

## SWIMMER PROFILE: DANIEL WONDAFEREW

By, Elaine Krugman



Last May, I featured Matt Jones of the Nautical Milers and now I would like for you to meet his teammate, Daniel Wondaferew. We met at the Auburn swim meet in 2023, and I have looked forward to seeing him at meets ever since. Not only is Daniel a nice guy, but he is fun to watch swim. The guy is fast! The 23-year-old is a one-time All-American relay winner and has racked up three individual and five relay Top Ten Honors since he started competing in United States Masters Swimming (USMS), in 2019.

Although I have always interviewed my past Swimmer Profile subjects, Daniel requested to respond to my questions in writing; so, this profile is different in that his are written quotes. Daniel is on the autism spectrum, and he finds that writing is a better way for him to communicate. After reading his replies to my questions, I responded in an e-mail that he might want to consider writing articles or a blog!

When asked what his swimming background was prior to joining Masters, Daniel replied, “I swam on the Sugarloaf-YMCA swim team under the umbrella of USA Swimming. I represented swim clubs, Swim Atlanta & Advanced Technical Aquatics (ATAQ). I was selected based on my swim times to represent Georgia at the 2018-2019 Southern Zones Age Group Championship. In 2019, I had received Georgia, “Disability Athlete of the Year Award”. Moreover, I swam during my senior year at Brookwood High School, and I was presented the 2019 “Coaches’ Award” from Coach Kevin Rodgers. This award was one of the reasons why I continued to pursue swimming. Next, I participated in the 2019 Gwinnett County Championship and felt honored to anchor my relay team. Last, I participated in open water events, and my first state championship meet at UGA with Coach Pat Thoreson, Nautical Milers Swim Team.”

The Nautical Milers is a special needs swim team, so I asked Daniel what challenges he has had and if they have affected his swimming. His first response was that his swimming technique negatively affects his race times—something we are all working to improve! The young swimmer added that he started competing later than the average swimmer. Daniel continued, “I am neurodivergent (Autistic). This life-long disability affects my attention span, mood, speech/ verbal literacy, social skills, reluctance to try new things, and ability to process information easily compared to neurotypical people. These are challenges that I must deal with daily which affect not only swimming but impacts my personal life as well.”

If you have been to any swim meets since the pandemic, you have probably seen Daniel tearing it up in the pool, seemingly unaffected by his autism. He swims a full slate of events. As he explained, "I don't particularly have a favorite event. I believe in the Nike slogan, "JUST DO IT!" However, based on my swimming trend, I tend to select the 200 Freestyle, 100 Breaststroke, 50 Breaststroke, 50 Butterfly & 100 Freestyle. I am working on improving my times in the backstroke and longer distances. Therefore, I could be a more versatile swimmer. I would like to focus on future events like the 200 Individual Medley, 200 Breaststroke, 400/500 Freestyle, and the 1000 Freestyle give or take an event."

Daniel trains hard for competition, putting in 4-5 mornings a week at Swim Atlanta with Coach Scott Davis. He also swims 3-4 evenings per week at West Gwinnett Aquatics as part of the Global Adaptive Aquatics program, headed by Coach Levy. "I believe I swim roughly swim 20-25,000 (give or take) yards per week, not sure. I just do the swim workouts what the coaches give me," he said.

When asked if he does any dryland training, Daniel replied, "I do 30 minutes of dryland training twice weekly at ATLAS Weightlifting Gym with Mrs. Danielle and Mr. Cord Gunnin. I use weights, ropes, kettlebells, barbells, the stationary bike, and do core work for strengthening and conditioning."

Daniel has accumulated quite a resume of swim meets since joining Masters. "First, I competed in the 2019 South Eastern Zone Age Group Championship where we received first place for boys 15-18 age group, and the Georgia team placed third overall. Second, I recently competed at the U.S. Masters 2023 Summer National Championship in Sarasota, Florida, and earned three top-10 medals. Third, I competed at the 2022 State Games of America, which was held in Des Moines, Iowa (5 Gold medals & 1 Bronze medal). Last, I had the honor of representing Team USA at the 2023 VIRTUS Global Games in Vichy, France. This international platform allowed me to showcase my skills, and I was proud to have brought home two bronze medals in the 50 and 100 Breaststroke and a top-10 position in the 100 Freestyle in my division." Congratulations, Daniel!



In the future, Daniel hopes to continue lengthening that swim meet resume. “I plan to continue to compete both at national and international meets. My future [goals] are as follows: Compete at the 2024 U.S. Masters Spring Nationals, the 2025 USMS Summer National Championship, and possibly the 2026 Virtus Americas Regional Games in Peru; and, the 2027 Virtus Global Games in Cairo, Egypt.”

This goal-oriented swimmer hopes to medal in those competitions and improve his USMS rankings in the process. “I am working on improving my swimming techniques, and therefore, I could improve my performance level.”

Although Daniel spends a lot of time training for his competitions, he has some other interests as well. “When I am not swimming, I enjoy playing video games, walking, bowling, shooting hoops (basketball), playing tennis with my sister, Yvonna, social media, and hanging out with my family and friends.” Still, it is Masters Swimming he seems to enjoy most. “In my adult years, I enjoy the camaraderie, competing and traveling to national & international swim meets. It’s great meeting athletes from different regions of the U.S. and world-wide. In addition, I enjoy challenging myself to swim a personal best, and working toward possible high point awards. I also enjoy being a role model, I would like to utilize my swimming ability or platform in social media to inspire other disabled swimmers and their parents to believe that they are capable of more than what others may perceive. I believe we are all champions in our own rights.”

Of all the memories he has of his five years as a Masters swimmer, one memory stands out. “My favorite Masters swimming memory is meeting and interacting with Mr. Rowdy Gaines at the 2023 Rowdy Gaines Masters Classic. It made my day when Mr. Rowdy said, “I know you; your name is Daniel.” Also, what a special moment it was when I received the high point award, and he took pictures with me and gave me a signed photo of himself, and high

school swimmers gathered around me to give me a high-five and we all took group pictures together. In addition, at the 2022 South Carolina State Championship Meet, a high-ranking retired Sergeant Major of the U.S. Marine Corps had volunteered as a timer. He had mentioned that he was very proud of my performance at the meet. He encouraged me to never stop swimming. Moreover, he surprised me by giving me his 25 years of service medal of honor. I was so happy for a hero to honor me in such high regards. I will never forget that special moment as he hugged me saying, ‘I was waiting to pass on this medal to someone special and deserving of it, and I wanted you to know how very proud I am of you, Daniel!’”



Daniel has been quite a success as a Masters swimmer, so I wanted to know his secret. What does he attribute his success to? “I attribute my will to succeed, and to overcome the challenges that my disability poses, my love for the sport, and the thrill of competing with other athletes are a few factors that attribute to my swimming success. Most of all, my most prominent attributes are people who looked past my disability and see potential in me and encourage me to continue swimming. Coaches have invested their time and energy and provided support for me along the way.

“With that said, I would like to extend my appreciation to my family, friends, former coaches-Emily Holton-YMCA, Linda Cosby-Angel Fish, Kai Smith-ATAQ, and Pat Thoreson-Nautical Milers. They initially encouraged me to compete, and they saw a champion in the making. Additionally, I greatly appreciate, enjoy, and respect my current training coaches: Scott Davis of Swim Atlanta, Helmut Levy of Global Adaptive Aquatics, and Dave Beem of Nautical Milers for their patience, commitment, and continued support. A special thanks goes to Swim Atlanta. I have been with them since middle school. Coach Davis and staff have opened their doors and hearts to me. I will always see them as my second family, and I consider the facility my home away from home.

“Also, please note, how much I appreciate the financial support service that [InCommunity Agency](#) afforded me and other disabled athletes over the years to help enable athletes like me to thrive. I am also proud of the opportunity that Mr. Barry Holman of [Athletes](#)

Without Limits provided me to represent the USA International Swim Team in Vichy, France. Not to mention, the coaches, Emily Wong & Bill Ewell were amazing! And last, I am an alumnus of Brookwood High School, and I appreciate the tremendous support of my former teachers, former teammates and swim coaches, Kevin Rodgers, Jack Gayle, & Martin. Generally, all the attributes mentioned previously had contributed to my success.” Daniel is also very grateful to his family for being so supportive. “My family has been my rock since childhood. My parents, Daniel and Michelle Wondaferew, have instilled, love GOD who lives within me, and all things are possible through GOD who strengthens me. They provide me the positive, structured and loving environment that I need to thrive in life. They are very patient with me and provide continuous safety and support for my family. They are GREAT people who deserve my medals. They inspire me to continue to swim, embrace my differences, and be kind and respectful to others.

“My sisters, Yvette and Yvonna Wondaferew, have tutored me while I attended elementary, middle and high school. They love me despite my faults. They would not hesitate to teach, guide, and step up in parental-like roles as needed. They are my cheerleaders even when I am not at my best. They encourage me to express my frustrations appropriately. Not to mention, my niece, Nadiyah along with my extended family (Aunts, Uncles, Grandfather, & cousins) has expressed how proud they are of me. I can’t forget my nephew, Yusif, he keeps me on my toes, and my Uncle Phillip at times, he tells my mother jokingly, ‘Daniel should be on the cover of a Wheaties cereal box.’”

“Over decades, my family has taken me to my swim practices, helped me to prepare my meals, and volunteered as timers; and, my sister, Yvonna has served as a counter for long-distance events if needed. Because my family are healthcare professionals and all former athletes in different sports disciplines, they understand the mental, emotional, and physical challenges the sport entails. As a result, they keep me grounded by encouraging me to do my best at whatever I put my mind to do while having fun. They foster positive and healthy behaviors for me to shadow, and I am grateful for them!”