

COMMUNITY SPORTS



Jeff Prior lost his love for swimming after not being able to qualify for the 1988 Olympic team. Today he has regained his feeling for the sport. *Scott Linnett / Union-Tribune*

New Beginning Carlsbad swimmer is still in the water, and he's loving it

By Whitelaw Reid
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CARLSBAD — Jeff Prior's love for swimming vanished after he failed to qualify for the 1988 U.S. Olympic team — something he had been shooting for all his life.

"It was the only time when I just hated (swimming)," Prior said. "I had always been the first one in and the last one out (of the pool)."

"I had always enjoyed what I was doing and always thought there was a benefit to practicing and getting better."

Prior, a 14-time All-American who won medals at the Pan American and Goodwill games, still had one year of college eligibility left at Cal. But sticking to the team's intense training schedule became arduous.

"It was hard for me to get up in the morning to go to a workout," Prior said. "The motivation was just not there, and I hated that feeling because it was something that I had loved all the time."

"I felt like I had to do it because I was on scholarship and couldn't afford to pay for my own college."

Prior's coach told him since he had contributed so much to the program he didn't have to swim — and he could still keep his scholarship. So, Prior sat out the season.

But then a funny thing happened — Prior realized he missed swimming. He resumed practicing with team-

mates in the off season.

"There was no pressure or thought about trying to qualify for the Olympics," said Prior, a Philadelphia native. "It was just pure fun, like when you're a little 8-year-old kid in the water. I loved it again."

Luckily, since Prior had not participated in any meets the previous season, he was still eligible.

"If I hadn't gone back and finished that season I would have been kicking myself," Prior said. "I'm really glad I went back. It became fun again."

It's been fun ever since for the 37-year-old Carlsbad resident.

Prior has since become a coach — first at his old youth club near where he grew up in Pennsylvania and then at Villanova University.

In 1995, Prior moved to La Jolla. Soon after, he coached at North Coast Aquatics.

Today, Prior works for a biotech company in Carlsbad. He no longer coaches, but he swims regularly with the Carlsbad Masters Team.

"He's so fun for me to work with because he can do some things that nobody else can do," said Jeff Pease, the team's coach. "I can really throw some challenging things at him, and then everybody else just tries to hang on as long as they can with him."

"There's nobody who can hang with him the whole practice. He's kind of in a class of his own."

Prior first learned to swim when he was 7 because his mother, Rosemary, didn't know how to swim and was

terrified of water. She wanted to make sure her children knew.

Prior, who met his wife, Jody, while coaching at North Coast Aquatics, says the autonomy of swimming has always been its biggest appeal.

"I love how you get in the water and have your own goals of what you want to accomplish and you work toward them, just seeing how hard you can push yourself," Prior said after a lunch-hour practice session at the Carlsbad Swim Complex.

"Sometimes you push yourself too much in the beginning and die out by the end of the set, sometimes you don't. It's a little game you can play with yourself every time you come. That's what keeps it intriguing."

Prior hasn't been in an official race since 1996 but says he will probably compete in a few this fall.

"I hadn't had the urge to do it," he said, "but the last month or two I've got the urge again — maybe because the Olympics were on."

Prior, whose college teammate, Matt Biondi, went on to win seven medals at the '88 Olympics in Seoul, South Korea, acknowledges that the disappointment of not making the Olympics still lingers.

"Every four years the Olympics come around and you think, 'That would have been so sweet to be there,'" he said, "(but) I love coming here now. It's a great sport."

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