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A lifelong passion

There was a time when champions came, conquered and quit sport while still in their teenage years. Socio-economic conditions and a relatively rapid transition from amateurism to professionalism courtesy of revenue from broadcast rights not only contributed to much larger numbers of athletes competing at elite level well into their 20s and even 30s by the late 1990s but helped to bring about a new movement: masters.

A showcase for aquatic sports as a lifelong pursuit and passion, masters clubs and competitions, an environment in which health, fun and commitment collide in a happy mix, arose spontaneously among athletes who had called time on their elite competitive careers but sought motivation to stay fit, keep working out on a regular basis and set themselves goals as they did in their young racing days. Early masters competitions were organised in the 1970s and 1980s in the USA and Canada, Australia, Germany, Italy, Japan, Britain and New Zealand. It was not long before the competitive gene craved more: a World Championship.

The first attempt to formalise international masters swimming was made at the inaugural Age Group Aquatic Competition in Toronto, Canada in 1978, the title reflecting not youth but those 25 years and older, ascending in five-year age bands. A formal meeting was held on April 12, 1983 in Sydney, which resulted in the formation of Masters Swimming – International (MSI), with Australian Gary Stutsel as the first President. A year later, seven more nations sought to take fee-paying membership to nine and a rulebook was drawn up.

Ever one to spot a strong trend, newly elected FINA President Robert Helmick proposed to the Bureau in 1984 that the international federation take Masters under its wing. In April the following year, the FINA Bureau met in Indianapolis and formed a Masters Commission, led by Bureau members Gunnar Werner (SWE) and Artie Shaw (NZL). They immediately sought a meeting with MSI to request close cooperation with FINA Masters and to ensure that the inaugural MSI World Masters Championships, in Tokyo in 1986, were organised under FINA rules.

The meeting, on June 21-22, 1985, at the Caltech Institute of Technology, Pasadena, California, USA, and chaired by Gunnar Werner in the presence of, Artie Shaw, Tina Martin (USA), Kusuo Kitamura (JPN), Brunello Graja (ITA) and Gary Stutsel, gave rise to the "Pasadena Agreement" [see DVD]. On November 9-10, 1985, the Bureau voted to accept that deal, which meant, effectively, that FINA had taken jurisdiction of Masters Swimming. Special rules had to be drawn up so that Masters could join the FINA family of sports and for the appointment of members of a Masters Committee to be possible. Proposals were presented at FINA Congress in Madrid in 1986. The Bureau approved the title of FINA/MSI Masters Championships in Tokyo 1986 and encouraged Masters organisations and MSI to affiliate with FINA's National Federations.

Gunnar Werner recalled the first Masters World Championships in an historical account that he penned for FINA. "There were 3,500 swimmers, including [me]," said Werner. "As I was the FINA Delegate at the Championships the organisers had placed a table on the deck, visible to everybody, for me to overlook the competitions. When my heats were called, I went from the table to the starting blocks, competed, and then returned again to my position."

Masters became a formal member of the FINA family of sports during the Congress held in Madrid in 1986. Amateur law had to be taken into account and a rule amendment was made to make it possible for older swimmers to race as masters without forfeiting their right to compete at the elite level. The Bureau also appointed the first FINA Masters Committee: Gary Stutsel, Chairman; Kosuo Kitamura (JPN), Vice-Chairman; Tina Martin (USA), Secretary; Steve Gosse (CAN); Morrie Chang (TPE); Tom Logan (NZL); Maria Lenk (BRA); Hermann Schluch (FRG); Gen. Ahmed Zorkani Hatab (EGY); Birger Kivela (FIN); Doug Scales (GBR); Geoffrey Burke (GUM). And Artie Shaw was appointed as Bureau Liaison for the Committee. The group met for the first time from May 11 to 14, 1987, in Palo Alto, California



Swimming remained the only sport at the second and third World Masters Championships, respectively in Brisbane, Australia, in 1988, and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1990, but since then all five FINA disciplines have become part of the show, while MSI faded away in favour of FINA. In 2008, the XII FINA Masters Championships were held at the Challenge Stadium in Perth, Western Australia. Almost 5,000 competitors took part from 80 nations.

Among them were a fair number who were Olympic and World champions in their youth. One of the ambassadors for the championships was Shane Gould (AUS). At 15 in 1972, she became a triple Olympic champion who remains the only woman to have won five individual medals at one Games. In her 50s, she could swim 100m freestyle in a little over a minute. She surfs, rides horses and takes on the odd ocean swim. Gould is among thousands of model masters who help to promote aquatic sports as a panacea of health and wellbeing throughout life. "Many of us think that now we're older, we can't possibly do what we once were able to. I hope my participation helps to add weight to change this stereotype," said Gould, aged 47, after racing a 50m butterfly at the Australian National Swimming Championships (and Olympic Trials) in 2004.
