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Richard Abrahams, 57
Super-Fit, Super-Fast



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Raw Speed



Photo by Peter H. Bick

At 57 years of age, Richard Abrahams of the Rocky Mountain Masters in Colorado continues to raise the bar with age-defying sprint swimming.

BY TITO MORALES

It's the kind of electrifying energy that illuminates pools like lightning flashes. Some swimmers have the gift; most don't. Weissmuller had it. So did Fraser, Skinner and Gaines.

A young Richard Abrahams had it, too. And, at the age of 57, he still does.

It's called raw speed—a gift that is shared by all great sprinters.

Sprinters are the sport's marquee attractions. They're the equivalent of one-punch knockout artists, fence-swinging sluggers or fearless downhill racers.

They're adrenaline-fueled aberrations of nature who can make the water boil. When their feet leave the blocks, it isn't so much that they're diving as they're launching—as if determined to reach the opposite end without getting wet.

So often, though, those blessed with such an exceptional gift decline to extend themselves. Perhaps it's because they've secretly convinced themselves that never in a hundred years could they make improvements to what nature has so perfectly bestowed.

Such is not the case with Abrahams, and never has been.

As evidenced by his jolting performances in 2002, Abrahams continues to raise the bar with age-defying sprint swimming. In May, he walked away from the USMS Short Course Nationals with two age group records for men 55-59, including a sizzling 24.59 in the 50 yard fly and a 54.39 in the 100. He already owned the 50 and 100 free records at 21.82 and 48.37 from 2000.

In August, a scant few months later, he swam in the Long Course Nationals and obliterated three world records in four races. His 25.53 in the 50 meter free was not only the second fastest time for all swimmers over the age of 40, but it would have placed him second in the 19-24-year-old division!

But ask Abrahams about his achievements, and he's quick to clarify that he's not all that interested in records or even PRs. Tidy little targets are not what continue to drive him after 27 years of Masters competition. His times are merely measuring sticks by which to gauge his progress in a decades-long preoccupa-

pation with testing his physical limits in the pool. It's a pursuit which began when he first taught himself how to swim at the age of 8.

Getting a Feel for Water

Abrahams' introduction to swimming occurred in New Rochelle, N.Y. He laughs now as he recalls how he initially swam freestyle with his face out of the water, and about how embarrassed he became when he brashly tried out for his high school team and discovered that not only was his form archaic, but so were his times. Even when he did figure out how to update his stroke, success was slow in coming. Determined to get better, though, he put his head down and went to work—literally—and gradually his swimming skills began to flow.

This marked the beginning of a passion that continues to grow to this day.

Abrahams improved enough to earn a partial scholarship to Northwestern University. It was there that he first exhibited signs of sprinting prowess. He came out of the blue as a freshman to snap off a 21.6 in the 50 yard free, earning fifth place at the NAAs in 1963. He built on that success, garnering his highest finish two years later by placing second (21.5) in the same event behind future Hall of Famer Steve Clark.

And then, as is invariably the case with the vast majority of post-collegiate swimmers, Abrahams put aside his swimming to get on with life. He was thrilled, before his retirement, to have added the 1964 Olympic Trials and the 1965 Maccabiah Games to his athletic résumé.

All in all, it was a very solid, but not particularly stellar career—and certainly not at all indicative of what the future would hold.

Mastering Masters

Abrahams drifted back into the sport nearly a decade later. In hindsight, given his competitive nature, it seems inevitable that Abrahams' gift could only be suppressed for so long. But there it sat, dormant and tucked far from view, until the day he stumbled across a newspaper article detailing an upcoming Masters meet.

His return to swimming was far from calculated; it happened by accident, really. But when he hammered out a 22.9 without any training, he quickly re-embraced the sport. What helped bolster his comeback was the realization that there existed a budding community of former swimmers who shared a passion

HOW THEY SWIM: Richard Abrahams

By Richard Abrahams

The following workout is designed to improve 100 yard/meter performances. It enhances the ability to produce and tolerate high levels of lactate as well as to get more comfortable at race pace. I try to do this workout about three times in the six weeks prior to a championship meet, with the last one about 10-12 days before the meet.

Warm-up: 400 swim, 200 kick

Transition: 10 x 75 on 20-sec. rest
(descend #s 3, 6 and 9)

Main set: 10 x broken 100s on 10 min.
(odds fly, evens free)

#1-2: 50 (off blocks) with 20-sec. rest + 2 x 25 with 10-sec rest. Should be within 2 seconds of PR

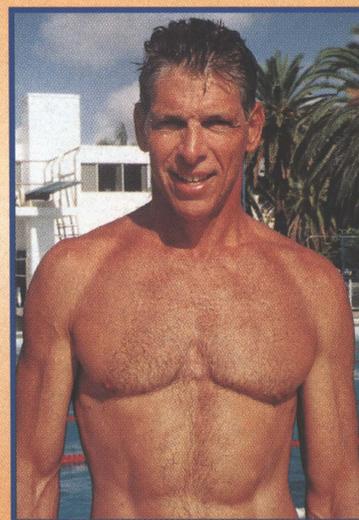
#3-4: 50 (off blocks) with 30-sec. rest + 2 x 25 with 15-sec. rest. Should be at PR

#5-6: 50 (off blocks) with 1-min. rest + 2 x 25 with 30-sec. rest. Should be better than PR

Swim 200-300 very easy after each effort.

Dry-land training thoughts:

- Stay consistent (the benefits increase over the years)
- Get a training partner (you'll keep each other motivated)
- Be creative (change your routine often; use your own body weight)
- Work the whole body (don't just mimic swimming motions)
- Challenge yourself (keep PRs, e.g., number of pull-ups)
- Work your nervous system (balance, rhythm, timing, explosiveness)



similar to the one which had been simmering inside him since his layoff.

"I just love the sport at every level," Abrahams explains today. "I love following age group swimming, world-class swimming and Masters swimming. I'm a huge fan."

Abrahams, an attorney who now works as a city recreation administrator in a suburb of Denver, has spent all of his second swimming career training with a loosely-organized group of four to five members of the Rocky Mountain Masters. Over the years, various swimmers have come and gone, but one who has witnessed Abrahams' startling Masters evolution almost from the very start is his friend and training partner, Bill Abbott.

"What's impressive is the improvement from 10 or 15 years ago," says Abbott, a top Masters swimmer in his own right. "People see that, and they all want to talk to him to find out how he did it."

Abrahams' transition into Masters' upper echelon was anything but seamless, and his impact far from immediate. Success



Photo by Ken Redmond

Abrahams has notched dozens of USMS and world records—primarily in sprint fly and freestyle events.

was never a given, and it only came about through an equal amount of patience and sacrifice.

“I swam for 10 years before I was able to win a national championship and set a record,” Abraham points out.

Since then, though, the record books have begun to bulge with his accomplishments.

An All-American many times over, Abrahams has notched dozens of USMS and world records—primarily in sprint fly and freestyle events. In 1998, he became the first man over the age of 50 to break 50 seconds in the 100 yard free, swimming a startling 48.80. In the process, he joined a select group of swimmers who could claim to have “swum their age.” Even more amazing, he lowered that time to 48.37 two years later after aging up to the 55-59 division.

Given that he touched the wall in 58.23 at the recent Long Course Championships at age 57, it’s quite conceivable that he may soon be able to pull off the same feat in meters. If so, he would become the youngest member of an even more prestigious group that includes the likes of Jeff Farrell, Ron Johnson and Frank Piemme.

Nothing, probably, would please him more.

“It’s the older guys that set the example for me,” he admits. “I look at those guys and I want to be like them.”

Truth be known, he’d much rather be talking about *their* accomplishments than his own. And it’s not only the best of the best who inspire him.

Richard's Records

MEN 50-54	LC Meters	SC Meters	SC Yards
50 Free	24.60** (1998)	24.73** (1998)	21.73* (1998)
100 Free	56.98* (1998)		48.80* (1998)
50 Fly	27.13** (1998)		
100 Fly			54.48* (1998)
MEN 55-59			
50 Free	25.53** (2002)	25.00** (2001)	21.82* (2000)
100 Free	58.23** (2002)	56.51** (2001)	48.37* (2000)
50 Fly	27.76** (2000)	27.74** (2001)	24.59* (2002)
100 Fly	1:03.90** (2000)	1:03.78** (2001)	54.39* (2002)

** Masters World Record

* USMS National Record

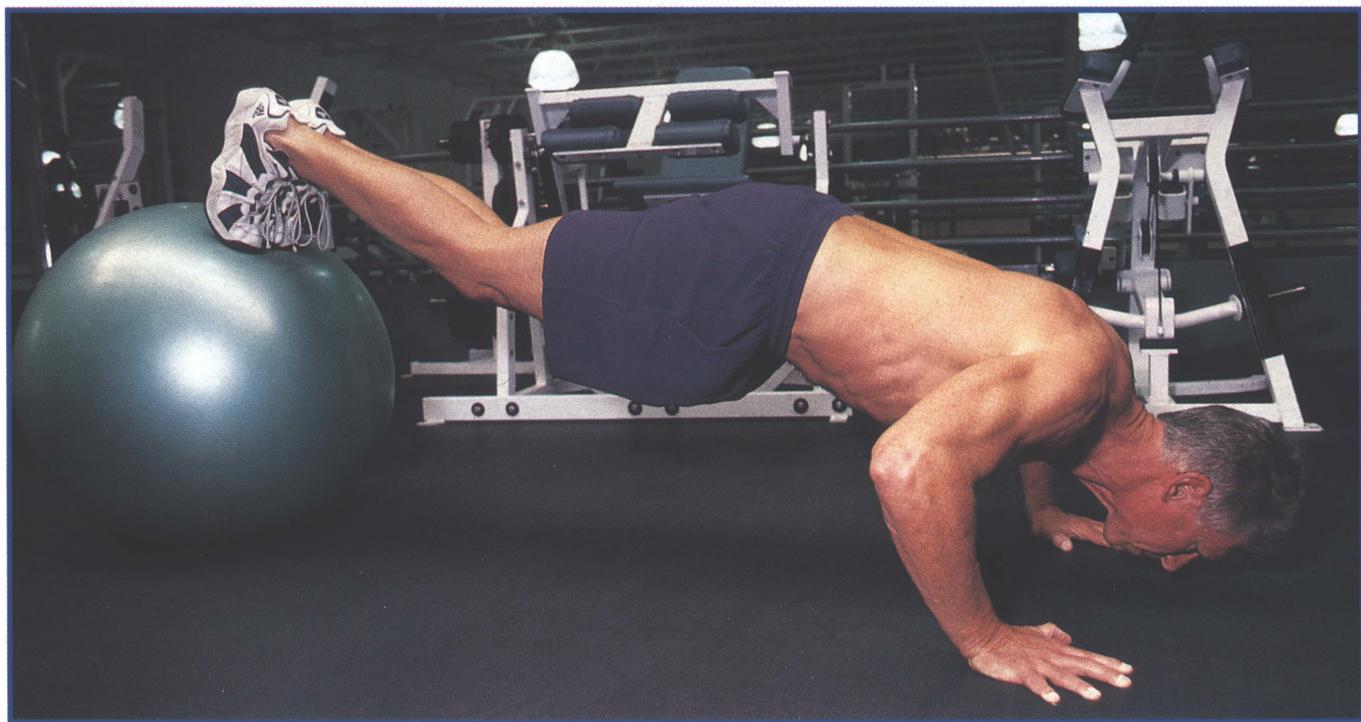


Photo by Ken Redmond

Abrahams supplements his pool time with a rigorous dryland session, including several plyometrics drills.

“Somebody who really just started two or three years ago and makes a time-drop—I absolutely love to see that. It’s so much fun.”

One of Abrahams’ biggest supporters is his wife, Peri. Though she, herself, isn’t a swimmer—he jokingly points out that she’s a Taurus and doesn’t even particularly like the water—she has come to adore Masters swimming nearly as much as her husband. She is a familiar presence at his competitions, forever amazed at the vitality of all the athletes.

“My wife is very supportive, and that really helps,” Abrahams says, crediting her enthusiasm and devotion as two big reasons for his success.

In addition to Peri, Team Abrahams includes two sons, Matthew and James, their wives, Tania and Hollie, and three grandchildren. All continue to be as mesmerized by his accomplishments in the pool as the entire Masters swimming community.

Most swimmers eagerly anticipate entering a new age group, and for obvious reasons. Abrahams, however, is one of those rare talents who performs just as spectacularly at the top of his age group as he does at the bottom. In 1994, for example, he clocked the fastest time of the year for 45-49 men in the 50 yard free as a 49-year-old. Five years later, at age 54, he turned the trick again for the men’s 50-54 age group—not once, but twice—posting No. 1 times in both the 50 and the 100.

“He has aged extremely well,” says longtime rival, Steve Clark, a triple Olympic gold medalist in 1964. “The speed and endurance that he has are phenomenal.”

Abrahams possesses an inquisitive, almost child-like fascination with the science behind swimming. Self-coached for virtual-

ly his entire career, he continues to analyze his sport with a keen eye and ear for adopting anything that might help him gain a tenth of a second here or a hundredth of a second there.

“He’s a true student,” Abbott says. “He’s innovative, and he’s not afraid to experiment or make changes.”

“He’s also a good motivator,” adds Clark. “He makes me want to get into the pool to work harder.”

“For me, a lot of this is about knowing yourself,” Abrahams explains, describing how he frequently refers back to a collection of detailed training logs he’s accumulated to determine what’s working and what needs to be tweaked. “It’s knowing how you’re feeling, and knowing how to train.”

Abrahams devours scientific articles on such wide-ranging topics as physiology, biomechanics and psychology. He borrows freely from the training methods and insights of athletes as diverse as Lance Armstrong and Michael Johnson. He once had an opportunity to train with top U.S. national swimmers at the U.S. Olympic Training Center (USOTC) training camp in Colorado Springs, and when he returned home, he immediately incorporated what he learned into his regime.

The Method

It’s a cruel twist of fate that distance aces who log longer hours and more yardage must oftentimes endure the irony of watching their accolades being eclipsed by short distance specialists who put in only a fraction of the time commitment. People remember the Popovs; they tend to forget the Salnikovs.

And while, yes, it’s true that there are surely other swimmers who are tallying more yards than Abrahams—he rarely exceeds 50,000 a month, even during his heaviest training—he more

than makes up for such slim numbers through a demanding program whose intense focus is on quality.

"One of our real standard workouts is ten 50s on the three minutes off the blocks," Abrahams says. "It's a very hard workout. We don't care what the yardage is. We care more about the effect."

Depending on the event for which he's gearing, Abrahams' main sets will consist of broken 50s, 75s or 100s. As he closes in on a key meet, he fine-tunes his training even further by introducing sets of 12-1/2s. It's a strict philosophy of under-training, which he continues to refine despite years of success.

"You have to trick yourself," he explains. "A lot of our workouts are designed to trick ourselves into performing at a really high level."

Abrahams supplements his pool time with a rigorous dryland session designed to attack the core muscle groups—abdominals, erectors, obliques, hip flexors and the like. He's also become a devotee of plyometrics drills such as stair hopping, vertical leaping, medicine ball work and a variety of push-ups.

"We do exercises that are more explosive," Abrahams explains. "We train our nervous system as much as we train our muscles. Our philosophy is to stay strong in all the things you do."

He and Abbott have kept things fresh over the years by dallying in such cross-training disciplines as mountain biking, hiking, running and even a little yoga. Stretching, they've come to realize through a lengthy process of trial and error, should be an integral part of every Masters swimmer's program.

Not even the best intentions, however, can completely stave off injuries.

Overcoming Setbacks

What makes Abrahams' recent performances even more remarkable is that they've come after a pair of career-threatening injuries. In 1995, he underwent surgery to repair instability in the shoulder joint brought on by overuse. To compound matters, he suffered through one debilitating setback after another during rehabilitation.

"Maybe I tried too hard," he admits now, reflecting back upon his efforts to get back into competition shape. He had been fully prepared to sit out for an entire year after the operation. Instead, he was out of action for three years. "I was really, thinking, well, is this it for me?"

After finally coming back, Abrahams hit the water with a vengeance by nailing seven Masters PRs and breaking four world records. At age 53, he was posting times just a shade slower than his lifetime bests. He lit up the pool with a 24.60 in the 50 meter free—a time that would have shattered the world record in the 45-49 age group as well. His butterfly performances, 27.17 and 1.02.25, were just as impressive and implausible.

Still, his physical ailments weren't completely behind him. A short time later his doctors informed him that they'd discovered a tear in the rotator cuff of his repaired shoulder and another tear in his biceps tendon. After having finally made it back into form, he was again faced with the dismal prospect of more

surgery and rehabilitation. "Some people think, 'What's the point?'" he says. "I can go through the rest of my life without having this operation. I just can't swim."

Abrahams, though, never hesitated.

"One of the reasons I went with the operation in 2001 was because I love swimming so much—not just the competing, but everything about it. I just felt that Masters swimming is a very long-term endeavor."

Abrahams, ever the student and always the coach, used the opportunity afforded by his downtime to do more tinkering—not just with his training, but with his stroke. He's convinced that his success in '98 was due in large part to adjustments he made in his technique during his rehabilitation.

That someone at the top of his game would even consider changing his stroke after some 45 years of swimming reveals the depth of Abrahams' commitment; that he could actually pull it off proves the strength of his resolve. But, then again, he's been nurturing and perfecting his gift from the very beginning.

"One of the things that keeps me motivated," he reveals, "is a curiosity of how well I can do for how long."

If his performances in 2002 are any indication, odds are Abrahams will be illuminating pools for many years to come.

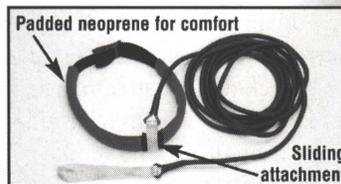
Tito Morales, a novelist and free-lance writer, is a Masters swimmer who competed collegiately for the University of California at Berkeley.

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