

A Brief History of Irish Masters Swimming

In the Beginning

American navy doctor Ransom J Arthur is generally considered to be the father of Masters Swimming. Ransom had a mission of encouraging adults to improve fitness through swimming and felt that his idea would give older swimmers (ex-competitors and beginners) a goal for keeping physically fit. His concept has grown over the years into the worldwide phenomenon we know today. However, he had been trying to get the American Amateur Athletic Union interested in such a program for 10 years during the 1960's, but to no avail. It was not until May 2 1970, that Masters Swimming officially started after Ransom convinced John Spanuth, President of the Coaches Association to hold the first National Masters Swimming Championships in his Amarillo, Texas, Aquatic Club pool. That competition started with age groups of 25+, 35+, and 45+. The events contested included the 50m-100m-200m-400m Free, 100m and 200m Back, 100m Breast and 100m Fly, 100m Medley and Relays. They had a total of 45 competitors.

In October 1971 Masters became an official part of the American Amateur Athletic Union, at which time, the contestants at the 1971 US Nationals had grown to 112 swimmers. The breaststroke and dolphin kicks were both declared legal for the butterfly.

The first international meet was held in March of 1974 at Sydney, Australia and Matamata, New Zealand. It was mostly fun and games. Dawn Fraser (An Olympian, who swam in three Olympic games: 1956, 1960 and 1964) swam the 50m Free at the age of 37, but it became cold in the afternoon and she left. Back in the US, the USMS (United States Masters Swimming) Rules were announced in 1976 which stated that 25 was still the minimum age for a swimmer to be considered a Masters swimmer. Age was determined as the first day of a championship meet (not the last day of the year as it is now). 80 plus was the senior age group then, (now it is 100+).

FINA take over

With the International Governing body of swimming, FINA, eventually taking over control of Masters swimming at the first FINA Masters Swimming Committee Meeting held in Palo Alto, USA, from May 11 to 14, 1987, Masters swimming has gone from strength to strength, and is a very important part of the FINA programme. FINA has organized the FINA World Masters Championships since 1986, but two meets were held in the pre-FINA era in Toronto in 1978 and in Christchurch, NZL in 1984. The complete list of FINA world Masters Championships is shown below:

1978 – Toronto, CAN (non-FINA)	2000 – Munich, GER
1984 – Christchurch, NZL (non-FINA)	2002 – Christchurch, NZL
1986 – Tokyo, JAP	2004 – Riccione, ITA
1988 – Brisbane, AUS	2006 – Stanford, USA
1990 – Rio de Janeiro, BRA	2008 – Perth, AUS
1992 – Indianapolis, USA	2010 – Göteborg/Boras, SWE
1994 – Montreal, CAN	2012 – Riccione, ITA
1996 – Sheffield, ENG	2014 – Montreal, CAN
1998 – Casablanca, MOR	2015 – Kazan, RUS

The FINA technical rules for Masters swimming generally follow those of the mainstream swimming, though there are some slight differences. For example, the Breaststroke kick is still acceptable for Masters Butterfly swimmers and Masters swimmers are permitted to stand at the front of the blocks, whereas mainstream swimmers were required to step forwards to the front of the block. Subsequently the mainstream rules were changed to follow Masters rules in this respect. Masters are still allowed to start in the water whilst mainstream swimmers must start with a dive for Free, Breast and Fly.

After the World Masters in Montreal FINA and LEN decided that the major Masters Championships would follow immediately after the Mainstream Championships meaning that the 2015 championships would be the Worlds (rather than the European Championships), to be held in Kazan, in Russia. The 2016 Masters were the Europeans held in London. Going forward, the 2017 World Championships will be held in Budapest, Hungary and the 2018 Europeans will be held in Kranj, Slovenia, a return visit, as the Europeans were also held there in 2007.

In Europe

While there was a lot happening at world level in Masters Swimming, equally, Masters Swimming was also rapidly developing in Europe, starting in the 1970's. LEN convened its first ever Masters 'Competition Committee' on 23rd November 1985 in Munich and the first LEN European Masters Championship were held in Blackpool in 1987.

The first Masters meet in Great Britain was promoted by the Otter SC at the City University pool London, in 1972. The first English (ASA) championships were held at York in 1981, and the first GB Masters Championships were held at Port Talbot in 1987, the same year as the first LEN European Masters Championships. Now, the Europeans and competitions in the UK, Italy, France, Sweden, Germany and elsewhere are major swimming competitions on the respective federations calendars.

In Ireland

In 1975 and 1976 Masters swimmers from Dublin S.C. travelled to London to compete in the Otter Masters Tournament and in 1977 with the encouragement of Fergus Barron, undoubtedly the father of Masters Swimming in Ireland, Dublin S.C. held the first Masters gala in Ireland in the Iveagh Baths in Dublin. In later years the gala was held in the ESB Sportsco pool and for many years was the only swimming competition specifically for Masters swimmers in Ireland. In recent years Dublin S.C. have resurrected their Masters gala as a sprint gala and present the Fergus Barron Trophy to the competitor in the 50 Breaststroke who scores the most points according to the Italian masters Points Calculator.

In Munster, Cork Masters Swimming Club was formed in 1979 by Susan Maguire, Martin Hayes, Tom Cross and Sue Noonan to cater for the increasing number of people who wanted to use swimming as a method of achieving fitness. Other Clubs incorporating Masters swimmers or specific Masters Clubs followed in the Munster region.

Masters swimming continued to flourish in Ireland and in December 1983 the I.A.S.A. Executive set up a committee to progress and make recommendations on Masters swimming. The committee was made up of Margaret Bugler (Cork Masters), Gay Walsh (Dublin and Tuam), Liam Loughman, Neil Kennedy and Fergus Barron (all of Dublin). In 1985 the I.A.S.A. Executive received correspondence from Sweden proposing to hold European

Open Championships in Ireland under the rules of M.S.I. (Masters Swimming International), an organisation established in the U.S. to fill the vacuum created by FINA's earlier non-involvement in Masters swimming. This proposal was brought to an advanced stage before LEN intervened stating that it had established its own committee for Masters swimming and referring "especially to a proposed competition in Ireland next year which is not authorised." There seems little doubt that the Irish event (or non-event) encouraged the formation of the European Federation's Masters Committee.

At the January 1991 A.G.M. of the I.A.S.A. it was decided to incorporate Masters Swimming at Branch level and to administer it by means of an I.A.S.A. Committee consisting of five members nominated by the Branches and appointed by the Executive Committee. At the 1993 Munster Masters gala Irish Masters records were inaugurated. Ossie Schmidt (Cork Masters) administered these and also acted as Committee Secretary for many years.

At the 2002 Annual General Meeting of Swim Ireland (which had replaced the I.A.S.A. in 1999), a resolution was accepted to establish a Masters sub-committee within Swim Ireland and in August 2004 the first meeting of the Swim Ireland Masters Committee was held. The Committee comprised Phillip Fitzpatrick and Jeff Phillips (Leinster), Francis Daly (Connacht) and Helen Patterson (Munster). Tony Morris (Leinster) was the Hon. Masters Recorder. In the same year Phillip Fitzpatrick was elected onto the LEN Masters Committee.

Since then the Masters Committee has grown in strength and has achieved the following:

- There is now full representation of two members from each province on the Masters Committee, holding regular meetings four to six times per year.
- It published the Swim Ireland Masters Development Plan 2011 – 2015 as a blue print for the future growth of Irish Masters swimming. An interim plan was produced for 2016 to align the timing of the strategic plan for Masters swimming with Swim Ireland's timeline. At the time of writing, the next strategic plan for Masters Swimming (2017 – 2020) is being finalised.
- Both National and Provincial Masters Records are now maintained for both Short and Long course and for all FINA events.
- A website, www.irishmastersswimming.ie, and an email listing are maintained by the Masters Committee.
- At the Annual Swim Ireland Awards evening the "Masters Outstanding Achievement Award" is presented.
- FINA and LEN both publish annually lists of the Top Ten swims for all age groups and events, both long and short course. Irish Masters swimmers are now listed regularly.
- The Irish Open Masters Competitions, both Short course and Long course are held annually thanks to support from Swim Ireland,
- There is now a full calendar of club run meets throughout Ireland.

In the Pool

In 1985 Cork Masters sent a team to Toronto Canada for the inaugural 'World Masters Games', where the Ladies Freestyle Relay Team set a new World Masters Games record. The following year the same team travelled to Rome and broke the record again. In 1990 Jane Jolly (Cork) flew the flag at the FINA World Masters Championships in Rio de Janeiro coming home with silver medals in the 100m Free, 400m Free and 100m Fly. In 1991 Cork Masters hosted the first biannual Irish Open, a meet that continued until 2011.

In the same year Claire O'Dwyer (nee Small) (Dublin S.C.) competed in the 50-54yrs age group in the European Masters in Coventry, winning the 50m and 100m Freestyle and the 50m Butterfly and setting European records in the 50m Free and Fly

In 1992 Claire, Jane Jolly, Rory Delargy and Willie Hempel competed in the World Masters in Indianapolis, U.S.A. Claire was placed second in the 100m Fly, third in the 200m Fly and the 50m Fly and the 100m Freestyle. In 1994 Claire travelled to Montreal for the Worlds winning Gold, three Silvers and a Bronze. Two years later in 1996 the Worlds Masters Swimming Championships were held in Sheffield and a large team travelled from Ireland, including Claire, who took six Gold medals and set world records in the 50m Free and the 100m Fly in the 55-59yrs age group.

In 2002 a small group of Irish swimmers travelled to Christchurch, New Zealand, for the Worlds where Claire yet again set World records in the 60-64 age group in the 50m and 100m Fly. (To this day, Claire remains the only Irish swimmer, young or old, to have set a FINA swimming world record). Irish Masters swimming has been represented in every World and European Championship ever since.

As well as Claire's World records, European Records have been set by Norma Cahill in the 200m Free (40-44yrs), the 1500m Free (45-49yrs and 50-54yrs) and the 400m and 800m (50-54). Dymphna Morris has broken European records in the 800m Free (50-54yrs) and the 1500m free (55-59).

In 2009 FINA and then LEN introduced 4X100m and 4X200m relays to the Masters record books. At the Aer Lingus gala in October 2010 swimmers took advantage of gaps in the record books and a total of nineteen European 4X100m Short Course relay records were taken. At the 2011 Celtic Masters Aer Lingus Masters set a new European Masters Record in the Men's 4X200m Freestyle Relay in the 160yrs to 199yrs age group.

In 2012 a large team of about 60 Irish Masters joined the 12,000 plus competitors in the largest ever FINA organised event, the World Masters in Riccione, Italy. They brought back 2 gold, 5 silver and 3 bronze medals and broke 34 Irish long course records. The following year over 40 swimmers competed in the 2013 European Masters Championships in Eindhoven, in 2015 a much smaller group of 14 travelled to Kazan, Russia for the Worlds and in 2016, a huge team of nearly 150 Irish Masters travelled to London for the over-subscribed European Masters Championships.

The future certainly looks bright for Irish Masters Swimming

Jeff Phillips

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