

Portrait of a Grand Master

Gail Roper, a 1952 Olympian and Masters pioneer, looks at her swimming as an art. "When I'm in a race, I'm trying to paint the perfect picture—with the perfect start, the perfect turn and the perfect everything-in-between."

By Tito Morales

It's the third week in May, and Gail Roper, a mentor of mine from what seems like an eternity ago, has just returned home from the USMS Short Course Nationals in Tempe, Ariz. Over a long, hot weekend probably more conducive to inner tube lounging than day-in and day-out of all-out swimming, the 73-year-old legend swam in four different events. To the surprise of no one, she touched the wall first in each.

This, in and of itself, is probably the greatest barometer of Roper's dominance. Whenever she's in the competition pool, it's rarely a question of *if* she will win. Instead, the focus shifts to her margin of victory and whether or not she will approach any national or world standards.

On this occasion, there were no new records. She did, however, once again prove herself to be the class of her age group. In the 400 yard IM, she outdistanced her nearest competitor by over 36 seconds. In the 100 fly and 100 IM, it was by 11 and 7 seconds, respectively. And in the most miniature of all events, the 50 freestyle, she beat the runner-up by an astonishing 5.55 seconds.

The latter, in particular, is no small feat.

To put it into proper perspective, if Jenny Thompson, Anthony Ervin or any



Gail Peters Roper

other 50 free specialist ever prevailed over a national-caliber field by more than two full body lengths, the story would surely headline ESPN Sportscenter, Nike will have uncovered the next Tiger Woods, and a swimmer might, *just might*, finally win *Sports Illustrated's* Sportsman of the Year.

An Artist Behind the Numbers

For Roper, though, competitive swimming ceased being about gold medals or records some time ago. After many decades immersed in her life's greatest passion, she now views the sport in much more aesthetic terms.

"I look at my swimming as an art,"



A very young Gail

she explains. "When I'm in a race, I'm trying to paint the perfect picture—with the perfect start, the perfect turn and the perfect everything-in-between."

Although Roper would be the first to disagree, her lengthy Masters career has produced enough masterpieces to fill the Louvre.

Try as one might to view her accomplishments in terms of brush strokes or composition, though, it's just plain difficult to get past some of the statistics.

Upon reflection, in fact, the numbers she's accumulated seem more befitting of another sport—perhaps basketball or maybe even baseball. Consider these:

- 185: the national records she's broken since her debut.
- 61: the world records she's set.
- 164: her U.S. Masters national titles.

It's the gaudy stuff of legends—residue left over from the legacies of a Ruth, Chamberlain or Gretzky. And, yes, when one looks purely at the statistics, Gail Roper must surely rank among such athletic icons as one of the most decorated performers of all-time—not just in swimming, but in the history of sport.

But to begin to gain an understanding of the artist behind the litany of numbers—and there are far too many to recount in detail—one must first take a peek into a youngster's soul.

A Watery Awakening

Roper grew up in Trenton, New Jersey. It was the 1930s and America was still reeling from The Great Depression. But the young Roper, then Gail Peters, wasn't paying much attention to the shaky stock market, soaring unemployment, or a tenuous geopolitical situation in Europe. She was too preoccupied playing in a nearby creek.

At first it was figure skating which caught her fancy, and like many girls at the time, she had dreams of be-

coming the next Sonja Henie. But the tug of the water had soon worked its magic, and by the time she reached high school, she'd begun to set her sights on doing some fast swimming.

Life, though, was quite different back then. Opportunities for female athletes were virtually nonexistent. Girls were expected to finish their schooling, marry and start families. End of discussion.

"It was difficult right from the very beginning," she recalls.

First it was Roper's mother who was dead-set against her daughter's ambitions, doing everything in her power to dissuade the youngster. Then it was a P.E. teacher who berated her, warning that too much physical activity for a developing young woman would lead to irreparable, catastrophic health problems.

The biggest blow of all, however, came from Al Neuschaefer, coach of the successful boys' high school team. When Roper, an admittedly so-so swimmer at the time, approached him about possibly accompanying his team to its annual training session in Fort Lauderdale, Neuschaefer took one look at the undersized teenager and broke into uncontrollable laughter. He continued mercilessly to taunt and deride her before finally barking, "Girls don't swim!"

Roper was left utterly humiliated and



Gail-Helsinki 1952



Gail with Eva Spekeley and Dick Papenquith-Helsinki 1952

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reduced to tears. Then indignation set in. And it was this lightning bolt of resilience, perhaps, which gave birth to a competitor and future aquatic artist of the highest order.

"That's the first time I can ever remember getting angry," Roper says.

Stroking Against the Tide

Roper decided that if she couldn't find anyone else to coach her, then she would school herself. She read every book she could on the subject, spent every spare moment at the pool and went out of her way to travel to competitions where she could sit in the stands and watch the best swimmers in action. Despite her tenacity and desire, however, the results were far from immediate. But, demonstrating a resolve which is just as apparent when she mounts the blocks today as it was back then, Roper was determined to succeed.

Eventually all the self-instruction and sacrifice paid off. Roper won a coveted spot on the 1952 Olympic team as America's top breaststroker, and earned a Sullivan Award nomination in the process. But still the obstacles kept coming. In Helsinki, just when the stars all seemed aligned for Roper to make her mark on the biggest of all stages, she injured her ankle during pre-meet preparations and was unable to compete anywhere close to top form.

Roper bounced back to reassert herself as one of the preeminent swimmers of her generation. She captured several more national championships and bested the young woman who had won the Olympic title she was convinced should have been hers. Her success in 1953 even earned Roper a rare, second consecutive Sullivan nomination. But her best opportunity for achieving Olympic immortality had been snatched away forever.

At age 26, Roper reluctantly retired from the sport in which she'd invested so much of herself. She turned her attention to other pursuits, including working as a marine biologist, and began raising a family which today includes seven children and six grandchildren.



A Rebirth in Wine Country

Roper has spent much of the last 30-some-odd years in northern California. Things are contemplative in Healdsburg, which she now calls home. The town's pace seems mostly dictated by the deliberate growth of fruit in the surrounding orchards and vineyards. In other words, it has proven to be a fertile environment for someone so passionate about such a meditative pastime.

In the early 1970s, Roper formed an age group program called the Santa Rosa Swim Club. My three brothers and I were among its first members. "Mrs.

Roper" cut a fairly unimposing image on the pool deck—she was neither particularly large nor loud. She was businesslike, yes, but was never one to govern through brute intimidation. What truly earned our respect, though, was when we first had the opportunity to watch her slip into the pool.

We kids had absolutely no idea what we looked like as we struggled with our form, trying hard to execute our coach's patient instruction; but, as our youthful eyes spied her seemingly effortless technique, we very quickly came to understand how we wanted to look.

When Roper strokes across a pool, it's clear that there is something special going on. Yes, her triumphs are the result of many years of intense study and labor. But one can also detect an almost uncanny bond between the athlete and her element—a sort of cozy familiarity, like O'Keefe surely had with her canvases.

Roper not so much works through the water as she works *with* it. And it's as if her watery surroundings have not only come to respect and admire her wisdom, but they're more than happy to reward her mastery with exceptional performances.

None of my teammates nor I had any idea about our coach's first successful swimming career. She was never one to divulge such details. I didn't learn about Helsinki until many years later—long after I, myself, had retired from the sport. As she paced about with a stopwatch dangling from her neck, her entire focus was on nurturing and nudging us in the direction of our own dreams.

A Thing Called Masters

It's an oft-repeated adage that athletes learn more from their failures than they do from their triumphs. And it seems clear that it was Roper's misfortune in 1952 which has proven to be the catalyst for her unparalleled success in the Masters arena.

It was during her age group coaching stints, after nearly two decades away from the blocks, that Roper first became aware of organized events for adult com-

petitive swimmers. And the more she learned about the raw start-up, then dubbed "seniors competition," the more she came to realize that it might just prove to be a good match for her. She had the time to train, had ready access to a pool, and, most importantly, she realized that she still had the drive to excel.

"I just really missed it," she says now. "I missed that good feeling of being in shape."

Little did any of us realize that we were actually witnessing the genesis of a rebirth. We didn't pay very much attention as our coach gradually resumed her own swimming career. To be truthful, not many people at all seemed to be paying much attention to the new movement.

Masters competition was far less organized than it is today and Roper, along with the likes of such other trailblazers as June Krauser and the late Ray and Zada Taft, almost appeared to be making up the rules as they went along. There were only a handful of competitions on the calendar, and the notion of Top Ten rankings or All-American lists would have been quite comical as only 46 athletes showed up at the first Masters nationals.

In a somewhat ironic case of turn-about-is-fair-play, I can distinctly recall on at least one occasion when we age groupers were recruited to be timers at one of the meets staged at our club's facility. The accommodations were far from world-class—the pool was without gutters and its depth never exceeded 5 feet—but the competitors didn't seem to mind. It was clear that they were simply relishing the opportunity to focus on the report of the starter's pistol again.

No matter how many kinks still needed to be worked out, though, the fledgling organization proved to be just what Roper needed.

"I think there are a lot of people in Masters swimming who have some unfinished business to take care of," she says reflectively. "That's the best thing about it. People have another chance."

There was no steep learning curve for Roper the second time around. She

handily won just about every event she entered in those early days, and hasn't looked back since.

Girls Do Swim—No Matter What

Roper was forced to retire once again in 1990, at age 61, because of arthritis and a severe case of spinal stenosis. The latter is a malady in which the back and limbs are plagued by alternating bouts of numbness and excruciating pain.

"The doctors told me I couldn't swim anymore," she says, "and that if I wanted to try, it would have to be with a snorkel."

But after four years away from the action, she once again decided to defy conventional wisdom and take matters into her own hands. Not only has her return brought still more success, but she's convinced that her comeback has been incredibly therapeutic for her health.

"I guess I'm just not the kind who gives up," Roper says with a soft laugh.

Not even the implantation of a pacemaker in August of last year has put a damper on her enthusiasm for the pool.

"I just love the sport," she says. "I don't think in all these years I've ever had an experience where I haven't enjoyed swimming."

It's given her a great deal of pleasure to witness how the popularity of Masters swimming has exploded beyond what she or anyone else ever envisioned possible. At last count there are approximately 42,000 USMS members, and the sport's growth shows absolutely no signs of slowing down.

"I enjoy seeing so many healthy people," she says. "I think it's the greatest thing to watch so many people daring to dream."



Gail—Masters swimmer

Recognition for a Life's Work

Given all her accomplishments, it's no wonder that Roper has swum her way into the International Swimming Hall of Fame in Florida not once, but twice. The most recent occasion was on Jan. 11, 2003 when she was honored by being one of the inaugural inductees into the new Masters wing.

During Roper's acceptance speech, the many struggles she's had to endure over the course of her long journey all came rushing back to her. And, as the grand master began to recount the incident in high school, she was so overcome with emotion that she couldn't finish.

"What I was trying to say," she says quietly, yet firmly, "It took me over 50 years, Coach Neuschaefer, but I guess I finally made it to Fort Lauderdale..."

...With easel, palette and masterpieces in hand.

Tito Morales, a novelist and free-lance writer, is a Masters swimmer who competed collegiately for the University of California at Berkeley.