

Swimming ACROSS NC

One writer sets his sights on an ambitious goal, aiming to swim at every YMCA pool in the state. In the water, he finds familiarity, fortitude, and memories of his first and most important coach: his dad.

written by MARK KEMP

ILLUSTRATION BY MATTHEW LAZNICKA



EARLIEST CHILDHOOD memory: I'm bobbing and swaying in the gentle white-caps of Kure Beach on Pleasure Island just south of Wilmington, safe in my father's sturdy arms. My tiny hands hold tight to Dino, the inflatable green dinosaur that Mom and Dad bought for my sister and me at the Sinclair gas station back home in Asheboro. Dad holds me up, assures me that he won't let go, and I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that when I'm in the water with my father, nothing will harm me.

Adult memory: Four decades later, Dad and I are on a road trip across the Southeast. The year is 2004, and he's accompanying me on the reading tour for a book that I've written on Southern music. In a hotel room in Nashville, I'm feeling nervous about a TV appearance the next morning. "Why don't you go for a swim?" Dad says to me. "It'll make you feel so much better."

For as long as I can remember, swimming has been my lifeline. It's where I find peace and serenity after long days of writing and editing, elemental calm when it feels to me like the world's out of kilter. When I'm swimming, nothing matters but my breathing, my strokes, and the warm caress of the water as my body glides like a vessel from one end of the pool to the other. As of this writing, I've swum in 50 YMCA pools across North Carolina, from Asheville to the Outer Banks. I've swum at tiny rural Ys in small towns like Eden, Barco, and Albemarle, and at massive modern Ys in Charlotte, Raleigh, and Wilson.

I didn't start out with the goal of swimming at every YMCA pool in the state. That's happened gradually, beginning in 2002, shortly after I returned home following many years living in New York City and Los Angeles. I'd reached my early 40s and needed to start exercising more. Running was out of the question; I never enjoyed

sweating on the side of a road as cars whizzed by. But swimming was a long-lost love of mine. It was something that I knew I could — and would — do.

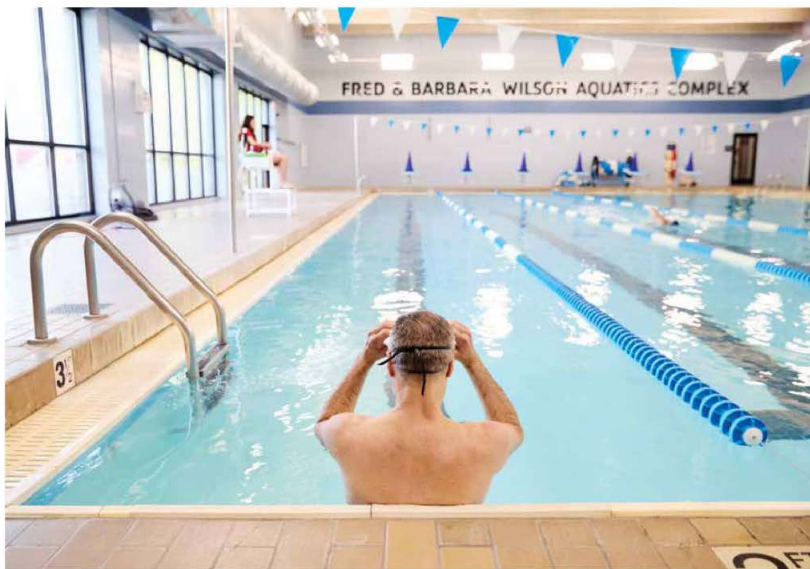
From my apartment in Uptown Charlotte, the closest indoor pool was at the Dowd Y on Morehead Street. For about four years, I began each day there, swimming 20 laps before heading over to *The Charlotte Observer*, where I worked as the entertainment editor. Later, after moving to the Plaza Midwood neighborhood, I'd stuff my swim trunks, goggles, and a towel into my backpack and bike over to the Johnston Y in nearby NoDa. On those occasions when I'd visit my parents in Asheboro, I'd accompany my dad on his daily stroll down the wooded path leading from his neighborhood to the sprawling Randolph-Asheboro YMCA. There, I'd swim laps while Dad walked his dog, Jetta, around the soccer fields.

The beauty of lap-swimming is that you can do it anywhere. There's a comforting sameness to a standard 25-yard swimming pool, a feeling that wherever you are, if you're a swimmer, you'll be able to find your fountain of youth, your source of inner strength.

In October 2017, when Dad was undergoing cancer treatments at High Point Regional Hospital,

In the mid-1960s, when the writer was a boy, he visited Kure Beach with his mom, Joan; his sister, Cheri; and his dad, Richard, with whom he can still remember venturing out into the ocean.





At the Hartley Drive Family YMCA in High Point — and other YMCA pools across the state — the writer performs his pre-swim ritual: stretching, adjusting his goggles, and taking a few deep breaths to get centered.

I'd head over to the Hartley Drive Family YMCA for a swim to clear my mind. Four months later, when my mom was dying of pneumonia at Moses Cone Hospital in Greensboro, I'd duck out for swims at the Kathleen Price Bryan Family YMCA downtown. One of the first things I did when my sister and I made the agonizing decision to put Dad into hospice care last year was drive to the Y — the same one that he and I had walked to countless times — and swim 40 laps. When you're in the water, no one can see your tears.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MY DAD, SWIMMING, and me goes back to the mid-1960s and the big T-shaped city pool at Memorial Park in Asheboro. I can close my eyes and still see the towering high diving board and sparkling turquoise water; feel the warmth of the sun; hear the summer hits playing on the stickey AM radio: "Stop! In the Name of Love" by The Supremes, "I Can't Help Myself" by the Four Tops, "Ticket to Ride" by The Beatles. I was maybe 5 years old when Dad, barely in his 30s, tossed me into the pool, explaining to my mom that this was the best way for a kid to learn how to swim. Apparently, it worked, because I'm still here to tell about it.

When our family joined the Asheboro Country Club shortly thereafter, I began my official swim lessons and spent whole summers sharpening my

Water was everything to me. When I was in it, I never wanted to be out of it.

technique in the club's pool and lake while Dad whacked little white balls around the nine-hole golf course. When I won a few first-place ribbons for my diving abilities, Dad beamed with pride. I was never the great football, baseball, or basketball player that he'd hoped I'd be, but I could swim like a fish. And that was good enough for him.

Back then, Asheboro didn't have a YMCA facility, and even by the time I reached junior high and high school, there were no aquatics teams that I could join. So I spent my summers swimming solo, jetting across outdoor pools, diving from cliffs at rock quarries, swinging into lakes and rivers from ropes tied to tree branches, and free-styling as far out into the Atlantic as I could during beach vacations. Water was everything to me. When I was in it, I never wanted to be out of it.

In one of the greatest books ever written about swimming, *Haunts of the Black Masseur: The Swimmer as Hero*, the late Charles Sprawson wrote of his "vague conception of the swimmer as

someone rather remote and divorced from everyday life, devoted to a mode of exercise where most of the body remains submerged and self-absorbed ... the introverted and eccentric, individualists involved in a mental world of their own." In the book, Sprawson obsessively documents every literary reference to swimming that he can find, including quotes and anecdotes from such heavy hitters as Homer, Ovid, Edgar Allan Poe, Lord Byron, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot.

Byron was particularly fond of swimming. In 1810, the 22-year-old poet swam four miles across Hellespont, a dangerous strait in Turkey now known as the Dardanelles. He did it in honor of the Greek mythological character Leander, who drowned at Hellespont while swimming to meet his lover Hero on the other side. Byron aimed to prove that a man could survive the swim, and he succeeded. "I plume myself on this achievement more than I could possibly do on any kind of glory, political, poetical, or rhetorical," he wrote to his friend Francis Hodgson.

Swimming may be a solitary endeavor, but it's also a competitive activity, whether you're trying to prove a point, as Byron was, training for a triathlon, or just doing laps at a YMCA. No matter

For me, swimming is an inward pursuit. A prayer. A reckoning with mortality.


where I'm swimming — at the local Y during my lunch break or at an out-of-town Y while traveling around the state — I find myself always trying to best the swimmer in the lane next to me. It's involuntary, like breathing. I feel victorious when I overtake my neighbor, and I'm humbled when my neighbor overtakes me.

At the YMCA in Goldsboro last summer, I met a woman who looked to be in her mid-60s. I'd been watching her in the next lane as she bolted by me multiple times, gracefully, effortlessly, with perfect form. When we both stopped for a rest, I complimented her on her speed and stamina.

"How do you do it?" I asked.

She smiled like a yogi. "I work with a coach," she said. "Changed my life."

Upon returning home, I reached out to an old friend, Doug Miller. He founded a company



The author's swimming routine includes alternating sets of five freestyle and five breaststroke laps apiece — typically 20 laps in all, but sometimes up to 40.



EST. 2008

205 FRIENDLY ROAD
MOREHEAD CITY, NC



More than 100 Recipes
Made Daily on the
Friendliest Corner
in Morehead City

friendlymarketnc.com



in Mecklenburg County called Miller Swimming, where he coaches water lovers of all ages. Back in 2017, when I was having shoulder problems, Doug suggested that I discard the paddles that I'd been using to try to build strength. Now, I told him, I was in a rut; I needed some assistance with my technique. "I'd love to help!" he wrote back. "As you know, swimming is all about technique — we'll get you out of that rut."

Doug took me on, and in just a few sessions, I was rotating my body more efficiently, using fewer strokes, swimming faster and with less effort. Now, my mind was freed up to do what I enjoy most when swimming: meditate, ponder life's mysteries, recall fond memories of summer vacations past. In the future, when I feel bad habits creeping into my lap-swimming routine, I plan to call on Doug for refresher sessions. Aside from my dad, I've never known a more supportive coach in any sport that I've ever attempted.

NOT THAT I'LL BE PARTICIPATING IN ANY triathlons anytime soon. Or ever, really. For me, swimming is an inward pursuit. A prayer. A reckoning with mortality. I never feel more alive than when I'm in the water, my head coming up for air at precise intervals. It's an altered state of consciousness, a Zen-like feeling in which body and ego eventually cease to exist. In some religions, water represents cleansing, renewal. In fact, water is what we are — around 60 percent of our bodies, nearly three-quarters of the Earth's surface. I remember leaving the Dover Foundation Y in Shelby after a swim while traveling through Cleveland County, and seeing a sign taped to the wall that read: "The world is 71% water. Your children are 100% curious."

Things have changed in my hometown. Not only does Asheboro have that big YMCA facility near my dad's house — the home in which I grew up and where I live again today — but the local high school also has a swim team. And as it turns out, swimming is in our family's blood. Today, my cousin

Megan Becker is a star member of the Asheboro High School swim team, one of the best swimmers of her age group in the state. Last year, at the North Carolina High School Athletic Association's swimming championships, she finished in second place in the 100-yard freestyle event and fourth in the 200-yard freestyle race. When I look into Megan's eyes, I see a young girl with an old soul, a competitive athlete with a contemplative spirit, in pursuit of an activity that allows her to feel safe in what Charles Sprawson would characterize as a mental world of her own.

"Really, most of the swimming part is just training," Megan told the local newspaper after her big win. "Mentally, you have to have a good spirit and tell yourself you can do it." One day, perhaps Megan, too, will take on the challenge of swimming across North Carolina — maybe even around the world.

For now, the chase is mine. The goal of swimming at all 82 indoor YMCA pools in the state propels me to tiny towns around the mountains, across the Piedmont, and along the coast, to leafy suburban neighborhoods, sprawling rural fields, and concrete sidewalks of city streets. Outside the hulking YMCA buildings, the landscapes are different — hilly or flat, lush or barren — but inside their cavernous aquatics centers, I find myself in a familiar place, among fellow swimmers seeking harbor in an unpredictable world.

In December, my dad died peacefully after only one night in hospice. He was ready to go. Throughout my life, he'd honored my curiosity and prepared me for something that he never learned to do properly. When Dad was a little boy, his mother was so frightened of the water that he had to sneak out to go swimming. He wasn't going to make the same mistake with me. Dad saw my love of the water early on and he encouraged it. He was a good dad, the best a guy could have. *OK*

Mark Kemp is a senior editor at Our State.