



Local Legend

Let's swim!

Local Legend Tony Spencer: 3x5 Card Master

Always Another Challenge



Frances: When we talked to Tony Spencer about a profile for Menlo Masters' Local Legends, his first response was disbelief.

"I have no idea why you picked me! I mean, all these guys have done so many incredible things!"

That humility is part of what makes Tony such a familiar presence around Burgess Pool. At 77, he's still chasing monthly mileage goals, swimming marathon sessions during February Fitness, increasing his running mileage, and looking for ways to get a little better. His is about a lifetime of finding new challenges, adapting when life throws a few curve balls, and discovering that the people you meet along the journey are the greatest reward.

Starting Over. Again. And Again.



Tony: Swimming wasn't really my sport growing up. I learned at Clyde Devine Swim School in Redwood City, back when the pools weren't heated. There were seven kids in our family, and every one of us had to learn to swim. I was kid number two, and I hated every minute of it.

After high school PE, I didn't swim again for almost twenty years.

Instead, I found gymnastics. I competed in high school, at the College of San Mateo, and then at San Jose State on the horizontal bar. During my senior year, I was spotting for a teammate when he slipped off the high bar. I broke his fall, but in doing that, I fractured the head of my femur. That ended my gymnastics career right there. Recovery took a year on crutches.

Looking back, that was probably the first time I had to reinvent myself.

One More Telephone Pole

After I had been married a few years, I decided to see if I could run around the block. The next day, I ran a little farther. After we moved to Morgan Hill, I'd add another telephone pole every few runs until eventually I was making it all the way around Chesbro Reservoir and back home.

I've always been someone who writes down goals. Every year, I'd make a stack of 3x5 cards with goals for business, family, finances, and fitness. One year, I wrote on one of the cards, "Run the San Francisco Marathon."

Crossing that finish line wasn't just about the race. When I got home, I picked up that card and drew a line through it. I've probably run fifteen marathons since then, but I still remember crossing off that first goal on the 3x5 card.

Becoming A Triathlete at Fifty-Nine



The funny thing is that my triathlon phase came from a conversation with a stranger.

My wife and I were sitting near the seawall in Capitola when I noticed a man wearing an Ironman shirt. I asked him what it was like. He smiled and said, "That was a long day." For whatever reason, that stuck with me.

I was 59 years old and hadn't been in a swimming pool since high school. I found Burgess Pool and started in the warm pool. I'd watch the swimmers in the competition pool and think, "Wow. Look at those guys. They're animals."

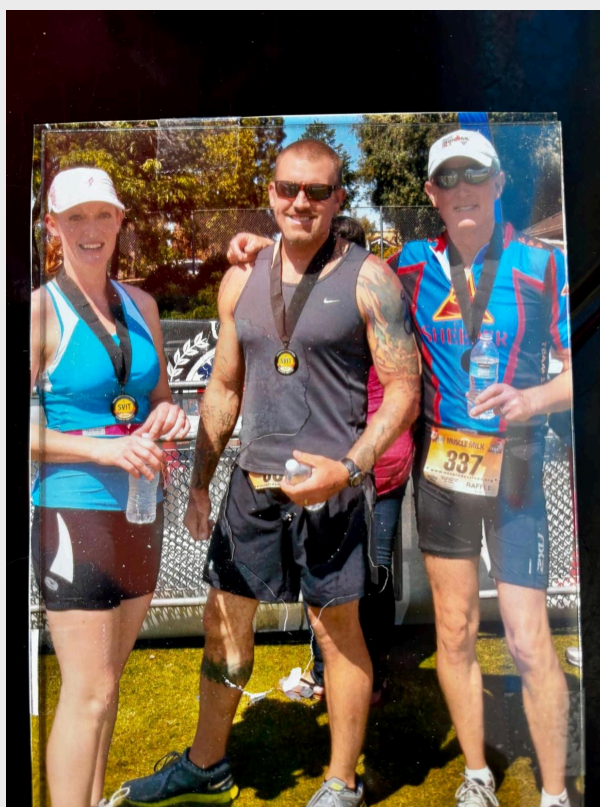
Eventually, I decided it was time to stop watching. I got into Lane 8, and I've been happily living there ever since.

Everything was new. Before my first triathlon, I hadn't ridden a bicycle in fifty years. It was a sprint race in San Jose. I borrowed my brother-in-law's mountain bike because I didn't even own one.

I enjoyed that first race so much that I signed up for an Olympic-distance triathlon. Then I figured, "Well, why not a Half Ironman?" That one was up in Guerneville, and standing there at the swim start, I had a complete panic attack.

You know how everybody is standing there waiting, and then suddenly they say, "Go!" Everyone around me took off, and I just...whoosh...froze. I remember putting my face in the water, blowing some underwater bubbles, and telling myself, "Come on, You've trained for this." Eventually, I got moving. Once I was swimming, everything settled down. Looking back, I think a Half Ironman just felt like the big leagues to me. It was a little overwhelming, but I got through it, and that gave me the confidence to keep going.

Just Sign Up Again



After that, I decided to train for the full Vineman Ironman, again up in Guerneville. We swam in the Russian River. Two weeks before the race, though, my asthma flared up badly.

I've dealt with asthma my whole life. When it's bad, I can barely walk to the mailbox. Somehow, gymnastics never seemed to trigger it, which is probably one of the reasons I stayed with that sport for so long. Endurance sports are a different story.

Missing that race was hard. I'd trained for months, and suddenly it was over before it even started.

So I did what I've usually done when something doesn't work out. I signed up again for the next year.

That trip almost became memorable for a completely different reason. We booked what looked like a nice hotel, only to discover when we checked in that it was a nudist resort.

The fellow at the front desk reassured us, "Don't worry. Most of them stay up by the upper pool." Fortunately, everyone kept to themselves.

The race itself turned out to be wonderful. It took me 15 hours and 37 minutes on a very hot day. The bike was hot, and then the run was punishing. By the time I finished, the winner had probably already gone to bed after the awards ceremony, but I didn't care. It was an adventure, and crossing that finish line just made me want to do another one.

Asthma eventually sent me back to the hospital several more times, but after I recovered, I got back into racing. I did several Santa Cruz Half Ironmans after that.

I guess that's become a pattern in my life. If something knocks me down, I eventually find my way back.

Learning From the Team

Most of my bike training was with the triathlon group here at Burgess, Team Sheep. I remember those Saturday rides. I was the slowest rider then, and I'm probably still the slowest rider now. The runs were way beyond me, so I eventually started doing a lot of my training on my own. That never bothered me much. I like having goals to work toward.

Every month, I still set running mileage goals, and lately I've been building back up to 15- and 20-mile runs. At 77, I honestly think I still have a few triathlons left in me.

The 500K Swim Club

February Fitness has become one of my favorite traditions because it isn't really about the numbers—it's about the people.

For one year, Ashley Lauderman and I kept pushing each other all month long. I finished with 278,000 yards. Ashley finished with 212,000 yards. On the last afternoon, we'd already climbed out of the pool because another program was coming in. We even went out to dinner with my four brothers afterward. Ashley said, "Wouldn't it be fun if I went back and swam another 10,000 yards? Together we'd have exactly 500,000." She'd already finished her workout. But she went back, got in the pool, and did it. Afterward, I had "500K Club" shirts made with Tim's permission to use the team logo, and with Anna and the rest of our Lane 8 group, we surprised Ashley at one of our coffee

gatherings. That's what I remember most—not the yardage, but the fact that we inspired each other. We made a strong team.

Last February (2025) looked completely different. I'd had shoulder replacement surgery. It didn't go well, so I needed a second surgery, so for most of the month, I couldn't really swim. I kicked with fins and a kickboard instead. You figure out a way. I still finished with 188,000 yards and only recently started swimming normally again. I love swimming with my Lane 8 lane members: Donia Bijan, Anna Lippi, Daniel Roitman, Dave Crankshaw, and Carole Matthews.

Psychological Warfare



This year, I was also in a situation where I could only kick. Aleksei and I somehow ended up chasing the February Fitness lead. Every day, Tim would announce my yardage and Aleksei's.

I'd see Aleksei arrive at the pool, he'd see me, and we'd sort of grimace at each other. A couple of times, he even swam in the lane next to me. Of course, he could swim 50 yards in about the time it took me to do 25. I told him that was psychological warfare.

What I really appreciated was getting to watch him swim up close. Everything he teaches is right there in the water. The head position. The body line. The kick. Every movement is efficient. It's amazing to watch someone whose technique is that refined.

Editor's Note: Aleksei Averchenko, who also coaches for Menlo Masters and founded the First Youth Triathlon Team, based at Belle Haven pool, is a national-caliber swimmer. One of Aleksei's [accomplishments](#) since arriving at Menlo is swimming 2 marathons (26 miles) to raise awareness and funding for his youth team. In a Long Course USMS Pacific Masters meet in 2025, Aleksei swam the 1500m in 16:55:36 (M30-34)

Paper. Pencil. Progress

I've always liked numbers.

Back when February Fitness was tracked on those big paper spreadsheets in the lobby (Thanks, Tasha, for creating those huge sheets!), you'd write your mileage down with a pencil and watch everyone's totals grow day by day. I loved that. Now I use my watch, and seeing five figures at the end of a swim—15,000, 18,000, even 20,000 yards—is still satisfying.

Running is the same way. I look at my rolling pace, my average speed, and whether I'm holding steady.

Then I go home and write everything into a big monthly spreadsheet by hand—swimming, biking, running, and whatever goals I'm working toward next. I guess I've always enjoyed having another number to chase. The numbers keep me motivated. The people keep me coming back.

1% Better

I've even started working with a nutritionist. My wife and I have always eaten pretty well, but I'm learning there's always something to improve. Before a long workout, I'll usually have waffles with maple syrup. But AI recently suggested adding peanut butter, so now that's my pre-run breakfast. I'm also discovering that I should probably be drinking a lot more water than I thought. At my age, you're still learning. I've never been very interested in standing still.

My Lane Eight Family



I've been fortunate to spend fifty years doing a lot of things I loved.

I sold Mercedes-Benz in San Jose for 50 years. Steve Jobs was one of my earliest customers, and over the years, I sold cars to him and many Apple executives.

My family has always been active in one way or another. My daughter Mandy is a trail runner, so now and then she'll convince me to head over to Rancho San Antonio or another trail, and we still run together.

Every July, our extended family gathers in Santa Cruz for Wharf to Wharf, and Mandy and I always make sure we're on the starting line together. My son Will has built quite a weight room in his garage, and while my other daughter, Megan, doesn't compete anymore, she was an outstanding volleyball player growing up. My four brothers all still live nearby, and we get together for dinner every week or two. My sister recently retired after fifty years as a Stanford nurse. Longevity seems to run in our family. My mom lived to almost 104. We've always been a close family, and I feel fortunate that it hasn't changed.

Family has always been everything to me. And that includes the family I've found at Burgess Park. When I think about Menlo Masters, I don't think first about Ironman races or February Fitness totals. I think about the people standing on deck before practice, the conversations after coffee, watching someone like Aleksei glide through the water, or seeing Ashley jump back into the pool just to help us reach a shared goal.



There are a lot of "don't quit" type people within Menlo Masters. Whether someone is training for a race, recovering from surgery, fighting cancer, or simply trying to swim one more lap than they did last month, there's always somebody beside you who understands why you're there.

I'm lucky. I ended up with two families—my amazing family, which includes my wife, Chris, our five children, and 12 grandchildren, and one I found in Lane 8. I wouldn't trade either one.

The interview for Tony's story was conducted and transcribed by Frances Reneau. Kim Freitas edited the story. Tony Spencer and Kyle Leimkuhler provided photos.

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