Master Swimmer: Octogenarian Sets World Records, Wins Gold

By Kristin Gilpatrick, *E-Register*
Women In Military Service
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Much has been made this Olympic season about 41-year-old Olympic swimmer Dara Torres, a single mom who returned to Olympic dreams "late in life," after starting a family. Sports analysts ponder how she can compete at world-class levels "at her age."

Master Swimmer and World War II veteran Billie Burrill laughs at such notions. After all, as a world-record breaking swimmer herself, 87-year-old Burrill knows something about coming to the games "a bit later in life."

Burrill didn't begin swimming competitively until she was 64 years old—decades after she left the WAC following five years of service, from 1943-1947, which included censorship detail with the 5203rd WAC Detachment in New Guinea during World War II.

Always athletic and a top college fencing coach, Burrill only started swimming after she enjoyed and retired from a 30-plus year career as a college health and physical education professor.

When she retired, Burrill suffered from debilitating arthritis in her back. She took her doctor's advice and started swimming for relief. She was spotted in the pool by a Master Swimmer's coach who encouraged her to join the regional team of the nation's elite US Master Swimmers. The WAC veteran entered her first Master Swimmers meet in 1984 and kicked up a fast start. "I won all the events in my age group, so that was exciting and motivating."

Burrill, now living in North Providence, RI, has rarely missed a stroke in 25 years with Master Swimmers. She's broken seven world records and still holds the world record for

Womens Army Corps Veteran Billie Burrill, 87, set 7 world swimming records, all after the age of 64. *Image Courtesy of Billie Burrill.*

the 1500-meter freestyle in the 65 to 69 age female group. A member of the National Master Swimmers Championship Team in 1987-88, Burrill has competed, and won, in world-class pools, in Casablanca, Montreal, Hawaii, Munich, and Japan, to name a few. She has also been inducted into the International Scholar Athlete Hall of Fame.

In 2007, at the age of 86, Burrill again earned an All-American title, this time in the 50-yard freestyle in the 85-89 age group, at the national Master Swimmers' meet in Seattle, WA. "I won by 14-hundredths of a second, and it's still as exciting as ever," she recalls.

Staying that competitive requires training, and coaching, "even at my age," she admits. When training for competition, Burrill swims at least one hour, five to six days a week, for a minimum of six weeks. "To stay competitive, you must be dedicated and concentrated and make it your No. 1 priority," she stresses. "You have to focus and can't make any mistakes. If I had lost my focus for even half a second or made one mistake, I would have lost by 14-hundredths of a second.

Billie Burrill swims almost daily for her health and to stay in competitive shape. *International Scholar Athlete Hall of Fame photo.*

It's that close; it's that thrilling."

Though she holds all the freestyle YMCA national records in her age group, and yearns for more, Burrill is too busy swimming against another opponent this year—cancer—to swim competitively right now. "That doesn't mean I'm not in the pool, though," she stresses. "I still swim; it's good exercise for everyone and swimming is relaxing and therapeutic for me. I just don't try to race right now."

The race is still in her; however. Until she's ready to compete, however, Burrill will relish watching a fellow "old" swimmer—and fellow Master Swimmer team member—Torres stroke for the gold in Beijing, China. "'Even at her age,' Dara will do well," Burrill believes, because of a competitive advantage that only comes with maturity. "At our age, we swim smarter."

Burrill adds that she and her other Master Swimmers prove that "any age is the right age" for exercise and competition. "The last meet I was in, there were 10 women competing in the 90 to 95 year-old group. It would be great to beat their records."

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