

Out of the Blue : Sharing insights and positive perspectives about the sport of swimming from those that have lived the experience. By Cynthia Owens



"I was just lucky that day." That's how Sharon Finneran Rittenhouse explains her philosophy about qualifying for the 1964 Rome Olympic team. Epitomizing good sportsmanship, grace, and humility, she went on to say that every single day, in the same pool, and frequently in the same lane, she trained with incredibly talented teammates who swam the same laps, stroke for stroke, day in and day out, that she did. Any of whom could have easily earned a berth on the Olympic team that year. But on the day of the 400 I.M. at Olympic Trials, it was Sharon's turn.

<- Sharon Finneran Rittenhouse and daughter, Ariel, Olympic diver, Beijing '08

She started swimming at age 10 in Florida. It became apparent that Sharon had talent in the water, so her family moved around the country seeking the best swimming program. She finally found her way to SCSC and George Haines. Her teammates were Donna de Varona, Terry Stickles and Don Schollander (to name a few Olympic greats). During her career, Sharon set 7 World Records in three different strokes, the 200 fly, the 800 free, and the 400 IM. She won 19 National Championships, won gold at the Pan American Games in 1963 in the 400 freestyle, and a silver at the Olympic Games in 1964 in the 400 IM.

Sharon tells of a wonderful rivalry with Donna de Varona. They had been battling it out for 2 years for the world record for the 400 I.M. Donna had it, then Sharon beat her time, then Donna beat Sharon's time, then Sharon took it back once more with a huge drop in time that qualified her for the *men's* nationals in the summer of 1962. At that time, there was no 400 IM for women! So, in 1963 when she joined Santa Clara everyone had to approve of her coming, especially Donna. By that time Sharon had dropped the record something like 20 seconds. But, being the champion that she was, Donna got it back early that Olympic year and then she went on to win the gold in the Olympics, with Sharon taking the silver. Here is a link to a photo of the awards ceremony: <http://www.corbisimages.com/Enlargement/BE075425.html>

Sharon was awarded an academic scholarship to USC after the Olympics, as there were no swimming scholarships for woman at that time.

Today, she is married to Bob Rittenhouse, with 5 children. Sports played in integral role in the Rittenhouse family; there was a swimmer/ water polo player, a gymnast/ dancer, a golfer, a volleyball player and a diver. A proud mom, Sharon says that one of her greatest pleasures in life was watching her daughter, Ariel Rittenhouse, dive in the 2010 Beijing Olympics.

Recently I had the opportunity to catch up with Sharon to talk about her thoughts on swimming.

Q: What has swimming meant to you?

S: Swimming has meant a lifestyle to me and to this day, the sports/athletic life has kept me going. I believe that through my swimming endeavors I learned more than just a sport; it taught me many important lessons that I have used throughout my life. Learning the joys of being dedicated to something that is hard to do, learning self discipline, learning sportsmanship, learning to be fair, how to win, how to lose, working on constantly trying to be better and to improve myself in all pursuits are the results of taking up the sport of swimming and giving it all I could. The satisfaction that one attains in this endeavor is unmatched and lasts a lifetime.

Out of the Blue (continued)

Q: When you think of your experience at SCSC, what comes to mind?

S: When I think of my personal experiences at SCSC, I think of the group effort that surrounded me, to be one member of this great team that every day puts in extreme efforts, and the common goals we all shared made for great friendships and incredible memories. The SCSC team I was on in 1963 and '64 put 13 people on the Olympic Team. It was incredible to swim everyday with the biggest and toughest competitors in the world; not only around you but in your lane!

Q: Did you always dream of making the Olympics? Why or why not was that important?

S: I always dreamed of making the Olympic Team. How could you not? I do think that loving the sport and the discipline and the love of competition is most important. Getting yourself to do your best is what brings the joy to the sport. If the Olympic Team or the Olympic Gold is your only focus you are missing out on the journey. Making it to the Olympics is great but there is so much more to sport. Because the Olympics come only every four years, making the team is as much about timing and luck as it is about ability. If you make it it's the cherry on the cake; if you get it, it's great, but if not, you still get to eat the cake. It's one meet and unfortunately the vast public only pays attention that year and at that time. As I told my daughter, Ariel, who hoped to make the Olympic Team, "many great athletes never go to the Olympics and they are just as great as those that get the chance." There are great wins each and every year. Another idea that you have to win to be happy means that there is only 1 satisfied person in every race. It's so much more about doing your best and living up to your own expectations.

Q: What advice do you have for swimmers just beginning their journey?

S: My advice to young swimmers is to enjoy the journey. The everyday practices and the small steps of getting better are what make an athlete great. Don't always think that you have to be number 1 to be satisfied. It's about doing your best and making yourself better that brings the positive results. If you practice and work hard, the improvement will come. Don't concentrate on what place you're going to get, concentrate on swimming a good race. The medals will follow.

There is a terrific article on Sharon at this ESPN link:

<http://sports.espn.go.com/oly/columns/story?id=3452423>