

DOC

He is “Doc;” always has been, always will be. And to me he is the finest example of what Masters Diving is all about. His record, which I will not recite here, but you can find it if you want to, tells only a part of his story, and a small part at that. I do not even remember his whole story although his history was recalled by his family during his 80th birthday party, which Bev and I were privileged to attend fifteen years ago.

Let’s go back a couple weeks to May 26, 2011. “That top drawer, Felix, is filled with cans of Budweiser Beer. The bottom drawer has beer and a bottle of Bacardi Rum; or it did until my wife stole my rum a couple days ago, thinking I shouldn’t be drinking hard liquor. It might be bad for me.” This was at The Villa, an assisted living facility in Downey, California, where Doc now resides. The drawers to which he referred were where one would normally store their extra socks, underwear and shirts. Not Doc. At 95, and with significant health challenges, he wants his daily beer (it may be this 95 year old man’s version of the Lord’s Prayer – you know, “Give us this day our daily beer”) and every once in awhile a shot of rum. When Doc told me that I practically wet my pants, not from incontinence but from laughing. Here was this fabulous old fart, compromised physically but still pretty sharp mentally, and he knew exactly what he wanted, how to express what he wanted, and determined to get it. He told me he was sure that one of his sons would soon replace his pilfered rum.

The time I was able to spend with Doc that Thursday was a treasure for me and I hope it was meaningful for him. He cannot walk; his once strong resilient legs with the beautiful toe point will no longer sustain his weight. Speaking of his legs and toes, when I first saw Doc dive in the mid-’70’s it was obvious why he was a national champion and would have been an Olympian in 1944/45. I was blown away by the grace he showed in all of his dives; and he was 60 at the time. He may not have had the toughest list in the world, but he sure was the most beautiful diver in Masters Diving at the time (although his good friend and tough competitor Frank McGuigen was right there with him).

As Doc sat on the edge of his bed at The Villa, we joked about our experiences together and I noted how tough it was to judge him during those years when his age group or Grand Masters put him in head to head competition with the delightful and wonderful Bill McAlister. Doc’s dives always looked beautiful; Bill could do lots of tricks even into his late 80’s but he could never point his toes or keep his legs straight. Still he managed to get in head first and most of the time pretty straight up and down. The judging results were all over the place – smart as we were, we didn’t always know how to fairly compare one with the other. I am sure other judges had the same problems I did, but I am also certain that we loved every minute of it. Seeing these two icons of Masters Diving in heated battle in their 80’s was something I know we will always remember with the greatest of joy.

Something that set Doc apart from the rest was his dedication and devotion to his community, whether that be his family, Downey or Masters Diving. What many of you may not know is that for many years Doc served as the volunteer physician for Downey High School. This required him to attend games every week and be prepared to take immediate care of anyone who might suffer any kind of serious injury. His talent and willingness to serve were proven when we were in the Soviet Union in 1990 for the first masters athletic event in that enormous country. During a training session, Mike Bartley, one of our divers, dislocated his shoulder. The Soviet coaches and life guards had no idea what to do, but Doc knew exactly what to do. He moved everyone else aside, placed his foot in Mike's armpit and gently pulled and twisted the arm into place. Done; perfect; Doc. I have wished on two occasions that Doc had been around when I dislocated my shoulders (left at the Woodlands in 1994, right last year at the Rose Bowl). In both cases the time it took for the paramedics to arrive, then do all their insufferable paper work and finally get me to the hospital, resulted in severe nerve damage, something that Mike did not suffer at all – his shoulder was out of its socket for 5 minutes, max.

Doc also always attended our Masters Meetings and shared his thoughts, ideas and insights with the rest of us. He probably competed in more Masters meets all over the world than anyone (although John Deininger is right up there with him and may even have more meets under his belt, but this is not a time for picking at nits). He created the Masters Diving Decathlon, which Ron Kontura now masterfully manages. Doc is so very appreciative of this fact and the rest of us in Masters Diving should be, too.

Over 30 years ago Doc had quadruple by-pass surgery and after that continued to compete and train aggressively and dive beautifully. About 17 years ago he had a hip replaced and continued to dive beautifully. He is and always has been something really special. As I was about to leave, Doc said that he planned on being around for a few more years – perhaps to 100. Go for it, Doc, we are all pulling for you.

Each one of us who has been in our sport for these last 20 to 30+ years has gained in so many ways from knowing and diving with Doc. So, to all of you out there, let's each say a silent prayer to whatever deity is your preference, for Doc's health and happiness well into the future. And, when you are all done with the serious stuff, let's open a can of Bud and toast the Master of Masters.

Written with love, respect and caring by

Felix Grossman, 6/15/11