

Erika Braun - Swimming



Twenty-five years ago, Erika Braun was supposedly hitting her stride as a competitive swimmer. After participating in the U.S. Olympic Trials two years earlier, she was attending the University of Georgia on an athletic scholarship and enjoying some of the fastest times of her career. But she was bored, burned out on a sport she had once loved. So one day, she took a break.

It was the best decision she ever made.

For the next 12 years, Braun focused on other goals. She earned a degree in business administration and began working in retail management and then human resources; married her husband, Eric; and became an active supporter of the National Multiple Sclerosis society. She also stayed active by biking and running.

After a friend suggested she compete in a triathlon, since she had experience with all three sports, Braun began researching clubs near her Raleigh, N.C., home that could help her get back in swim shape. A month later, she competed in her first Masters Games meet – and fell in love with the pool all over again. So much so that she never completed her triathlon. Instead, Braun dug back into competitive swimming.

Today, Braun, 44, swims four or five times a week. She qualified for the 2012 U.S. Olympic Trials in the 50m – swimming a lifetime best 26.32 – and is trying to qualify for the 2016 U.S. Olympic Trials in the same event. She'll also swim in five events at the USA Masters Games – 50m and 100m freestyle, 50m butterfly, 50m backstroke and 100m individual medley.

While the mechanics of swimming haven't really changed since Braun was a teenager, there are some major differences she's noticed as an older athlete. For one, swimming as a Masters competitor is more enjoyable because it's just one part of her very full life. In college, swimming was the end game. Today, swimming is something Braun can do as much or as little as she wants; instead of commandeering her calendar, it shares space with her family and career.

Secondly, Braun is a better athlete today than she was 25 years ago. In addition to swimming, she also lifts weights regularly, a change that has translated to faster times in the water. In fact, Braun's athleticism, coupled with the technologically advanced racing suits now available, has allowed her to consistently swim faster as an adult than she did as a teen or college student.

But most importantly are the relationships she has built with other Masters swimmers. Whether it's someone she sees once a year at a national competition or someone she trains with weekly in Raleigh, the Masters swimming community isn't just a tight-knit group, it's a family. And Braun is excited for the first-ever national reunion this July in Greensboro!