

State's Women Swimmers Push the Limit

IS A WOMAN a born swimmer or is swimming a recreational sport that can be mastered successfully through dedication, desire and a planned program of training and instruction?



This question crossed my mind as I set about interviewing many Arkansas women

who are involved in regular swimming programs. The reasons each of these women began swimming are as varied as the women themselves. Some of them did not start

at an early age and many of them are not holdovers from age-group competition as teen-agers. However, they are unanimous in their enthusiasm for swimming and its benefits, both physical and mental. Each has set priorities and goals to accomplish in 1984.

To select and highlight some outstanding examples of our women swimmers is a difficult task but one that is made easier by beginning with the significant and international achievements of Mary Kok Oudegeest, a native of Holland. If an Arkansas Women's Swimming Hall of Fame is ever established, Oudegeest undoubtedly

would be its first inductee. She carved her name in the record books with 10 world and 18 European records, including a successful English Channel swim at age 19. Oudegeest also trained extensively for the 1956 and 1960 Olympics but was prevented from competing because of international tensions. At a national Masters meet entered several years ago, she earned six gold medals in seven events entered. Recently, her competition has been limited because of her involvement as head coach of the 130-member Central Arkansas Swim Team program.

Considerable Expertise

At the YWCA pool in Little Rock, where many women are getting their swimming start, Mary Lou Jaworski, executive director, and Peggy Ebbing, aquatic director, both lend considerable expertise and accomplishments to the ranks of competitive women swimmers. Jaworski's competitive spirit powers her through the water and propels her to big wins at any competition she enters. In the 1983 National Masters Short Course Championships in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., Jaworski, 46, won three medals: Fourth in the 50-yard fly, seventh in the 50-yard free and eighth in the 200-yard individual medley. Sprint races are her first love because, as she says, "they're over with quicker." Not one to rest on her laurels, her goal in 1984 is to build endurance on the 200-yard butterfly. When training for a

meet, Jaworski swims intervals of 400 yards of mixed strokes with quarter-mile kicking and pulling laps interspersed.

Ebbing started swimming as a child but waited until her 30s to swim competitively. Recently turned 50, she works out regularly, combining her swimming with five to 10 aerobic workouts a week. In addition to swimming, Ebbing began running a few years ago and regularly competes in 5K and 10K races. In 1982, in order to enter the Siloam Springs Triathlon, she added biking to her training program and placed respectably in an event that sent veteran bikers sprawling on the arduous course and had seasoned runners begging for mercy along the gravel roads. When Jaworski and Ebbing are involved, theirs is a tough combination to beat.

'Late Bloomer'

The "late bloomer" in competitive swimming is Kathy Bay, 32, the mother of two preschool children, who began entering Masters' competitions only six months ago. Bay works out four or five times a week at the YWCA to build endurance

for the long-distance events she loves, including mile lake swims and 1,500-meter events. She was official women's winner of the Duracraft Mile Lake swim at Lake Norrell in August 1983 with an impressive time of 32 minutes, 47 seconds, finishing 14th of a field of 70 finishers. Bay admits her backstroke needs some attention, but with her natural ability and improved technique, she'll no doubt

be setting records in those events in 1984.

While Little Rock is nurturing its own talent, Mountain Home, with only a single indoor lap swimming pool, is busy producing its own crop of competitive winners. Under the leadership of unofficial coach Idá Hlavacek, whose infectious enthusiasm attracts new recruits, the Mountain Home group works out once weekly, completing one to two miles per person. Hlavacek and her teammate, LaVerne Anderson, took honors at the Fort Lauderdale meet: Both had two seventh-place finishes. No one could have guessed it was the first national event either had ever entered or that Anderson, who recently turned 65, began swimming only a year ago. Obviously, Mountain Home is producing the Right Stuff.

And the list goes on. Younger or older, women swimmers take the sport seriously and reap its rewards, which range from relaxation and weight loss (the all-consuming fixation shared with the nation at large), to sharing a common experience with others. Surely there is a strong thread among them of keenly competitive natures. Swimmers such as Mona Mizell, whose times are competitive in national time standards, and Cindy Ledbetter and Melinda Smith, along with many others, enjoy the thrill of turning in winning performances among their peers. These women are wives and mothers, professionals and students, young and old, with water their common denominator. They are proving themselves equal in determination, spirit and performance in this arena as in all others.