

Fins: The Absolute Beginning

To paraphrase Sofia Petrillo, the esteemed Estelle Getty's memorable character from the hit television series *The Golden Girls*, "Picture this, Philadelphia, 1988." In pop music, George Michael and Whitney Houston topped the charts, and radio stations were "Rick-Rolling" us on a daily basis. As for Mariah, no, we didn't know her (at least not yet). *The Cosby Show* and *Roseanne* were the top two television shows (where are *they* now?) In local news, One Liberty Place, the tallest building in Philadelphia was just nearing completion and ground was broken on Two Liberty Place. Comcast was just a local cable company, not the behemoth we know now. The Phillies were far from a winning team, ending 1988 in their usual spot: last place in the NL East.

As for LGB people (as we referred to our community back then), there were few options if you were interested in any type of team or club sports. The Frontrunners running club was one of the oldest clubs with chapters throughout the country. Volleyball, softball, and bowling were popular with men's, women's, and mixed gender teams that drew members of our community from across the region. As for me, none of these teams sparked my interest, mainly due to my own lack of skills. Yet I was attracted to the concept of building camaraderie with other LGB people back then through other opportunities besides nightclubs or restrictive social groups. Keep in mind that we were about a decade away from the earliest days of online communities such as chat rooms and bulletin boards.

In early 1988, I was dating a guy from DC who was very active in several sports in the metro area. Our relationship didn't last long (as is sometimes the case with long-distance relationships) but he happened to play water polo for a gay men's team called the Washington Wetskins. Aside from the incredibly clever name, I was intrigued by the fact that there were gay

men who actually played water polo and wondered if that might be something that I could do. After chatting with the team president, he informed me that he wasn't aware of a team in Philly, but should I be so inspired, maybe I could form a team.

So, forming a sports team was far from anything I had ever tried in my entire life. Besides, I thought that *maybe* I could play water polo. I never played and only watched it played live on that one occasion in DC and on television during the Olympic Games. As for swimming, I was an OK swimmer, certainly not all that fast. After some thought, I decided to throw caution to the wind and figured, "what the hell, right?" I mentioned this to my friend, Mark, and interestingly enough, he had another friend who was also interested in forming an aquatics club. What a relief, I thought, since having someone else lend his talents to the task at hand would help get things off the ground more quickly.

Meeting Randy Sabbagh made all the difference. Aside from being a total dynamo, his outlook and skill set complemented mine. He charged ahead when necessary and I made sure all the pieces were in place when they needed to be. We made a good team in those early days. Especially when it came to recruiting members. We planned through the summer, advertising in the PGN and tacking flyers to bulletin boards in all the bars throughout the city. Both Randy and I fielded phone calls from dozens of interested men. Naturally, we got a few calls from those mistakenly thinking we were a "water sports' club. Yet, in general, the responses were positive and appropriate.

By early September, we scheduled our first meeting with prospective team members. We met at the newly opened Penguin Place Gay Community Center of Philadelphia housed in the shuttered Monster Inn on Quince Street. We had a turnout of about 20 guys of varying degrees of

skill levels and experience. Everyone was excited about this new team and looking forward to our first practice session. I was elected President and Randy, Vice-President and Coach.

Initially, we practiced at the YWCA, located in the 2000 block of Chestnut Street. The staff couldn't have been more open and welcoming. They were, of course, pleased to have someone using their pool. The price was right, too given that our financial situation was less than ideal. Regrettably, our relationship with the "Y" didn't last too long. Their organization was in dire straits, receiving little to no help from major donors. At one point, they could no longer afford to heat the pool. We toughed it out for a week or two, but they eventually had to close the pool. Fortunately, we quickly found another pool at the YMCA in Camden. This didn't last long either due to the distance, so we moved to the YMCA at 1400 North Broad Street. This location was more accessible to all our members.

As we practiced, we also grew our membership. We seemed to be getting our fair share of attention in the community. We also hosted several notable fundraising events such as bartending events, raffles and swim wear modeling. Gatsby's in Cherry Hill (since closed) was one of our major supporters. We also decided that during the height of the AIDS crisis, we should support a local charity that assisted those in need. A group that we designated to receive some of the proceeds from our fundraisers was the Burning Bush, which provided in-home care services to people with HIV/AIDS. At this point, they appear to be defunct. Hopefully, there are other organizations that have stepped in to fill their void.

As for competition, that started off more slowly than we had hoped. We optimistically planned to play our first water polo match against the Wetskins in November 88. We were sorely unprepared. They beat us badly, very badly. I don't remember the score but suffice to say although we lost, we were undaunted. We learned more than we could have ever expected.

Additionally, the weekend was a success from a number of other aspects. We got to meet and socialize with team members and supporters in DC. The trip also proved to be a good team-building exercise and helped forge friendships amongst us.

Feeling a sense of pride in having made the first leap into competition, the team set about the task of formalizing the organization. We eventually drafted a constitution and by-laws. We soon elected a board of directors, and I continued as President for the first year. We published a monthly newsletter (I think we called it The Splash). We also decided to expand our focus to include a full-fledged swim team since that would give us both further opportunities to recruit new members and compete in additional events, particularly those sanctioned by US Masters Swimming. As we headed into 1989, we started the 501(c)(3) process and planning for the 1990 Gay Games in Vancouver.

Sadly, all good things must come to an end. In late 1989, my life took me to Trenton (a bit of a long story). I had to leave the group that I not only put much of myself into, but that I started based on what I thought was fairly insane idea at the time. Randy had left earlier, at the end of 1988, when his job took him to Bath, Maine. I ran into one of the team members just before the 1990 Gay Games and he did inform me that the team was attending. That filled me with a sense of accomplishment.

Looking back on this now as I listen to a Spotify playlist of songs from 1988, I am filled with memories from that time. I reflect on where life has taken me, from my hometown of Philadelphia, across the country, then across the Atlantic to Barcelona. I am excited at the prospect of the Fins competing in the Gay Games in València next year, essentially in our backyard. I'm looking forward to not only attending but doing my best to help LGBTQ+ swimmers from Philly get to the games and represent the Fins!