

Masters program hopes interested parties join

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"We want everyone to join us," said Ron Banks, 41, of Little Rock.

Banks organizes the Masters Swimming program for Central Arkansas.

To join you must be over 19 and register with U.S. Masters Swimming. The cost is \$25 a year and it includes insurance. There are costs for pool use that vary.

"There are over 24,000 masters swimmers nationwide," Banks said, "about 50 of them are on the two teams here in Central Arkansas. There's the YWCA team that I'm in and the one at the Little Rock Racquet Club. They're a bit more organized. They have the triathletes, people like that.

"We get a lot of people who are ex-jocks," he added, "but we also get older swimmers, people in their 50's and 60's. In fact, we had to add an age group this year. A man who was competing at 95 complained to our national governing board about having to compete against the younger 90-year-olds. He said it wasn't fair so we added a 95-plus division."

Banks said there are a number of swimmers who want to keep on competing after an outstanding college career. Doug Martin, 35, of Little Rock is one of these. He was All-American in the 50-yard freestyle event in college and has maintained an outstanding record as the national record holder for the 31-35 division. He's actually swimming faster now than in college.

Jay David Gillanders of Jonesboro continues his outstanding swimming career in the master swimming program. Gillanders won a bronze medal in the 200-meter butter-

fly event at the 1960 Olympic Games. According to Banks, Gillanders still comes to meets and beats all the young guys.

But the former-jock contingent is just a small part of Masters Swimming.

"The average person in the program swims for fitness," Banks said. "I'm not going to deny that there's a mid-life crisis of some sort that motivates a majority of our swimmers. They say they were in shape and want to get back in shape. This is the guy who's just turned 40, stopped smoking and lost weight.

"The general focus for most of the swimmers is physical fitness," he said. "It's kind of a craze now. I believe you really get addicted to it. It's the endorphins. You feel uplifted after a workout.

"We also get people who can't for some reason participate in the sport they are used to," he said. "Just recently, a former competitive runner joined. He'd hurt his ankle and couldn't run. He told me he just *had* to do something.

"I think it's also a choice of the type of person you want to be and be around," he said. "We get the person who'd rather be around energetic people with goals than around couch potatoes. I think we have to have goals, to achieve something. We just need that in life."

It's the aspect of personal achievement that keeps these amateur athletes coming back for more. Banks said the program encourages the swimmer to compete against himself, first of all.

Then he said a swimmer will size up the competition that comes from people about his how age and ability. Little, intense rivalries will develop between swimmers of similar ability in the same age group.

It gives the athlete something to shoot for.

Banks said the masters swim program tries to have a meet a month for members to go to. In December, it's the Hell on the Border IV meet at the Boys Club in Fort Smith. In January, the team at the YWCA hosts the hour swim. Each participant gets a certificate of their distance. In February, there's a meet in Memphis and the YWCA 1,500 meter swim. In March, there are plans for a Marquis de Sade swim challenge.

"If you had to be fast," Banks explained, "we'd lose half our swimmers. Lots of people are competing here for the first time. To me, that's what masters swimming is all about.

"The people I have the softest spot for are those like Larry Williams," he said. "He comes out for our lake swim at Lake Norrell every year. He's had polio and it takes him a half-hour longer to do it than everyone else. He's the type of swimmer our program is made for. He's still out there trying to prove himself."

Banks said anyone who swims laps is a candidate for masters swimming.

"No experience is necessary," Banks said. "We downplay competition. You can use it to set milestones for yourself. You can find someone your speed and swim against them. It's better than doing laps. The meets give you an excitement. You have a goal to shoot at."

If you'd like to join one of the masters swimming programs in Central Arkansas, just call the YWCA or the Little Rock Racquet Club. Workout hours vary and you may want to select the one that has the time most suited to your schedule.