

# Trawl

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The International Swimming Hall of Fame is full of aquatic memorabilia, film clips and quirky artifacts.

## SIDE ORDER

# Take a deep dive in Fort Lauderdale

By Robin Soslow

Morning's my favorite time to jog and swim at the beach. When the sun's high, I seek cover and culture, and Fort Lauderdale, Fla., offers an ideal spot.

Strolling down the beach-side promenade that curves along a wavy white wall, I pass coconut palms, displays about sea turtles laying eggs in the sand, the W Hotel's daytime DJ pool party, the Beach Cigar & Hookah Lounge, the Elbo Room's dive bar and St. Barts Coffee. A block west, my destination surfaces between a huge swimming pool and live-aboard yachts bobbing in the Intracoastal Waterway.

The International Swimming Hall of Fame fills a wave-shaped building with a collection so vast, it overflows into the pool shop's attic. I expect photos, medals and back stories related to superstars whose strokes I'm still trying to emulate, from Fort Lauderdale-based swimming/diving legend Katherine Ederle to nine-time Olympic champion Mark Spitz. It's the surprises that anchor me here for hours.

The first surprise: encountering Bruce Wigo, a lifeguard at the South Jersey beach where I swam as a kid. He went on to become a competitive swimmer, a diver, a water polo player, a romance-novel cover model, an aquatic historian and, finally, the Hall of Fame's president.

Wigo suggests starting with a short film that reveals how Olympic freestyle gold medalist Matt Biondi honed his skills swimming in open waters alongside dolphins. Artifacts such as coins dating to ancient Greece echo accounts of the marine mammals saving swimmers and shipwrecked sailors.

Those dolphins would have helped in early-20th-century America, when laws requiring heavy full-body "bathing gowns" kept women from learning how to swim. A "Bloomers to Bikinis" exhibit illuminates this little-known chapter in women's rights. Moralists believed that female bathers corrupted men and had hastened the fall of the Roman Empire. Their rules prevailed

until the arrest of swimmer/water-ballet actress Annette Kellerman on a Boston beach in 1907 for "indecent exposure" — wearing a men's-style one-piece bathing suit. The judge dismissed the charges, and public support vanquished the Victorian law. ("The Diving Venus" continued making waves, producing "Neptune's Daughter," supposedly the first \$1 million-grossing movie and, in her next film, diving nude from a cliff.) Women's swimming rights paved the way for the right to vote.

The first widely seen two-piece swimsuit was created by Gertrude Ederle to reduce chafing while she practiced to swim across the English Channel. A U.S. flag adorned the top. The tailoring surely helped: In 1926, Ederle broke records set by male Channel swimmers — by nearly two hours. This win convinced the masses that women could compete in strenuous (and extreme) sports. Several exhibits document how some celebrities gained fame through swimming exploits. Benjamin Franklin dazzled spectators with a four-mile swim in the Thames; look for the swim paddles he invented at age 11. Ronald Reagan captained his college swim team and reportedly saved 77 lives as a lifeguard. Another display revealed that John F. Kennedy swam on the first Harvard team to beat Yale.

As for movie stars, Johnny Weissmuller, a major donor of memorabilia to the hall, shattered swimming records before diving into the role of Tarzan. Buster Crabbe began as an Olympic swimmer. Then there's Esther Williams, who was to compete in the war-canceled 1940 Olympics before she went on to achieve silver-screen swimming stardom.

Speaking of movies, one display exposes the secrets of the physics-defying "Triple Lindy" dive that was the climax of the 1986 movie "Back to School." The toughest challenge? Rodney Dangerfield's stunt double had to perform the dive in a fat suit.

Somber subjects get equal time. For

decades, swimming was considered a "white sport," but before 1865, Africans, Native Americans and Polynesians were revered for their aquatic prowess. Starting in the 1500s, enslaved Africans harvested pearls off Venezuela's coast. In the 1700s, freed slave Yarrow Mamout earned fame for his vigorous swims along the Potomac River; a reproduction of his portrait painted by Charles Willson Peale, who was awestruck by Mamout's vitality, hangs in the museum. Vintage photographs fast-forward me to American beaches and pools that remained segregated into the 1960s.

Other artifacts run the gamut: posters and postcards depicting architecturally stunning pools from Rockaway Beach, N.Y., to Johannesburg; mementos from New York's 1939 World's Fair Aquacade (muscle men, bathing beauties, clowns!); stage and movie swimming costumes; medals dating to the 1896 Athens Olympics; exquisite sculptures; historic surfboards. I learn about the evolution of strokes: the butterfly, considered a novelty unfit for competitions, was added as an Olympic event in the 1956 Summer Games (lucky thing for Michael Phelps, decades later). Synchronized swimming, water polo battles (imagine racing two miles a match, often at 15 mph) and record-shattering competitions live on in film and news clips.

After total museum immersion, I walk back to the promenade. At the elegantly manicured entrance to Las Olas beach, a historical marker recalls 1961 "wade-ins" staged here by civil rights demonstrators. The wade-ins led to area beach desegregation the next year. Such a pivotal event occurring so close, in time and place, to the Hall of Fame's 1965 opening adds to this swimming pantheon's depth.

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