimming facilities.

It’s become this psychological thing that swimming is a ‘white sport,’ which is just ridiculous. It was Africans and Indians who were the great swimmers in history.”

But progress is possible. Using his position at ISHOF, Wigo aims to improve access to the water for people who currently do not or cannot participate. For his efforts, he was named one of *Aquatic International* magazine’s “Power 25” in February 2010.

### Making the Water Safer

**However, unlike the ease** of upping the number of fitness joggers, swimming requires certain safety measures and a level of skill before it can become a viable health regimen for anyone, particularly if the venue is open water. “If someone faints while jogging, someone will see them. But it’s harder out in open bodies of water. Unless you have two eyeballs on him

all the time, you’re not going to see him slip beneath the surface,” Wigo says.

Part of providing equal opportunity to aquatics means making the water a safer place, and Wigo has endeavored to do just that by inventing a device called “SafeSwimmer,” a fluorescent air bladder tethered to a swimmer’s waist via a short leash. The watertight sack does triple duty as a highly visible marker for boaters and safety spotters, as a convenient carryall for the swimmer’s gear and as a flotation device should the swimmer get in trouble.

Wigo’s concern for safety was forged by a near-tragedy in his own family. His oldest son, Wolf, was practicing underwater drills in the backyard pool one afternoon several years ago when he lost consciousness. Thankfully, the other boys in the pool soon realized that something was wrong and summoned Wigo from the house. He retrieved his

son from the bottom of the pool and was able to revive him, but Wolf spent a few days in the hospital afterward for observation. It was a close call that can happen to anyone, Wigo says. “No matter how good a swimmer you are, things can go wrong.”

Despite the need for additional care around water, Wigo seems to see the solution to most of life’s greatest problems out there, just beneath the surface. And providing access for all potential swimmers is his life’s mission. Making swimming a fun and safe experience is just part of his plan to bring the masses back to their intended place in the water and the river of history. **S**

////// **Elaine K. Howley is a freelance journalist and open water swimmer hailing from the Boston area. She enjoys the cold water in New England (yes, really!) and was the 32nd swimmer to complete the Triple Crown of open water marathon swimming.**

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