

General Record and Major Transformations in the Sport of Men's Swimming at

Michigan State University

By James Stewart

Men's varsity swimming today is certainly not the most popular, followed, or funded sport at the University, nor even tremendously successful. However, the sport was extremely successful during its height of both university and national importance from shortly after World War II up until around 1970. The sport was able to begin as a small, under funded sport, and with the help of a dynamic coach and athletic director, was able to become a nationally-prominent program, showing all of the aspects of big-time collegiate athletics. Men's Varsity Swimming at Michigan State has followed a familiar trend shared by other sports such as football in that the sport began small, rose to national prominence, then faded in recent years. Nonetheless, it is still of importance to study the history of this sport at Michigan State, for both the surface value of the sport's merit, as well as the trends reflected in other collegiate athletics, both at MSU and nationally.

As with most other sports, men's swimming at Michigan State University began as a modest sport, with much greater success to follow. Competitive and eventually varsity men's swimming can be originally traced back to the building of pool facilities in 1902, called the "Bath House." The actual pool was small by today's standards, only seventeen by thirty-five feet, but contained showers, locker rooms, among other amenities. Certainly impressive was the 18,000 dollar price tag that the then college devoted to its construction. From then on, there is little official competitive swimming, as

the building apparently failed to entice the sport to grow. But it was able to grow enough that swimming was added as a varsity sport in 1922, the team being coached by Southard F. Flynn.

The early days of Michigan State men's swimming was competitive, but not successful. The first meet was a loss against Detroit Junior College, and from there the team lost all four of their remaining meets that year. The first year of varsity swimming at the school set the tone for the rest of the decade, with the first winning record in meets not to come until the 1929-30 season. During the first decade, the sport was characterized by inconsistent coaching and losing records. In the first seven years of the sport, the team was coached by seven different men. On top of this, the entire 1928 season was cancelled due to repairs being performed on the pool, indicative of the sport's place at the school.

However, the sport was due to turn around. The aforementioned 1929-30 season was the first for Coach Russell B Daubert, who was responsible for the partial successes of the sport during the 1930s. He posted several winning records and certainly brought more attention to the teams. These moderate successes perhaps brought about some much-needed administrative attention when Coach Daubert left in 1941, in order to find his successor. The hiring of Charles McCaffree in 1942 was the critical turning point in the both the fortunes and legacy of Spartan swimming.

Charles McCaffree, Jr. was hired away from Iowa State College in 1942 in order to continue the building that Russell Daubert had started in the 1930s. He was originally a Michigander, coaching Battle Creek High School and assistant coaching at the University of Michigan, so he was certainly keen to make Michigan State a successful swimming program. And he certainly brought success, going 189-57-2 during his tenure (1942-69).

He was also coach Spartan swimmers to win 22 NCAA, 7 NAAU, and 34 Big Ten titles. In order to achieve this success, he enacted several changes in both how the program was approached and managed.

One of the most major transformations that he brought to State was the use of heavy and national recruiting in order to bring the most talented swimmers possible to the program. McCaffree was pushing for the program to become top-tier, and to do so he would have to do heavy recruiting. During his tenure he used several methods, extensive even by today's recruiting-crazed coaches, which involved extensive travel and communication. For instance, in 1957, there are a pair of instances that highlight McCaffree's commitment to recruiting. One is contained in a letter from a Mr. Hugh Tolford on July 31st. In the letter, he comments on a meeting with a swimming prospect and his father. In it, he states that "it appears that you people have done a tremendous job in selling this boy on State."¹ Also in the same year, a letter to Ralph Alexander, a swimmer at Texas Christian University, on August 15th shows that McCaffree was attempting to get Alexander to leave TCU and attend State. He states that:

"...we should have liked to have had you with us here at Michigan State. I realize the problems of transferring are always difficult. Please give our best regard to your Mom and Dad."²

This reveals his commitment to recruiting in his obvious meeting with the young man's parents, and his determination. The use of heavy recruiting was certainly one of the

¹ *Letter from Hugh Tolford to Charles McCaffree, 7/31/57.* Clarence Munn Papers, Courtesy MSU Historical Archives.

² *Letter to Ralph Alexander from Charles McCaffree, 8/15/57.* Clarence Munn Papers, Courtesy MSU Historical Archives.

biggest transformations that McCaffree brought to Michigan State swimming, but not the only.

The other key changes that propelled the program are the addition of new facilities, and the bringing of the Pan-American Games of 1959 to the campus. Both are linked and equally important to the development of Spartan swimming. The first new facilities since the first in 1902 were built in 1940, shortly before McCaffree's arrival. However, the facilities were not what McCaffree was looking for and he waited for an opportune moment in order to get the world-class facilities he desired. In August of 1959, the Olympic swimming trials and the Pan-American games were to be held at Michigan State University. In order to put these prestigious events on, the school needed new facilities to hold them. It was due to McCaffree's campaigning and pushing that the events, and thereby the facilities came to State. In a letter to Ray Daughters, Chairman of the Olympic Swimming Committee, McCaffree describes the newly built facilities as "the Olympic pool of the nation."³ These new facilities, along with the national attention paid to state due to the Games, the swimming program became one of the most important of the winter, if not all, sports at MSU.

Athletic director Biggie Munn is also responsible for the rise of Spartan swimming, due to his allocation of large funds to McCaffree and his program. In 1957, McCaffree's request for scholarships reached 14,450 dollars.⁴ This combined with the 12,647.01⁵ dollar investment, not counting the cost of the new facilities, into the Pan-

³ *Letter to Ray Daughters from Charles McCaffree*, 12/1/58. Clarence Munn Papers, Courtesy MSU Historical Archives.

⁴ *Scholarship Requests for the 1957-58 Season*, Charles McCaffree. 7/2/57. Clarence Munn Papers, Courtesy MSU Historical Archives.

⁵ *Financial Report-Pan-America Swimming Trials, MSU*. 1959. Clarence Munn Papers, Courtesy MSU Historical Archives.

American Games, puts swimming at a considerably high spending bracket for collegiate sports at the time. So, going into McCaffree's final decade at MSU, the swimming program was at a height it had never been, both at the University and on the national stage.

It was also during this period that the popularity of the sport among students was highest. In addition to crowds and support at the swim meets, there was also an active swimming fraternity on campus, the Porpoise Fraternity. Active since at least 1941, the group supported and promoted swimming on campus competitively and recreationally. They held swim meets for students, put on water shows, and conducted water safety classes. The fraternity was certainly partially responsible for the support among the students during this time.

McCaffree's successes left behind a definite mark both in swimming and in athletics as a whole. He was able to push the program from mediocrity to national levels, using recruiting, large budgets, and excellent coaching. McCaffree was followed as coach by Richard Feters, an assistant of his for seven years. The decade of his tenure was marked by modest success and wins. However, none of it reached the level of McCaffree's tenure.

As the decade wore on, however, swimming was to lose its place as a major sport at Michigan State due mainly to the rise of other winter sports and the decline of the program. With the wins abating, the rise of basketball, and the return of hockey, swimming was unable to hang on to its status. From then on, it returned to a minor sport at the university, with little attention and smaller budgets. However, it still remains a strongly competitive varsity sport, competing in the Big Ten and the NCAA.

The legacy of swimming at Michigan State is essentially defined by the Charles McCaffree era. The changes he brought to swimming are indicative of how a sport can be turned from an afterthought into a major consideration in a small period of time. The investment of capital, heavy recruiting, and dynamic leadership can push a sport into the national spotlight. This can be compared to any number of other sports at MSU and around the country, showing how sports are made at the collegiate level. That said, the history of swimming at MSU is still a successful and interesting saga that hopefully will return to national prominence in the near future.

A Note About Works Cited:

Where noted, sources directly from MSU archival material. All un-noted information from the Clarence Munn or Ralph Hayward Young papers, courtesy of the MSU Historical Archives, or *The Spartan Saga* by Lyman L. Frimodig.