

MENLO MASTERS 93

Local Legend

Let's swim!

Local Legend Stephanie Couch: A Rich Aquatic Life

A Six-Year-Old Who Rides Her Own Bike to the Pool



I started swimming on a summer team called Scottsdale Swim Team in Walnut Creek. I believe I was five because I know that I was on a fast six-and-under relay team. I took the swim test in the deep end to give me free reign of the pool and got my "Fish card" that gave me full access to the swim club.

Back in the olden days I could ride my bike on the sidewalk to the pool which I did regularly by myself. I was the youngest of four. All four of us were on the swim team, but I was the only one who stuck with swimming. I loved it from the very beginning.

In the Spring, there were preseason swim clinics offered by the Hoy family, the father and his two sons. I loved the Hoy's and remember their clinics and how much I enjoyed this launch into the swim season. I couldn't wait for that to start in early April. In addition to the clinics I took private lessons at their home. I swam for Scottsdale swim team as a U6, 7-8, and 9-10, and then, after 9-10, I moved on to club swimming. (Bob Hubbel and his siblings were also on this team!)

Editor's Note: The Hoy family is an institution in Walnut Creek swimming. Walter Hoy took over the Walnut Creek Swim Club (WCSC) in 1965, laying the foundation for competitive swimming in the area. He was a principal at Campolindo High School. In the 1970s, his twin sons, Brad and Kirby Hoy, stepped up as coaches, helping the club grow into a powerhouse. During this era, WCSC and the Walnut Creek Aquabears were the dominant forces in the county AAU (now USA Swimming) circuits. The Hoy family hosted clinics and trained thousands of children.

Mark Spitz Watched Over Me



Photo take by my Dad, Art Danzig

My mom was a non-swimmer and afraid of the water. It was really important to her that we all learned to swim because she was so fearful. There was an incident in a lake where my dad actually rescued my mom, holding on to my sister, and my mom felt like she was drowning. That just reinforced her fear of water and reinforced her desire for us all to be competent swimmers.

Mom put us all on a swim team to ensure we could swim. My parents built a pool in our backyard once I was a competent swimmer. I can remember walking down the unfinished pool when it was being built. I spent my childhood in our pool, unsupervised and without incident.

When my mom turned 40, friends and family gave her a surprise birthday party. One of the gifts was a life-size poster of Mark Spitz which she gave to me. I hung the poster on the back of my bedroom door for my entire childhood.

I met Mark Spitz in Southern California while attending a travel meet. I still have his autograph on a piece of scratch paper in an album. My sisters and I had matching Mark Spitz Stars and Stripes bathing suits.

A Different Race to Run

I swam on a competitive club team then called Pleasant Hill Swim Club. We did double workouts plus weights. At age 12, my mom was diagnosed with ALS, Lou Gehrig's disease. Due to her illness, I later switched to Walnut Creek Aquabears so I could get myself to the pool. As the disease progressed, I watched her lose abilities that most of us take for granted. She gradually lost her mobility and eventually could no longer walk independently. Later, she lost the ability to speak and communicated with us through a computer. The computer itself was new technology back then and someone created a list of common phrases like, “I need to use the bathroom” that she could click on with her teeth. (My uncle the dentist made retainers that were wired to the computer so she could communicate) Sometimes she wrote to me with ideas and suggestions for my life, especially about attending college since she placed education as the highest priority. She herself graduated from Stanford with a masters in linguistics. She followed everything happening in our lives and lived long enough to see the four of us graduate from something. I went to college near home to be with my Mom until she passed at age 50.

Around 16 years of age, I temporarily quit swimming and fell in love with running. I joined the cross-country and track teams. Adding running led me to triathlons. I competed in triathlons for a decade, the 1989 Hawaii Ironman being a highlight and culmination of years of training and racing.

Family First, Then Time for Me



I was training for the S.F. marathon running way too much and got a stress fracture. I immediately joined Walnut Creek Masters when I was 19 and have not stopped swimming since. Cross training is good.

My experience in caring for my Mom would shape the way I approached endurance sports later on. Running and cycling were like meditation and allowed me to escape the world momentarily (much like open water swimming) when things were outside of my control. I loved the solitude of running as well as racing in 10K's, half marathons and even a few marathons. I've always enjoyed racing in any sport and how I feel after pushing myself to the limits.

A Half Ironman and a Plot Twist... and then I met Tom.

We met at the Redding Half Ironman Triathlon in 1988. At that point, I was about 23 years old and had pretty much decided I was done dating. I went to that race completely by myself with absolutely no intention of meeting my future husband. Of course, that's exactly what happened.

Our first date was a 40-mile bike ride. Tom came over, we got on our bikes, and we spent the day riding and talking. That's how we got to know each other. Somewhere along the way, it became obvious that this was going to be more than a first date.

I finished school, moved across the Bay, and about a year later, we were married. We went on to have three daughters. Today, one of those daughters has a child of her own, a little boy named Noah Thomas, born 4/28/26.

Before Team Sheeper was Tim Sheeper



Tom and I spent about six or seven years racing in triathlons with Peninsula Tri Team. There were roughly fifty people on the team, and it was a really fun era of the sport. Peninsula Tri Team existed before Tim formed Team Sheeper Triathlon. Nevertheless, Tim Sheeper was already very much a part of our triathlon lives. Tim was our swim coach at Peninsula Covenant Community Center in Redwood City prior to Menlo.

What do I remember about Tim from those days? Honestly, exactly what people see now. He was wonderful then, and he's wonderful now.

Following the Coach



At some point, Tim moved to Burgess and began building what would eventually become his own program. That was the beginning of Menlo Masters and Team Sheeper.

I wasn't able to follow him immediately because I still needed childcare for my kids. Tim had moved over to Burgess, but I had to stay put for a while. As soon as my children were old enough and out of childcare, I followed Tim to Burgess. Once I made the move to Burgess, I never looked back.

Just before I moved over to Menlo Masters, I went to the 2006 FINA World Champs at Stanford. If you look at my times after that event, you'll see they improved significantly when I joined Tim's program. What was the difference? There's a big difference. Tim's workouts are super creative, and they're well-rounded. You're not just doing 5x200s and 10x100s and 8x50s. If you look at our calendar, you'll see how varied our workouts are. You're targeting different muscle groups by using different strokes, distances, and intensities. All the workouts are well thought out. I was on my way to becoming a much improved masters swimmer with Menlo.

Finding My Superpower



Sport Photography by Simone Amaduzzi



As time went on, and because of my background in triathlons and open-water swimming, I began to focus more on distance swimming. As much as I wish I could be a top sprinter, my best times are in distance swimming, the 1500 being the most competitive. Tim once told me I was a “slow twitch athlete”. I had to think about that but sadly he was right.

My goal is to try to get top tens in the US each year in a few events. The 400 IM or the 200 fly are easier to do well in than any sprints. We call those the *cherry-picker races* that nobody wants to swim.

Many years ago, when Tim did the 'Swim the Cycle' challenge, we were challenged to swim all 18 events during the competitive swim season. After that, I started swimming events that I had never swum before. I never would have swum the 200 fly! Swim the Cycle helped me find events I was competitive in that I would not necessarily have considered. That's the beauty of the team challenges, they can find hidden gems that we would not have done without a goal put out there by Tim.

When World Aquatics recently reported top-10 2025 results in Short Course and Long Course Meters, Daniel Tom sent me the link. (Daniel took 6th in the 200 breast for SCM!) I never knew they kept track of our times outside of the US. As it turned out, I took 7th in the world in the 1500 free in SCM for my age group and 10th in LCM. There is a first for everything even at our age!

Editor's Note: Stephanie has achieved USMS Top Ten results in every year since 2011, except 2017, often in Short Course Meters, Long Course Meters, and Short Course Yards. For example, in 2025, here are her results in various divisions:

2025 Short Course Meters

Place	Event	Name	Age	Club	LMSC	Time
10	W60-64 400 Free	Stephanie D Couch	61	MELO	Pacific	5:32.56
4	W60-64 800 Free	Stephanie D Couch	61	MELO	Pacific	11:05.52
3	W60-64 1500 Free	Stephanie D Couch	61	MELO	Pacific	20:44.31
9	W60-64 200 Back	Stephanie D Couch	61	MELO	Pacific	3:01.01
10	W60-64 200 Fly	Stephanie D Couch	61	MELO	Pacific	3:25.36
9	W60-64 200 IM	Stephanie D Couch	61	MELO	Pacific	3:05.71
7	W60-64 400 IM	Stephanie D Couch	61	MELO	Pacific	6:24.11

2025 Long Course Meters

Place	Event	Name	Age	Club	LMSC	Time
8	W60-64 800 Free	Stephanie D Couch	61	MELO	Pacific	11:15.31
5	W60-64 1500 Free	Stephanie D Couch	61	MELO	Pacific	21:02.92
7	W60-64 400 IM	Stephanie D Couch	61	MELO	Pacific	6:36.45

2025 Short Course Yards

Place	Event	Name	Age	Club	LMSC	Time
5	W60-64 1650 Free	Stephanie D Couch	60	MELO	Pacific	20:38.63

What is even more remarkable is that in 2025, her times were faster than in 2024: 1650 Free (SCY), 1500 Free (SCM) by 17 seconds!, 800 Free (SCM), 200 Back (SCM), and 400 IM (SCM)

Racing Is Better With Company



One of the reasons I joined Menlo Masters was that nobody from PCC was going to swim meets. I was looking for something beyond daily workouts. At PCC, I was usually swimming in a lane full of men, and I was hoping to find a group of women who liked to train, race, and spend time together outside of practice.

That's exactly what I found at Menlo.

Over time, another core group of us started racing together regularly. We have a WhatsApp group called "MELO Racing Team" where we share information about upcoming meets, open water registrations, relay opportunities, carpools, and race logistics. We compare notes, celebrate good swims, post photos from events, and help each other figure out what races to sign up for next. This smaller group creates community within our Menlo swim community.



Photo credit: Kyle Leimkuhler

One thing I appreciate is that people genuinely show up for each other. If someone is training for Nationals, an open-water swim, or Pacific Masters Championships, the rest of the group is genuinely interested in how it's going and roots for one another. We even bought a pop-up tent with the Menlo Masters logo and colors. The team friendships, atmosphere and participation in meets have become among the best parts of Masters swimming for me. We even attracted a swimmer from Los Gatos who now comes over to practice and race with us because of the group we've built.

Editor's Notes: More about Stephanie's race career. USMS has recorded 614 official swim events for Stephanie, dating back to 2006. She is clearly dedicated to competing at a high level and has kept that spirit for decades. You can scroll through them ***here.*** *Dave Gildea pointed me to these stellar results.*

Turning Pool Time Into Ballet Lessons

I've been teaching kids to swim for many years, but the original reason was pretty practical.

When our daughters were young, my husband and I wanted them to have opportunities to try different activities. We wanted them to be able to take swim, ballet, and music lessons, as well as whatever else interested them. Like most parents, we wanted to give them options, but we also had to fit these enrichments into our family budget.

Initially I only taught in the summer time but as my children grew, so did my swim business.

In 2008 I started working with Louise Feeley. The extra income helped pay for our girls' activities. What started as a way to support our children became a long-term part of my life.

Louise and I were a teaching team right up until the pandemic. During that time, I taught many kids and learned that no two students are exactly alike. Some pick things up immediately, some need a different explanation, and some surprise you by suddenly figuring it all out after struggling for months. Louise had an early childhood education background and shared her knowledge in getting right at a child's level, making the kids with bigger challenges feel special, and being creative with a teaching plan each week. She has a way to make kids laugh even when they are scared and do things they were timid to do and become proud and able. Those were great years and not only helped me grow my teaching skills, but it grew into a beautiful friendship.

Persuading Louise

Early on I encouraged Louise to join Menlo Masters. I thought it would be a great fit because it combined fitness, competition, and a strong social side. At first, she was hesitant because she teaches very long hours and she initially swam with us on weekends. However, she soon realized swimming masters actually gave her energy, she made new friends and she started swimming throughout the week.



Running a Backyard Swim School

When COVID shut everything down I extended running my swim school in my backyard pool from May- November rather than just the summer time. My summer swim school started in 2006 as an auction item at the Woodside Elementary School! Local parents asked me to teach their kids. As my kids grew older and independent, I had more time.



One of the things I enjoy most is watching kids become comfortable in the water. Some arrive nervous and unsure of themselves. Others are afraid to put their faces in or try something new. Then, little by little, they gain confidence. Before long, they're swimming independently, trying new skills, and looking forward to lessons.

I still enjoy the challenge of teaching. I like figuring out what approach works for each student. I encourage kids to move on to Menlo's Bridge program or summer swim teams close to them. I often feel I'm advocating parents to help their kids be strong swimmers by continuing past swim lessons. It's so important.

From Volunteer to Head Coach



My involvement with coaching at Woodside High School happened somewhat accidentally.

When my daughter attended Woodside starting in 2014, the swim program was led by Laura Reynolds and Lynn Jolly. They were excellent coaches who also coached water polo and encouraged their athletes to swim year-round. They built a strong program and a strong culture.



When they left, a new coach came in who wasn't the best fit for my daughter. I volunteered with the JV team to help and to better understand how the program operates. I wasn't looking for a coaching career. I was just trying to be involved.

The following year, that coach left, and I offered to take on a larger role. One season led to another, and before long, I found myself running the entire swim program at Woodside High School.

Kids Need No-Cut Sports

I've now been coaching the Woodside High School swim program for well over a decade. High School swimming is Co-ed. We have nearly 70 swimmers across the program, and one principle I strongly believe in is that swimming should be a no-cut sport.

If a student wants to swim and doesn't know all four strokes, how to flip-turn or dive, I'll teach them!

Every season, we have athletes who arrive with very little experience. We start with fundamentals like, keep your head in the water when you breathe in freestyle and backstroke, legal breaststroke kicking and how to dive without causing serious injury. What continues to surprise me is how quickly all students improve. Swimming is a technical sport, but given some focused practice and instruction, kids can make enormous progress in a short time. We essentially have four groups within the program: JVV (very very JV) for emerging swimmers, JV for developing swimmers, Varsity (summer league swimmers), and Varsity/Club swimmers. This structure allows athletes to develop at their own pace while still being part of the larger team. **The girls JV and Varsity team went undefeated in 2025 in our dual meets. Woodside has been "PAL", Peninsula Athletic League champions for the past 3 years for JV girls which includes over a third of the team.**

No Shortage of Strong Women





One of the things I was looking for when I joined a master's program was other women who loved swimming as much as I do. I not only was hoping to train with more ladies but have friends who genuinely enjoyed training, setting goals, getting on the blocks at a swim meet or travel to places I've never been to before and swim in open water.

During the pandemic we found Bair Island and started jumping into the duck filled waters off of a dock and swimming to what we call the vortex. Bair Island is primarily used for rowing but we were desperate to find water to swim in. We all wore bright buoys and bright caps and met often to swim together. We swam down the middle while the rowers took the sides of the slough. This started the now well known MM Honey Badger open water swim group.

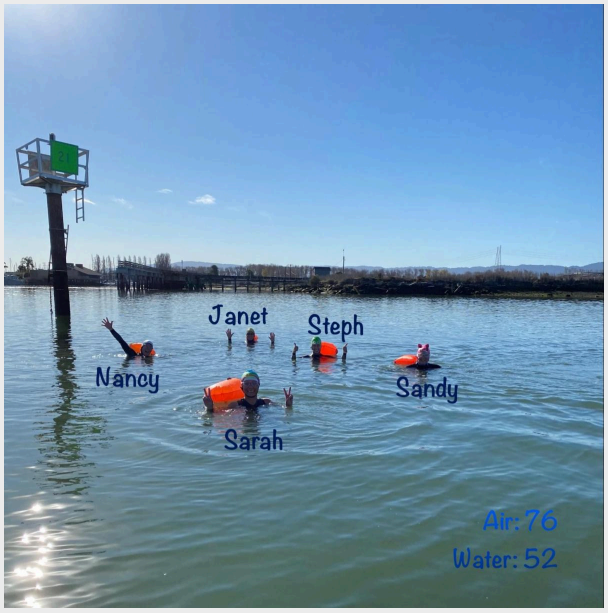


Photo taken by Laura Legros - always an Apple iPhone on hand!

What I found at Menlo Masters was far beyond what I was hoping for. We have strong women (and men of course) swimmers in all lanes and age groups. Some of the most consistent and longest-tenured members of the team are women. I don't know if every Master's program is like that, but I do know that Tim has always been supportive of the women on the team. He treats us like athletes. That may sound like a simple thing, but it isn't always the case.

I've always appreciated that there is no sense that your goals matter less because of your age or because you're swimming Masters. Whether you're 24 or 75, you are treated as someone trying to improve. You feel acknowledged and like you belong.

Fast Doesn't Have an Expiration Date



One of the things that continues to impress me about Menlo is the number of older athletes who are still competing at a very high level. We have swimmers in their seventies who train seriously, race seriously, and continue to improve. They aren't showing up out of habit. They are engaged in the sport and care about their performances.

I think that's a reflection of the coaching and the culture. Good coaching attracts athletes who enjoy being challenged. Strong swimmers want workouts that are thoughtful, demanding, and purposeful. They want to feel like there is a reason behind what they're doing.

Menlo has always done a good job of creating that environment. People know they'll get an intentionally designed workout, which keeps athletes engaged year after year.

The Secret Sauce Isn't Secret



I've thought quite a bit about why Menlo Masters has been able to retain swimmers for so long and continue attracting new ones. There are probably many reasons, but a few stand out to me.

One is the online calendar. That may sound like a small thing, but it isn't. You can look ahead and see the intention behind the workouts. You can see the variety of strokes, distances, conditioning, and training emphasis. It communicates that the coaching staff is organized and has a plan. The workouts aren't random. They're part of a larger progression.

Another factor is the team challenges. This year, we introduced the Weekend Warrior, the Pyramid Challenge, and the Tour de France Natation Challenge. Many people participated because it gave swimmers something new to work towards together. Those kinds of shared goals keep things interesting and give people another reason to stay engaged.

Lastly it's the people. Whether it's a weekly Saturday morning coffee or a holiday team social, Menlo does a good job at creating space for us all to get to know each other outside of the pool. We get to know our lanemates in the water and outside of the pool we make an effort to get to know everyone in the pool.



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**