



Local Legend Let's swim!

Local Legends John and Edith Collin: An Interplay of Swimming and Love

Self-Taught Kid Swimmers, Just Like Everyone Else Back in the Day



John Collin:

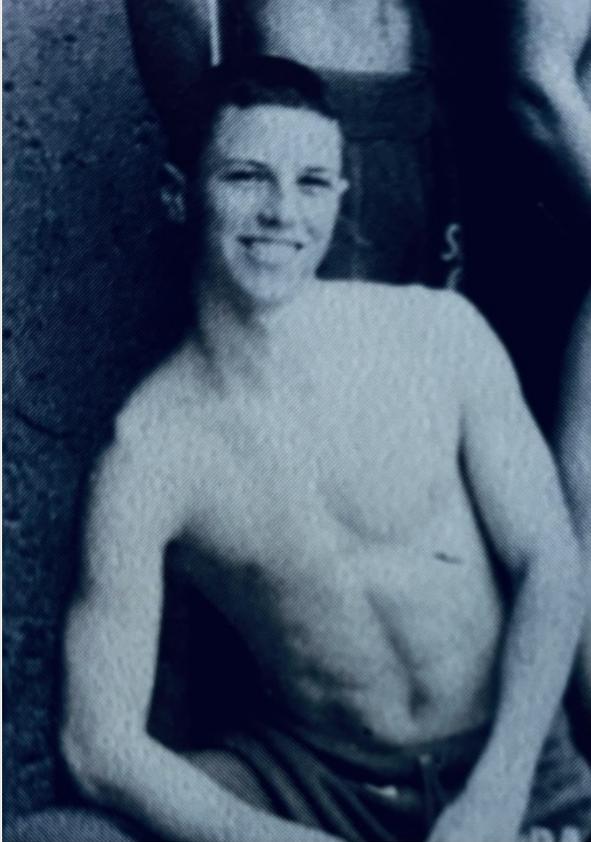
I grew up in San Carlos. We had one of those little plastic six-inch-deep wading pools, and I'd paddle around in it like it was the ocean. Fortunately, my parents had friends with a real swimming pool—but I couldn't swim a lick! I was probably in second or third grade and still a total non-swimmer.

Then one summer, we took a vacation to a resort north of Napa called Forest Lake. They had this *massive* pool—don't ask me how big it was! That week, something clicked, and I basically taught myself to swim.

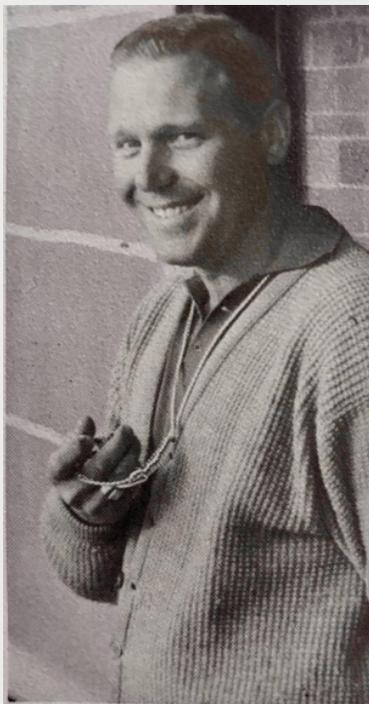
I still didn't quite believe I could do it, but when we got home and went back to our friends' pool, I swam all the way across—and then across the long way, too. Nobody taught me. I just watched other swimmers and figured it out.

After that, I started making some good friendships around the pool. That's where I got better. We played endless games of Marco Polo, and the diving board was a big draw—so much fun.

I swam on a team for the first time in 1963, my senior year at Serra High School (*Editor's Note: Junipero Serra High School in San Mateo, California, is an all-boys Catholic college preparatory school founded in 1944 by the Archdiocese of San Francisco. The school is known for its rigorous academics, strong community, and focus on character development for young men*). They didn't have



a swim team the first three years I was there, but they started one my senior year and since I was quite confident, I went out for the team. I still remember our first practice like it was yesterday. Serra didn't have a pool, so we drove over to the Hillsdale Apartments, where the pool was about 22 or 23 yards long. Our coach was Gus deGarra, a Hungarian who had won a gold medal in water polo when Hungary upset the Russians—an enormous deal at the time. (See photo below.)



He ran that first practice over Christmas break, when everyone was back in town. It was brutal—set after set, really intense. He pushed us hard. I guess that was the Eastern European influence. We were all so completely overworked, that we got out of the pool and threw up. I thought, “Maybe this isn't the sport for me.” But I stuck with it.

Edith: My family lived out in the hills behind Watsonville, a good eight miles from town. There were seven of us kids, and my dad—who could build just about anything—built us a pool. I couldn't tell you how long it was, but it had a deep end and a shallow end, and that was all we needed. It wasn't heated, of course. You'd shiver your way in, inch by inch, but eventually your body would adjust, and off you'd go. There were no formal lessons, no coaches—just a lot of trial and error, a lot of games, and a whole lot of laughter.

We played Marco Polo endlessly. And we got good at it—really good. My personal specialty? Silence. When it was my turn to hide, I'd just slip down to the bottom, tuck myself in, and hold my breath until my brother gave up and swam off in the wrong direction. I don't really remember learning how to swim, I just remember doing it—figuring it out on my own, one game at a time.

Neither of my parents got in the pool with us. They were happy to watch from the side. But we had a diving board, which was endlessly entertaining. Then, at some point, we added a trampoline and set it up across one corner of the pool. That's when things got wild. We'd climb the slide, jump from the top of it onto the trampoline, and bounce ourselves into the water. It was completely nuts. Nobody got hurt, miraculously, but when I think about it now—oh my God! What were we thinking?

We also went to Hawaii once, with the whole family, and there was this beach maybe half a mile from where we were staying. All us kids would walk down there together, towels slung over our shoulders, barefoot and sunburned. Hawaiian kids were always there, already in the water, just

swimming and playing. One day I noticed—suddenly—all of them got out of the ocean. And then, like a wave itself, everyone else did too. I didn't know why, but I knew it mattered. I got out. I was still little, this skinny kid who kept getting bowled over by the surf. And when I turned around, I saw the shadows—sharks swimming right through the waves. The Hawaiian kids stood calmly, just waiting, like they knew the ocean would give them the signal when it was okay again. After maybe five minutes, they all headed back in.

There was a pier nearby too, and we'd jump off it and dive down to collect sea urchins from the bottom. We had no gear—no masks, no snorkels, just our eyes, our hands, and our tolerance for saltwater. Eventually it didn't sting anymore. We'd come up holding urchins in our hands, not knowing that this guy up on the pier was actually *selling* them! He'd call down, "Can you get that one? That one right there?" And we just thought he was being helpful!

That was our version of swimming—no strokes, no lanes—just freedom and fun and whatever the ocean threw at us.

I did have one year of swimming in high school—not a team, just a class. I went to boarding school in San Francisco—Hamlin High School—and we lived inside this big building all week long. So when I saw that there was a swimming option, I signed up immediately! But it was pretty minimal—just 20 minutes of laps, back and forth, no coaching or structure. Still, it felt good. I liked it.

Editor's Note: Hamlin is an all girls independent K-8 school in San Francisco that still exists. It is the oldest non-sectarian school for girls in the western United States, serving 450 girls. The school was founded in 1898 by Sarah Dix Hamlin, a world traveler, suffragette, and fierce advocate for women's rights. Sarah was determined to afford young women the educational opportunities needed to "meet the challenges of their time." It is not the least bit surprising that Edith is the product of such a school!

Swimming in the Beaux-Arts Style Hearst Gymnasium Pool

John: During college I taught Red Cross swimming lessons at Hillsdale High during the summers. I swam in college at UC Berkeley—not on the varsity team, but in the intramural meets. I lived in Bowles Hall, the all-men's dormitory, and we competed in swim meets and often won! My best stroke was butterfly. I could swim 50 yards in about 30 seconds flat. It's not the greatest time in the world, but I could place in several of our meets. Funny thing is, I don't even remember the women at Cal having their own swim team or swim meets back then. Different times.

Editor's notes: UC Berkeley's women's swim team was established as a varsity sport in the 1976-77 academic year. It was one of 12 sports that were part of the newly created Department of Women's Intercollegiate Athletics, which began in 1976. This coincided with the implementation of Title IX, which mandated equal opportunities for women in sports. UC Berkeley established its separate Department of Women's Intercollegiate Athletics, which included the women's swim team, in 1976-77. Luella "Lue" Lilly was the first and only athletic director for this department before it merged with the men's athletic department. UC Berkeley, like many other women's sports programs at the time, encountered significant hurdles, including limited funding and resources (upcycling discarded equipment and uniforms), inadequate facilities and support (no office space, no weight rooms), lack of acceptance and recognition, low salaries and limited opportunities for coaches, and difficulty overcoming gender norms and expectations.

Edith Collin: Actually, at UC Berkeley we did have a women's swim team, swim practice and swim meets! It wasn't at the same time as the guys. The women at Cal had this incredible pool. I think it's still there. A separate pool just for the women? Oh, yeah! absolutely! This was back in the 60's and things hadn't changed yet. The years we were there...the times were changing so fast!

Editor's Note: Through the 1970's UC Berkeley women had their own dedicated swimming pool located within the Hearst Gymnasium, it was built in 1927! The pool still exists today. Hearst Gymnasium was designed by the architect Julia Morgan, who also designed San Simeon for William Randolph Hearst, It is known for its historical and architectural significance, featuring ornate marble tile decks and classical architectural elements. They don't build them like that anymore!

I showed up for my first women's swim meet, and I thought, "Oh yeah, I can do this." When it was time for the breaststroke, I was confident. I lined up, pushed off, and by the time my head came up for the third breath, the other girl had already climbed out of the pool at the far end. I was the very last one out, and let me tell you, it was humbling. Breaststroke has never been my best stroke. I was

surrounded by all these girls who had been swimming competitively their whole lives. The Ferris family, for example—some of them actually swam in the Olympics. And I was in a sorority with all those Ferris girls! They completely dominated the meet. I just tried to hold my own and not get lapped.

John: You might know Caroline Ferris—she swims Masters in Texas. But the big star of the family was John Ferris. He swam butterfly against Mark Spitz! And—get this—he always came in second. That was the level he was at. He won several medals at the Olympics, even beating Mark Spitz who came from the same club near Sacramento.

Editor's Note: Carolyn Ferris Boak comes from one of the premier swimming families of northern California. The sister-brother trio of Carolyn, Joan and John Ferris were among the top swimmers in the country at age group and national meets. But like most girls in the pre-title IX era, Carolyn's swimming career ended with high school graduation. It wasn't until 1977 that Carolyn began swimming again – and setting national and world Masters age group records in the pool. John Ferris won two bronze medals at the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City; one in the men's 200-meter individual medley and one in the men's 200-meter butterfly with a 2:09.3, remaining in third place through most of the race. America's Mark Spitz, a former Arden Hills Club (California) swimmer like John, was favored to win the race, but finished eighth.

Umm, Can I Share Your Microscope?

Edith: We met in class at UC Berkeley.

John: Yep, Zoology 1A. Edith's maiden name is Chamberlain, and, of course, mine is Collin and they made you sit alphabetically. We sat at the same desk in Zoology, but had two microscopes. One microscope would have been OK. We had to dissect sharks.

Edith: John was very quiet, he loved science and he loved this class. He continued in the biological sciences and decided to be pre-med. The competition was fierce, but John was very strong and a natural at science. He went to UCSF for medical school. We got married during his second year of medical school. At some point he needed to decide on a speciality and decided on pathology.

John: I mostly worked in the pathology lab diagnosing diseases with tissue biopsies. We all worked in the labs on our own cases but we would get together once per week to compare notes on our challenging cases. It helped us learn and share our knowledge as medicine evolved. I like the work and it was continually interesting.

I later joined the American Board of Pathology (ABPath) which is non-profit organization that certifies physicians in the specialty of pathology. It is responsible for setting the standards for pathology practice and ensuring that certified pathologists meet those standards. I felt strongly about contributing to the profession at this level.

I worked first at St. Mary's in Daly City then worked for most of my career at El Camino Hospital in Mountain Views. The hours were quite long. Edith did all the housework, took care of the our children and got quite involved with the school by tutored other children in math.

Edith: While I didn't take a professional path. John and I raised children. I started volunteering at Santa Mateo Mediation Center in the 1990's. One example of the mediation was a situation where two 14 year olds started a fire playing around. The mediation was between the firefighter, the youth and their parents. At the end, the parents were thankful and the kids understood the firefighter's responsibility. Another example was about trees where one owners trees were blocking the sunlight and view of her neighborhood. They had been friends but had lost that connection over time and the death of one their husbands. They decided to trim the tree and repair their friendship. There were so many magical moments where people found a way to have difficult conversations. I was trained to listen and ask questions like "What do you want to do? What would that look like? What does that mean to you?"

I especially liked working with teenagers; most of them did crazy and risky things without thinking about the consequences... until later. I went back to school to become a family therapist. Again, I worked with youth that were in the probation system. There was often a lot of trauma in their home lives, often it was deep and would be present for their entire life. They were good kids. I felt lucky to be able to do that work. The part of work that was most fulfilling was trying to help youth understand that they were good people and could become complete adults. Often they were never noticed,

praised or encouraged and had been through very violent and traumatic situations. I wanted them to see themselves as humans with remarkable potential. Sometimes I worked with women who didn't believe they could hold a job, or leave a marriage and live independently. We would take one step at a time, sometimes something small like having nicer clothes changes a person. I really enjoyed seeing people blossom.

John: We have two daughters and a son. Our children attended St. Francis High School at the insistence of my Catholic parents. The oldest daughter is a professor at a community college in Idaho. She cycles, skis and hikes a lot. Our second daughter is a professor at Georgetown University and teaches Peace and Conflict Studies. I think she is following her mother in mediation related work. Edith worked locally on human relationship problems and our daughter works on International issues on national relations. She also works with first generation students on how to advance through higher education. Our son was a runner in high school. We loved going to his track meets. Now he works in the television entertainment industry. He worked on military related shows and actually was embedded in Afghanistan to get real experience. It was quite stressful to us as parents to have him in harm's way, so swimming was one of the places where we could settle our minds.

Edith: I definitely started swimming so I could calm myself down. Dick Bennett, Ann Kay and Tim Sheeper all helped me with technique and the rhyme of swimming. It was so much part of my mental health in the beginning.

Each of our children are individuals. What we have given them is the ability to make decisions on their own. It has given them autonomy and the faith in themselves that what they are doing is good. We listen a lot and feel lucky that they share with us what they are working on. Even though they didn't get along as children, they are closer as adults and like each other now. We have three grandchildren already in high school and college.

Big Innovations in the Sport: Goggles and Flip Turns

John: When I swam in high school, there was no fancy gear. None. No caps, no goggles. We had kickboards, and that was about it. I remember sticking the kickboard between my legs and using it like a pull buoy—because we didn't have those either. Flip turns? Totally illegal! This was 1963, and you had to touch the wall with your hand before you turned. The really fast swimmers had figured out a hybrid—touch and then flip—shaving maybe half a second, but it wasn't legal yet. That all changed the next year, I think. But at the time, it was hand first, every time.

Editor's Note: Flip turns in swimming became legal for freestyle for the 1956 Olympics in Melbourne but it took some time for it to be fully adopted and for the rules to be adjusted to allow it in all competitions. For the backstroke flip turns were not legal until 1991. Prior to 1991, backstroke swimmers had to touch the wall while on their backs before turning.

I remember those early days so clearly—especially the way the chlorine would burn your eyes. I'd come home from practice, try to get through my homework, and everything would be blurry. Just this haze over the pages. But we didn't think twice. That was just how it was.

Edith: You'd think someone would've invented goggles way before they did! I mean, really—how long did it take? *Editor's Note: Goggles were first allowed in competitive swimming in 1976.*

Searching for the Right Masters Fit

Edith: After college, I didn't swim for a while. Life got busy. But eventually I thought, "I've got to do *something*." So I went down to the Alpine Swim Club. That lasted exactly one day. They had a board on the deck with the workout written on it, and apparently you weren't supposed to talk to the coach. But I was new, so I asked him, "Hey, what's LSD?"—meaning the set, not the drug! He didn't say a word. Just turned and walked off. (Turns out it means Long Slow Distance.) I thought, "Okay, not my scene."

Then I joined Ladera and swam there for about two years. That was a totally different vibe—really lovely people, and the pool was great. But eventually I got a letter saying that at least 50% of the swim team had to be club members. I wasn't, and I didn't want to deal with all that.

There was a guy there, Adam Wilbur, who kept saying, "You really should swim at Menlo." So I

finally checked it out. Back then, Menlo Masters was swimming at Sacred Heart. And *that* pool—wow. It was just stunning. Crystal clear, big, open. 50 meters by 25 yards. But the best part? It didn't matter how fast or slow you were. There was a lane for you, and nobody cared where you came from or how you swam. It was welcoming. It felt like I'd found my place.

John: This was around the year 2000. By then, we were swimming at Herkner Pool in Redwood City and sometimes at the Woodside pool. Wherever there was water and Tim could wrangle some lane space, that's where we went.

Edith: Yes, wherever Tim could find a pool, we all just followed. You don't let go of a good thing once you find it. I remember Tim once joked, "For those of you who didn't start swimming until later, like eight or nine..." and I said, "Try fifty!" But I was having fun by then, and I didn't care what age I started.

John: Edith dragged me into masters. I joined Menlo in 2001, reluctantly at first. I came out of years of running—marathons, half-marathons, 10Ks—since the early '90s. But the pounding caught up with me. My knees, my feet—everything started to ache. So when Edith said, "Just come to the pool," I finally gave in. I had swum as a kid, so I figured I'd see what was still in the tank. Now here I am, 24 years later. Edith's been in it a couple years longer than that.

Edith: When you joined, John, you were at least three lanes faster than me. I wasn't in the slowest lane, but close! These days, we're both in the slowest lane together and, honestly, it's lovely. Everyone is kind and nobody cares how fast you are.

Our Swim Regimen

John: I swim three times a week, usually Monday, Wednesday, and Friday—or sometimes Saturday. I don't double up. I like to keep it balanced.

Edith: It depends on the workout for me. I love long freestyle sets, especially when we trade leads. It's rhythmic, steady. And no fins, please. I'll be a good sport if I have to wear them, but I'd rather not. They wear me out!

John: I actually like the fins. And I like breaststroke, which Edith avoids at all costs. If it's a breaststroke day, I'll usually drive myself!

Edith: I just tell people, "My breaststroke looks suspiciously like freestyle." I can fake it for about 25 yards. It's not that I hate it—it's just that I'm so slow at it. Still true after all these years!

John: Full circle.

Edith: Exactly. I've given up the dream of being a breaststroker. And I've done Tim's clinics—he explains things so clearly—but no matter how well I understand the mechanics, my body just goes right back to its old ways.

So this year, I've got a new goal: I want to be in a relay! Nothing too intense—something low-key like the Rinconada meet. Do you know Sou Qi? Have you met her? She's wonderful. I want to be on a relay with her—**she** can do the breaststroke. I'll swim anything else. I'm not picky, as long as it's not freezing outside.

I think the most fun I ever had at a meet was with Frances Reneau's mom, Letty French, and several other women. It was a 400 free relay in Santa Cruz, at a long-course pool—everyone swam 100. I was the anchor. And by the time the third swimmer got out of the pool, all the other teams were *done*. Just standing around in their towels, cheering. And I thought, "Can't we just call it good?" But I swam the last leg as planned. Every last meter. It was hilarious and embarrassing and joyful all at once. I really miss those days.

Navigating Changes

John: I did triathlons for several years. I trained on my own—not with Tim—and the longest race I ever did was a half Ironman in Santa Cruz: a 1.2-mile swim, 56-mile bike ride, and a 13.1-mile run. It took me about six hours to finish, which I felt pretty proud of. Running was always my strongest discipline.

But things started to change. I have a condition called *cerebellar ataxia*. My cerebellum—it's the part of the brain that controls coordination and balance—is slowly atrophying. It's been a humbling process. At first, I noticed it in my running. Then I started having trouble on the bike. I crashed twice and ended up with concussions, which forced me to stop riding outside. Eventually, it made its way into my swimming.

I used to just jump out at the diving blocks. Now I have to use the ladder. I face-planted once pushing myself out in 2022. The cement won. It was a hard moment. But swimming still helps. At first, when I get in the pool, I know I look uncoordinated. Anyone watching me warm up probably wonders what I'm doing there. But after a few laps, I find my rhythm. That's the main reason I keep coming back—because I actually feel better in the water. It helps my coordination more than anything else. I love getting a good workout.



Emotionally, though, it's tough. I've thought about quitting, more than once. But something always brings me back.

I used to hold the Menlo Masters record for the 50-yard butterfly, back when I was in my fifties or early sixties. I remember Harlan Pinto coming in one day and saying, "I tried to break it, but I couldn't do it." Later, Tom Anderson finally did. Records fall. But I was proud to hold that one for a while.

I also remember when Tim was trying to beat USF at the Santa Cruz meet, back around 2010. He told everyone they had to swim the 200 fly. Peter Shepard was next to me on the blocks. I trained so hard for that race! I made it to the wall, and during cool-down, Judy Strauss came over and said, "John, I hate to tell you, but you got DQ'ed—they said you were flutter kicking between your dolphin kicks."

That was a real letdown after all that work. I went from a high to a low in about five seconds.

Outside of swimming, I still ride my bike—indoors now, on a smart trainer. It's in the garage, and I can ride routes from all over the world. Without that, I'd probably be a basket case. Movement still gives me purpose.

Edith: The water at Burgess Park Pool has been so nice and warm lately. That first push off the wall, and it's clear and warm—except for the leaves on the bottom! That feeling is still one of my favorite things.

I had my own health scare last summer. I had a stroke, and I was out of the pool for a couple months. I've lost a lot of muscle and gained some weight. It's frustrating. I've seen more doctors than I can count. I'm doing physical therapy now to try to get my strength back. My left side is the weak side, even though I'm left-handed. I have to walk while bouncing a tennis ball, and it's way harder with my left hand. But I'm staying calm about it. I don't think about what I've lost. I think about where I want to be.

Legends Workouts for Legends

I'm doing the twice weekly workouts with Aleksei Avarkendo called 'Legends'. About 10 of us do 45 minutes of strength training with stretch cords, dumbbells and body weight. Aleksei is very creative in designing circuits of exercises. We do them together as a group and the time flies by. A lot of the movements are very swim relevant, increasing range of motion and working on all the muscle groups in your arms, shoulders, core and lats. Then we do swim drills and some conditioning in the pool for 45 minutes. I feel fresher and more limber after the workouts. I encourage other swimmers to try this [training](#) opportunity. I'm rebuilding my muscles and improving my balance thanks to

Legends workouts. You will get stronger with Aleksei! Aleksei is our hero, especially following his swim marathon for his youth team. I thought it was cool that his Russian friends, Menlo Masters and his team kids came to cheer for him.

I told Tim the other day, “Now I swim, I go home, have breakfast... and then I take a nap.” He looked surprised—“A nap?” I said, “A nap!”

I’m walking a mile a day now. I used to hike up Windy Hill with my daughter and grandson. That’s out of reach for me right now, but I’d love to get back there someday. That’s one of my goals—Windy Hill. These days, I try to do the most I can with the body I have, and let that be enough.

It was hard coming back to the pool after my stroke. I didn’t tell anyone at first. I think John told a couple people. The day I came back, I was standing on the deck, and Mike Dorsey saw me. He got out of the pool—everybody else was lined up to get in—and he walked over, gave me a big hug and said, “I’m so glad to see you’re okay.” He’s just the sweetest. That moment meant a lot.

This team really is a family. Everyone supports each other. I just want to get back to something like normal. My new normal is a little slower, but it’s still mine—and every lap still matters.

This interview was conducted by Frances Reneau and Kim Freitas and edited by Kim.

About Local Legends

Menlo Masters is gathering and sharing stories of extraordinary individuals on the team. We hope these narratives will connect us with each other and inspire us to swim often.

If you know a swimmer who has some stories, please send an email to Tasha Capen, Menlo Master Team Manager tasha@menlomasters.com

Menlo Swim & Sport menloswim.com