

Meet NC Swimmer Erika Braun

By Harry DeLong

This is not your usual picture of Erika. She is frequently around water, but usually dressed to compete. This photo is another facet. It was taken recently by her husband Eric on a trip to Victoria BC Canada.



Erika Braun is well recognized around North Carolina as a top-notch swimmer and an intense competitor. But what do we know of her background and how she became one of our fastest swimmers. I think we need to know a bit more so here goes.

Erika was originally a gymnast who discovered at age 12 that gymnastics was not her sport, mostly because she towered over everyone else (she's 5'10"). She was living in Columbus, IN and her coach Jim Sheridan of the Donner Swim Club found a way to encourage her interest in swimming. After two years she qualified for Junior Nationals and she was hooked. She also learned during this time that she excelled at sprinting and didn't like the pain of distance events, an attitude she still holds today.

She began high school in Columbus IN and discovered the team aspect of swimming. She went to the 1986 State Championships to swim sprints, set the high school record in the 50 Free and was part of the 400 Free relay that won while the team finished second. Unfortunately for Columbus, but fortunately for her new highschool, the family moved to Wayzata, MN where she enrolled in Wayzata High School.

Swimming made the transition to a new school easier and she found herself enjoying the new team. Still swimming sprint events, she continued to excel and she placed first in both the 50 and 100 Freestyle events for the remaining three years of high school state championships. She is still listed in the top 25 of all swimmers on the Wayzata High School Swim team in 7 events, and yes, even the 500 freestyle. When she was a High School student, her coach set a goal for the swimmers to qualify for the 1988 Olympic trials which were being held in Austin TX. As trials approached she still needed to qualify and used the summer Junior Nationals meet to achieve the cut with a 26.64 by winning the event and setting the pool record at the Arizona State University pool. She was clearly in tough company at Trials with Angel Myers, Jill Sterkel, Jenny Thompson, Dara Torres, Janet Evans and Matt Biondi. What a heady group of swimmers!

After High School she was offered a scholarship to swim at the University of Georgia in Athens, GA. She fell in love with the city and the school and made lifelong friends on the swim team. She swam only two years since she wanted to focus on academics. This constituted a break from swimming, but it also allowed her to meet Eric, her husband. After school they moved to North Carolina since Eric had already passed the bar exam and wanted to practice law here. With her move to North Carolina, she began her career in Retail Management and eventually moved to Human Resources. Erika is currently the Director of Human Resources for Golden Corral.

Erika stayed out of the water for 12 years and then decided she wanted to train for a triathlon. She had been biking and running but knew she needed to get into the pool. She found Raleigh Area Masters (RAM) and decided to check out how workouts and training would go. Not surprising she fell right back into swimming and found she still loved the sport. She never did do a triathlon.

After a couple of months of hard work she felt at home again in the water. After several more months of practice she entered a meet in Charlotte. This as it turned out was not to be the best first meet. She injured her heel doing the 100 backstroke; she was still having a bit of a problem adjusting to the new backstroke flip turn. This was the first competition her husband Eric saw. As he observed, he didn't think that was supposed to happen - (probably the best observation of the meet.) Anyway, she got the heel wrapped by the lifeguard and swam four more events. Several doctors at the meet later convinced her to go to the ER where it took six stitches to close the wound and she was directed not to swim the second day

of competition. Even with that reintroduction to competition, she wanted more. She had the bug and still has it today.

Erika seems not only to enjoy the practices and meets, she enjoys meeting people and making friends of RAM and other NCMS swimmers. She enjoys meets inside North Carolina, traveling to meets outside the state and competing against other teams. She gets excited and enjoys watching other swimmers compete. All levels of swimmers, it's just the joy of the experience of watching people achieve their own goals. It's a Masters family atmosphere.

So does Erika have goals for the future? You bet. She wants to qualify once again for Olympic trials in the 50 Free and do that at age 40. She is faster now than when she did it as a teenager. Think of the thrill. Recently she swam 26.65 in Goldsboro and 26.78 in Cleveland. These times are just off the qualifying time of 26.39. Now that would be exciting! The group of swimmers she met and saw at trials in 1988 will be matched with an equal group for 2012. One consistent item will most likely be Dara Torres who will also probably be at trials. Fascinating: two swimmers who attended both the 1988 trials and the 2012 trials.

Erika's non-competition goals are to continue to attract and retain people to swimming. The workout group, RAM has a good collection of swimmers: triathletes of all levels and fitness swimmers of all levels. She wants to encourage more of these athletes to compete and discover the experience and excitement of competition. As we head toward having the USMS Short Course National Championships in Greensboro next year, she wants RAM to contribute to a North Carolina outstanding swim presence at that meet.

In review: Erika still holds the 13-14 50 Free record in both SCY and LCM for her first swim team. She is still listed in the top 25 of all swimmers in seven events at her high school in Minnesota. She is faster than when she was a teenager and more importantly since she returned to swimming in 2004 she has consistently achieved faster times each year. One example from SCY meets is how her 100 FR time has improved. In 2004 her best time was 54.02, in 2011 it was 52.49. Most importantly she is an asset to Raleigh Area Masters and to North Carolina Masters Swimming not because she is fast, but because she wants all swimmers to enjoy the sport as much as she does.