

Olympics coach, Fort Lauderdale Swim Team founder Jack Nelson dies at 82

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COACH AND KIDS: In a March 1996 photo from the International Swimming Hall of Fame Pool in Fort Lauderdale, FLST coach Jack Nelson poses with some of his swimmers. (L-R) Susie Geyer, then 22, Susan Gottlieb, then 26, Jack Todd Pace, then 27, and Max Dersch, then 23. JOE RIMKUS, JR./MIAMI HERALD FILE

If you grew up around a pool in South Florida during the 1960s through the '90s, chances are you heard Jack Nelson's friendly, if commanding Georgia drawl. When out of earshot, maybe you saw a banner on the pool deck or a brochure in the office for one of his famed swim clinics.

However it reached you, Fort Lauderdale Swim Team coach Nelson's motto, "Access to success is through the mind," was ubiquitous in the days when swimming was a major competitive sport in the region.

Few knew the sport better than Nelson, a powerhouse coach who would need to tap every corner of his mind to carve a path toward gold for the 1976 American women Olympics team at the Montreal Summer Games.

Nelson, who coached the U.S. women's 400 freestyle relay to victory over the formidable East Germans in that American bicentennial year, died Wednesday of complications from Alzheimer's at 82. His friends, former swimmers, and family recall "a bigger than life" man, said his namesake daughter Jackie Nelson Doyle.

Amid speculation that the East German women, who dominated their American counterparts in nearly every race, were doping with performance-

enhancing steroids, Nelson, then 44, gave his relay women – Kim Petyon, Wendy Bogliogli, Jill Sterkel and anchor Shirley Babashoff – a motivational pep talk laced with intricate strategy.

Access to success is through the mind...

In an interview with Swimming World magazine in 2007, Nelson revealed his strategy.

“What was so outstanding was they won with their minds, they didn’t worry about the East Germans at this point, they were worried about America winning and they did and people went bonkers,” he said. “And the thing about it is they were truly, truly great Americans during that relay and they had no fear, no fear at that point.”

Nelson knew the Olympics because he had been on those blocks 20 years earlier. Nelson, short and stocky, better suited to the football he played in high school back home in the small town of LaFayette, Georgia, placed fourth in the 200-meter butterfly at the 1956 Melbourne Olympics. According to the International Swimming Hall of Fame, Nelson is the only man to qualify for an Olympics final and then go on to be named a head Olympics coach.

Access to success...

“He instilled a belief in us that you can do anything you put your mind to as long as you worked hard. And he backed you up every step of the way,” said swimmer Kurt Wienants, 52, whose father John Wienants coached alongside Nelson.

The younger Wienants swam for Fort Lauderdale Swim Team, the club Nelson founded at the International Swimming Hall of Fame complex in 1974, and later at the University of Miami, which named Nelson its Athlete of the Year in 1959.

“He was one of those coaches who, as you get older and leave the sport and start carrying on with your life – like Bill Diaz [the iconic UM swim coach who died in September at 89 in Palmetto Bay] – becomes more of a friend. I’ve known him since I was able to walk and he did a lot for me, keeping me out of trouble and straight and it was hard work,” Wienants said. “Being a swim parent [myself,] there are a lot of politics and egos and jealousies and Jack seemed to come out of it and made more friends in that business than enemies.”

Born in Chickamauga, Georgia, on Nov. 8, 1931, Nelson moved to Fort Lauderdale in May 1950 and worked as a lifeguard. He originally contemplated a football career and didn’t start swimming competitively until he was 21 in the U.S. Air Force – a late start, by most standards. Yet within a few years he made that Olympics team at age 24.

After the Games, Nelson went to the University of Miami from 1957 to 1960 and would spend four years coaching swimming there on the Coral Gables

campus.

“Jack was an integral part in the development of swimming and diving at the University of Miami. As a Miami alum, he did his alma mater and his country proud, serving as the U.S. Olympic Swimming Head Coach in 1976. He also played a key role in promoting competitive swimming throughout the South Florida area,” said UM University Athletic Director Blake James.

Nelson would coach high school swimming at Ransom in Coconut Grove, Pine Crest and Fort Lauderdale schools, winning 30 state titles over a 14-year period that began in 1960. He formed the Jack Nelson Swim Club in 1966, which eventually became the Fort Lauderdale Swim Team.

In five decades, he would coach 44 Olympians, including Joel Thomas, Paige Zemina, Dave Edgar and Shirley Stobbs; world and U.S. record holders like Andy Coan and Laurie Lehner and some 460 All-Americans. The verbose Nelson coached eight U.S. national teams, the first in 1974 and last in 1994.

“More than just his great accolades in swimming, I think what was so important to so many people is that he was a father figure and he was an inspiration to so many people,” said Nelson Doyle.

“Coach Nelson always was the most positive person that I have ever known. He had a way to make everyone he was with feel like they were the greatest at whatever they did,” said Illinois swim coach John Schauble on Facebook. The two coached together after Schauble met Nelson at one of his swim clinics in 1976.

Nelson retired in November 2004.

“I cried like a baby when all these people got up and said their things,” Nelson said in a 2005 Miami Herald article. “When these people came from Japan, Canada, from wherever they came from, just to say hello and congratulations for that one night, it just doesn’t get any better.”

Nelson is survived by his wife, Sherrill, daughters Nancy Nelson Going, Jamie Nelson and Jackie Nelson Doyle, and stepchildren Michael Kilpatrick, Ann Kileen and Mary Jackson. Services will be held at 2 p.m. Nov. 15 at First Presbyterian Church, 401 SE 15th Ave., Fort Lauderdale.

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