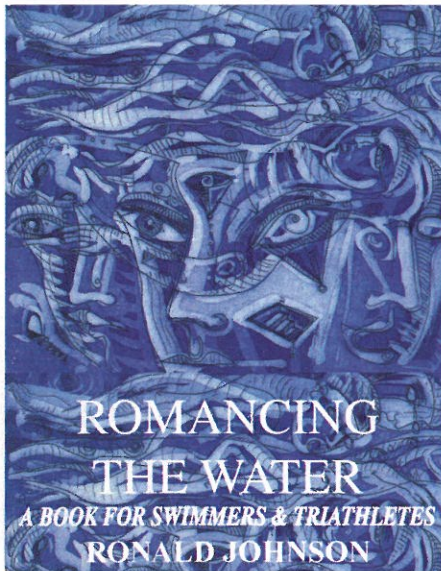


Tools of the trade

Our book of the month, and we are always interested in your opinions of the books or products we feature – simply email swimmingtimes@swimming.org.



Book of the Month

Romancing the Water, by Ronald Johnson

A review and tribute by **Tony Pearce**

The Renaissance Man

I met Ron Johnson in 1998 at the World Masters Games in Portland, Oregon. As a masters swimmer, then in the 65+ age group, he was breaking world records for a hobby. I found him very easy to talk to. We agreed that Dick Jochums was the best coach 'on the deck' in the US at that time, that James 'Doc' Counsilman was one of the great doyens of swimming coaching and that both of us would always struggle to get past the first chapter of Ernest Maglischo's latest book on swimming, even though it was regarded as a great reference book.

Some time ago, I heard that Ron was writing a book on swimming entitled *Romancing the Water*. I had also heard that he had had five heart attacks. The final one occurred in the warm-down pool immediately after breaking a world record in the 75+ age group in the 200 fly. Despite being pronounced dead, he was miraculously revived and survived quadruple heart by-pass surgery. His personal recollections of these experiences during the promotion of his book on the Swimming World TV Show made other reality television look decidedly dull.

It was about this time that I decided to go out

to Arizona and meet him again. I needed a break. However, just before I was about to depart I received the news that Ron had passed away. This did not deter me from embarking on my journey.

When I got to Phoenix, I immediately got my hands on the book and from then on, I was living the 'swimming life'. In the morning, I would cross over the bridge where the lake separated Scottsdale to the Bohemian university town of Tempe, where a mountain overlooked the huge Arizona State University sports stadia. There, in the Mona Plummer swimming pool, I would train with the Sun Devils Swim Club under the watchful eye of stand-up comedian and coach John Tunstall and the hot midday Arizona desert sun. But the one thing that one was always aware of was the presence of Ron Johnson. 'Ron used to train in the lane that you were in!' In the evening I read his book avidly.

Raising Arizona

As a young swimmer in the 1950s, Ron was a regular member of the US swim team. Later, as a masters swimmer, he became the only such swimmer to hold world records in his age group for every stroke including the IM. Three times he was voted Masters Swimmer of the Year and he was inducted into the International Swimming Hall of Fame.

While still a masters swimmer, he began his coaching career in the early 1960s as the assistant coach at the University of Iowa, with swimming coaching heavyweights around him such as David Armbruster (the high elbow), Bob Kiputh and a young swimmer studying for his PhD by the name of James 'Doc' Counsilman. He quickly ascended to the position of head coach to the Arizona State University, where he coached 31 Olympic finalists, 14 Olympic medal winners (including Great Britain's Andy Jameson) and 19 national champions (including GB's Andy Astbury, who won the NCAA Division 1500yds freestyle).

He was voted Division 1 College Coach of the Year and became a US national coach which included being a coach at the Mexico Olympics. He also formed the Sun Devils Swim Club and was voted Masters Swim Coach of the Year.

When reading Ron's book, you are not reading a technical swimming book. Rather, you are listening to Ron narrating his own personal experiences from a period of over six decades. This alone makes this book a must to read as it is not about swimming, it is about him.

No, there is not the usual long list of references or a bibliography at the end of the book to qualify his every statement. The book is,

as he aptly states during a TV Show interview, 'What I have observed'.

Observation is a great teacher.

Here, although being acutely aware of sports science, he obviously ensured that it did not interfere with the way he coached - he believed that swimming is more of an art form than a science. To me, this is depicted by his learning to become an accomplished Spanish guitar player - although, he clearly understood the science of swimming, as the invention of his own brand of hand-paddles and swimming helmet demonstrate.

This book is also fun to read, with anecdotes which illustrate his personal experiences. Also, the photographs deserve honourable mention particularly with sculling reinforcing his faith in developing an effective 'feel' for the water.

But to me, his ideals referring to the importance of kicking, the use of hand-paddles, the prevention of shoulder injuries, age and performance and his personal philosophies regarding training methodology are the most interesting. Underload versus overload, pacing strategy in terms of distance per stroke and its relation to tempo and overviews on all of the four strokes with an emphasis on eliminating resistance with again a reference to 'feel' are interesting concepts.

The Sun Devil

Ron also considered future developments in swimming in general. This is the only aspect of the book which I am somewhat sceptical about. In this book, there is to me an assumption that both swimmers and coaches are relatively quickly forgotten through the passage of time. Ron certainly will not be forgotten quickly. Well over 500 people attended his funeral to say goodbye to a man who had time for everybody from the supposed weakest swimmer to the supposed super swimmer.

Where did all this come from? Well, at school he tried various sports and thought he was abysmal at swimming. So, in an effort to redeem himself with his team-mates, he began travelling the road of a swimming life that truly depicts what swimming should be all about. See *Romancing the Water* pages 49-50, 'Self-Esteem versus Self-Discipline'.

I urge all swimmers and coaches to read this book: www.romancingthewater.com.

Tony Pearce directs swimming at St Paul's Boys School in London and is head coach of the recently-formed St Paul's Barnes Swimming Club.