

Jim Wood: A Life of Offering A Fork in The Road

By Chuck Warner

If we are fortunate in our personal lives, we meet an individual or two that offer a fork in the road to our principle opportunities and purpose. In conducting the sport of swimming “path creators” are also rare. Jim Wood offered a fork in the road to many people personally and to all of those involved in competitive swimming.

The instincts of this fearless, big-thinking leader, were molded at Union High School in New Jersey where Jim studied, ran track and served on the student council. His junior year he and his friends invited and secured the rock band “Cream” (with leader and rock legend Eric Clapton) to perform at the fund raiser for their tiny student body. His senior year they went a step further and brought the rock hall of fame group “The Who” to their school. Jim Wood was never shy around big ideas.

His employment was the casualty of a change in athletic directors, while he was a very young head coach at the University of North Carolina completing graduate school. He retreated to his family home in New Jersey and set a course to own his future. He became sole owner of the Berkeley Aquatic Club (BAC), and purchased his family home where he lived to his passing.

For many years, he served then “US Swimming” as the chairman of the Olympic International Operations Committee. Tirelessly, he prepared a process and procedure for American international teams to compete successfully around the world with nothing personal to gain from it except to fulfill his sense of service--a demand he has made on everyone who works for him.

When Jim decided to run for USA Swimming president one national supporter said, “We have the right man, but the wrong candidate.” Jim was never a politically minded candidate, just a person of the highest integrity and intelligence willing to let the USA Swimming membership vote for him or not, based upon his record of service, his character and his vision for the organization. Standing on that platform he was elected the first coach president of USA Swimming. Then re-elected. Then elected president of US Aquatic Sports. Then re-elected.

Coach Wood showed us a path in everything from the conduct of a meeting, to a four-year plan, that was informed from our past and created more opportunity for our future.

When disagreements arose, Jim’s only sword to fight the battle of what he believed was the right course (which almost always proved to be right for you and I and the sport of swimming) was preparation, principal and the brilliance with which he could convey his point. One example, was his role in successfully stopping the “big suits” from stealing the effect of out-preparing the opposition from swimmers around the world. Closer to home, when Rutgers University decided to drop men’s swimming and five other sports, the coalition of the affected sports asked Jim to be their spokesman in a meeting with the university athletic director and

representatives of the Rutgers Board of Trustees. When the university noted that there was a shortfall of \$35,000 in our plan to self-finance men's swimming, Jim offered to pay the sum annually from his own pocket to continue to offer the opportunity to New Jersey's boys to swim at their state university.

Never married, Jim's children were his swimmers. For nearly his entire career he coached his morning practice, then his senior group from 3-6 pm and another group of the best age-groupers until 8 pm. In the summer, 60 swimmers would greet him most mornings at 6 am to giggle, update their lives from 10-12 hours before and work. The only light glistening brighter than the sunrise sparkling on the water was the smile on his face. He loved the girls, and hugged them judiciously and appropriately. As most American swim teams saw the decrease in boys over the decades, not so at BAC. His guys found a role model to look up to outside the home. Each year Jim designated a night for the senior boys to get together for beans and steak where they could joke and just be boys. Nothing speaks more fondly about his coaching, than the annual Thanksgiving practices where more than 100 alums and college students would visit the team and their coach.

If you were Jim Wood's friend, you were most fortunate. He loved his Yankees, Giants and could pick up a golf club whenever he liked and play like a seasoned amateur. A few years ago, his New Year's Day wasn't spent on any of those activities, but instead he spent the entire day visiting with his friend Chuck Wielgus, ailing from cancer in a New York hospital.

There were swim coaches before me and after me that looked to Jim for help when their career took a tough turn. Five years ago, he and I formed a business partnership. A former partner in owning the Metro Swim Shop, Greg Eggert advised me, "Jim has a better business sense than any of us." There was an element of risk to a major deal I wanted to make and Jim deliberated carefully and analyzed it at length. When we came to our own crossroads to make a commitment we simultaneously agreed that "we wanted to do something for our community that would outlive our lifetime." (He has done that many times with other partnerships, and in particular, creating the amazing Berkeley Center of Excellence in his home town of New Providence, NJ). When Jim agreed to move forward, I said to him, "thanks a million." He said carefully to me, "no, thanks..." and reiterated the exact number of dollars that he had shared a commitment to.

In August of 2018, Jim finally visited Cuba, a bucket list item for him. His health had been suffering for some time, but no one told Jim Wood how to live his life. Off he went by himself and we texted and emailed back and forth during the trip. When they docked in Havana a surprise awaited him. He shuffled into the town square and heard his name being called by someone with a Cuban accent, "Coach Wood! Coach Wood!!" Much to his surprise a boxing coach he had met and helped at a recent Olympics, recognized him. The coach provided Jim a two-hour private tour of Havana and his club; quite simply a small return on the investment Jim had made into the world of sport.

When it came to the governance of swimming and it's effect on us all "The Wood Edict" has been: *if we act in the best interest of the sport around the world, we will also best affect the sport in the United States.* So at times he has been sent on his own from the USA to the powers there are internationally to talk sense about suits, about drug testing and other critical topics. With him he packed only his sword (preparation, principal, brilliance) to argue for whatever he believed was right. Through his efforts, we have been offered a fork in the road for our sport, just as he has done for friends like me. Most importantly, he has offered a model to his beloved swimmers of how to choose a life of purpose and service.

Where is the next person with the metal of Jim Wood? Is she or he out there now, waiting to decide whether to serve? If so, please pick up your sword and step forward. We need you.

Eight years ago, Jim, and his swim school director Toney Brewster, introduced me to a young woman named Lisa Rivera, who has become my right-hand person in developing a key venture for our community, the Little Dolphin Swim Academy. As night dropped the curtain on New Year's Eve 2018, Jim fought a losing battle to stay in this life. At the very same time Lisa bore Kaitlin Iris Rivera into the world and the year 2019 began. Is it you, Kaitlin, that will open forks in the road to others?

As the poet said, "He took the road less travelled by, and that has made all the difference."

Thanks for my fork Jim. Thanks for all of ours in swimming.