

SWIMMER PROFILE MATT JONES & DEANNE JONES By, Elaine Krugman



For the past ten years, it seems like every time I swam the 200 Butterfly and 400 IM at a Masters meet, I would look at the heat sheet and see “Matt Jones” listed for the same events. Often, we are right next to each other on the blocks, even though I’m thirty years older and a lot slower than him, because there aren’t many of us competing in those physically demanding races.

I decided it was time to get to know this guy who keeps beating me (by a lot!) to the finish. Matt Jones, 32, has been a member of the Nautical Milers, a special needs Georgia Masters team, since 2013. As a person with [Asperger’s syndrome](#), he has a high-functioning form of

autism. His mom, Deanne, explained it this way:

“Matt is extremely intelligent. He graduated with honors from high school. But, he learns things differently than everybody else does. For him to grasp things, we may have to go about it in a different way to get there. He’ll watch a movie and come out of the theater after seeing it the first time quoting the movie. He remembers everything; he has a very good memory. That’s kind of his thing... Matt is a very visual learner, so he watches a lot of Michael Phelps videos—his technique and how he does things—and Matt mimics that.”

Prior to joining U.S. Masters Swimming (USMS), Matt gained a lot of experience in the pool. His grandfather taught him how to swim, and one of Matt’s special needs friends was also a swimmer. And his mother was the Special Olympics program director, so she encouraged Matt to compete along with her son. He was 14 at the time, and that eventually led to him swimming for two years on his high school swim team.

One of the highlights of Matt's swimming career was swimming at the Paralympics. "I traveled to Ecuador for an international swim meet with the Nautical Milers. We ended up being Team USA. That was back in 2014 when I did that. I came home with 2 silvers and 2 bronze [medals]." (Although the swimmers traveled as part of the national Athletes Without Limits team, the swimmers were also members of the Nautical Milers.)

Although Matt really enjoyed the experience—especially seeing the large iguanas roaming around outside of the pool facility—the entire team came home sick following the swim meet.

Still, the dedicated swimmer would like to travel internationally for a meet sometime again in the future. His destination of choice? "Tokyo, Japan," he replied, but added, "My biggest dream of all time is to travel to New York. I have never been there."

Another dream of Matt's is something he realizes may be just a bit out of reach, but he joked, "If I ever get lucky, I might become a world champion swimmer like Michael Phelps was." Deanne commented, "He just enjoys swimming, and I guess we'll keep swimming until it's not fun anymore."

Like Michael Phelps, Matt loves swimming butterfly—his favorite, along with backstroke. He emphasized, however, "I prefer long distance [events]." (Sprints are on his race line-up for this summer, though, when he competes in Grown-Up Swimming meets for the first time.)

When Matt trains on his own, he puts in at least 4-5,000 yards. The Dalton resident also trains with fellow Georgia Masters swimmer, Randy Russell, in Calhoun, where he is swimming 2,500-3,000 yards per session. In all, he swims 3-4 days per week, and then supplements his swimming with dryland workouts. "I have been doing a lot of those dryland workouts lately. I do the full plank, the side plank (left and right)," Matt explained. He also does weightlifting with dumbbells and adds pull-ups and push-ups to his routine.

In addition to training, Matt works at a car wash, which requires a lot of hard physical work. When he's at home, he enjoys playing video games, watching

movies, and YouTube videos. Matt also helps his mom around the house and takes care of his dog, a German Shepard mix. “He kind of sheds a lot,” Matt remarked.

As a dedicated student of the sport, Matt has worked hard to develop his stroke technique and improve his race times. When asked what he attributes to his swimming success, Matt replied, “I just never quit. And, I never give up on my teammates.” When I added, “And, you never give up on yourself,” Matt replied, “No way!”

That dedication to swimming has resulted in Matt winning the Georgia Masters Grand Prix Award four times during his ten years in USMS. His most recent award was in 2023, which he received at the Maria Thrash Memorial Meet, in March. Deanne commented, “He was pretty excited!”

Individual accomplishments mean a lot to Matt; however, when asked what his favorite thing about Masters is, he replied, “I like to give my teammates encouragement.” One of his favorite teammates is Anna “Libby” Beam. They enjoy hanging out together at the pool and doing tandem distance swimming.

When asked what he likes most about swimming, Matt said, “I just swim hard, that’s all.” Deanne added, “He tends to zone out. He just focuses strictly on the swimming, and it’s such a stress reliever for him. I don’t think he realizes how much it’s a stress reliever, but it does help tremendously. He can tune everything out.” When I asked Matt if he focuses on his stroke technique, he replied, “Oh yeah, sometimes. I just have a lot of things bouncing around in my head, somehow.” Swimming helps relieve that for him.

Fortunately, Matt has a lot of support and encouragement from his family. “They support me a lot. A lot of my folks keep up with me on Facebook, because my mom has a Facebook Page. I don’t. It’s just my mom that lives here; my dad is in Nashville, and he keeps up with me on Facebook. My sister, Stephanie, lives in Acworth... She comes to my open water swim meets at Lake Acworth and saw me doing a 5K. She is my older sister; my younger sister lives with my dad.”

I asked Deanne, “What has this meant to you seeing Matt succeed like he has in Masters and enjoying it as much as he has?” She replied, “It’s amazing to me that he enjoys it so much—just to watch him do something that he loves to do. And,

like I said, as long as he's enjoying it, we'll keep doing it. I kind of laugh and tell him, 'I'm just an Uber driver!' I just get him from place to place!"

"I'm really proud of him, because when he started out, it was a big learning curve. We had never done anything like this before, but then he's really gotten into the groove of Masters swimming. He likes it because he's more relaxed; it has helped a lot. With autism, there's a lot of social issues, but we have been totally accepted in Masters; and, everyone has been so friendly. It has just been great, because it has not always been that way everywhere [else] we go. Everyone [in Masters] has always been very inclusive. They have never tried to treat the Nautical Milers differently, and they have always just cheered them on like they have everybody else. To me, it's the coolest thing to see that happen. Matt may not be the fastest swimmer, but he concentrates on his technique—he is very particular about his technique. I kid him and tell him he'll sacrifice speed for his technique. But he enjoys doing it and it helps him... Matt is really working hard on his breaststroke. It's a stroke he has kind of struggled with. I have trained Matt for years, so that is why I have gotten him in with Randy, so Randy can help him fine tune things. I'm sure he's tired of his mom training him. It always helps for someone else to kind of look at [his strokes] and make adjustments as well." (Although Deanne has never competed in swimming, she taught swimming lessons many years ago.)

Deanne further explained, "We got into [swimming] for the competition, and he has grown so much. When he initially started competing, he struggled if he didn't always beat his times. And, that has to do with the autism. He's come a long way to where he just continually strives to do better, but if he doesn't, it's, 'Ok, I'm going to try to do better next time.' There's a lot more accomplishment with the autism connected to it than a lot of people realize. It has helped him cope with everyday living, really. Years ago, he had trouble with his sensory—with sounds being too loud. But, because of swimming it doesn't bother him [now]. It used to bother him when the horn would blow or the whistle would blow; I could see [how it affected him]. That has been another aspect of helping him grow into a more relaxed and better adult... It has helped [Matt] to be a more well-rounded person."

Matt, I look forward to seeing you next to me on the blocks in the 200 Butterfly and 400 IM for many years to come!