

The Ockendends have left the pool

No regrets after 22 years of coaching

By Frances Niblock

Like many volunteers, Gerry Ockenden offered to help coach an Acton swimming club "for a year," and 22 years later, he is finally calling it quits.

Ockenden has retired as head coach of the Acton Aqua Ducks Swim Club which he helped form in the late 1980s, and his daughter Julie Matthews has retired as assistant head coach, leaving a void in the club that offers lessons and competitive training to Acton area swimmers.

Ockenden said it's time for a change and that his job as Acton trustee with the Halton District School Board takes up much of his time.

Both of Ockenden's children swam with a Swimming Stars of Acton, and after that club floundered, Ockenden, who had just completed his coaching certification, agreed to help out for a year to get a new club – the Aqua Ducks – up and running until they found a "real coach."

"That was 22 years ago and I haven't regretted a minute of it," Ockenden said on Friday, adding he took over with two conditions – that they take the summer off from training and that they up the level of competition by joining Swim Ontario.

"The one thing out of all the years that I kind of pride myself in trying to help the kids was not just to understand how to swim, but also to learn some lessons about life. I felt the circle they were swimming in wasn't as demanding as where they



HEAD DUCKS DONE: Acton's Gerry Ockenden has retired as head coach of the Acton Aqua Ducks Swim Club, and his daughter Julie Matthews has retired as assistant head coach. – Submitted photo

should be going and wasn't doing anything for their understanding of success," he said.

"Failure is a good thing if its managed properly and continued success isn't always the best things if it's always coming easy," Ockenden said. Adding he refused to run morning

practices and expected his competitive swimmers to put in about six hours of pool time a week, where other clubs were putting in 20 to 13 hours a week.

"The kids had to have a life outside the pool and they always had respectable results in the pool – they always made me proud, so it

all worked out, he said.

Ockenden was known as a "fun" coach, who although he expected hard work, could also have a good time and always paid his bets. That's why today he sports a gold earring.

"We were at a provincial meet in the early 1992s, and it was the first time in five years that we hasn't had anybody win a medal. On the last night, one of the swimmers asked me if she got a medal that night, if I would get a earring and I agreed," he said.

Ockenden said he felt secure he wouldn't be getting his ear pierced because the swimmer had already bested her fastest time by five seconds in a qualifier earlier that day.

"Well, didn't she drop her time another three seconds to come in third, so when we came home, we all marched downtown and the whole team sat there and watched

while I got my ear punched," Ockenden said.

"I promised that I'd wear it forever, and I wear either a diamond or emerald stud, and in some circles I get into, it does look a little weird and they look at me funny, but when they hear the story, they think it's okay," he said, adding he has also dyed his hair various colours over the years when he lost bets with swimmers.

While members of the Aqua Ducks got top notch coaching, Ockenden said he got a release from daily stresses.

"The kids taught me to chill out. There were some days when I'd come home from work wound up like a spring, and I'd walk out on the pool deck and some little kid would crack me a huge smile and jump in the water and start swimming lengths and all would be well," he said, adding he is not a swimmer, but he did get wet on

several occasions.

"Once at a competition, I got so excited that I unintentionally stepped off the pool deck into the water, and once I jumped into the deep end out of excitement."

Ockenden said he intends to keep his coaching certification current, and since his retirement from the Ducks, several clubs in the Toronto area have approached him with job opportunities. He said he has a company called popswimming, and he and Julie are looking at doing some training with tri-athletes.

Looking back over a long career – Ockenden thinks he may be the longest standing coach of one club in Ontario – he had many great times and many great kids.

"They were with me every week, five days a week and on many weekends – they were just like my own kids in a lot of respects and you get pretty attached."



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To ensure your garbage and recyclables are collected, put your waste curbside by 7 a.m. the morning of your collection day, but no sooner than 5 p.m. the evening before. Collection times can vary from week to week due to route changes, weather conditions and equipment maintenance.

If you are concerned about animals accessing your garbage or recyclables:

- On the morning of your collection, put your Blue Box and garbage at the curb by 7 a.m.
- Instead of leaving garbage bags at the curb overnight, use a secure locking garbage can. Put your house number on the garbage can and lid.
- Sprinkle strong smelling repellents (mothballs, etc.) around or inside garbage containers.
- Rinse out all bottles, cans, jars, etc., before placing them in your Blue Box.
- On windy days, stack your Blue Boxes. Put the Blue Box for containers on top of the Blue Box for papers.



Remember, collection trucks will start to pick-up your waste and recyclables at 7 a.m. on collection day.

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