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Former UTA swimmer, coach going into Texas Hall of Fame

BY CHAREAN WILLIAMS
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ARLINGTON — Ric Nesbit never swam in an Olympics. He finished seventh in the 100-yard breaststroke at the Olympic Trials in 1968, his only opportunity to make a U.S. team.

No matter, the former UT-Arlington star is remembered as one of the best in his era.

"It was just a bad break for Ric," said Charlie Smith, Nesbit's good friend and former teammate at UT-Arlington. "It's like a horse race. Everybody wants to have a Derby horse, but you have to get that top performance on the given day. It's not easy.

"I'm sure it was devastating to Ric, but at the same time, he was an NCAA champion and dominated for a long time."

Nesbit is among the Class of 2009 inductees into the Texas Swimming and Diving Hall of Fame. He and 13 others, including his coach at UTA, Don Easterling, will be honored at a luncheon Saturday in San Antonio.

Easterling built a powerhouse program at UTA in the 1960s. His '67 team took fifth place at the NCAA College Division national championships as the six-man contingent set five meet records and earned five gold medals. In 1968, UTA had 11 swimmers earn a total of 35 All-America awards while finishing seventh in the NCAA National Collegiate Swimming Championships after finishing second in the NCAA College Division.

"Those were my favorite years of coaching," said Easterling, who left UTA after the 1970 season and spent 27 years as the head coach at North Carolina State. "We started out with nothing in 1962. I think we had 3 1/2 scholarships and 25 or 30 kids on the team. Nobody thought we could do it, so we just went on and did it."

Nesbit, who set a national age group record at age 10, an American record as a sophomore at Highland Park and was the first Texan to go under a minute in the 100-yard breaststroke, started his collegiate career at Texas A&M. But after his friend and teammate, John Cleaves, was killed in a car accident, Nesbit made some "bad decisions" and became academically ineligible his sophomore year.

He transferred to UTA to swim under Easterling.

"He worked us almost to death," said Nesbit, a Fort Worth resident. "He recruited a hodgepodge of swimmers. You either got good or you quit."

Nesbit was one of the best. He was a 10-time All-American, a seven-time NCAA champion, and he set three NCAA records. As a senior, Nesbit won the national 100-yard breaststroke (59.11).

It made him the favorite in the 100-yard breaststroke at the U.S. Olympic Trials in 1968. But a motorcycle accident and strep throat kept Nesbit from properly training for the Trials. Don McKenzie, who won the Olympic gold medal for the U.S. in Mexico City, had finished behind Nesbit only five months earlier at the NCAA meet.

"I see how that gold medal in the Olympics is kind of an ultimate success," Nesbit said. "For some people, it changes them. I consoled myself by saying, 'I'll probably turn out a better person, because I don't have the fat head, thinking I'm all this hot stuff.'"

Nesbit retired to fulfill his duty as a husband and a father. He left Easterling, who had shared in Nesbit's disappointment, a letter, which now is framed in Easterling's house. It reads in part:

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"I know my failure to perform up to my capacity has caused you disappointment for me here at the Trials. But despite the obvious outcome in the pool, I will gain probably more by focusing my shortcomings than had I made the team. Thanks for giving so much of yourself to me these past three years."

Swimming has never left Nesbit. He has set American and world records as a U.S. Masters swimmer, and five years ago, he began coaching. Nesbit, who retired from the Fort Worth ISD last spring, coaches a Masters team in Fort Worth, teaches lessons for the Fort Worth area swim team (FAST) and is a franchisee for SwimAmerica, the nation's leading learn-to-swim school.

"I knew how to swim before I knew how to walk," Nesbit said. "When my dad was overseas and my mom was living with her mother in La Jolla, Calif., she would take me down to the beach every day. She would have to tie me to a rock to keep me out of the surf, because I would crawl into the water. "... I've loved swimming forever."

Swimming and Diving Hall of Fame

The Texas Swimming and Diving Hall of Fame will honor the Class of 2009 on Saturday in San Antonio. The inductees:

Don Easterling : Coached the Fort Worth Panther Boys Club and Burford Aquatic Club, 1952-70. Coached UT - Arlington to prominence in 1966-70 before leaving to coach North Carolina State.

Danny Green : He won SWC swimming titles and All -America honors for Texas A&M and was a finalist for the 1943 Sullivan Award.

Phil Hansel : He is a long-time promoter of Houston swimming at the Shamrock Swim Club and the University of Houston's men's and women's programs. He was a coach or manager on two Olympic teams.

George McMillion : He was an All-American at SMU, an assistant coach there for 14 years and the head coach for 17. He was the U.S. National team coach in 1978, '82 and '83.

Ric Nesbit : He led Highland Park to three state titles, and at A&M and UTA, he was a 10-time All-American and seven-time NCAA champion.

Jane Kneip Patterson : She was a pioneer of women's aquatics in Texas, including being the state's first female to wear a tank suit. She was undefeated from 1947 to '55.

Melvin Pat Patterson : He was a UT team captain in 1955 and coached at A&M, Rice, Arkansas and Texas. He was instrumental in the design and construction of the UT Swim Center.

Richard Quick : A former SMU swimmer who started the SMU women's team and then went on to coach at Iowa State, Auburn, Texas and Stanford, winning 12 NCAA team titles.

Bobby Taylor : He swam at Highland Park and A&M and won every event he entered at the 1942 and '43 SWC meet.

Joy Cushman : She was the pioneer of Synchronized Swimming in Texas.

Jerry Heidenreich : He set 17 school records at SMU and won two golds, a silver and a bronze at the 1972 Olympics.

Kuni Schultz : She was executive director of the Dad's club and coached diving for 30 years.

Graham Johnston : He has called Houston home since 1962, pioneering masters swimming in Texas. Since 1971, he has set 124 Masters National records and 81 World Masters records.

Leo Cancellare : He was head coach of the El Paso Aqua Posse from 1979-99 and a force in West Texas Swimming.

Charean Williams, 817-390-7760



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