

SURVIVE & thrive

BY P.H. MULLEN

A LESSON IN LIVING

Surviving and thriving occur at all moments of life, even final ones. That's what happened with swimmer Jon Steiner, who, despite being ravaged by lung cancer, showed us how to finish strong, even amid fear and confusion.

Jon Steiner didn't dive into the water because he was looking to inspire us.

Yet that's what he did. He managed it with just one lap. It was neither fast nor particularly pretty.

What it possessed, however, was more heart than an Olympic final.

Were you there that sunny day last August at the FINA Masters World Championships? Were you among the fortunate who stood and cheered and wiped unexpected tears as a dying man gave us a lesson in how to live?

Steiner's race was the anchor leg of a 200 meter freestyle relay. It was magnificent. It was also a mighty struggle, for he was ravaged by lung cancer.

His disease had arrived suddenly just months earlier, and it was devastating. His sturdy, bear-like body had become a gaunt comma. He needed assistance walking to his lane. He breathed on an oxygen tank until race time.

A man who can't breathe when he's sitting on land has no business trying to breathe in water.

Those 50 meters were a fight. It took forever. The other lanes emptied. The emotional crowd went crazy when he weakly touched the wall. Friends gently lifted him out.

His triumph that day is even more affecting in retrospect. Steiner died the following month at age 56.

His last swim got him a standing ovation.

THRIVING TO THE END

With his trim beard, barrel chest and smiling eyes, Steiner knew how to thrive. He had a family and two daughters. By day, he was a successful lawyer. By night, he played jazz guitar professionally with his band, the Jon Steiner Trio.

And, of course, he loved to paddle back and forth.

He was never a top-10 swimmer, but he was a cornerstone of the Tamalpais Aquatic Masters (TAM) in San Rafael, Calif. He spent considerable time volunteering with local and national Masters committees. He was legal counsel for the 2006 FINA Masters Local Organizing Committee, and continued with the role as his health declined.

In spring 2006, he raced at Masters Nationals in Florida. Something was off. Despite a good taper, his times were much slower than a month earlier. But most troubling was his difficulty taking deep breaths. He went home to a doctor.

You don't see much lung cancer. It's difficult to catch early, and can spread with chilling speed. Usually, it kills quickly. A person gets sick, and doesn't recover. For all types of lung cancer at all stages, Cancer Research UK calculates one-year survivorship is just 20 percent.

Steiner's disease progressed rapidly. His swim club's spring 2006 newsletter wished him and others good luck at nationals. The summer issue wished him a speedy recovery. The autumn edition announced a memorial fund-raising event renamed in his honor.

Friends say the sicker he grew, the more important swimming the Masters World Championships became to him. Before falling ill, he had entered individual events. Those had to be scratched. But his teammates rallied and set up a relay.

You could say his swim was folly, because it surely weakened his fragile system.

Or you could see it quite differently. You could say it was a brave act by some-



[PHOTO BY RICH BURNS]

ABOVE »

Jon Steiner's final swim at last summer's FINA Masters World Championships was a brave act by someone who knew the odds were against him, but he refused to give up his optimism. He died the following month at age 56.

one who knew the odds were against him, but refused to give up his optimism.

Surviving and thriving occur at all moments of life, even final ones. In fact, a defining act of willful determination probably happens most often near the end of a person's life. Usually, it doesn't play in public.

We got lucky this time. We were able to be witnesses to a lesson in living.

Steiner showed us how to finish strong, even amid the fear and confusion. That last swim—it was his gift to us.

Our gift back to him is to show that we understood it. ♦

Do you know a swimming
SURVIVE & thrive story?
Send us an e-mail to editorial@SwimmingWorldMagazine.com

P.H. Mullen is the author of the book, "Gold in the Water." Jon Steiner is survived by his wife, Sue, and daughters, Claire and Annie.