

**SWIMMER PROFILE
RAMON “RAY” VALLE
By, Elaine Krugman**



Last March, I featured Eran Lotan as my Swimmer Profile subject and said you would probably see him hanging out with his buddy, Ray Valle, at a swim meet. I promised to feature Ray in an upcoming newsletter.

Meet Ray! Like Eran, he is always smiling and having a great time at swim meets, especially when he's cheering his teammates on.

Ramon "Ray" Valle found his way to United States Masters Swimming (USMS) in 2014, two years after being transferred by his employer to Georgia, from his native country of Honduras.

The former Honduran, now a U.S. citizen, was no stranger to swimming when he joined USMS, first as an unattached swimmer, and then as a member of the Atlanta Water Jocks. When Ray was a child, he suffered from asthma, and his doctor recommended to his dad that he enroll him in a swimming program to help strengthen his lungs. "After several years I started to like it a lot," Ray explained. "At first, I wanted to be the best on my team, back in the '80's. In the early '90's, I

wanted to be the best of the region, and then I wanted to be the best of the country. And then, in the mid '90's, before the Olympic Games, I was the best in Central America, so I got my ticket to the Olympic Games in '96 (at the age of 19). I continued my swimming until Winnipeg, the Pan American Games in Canada. That was my last event continuously. I did enter the finals of the Pan American Games, and in the 1500 free, I finished in 8th." Ray was the first male swimmer from Honduras to qualify for the finals in any Pan American Games and held the national record with a time of 15:59:17 in that event from 1997 until it was broken last year.

"But wait! What about the 1996 Olympics?! I want to hear more!" I exclaimed (give or take a word or two...). I wanted to hear all about that amazing experience, so when I asked Ray what it was like, and he replied, "Incredible! You get there, you start meeting people from all over the world, especially at the Olympic Village. We stayed at Georgia Tech, and all of that was full of athletes around the world. And the fun part is that I really came prepared, because when you go to the games you bring a souvenir from your country, and then you exchange those souvenirs with other athletes. I can show you my pin collection!"



“My specialty was always distance freestyle, so I did the 1500 free, and I finished first [in my heat]. It was funny, because they were videotaping that live, and in my country, everybody was watching me live when I was swimming, and they thought I had won the event! It was funny because everybody was cheering when I got back. After that, everyone knew it was just my heat I had won.”

“Definitely, the cool thing about the Olympic Games is that you go to the cafeteria, and [it] has so many different buffets from all over the world. You can choose what you would like to eat. Of course, before the meet, you have to be careful, but after the meet, you can try whatever you want! It was a great experience and fun.”

After the games, Ray stayed in touch with a lot of the people he had met; however, Facebook (and other social) media didn't exist at the time, so the communication was through writing letters. Eventually, he and his friends lost touch with each other, so he is now trying to relocate them through social media.

Following the Olympics, Ray completed his college education in Honduras, earning a degree in Industrial Engineering. He continued swimming and competed in two Central American Games, which occur every four years. “That was a great experience, because my first games, Honduras hosted those games. Those were the 6th Central American Games. I participated in the 6th and the 7th in Guatemala. It was definitely a great experience.” In Honduras, in 1997, Ray won six gold medals and in 2001, he won four gold medals in Guatemala. Meanwhile, in between those two games, Ray competed in the Central American and Caribbean Games, in Venezuela, in 1998, taking home a bronze medal in the 1500 freestyle. Then, in 1999, Ray took a break from swimming until he trained for the 2001 meet.)

After the second haul of gold medals he earned at the Central American Games, Ray was recognized as the Michael Phelps of his country. “I was so popular in Honduras, they did a [postage] stamp for me,” he said, as I listened in amazement. I replied, “Please send me a picture!” As you can see, they had hoped Ray would compete in the Sydney 2000 Olympics, but that didn't happen.



In addition to his likeness gracing a postage stamp, the Olympian added, “The [Honduras] Olympic Committee gave me the honor to be the Male Olympic Athlete of the 20th Century in Honduras.”

At this point, Ray was ready to move on from swimming. “I took a long break; I was more focused on work. I started working, I started my MBA, and of course, zero swimming until I got back here in the United States.” The work he was referring to is a job he landed with Kimberly-Clark, the large American multinational personal care corporation that produces mostly paper-based consumer products. After working in the health-care division for ten years, Ray was transferred to Roswell, Georgia, in 2012. His parents and son from his first marriage remained in Honduras, and he visits them twice a year. “The food is what I miss most!” he joked.

Ray explained that when he was working in Honduras, there was no Masters Swimming in any of the Central American countries. At Kimberly-Clark campus in Roswell, they have a 25-meter pool, so Ray started swimming again and joined Georgia Masters two years later.

Wanting to know how he and Eran Lotan became friends, Ray explained, “I met Eran at the [Southside Seals] Pentathlon meet in 2016. I heard him talking, and when you hear a Latin dude talking in English, you will hear the accent...” Ray asked Eran where he was from, and then they started speaking to each other in Spanish. That was the beginning of their friendship. They now train together, race together in relays, and hang out on deck together at meets. Ray and Eran both battle asthma, so they share that in common as well.

Ray’s asthma wasn’t a problem for him as an adult until late 2021. “[Asthma] wasn’t a challenge before COVID, but I got hit by COVID, and after that, it

reactivated it.” Ray is now trying to get back in top racing condition after being away for one year, which has been difficult. “You can see my times before COVID, and then after COVID. There was one meet, the St. Nicholas meet back in December 2022, I was swimming the 800 free and I had to stop twice. I needed to get air; I was out of air.”

Although he is still having issues with breathing when he races, he has set some goals for the future. “My goal this year... I want to go for the Masters Pan American Games and I will swim as well the 400 and 800. I want to win the gold... I really want to go to another Worlds [Masters] Championship. Next year, it won’t be possible, but maybe when I turn 50 [in 2027]. I will be the youngest in that group.”

If his past goal accomplishments were any indication of how he will do going forward, I would put my bet on Ray achieving those attainable goals. “My [past] goal was to get a Pan American [Masters] medal. In 2018 the United States hosted the Pan American Games down in [Orlando], Florida. I heard about that and started training for that meet. I just participated in the 400 free and I got the silver medal for that. That was great... Back in 2021 (before getting COVID), I participated in [USMS Long Course] Nationals, in Cleveland. I did the 400 and 800 and got first places there. I also participated in Worlds Master, in Hungary. That was back in 2017. I participated in the 400 and 800 as well and got 7th place in both.”

To prepare for his meets, Ray is training an average of 3,000 yards per day, six days per week. “I’m a long-distance swimmer, so my sets are pretty much distance... I like to focus on my swimming and meditating. It’s my “me time”, he said.

Asked what advice he would give to others trying to achieve their swimming goals, Ray replied, “Just keep consistent. Consistency is the key to improve anything in your life.”

Reflecting over his ten years in Masters, Ray’s consistency has paid off, and he has done extremely well. In addition to two 2021 All-American honors (short and long course meters 800 freestyle), the freestyle specialist has earned 34 individual and two relay USMS Top Ten swims, one of which was an All-American relay in 2021.

This long distance swimmer's favorite Masters memory was neither of those accomplishments, though. As Ray remembered, "I participated in the first U.S. Masters Games in 2016... I remember getting ready for it and staying focused. And, during that meet I felt so good I did the best 400 free I had [done] in Masters. I did a 4:25:79" If that time had counted in the USMS rankings, Ray would have been an All-American that year. He swam a slower time at another long course meet and placed 4th in the country, still a fabulous accomplishment.

Ray not only has accomplished a lot in USMS, he had a lot of fun doing it. Asked what he likes most about his Masters journey, Ray thoughtfully replied, "First of all, it keeps you healthy... The meets are awesome. You meet people your age, you exchange stories of your family; we're all on the same page... Your teammates are competing and you're rooting for them. It brings a lot of great memories back [of] the good old days."