



Local Legend

Let's swim!

Local Legends Marianne Brems: A Poet In Motion

Youth Swimming 1960's Style



I began competitive swimming in 1962 at the age of thirteen. I might have started sooner because I had always loved swimming, but at that time in Urbana, Illinois, the public pool I went to was oval shaped and the only swim teams were at private country clubs with costly memberships. So I speed skated instead (training with Bonnie Blair's old brothers and sisters) When I did start swimming, it was on a summer team which existed only in the "outdoor season." When "indoor season" arrived, I was eager to continue on the girls' team at the YMCA where girls practiced on Monday and Wednesday evenings, boys on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and on Friday evenings they had family swim. On Saturdays we had another practice, or a swim meet if the roads were clear of snow and ice. There was only one team in our conference that had a 25-yard pool. The other teams, including ours, had four-lane 20-yard pools, except one had a 15-yard pool (three lengths of each stroke for an IM). Ancient history, right?

Florida Sunshine. No 'Off Season'

In my junior year of high school I had the good fortune to go to Pine Crest Prep School in Fort Lauderdale. This led to a drastic change in my swimming life going from swimming three times a week to two times a day and it was all "outdoor season" so I improved rapidly. Some of us on the team (including Diana Nyad) were in the class of '67 and since this was pre-Title IX and there were virtually no college swim teams for women, we were wondering how to prepare for the '68 Olympic

Trials. The girl who was valedictorian of our class decided to stay out of college the first year and train despite having been accepted to a prestigious college, a bit of a scandal since this was a prep school and she was the valedictorian. People didn't do "gap years" back then!

Editor's Note: Diana Nyad Diana Nyad (born 1949) is an American author, journalist, motivational speaker, and long-distance swimmer. Nyad gained national attention in 1975 when she swam around Manhattan (28 mi or 45 km) in record time. In 2013, on her fifth attempt and at age 64, she swam from Havana, Cuba, to Key West, Florida, a journey of 110 mi (180 km) without a shark cage.

Pre-Title 9 College Swimming



I went off to college and started swimming every day, but only for an hour while dodging the lap and recreational swimmers. After a month or so I found a high school girl who had a car and was driving a couple of nights a week to a 2-hour workout 45 minutes away so I started going with her. She'd pick me up at my dorm at 6:00 PM and I'd get back at 10:00 PM. The other days it was back to recreational swim at the college pool. The problem was she stopped going with about four months to go before the end of the school year and since I had no car, I was stuck.

The minute I finished my last exam in the spring, I went back to Florida to train for the summer. Now as a Masters swimmer, I have to laugh when someone under 60 asks me where I swam in college. They have no idea what it was like back then!

Masters is Born!



Fast forward again to the dawn of Masters swimming. The first Masters Nationals was held in Amarillo, Texas in 1970 and drew 46 swimmers. By 1972 the event drew 325 swimmers and was held at the old College of San Mateo pool (25 yards by 6 lanes) up on the hill where the wind was typically howling by 4:00 PM most days. I had to wait until 1974 to compete because there was no 19-24 age group back then. You had to be at least 25. So I swam *Exhibition* in a few Masters meets before I turned 25. I'm quite sure *Exhibition* is not allowed anymore.

I swam for 17 years with the San Mateo Master Marlins and was also an assistant coach, then 7 years with the Rinconada Masters, and now I've been with Menlo Masters for 24 years. In other words, I've been swimming for a very LONG time—62 years!

Editor's Note: In competitive swimming, "exhibition" swimming refers to a swimmer's participation in an event where their results are not counted towards the team's score, and they don't receive official placing. It's a way for swimmers to participate, get a time for potential future meets, or try a new stroke without impacting the overall competition. The times are official and often 'participation' ribbons were given. I would love this type of event!

So, what keeps me at it?



In the mid-1970s I got quite excited about open water swimming which I had never done before. This was before PMS sanctioned open water swims, but around that time the City of San Francisco ordered the South End Rowing Club and the Dolphin Club, the two open water swimming clubs in San Francisco Aquatic Park both of which were *men only*, to admit women because they were on public property, so discrimination was not allowed. I joined the Dolphin Club and participated in a number of open water swims in the bay. When Pier 39 opened some of us were invited to do a swim from Alcatraz to the Pier as part of the opening ceremony. That was really fun! The first two Pacific Masters sanctioned open water swims were the Donner Lake Swim in 1980 and the Lake Berryessa Swim in 1981.

Editor's Note: Originally founded in 1877 as an all-male club, the Dolphin Club officially started admitting women in 1977, according to the Dolphin Club Chronicles. As Marianne says, the lawsuit, brought by six women, argued that the clubs' exclusion of women violated federal law. Women now make up a significant portion of the membership in both the Dolphin Club and the South End Rowing Club.



Now in 2025 I'm no longer competing at swim meets. I'm still swimming at least four days a week. I feel twinges of nostalgia when my teammates go off to Donner Lake and other swims. If I'm ever in town for the La Jolla Relay, I'd love to be part of that. My daily workouts revolve around trying to maintain strength, I focus on technique. Oh, and doing my best to try to keep up with my baby sister, Karen (Brems), also a Menlo Masters swimmer, who was born the same month I started competitive swimming back in 1962!

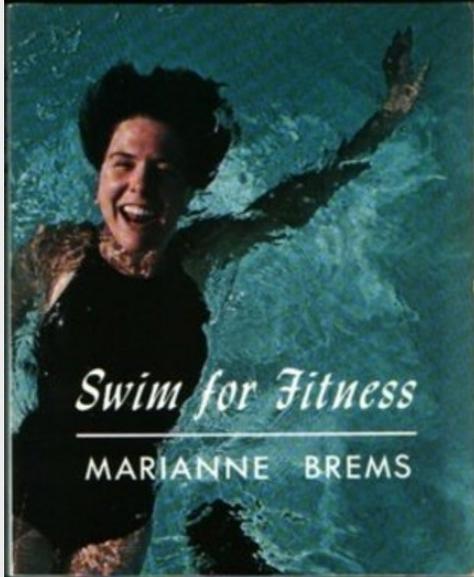
It's a Beautiful Thing...

Unlike some of my teammates, I don't need an event to keep up my motivation. I feel plenty motivated by the good fortune of having the health and fitness to swim as far and for as many days as I want. No question, *it's a beautiful thing*. I do have my struggles with being more than a quarter of a mile slower for a two-mile swim than I used to be. As Tim knows well, I am happier in the pool if I ignore the clock and think about stroke efficiency. I think about the many warm and supportive relationships I am lucky enough to have on the team. Thank you Menlo Masters!

Swimming as the Catalyst for Writing

Swimming managed to make its way into other parts of my life. I am a writer and back in 1976 when I was just finishing my Masters degree in creative writing, Jim Fixx's book *The Complete Book of Running* came out and it was selling like hotcakes. At that time the only books on swimming were books on how to teach your child to swim, so I thought, "Why not write a book for adults on swimming for fitness?".

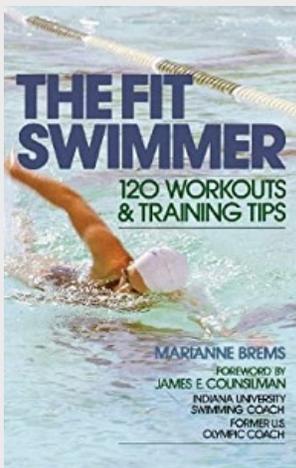
I had never written a book, so I lacked the confidence to



proceed on my own. I drew up an outline based on my experience as a Masters swimmer and presented it to Dave Scott (of triathlon fame) who was coaching the Davis Aquatic Masters at the time. We started working on the book together, but after a few months, Dave left the project. At that point I was far enough into it that giving up was absolutely out of the question. I continued on my own.

I started doing research and writing on adult swim training. One of my teammates on the San Mateo Master Marlins took lots of swimming and dryland training photos for me. The result was a book called *Swim for Fitness* published in 1979.

Editor's Note: Dave Scott is a U.S. triathlete and the first six-time Ironman World Championship winner (1980, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1986, and 1987). He is known for his intense training regimens and his unrelenting race performances.



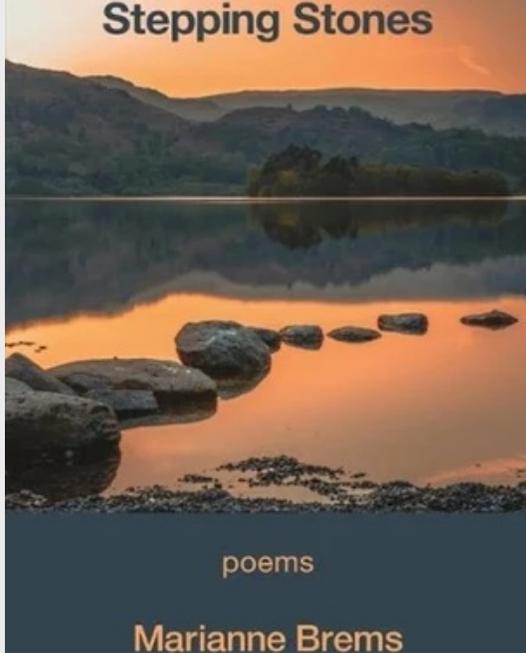
During the next few years when I was coaching swimming part time both youth and Masters, I wrote three more swimming books and created a commercially produced instructional videotape on swimming technique. I still have a few of those old VHS tapes!

After that my writing life went in a new direction. I was teaching English as a Second Language part time and I began to focus on writing textbooks. Over the next twenty-five years I wrote or co-authored six ESL texts. The fifth one was published about a year after I retired and I worked on one more after that. It took me and my co-authors five and a half years to complete. At that point I'd had enough of textbooks.

The Inspiration for Poetry is Everywhere

Now I'm in the third phase of my writing life—poetry. I was ripe to work on something that came in small chunks after the last five-and-a-half-year project. I read a lot (and still do) and once I had a body of decent poems, I started submitting to literary journals. My first published poem was “The Owl on the Fence” based on the plastic owl that used to sit on the back fence between Burgess Pool and the tennis courts. You probably never noticed it, did you? It's long gone now. I have published five poetry collections, the most recent is forthcoming in early 2026.

Editor's Note: Marianne's poetry books are: Sliver of Change, Unsung Offerings, In It's Own Time, Stepping Stones. More about Marianne's writing at www.mariannebrems.com. She is published by Finishing Line Publishing.



Cycling to the Pool Seeded My Other Sport

There came a point in the early 1980s when I began to lose interest in competing. I still wanted to swim, I just didn't want to compete so I decided to add another sport that I would never compete in and I started cycling. When my sister Karen, who you may know is an Olympic cyclist, moved to the Bay Area in 1984, I learned about different bike tours and events and I joined the Western Wheelers Bike Club. I started doing club rides and developed a small group of friends that I rode with (not Karen, she was too young and too fast!).



Editor's Personal Note: I met Marianne and Joan on a camping bike tour in Montana in the summer of 1993. I've done a lot of touring and weekend rides with her. You might notice that she rides her bike to the pool in all weather conditions the four or five days she swims each week, a 16 mile round trip from her home in Portola Valley. This adds up to 65 miles a week of just bike commuting. On the days she doesn't swim and rides her bike to Skyline, always including a climb or two to maintain her leg strength. Her lifelong consistency in sports explains her remarkable health and fitness. It is in these small everyday gestures that Local Legends defy their chronological age. Plus, Brems have good genes too!

Cycling Sea to Shining Sea



In 1989 I turned forty and was sure I already had one foot in the grave, so I wanted to do something challenging and exotic. For a few minutes it occurred to me to train for an Ironman which was a new event at the time, but I got over that quickly. Instead I decided on a cross country bike trip because I had heard about one that was supported. It was a fund raiser for the Lung Association. 300 cyclists set off on our bikes from Seattle and rode eighty miles a day until we reached Atlantic City forty-seven days later.

We had five rest days along the way and on those days I was writing a sample to be considered as an author for a textbook series. When we went through Chicago, I got on the L in my bike clothes and personally dropped off my textbook writing sample downtown with the publisher. Later I got the contract!

The PCT by Bike

After riding across the country, I was game for more long tours. In 1991, Bill Paul published a book called The Pacific Crest Bicycle Trail. The route followed the hiking trail as nearly as possible on paved roads and it went from Vancouver to Tijuana. Another important event in 1991 was that I met Joan who was close to my age and had always wanted to do bike touring, but never found anyone to do it with. In the summer of 1991, we flew to Vancouver and set off on the Pacific Crest bicycle trail with thirty pounds strapped to our bikes. With the help of the book, I had set up a daily itinerary of where we would spend each night and I set up mail stops in certain towns where we would check General Delivery for mail. Those were the days before email and cell phones! We rode all the way home through the mountains to our front door with a detour to Mammoth Lakes—two thousand miles in a month. We did not go all the way to Tijuana.

Since then, Joan and I have covered thousands of miles in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Tasmania, South Africa, and Europe. In 2001 we even repeated a version of our 1991 Vancouver tour. Joan has now stopped riding. Now we do hiking trips together. I continue to do some bike tours—most recently the length of Ireland and across France from the Channel to Nice. While cycling, I'm always look for a body of water to swim in. Not sure how long I'll last, but I'm hoping for a bit longer.

This narrative was written by Marianne Brems. It was edited by Kim Freitas.

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