Bruce Wigo (on the right) and Prince Albert of Monaco viewing historical exhibits at the International Swimming Hall of Fame.

Photo: Ivonne Schmid
“When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe.”—John Muir

Just as all water is connected, so is all history. Streams of past endeavors and future generations merge and diverge, becoming tributaries of the racing waters of human history. At the source of these streams running through the history of aquatics stands Bruce Wigo.

Tall and fit, with a thick shock of sandy, gray hair, the 62-year-old Wigo cuts a handsome figure as he strides across the pool deck for the start of his 50-meter freestyle event during the 3rd Annual Rowdy Gaines Masters Classic meet held last October in Orlando, Fla.

This splash and dash is Wigo’s first race since 2009. A swimmer with the Blu Frog Team in Florida and CEO of the International Swimming Hall of Fame in Fort Lauderdale, Wigo recently underwent extensive arthroscopic surgery and rehabilitation on his shoulder. Though a seasoned swimmer and accomplished businessman, Wigo admits to feeling the pressure of this return to competition after more than two years away.

“I was very nervous. I’m up there thinking, ‘Geez. What do I do?’” he smiles bashfully.

Although Wigo may have been tentative about his recent return to Masters competition, there’s zero hesitation in his voice when he talks about the mission of the International Swimming Hall of Fame, the organization he’s helmed since 2005.

“Studies show that everybody should be swimming, and that’s the mission of the Hall of Fame—to inspire people to swim. For all the reasons: health, recreation, the 20 million things you can do from snorkeling, surfing and sailboarding that get you out and active instead of sitting on the couch,” he says. “I’m afraid that we’ve become a nation of spectators and beer guzzlers instead of participants. And the one thing that everybody should do is swim.”

But it’s not really us Masters swimmers he’s trying to reach; we are already the converted, and ISHOF has been recognizing Masters swimmers since 2003.

“More for their healthy lifestyles, not so much for their times,” Wigo explains. “You look at the people we recognize in the Masters Hall of Fame, and goodness! These people don’t look...
like the average American. These people are fit, in shape and have a zillion friends. That’s what Masters is about.”

But for the rest of the country, Wigo sees a real urgency in encouraging would-be recreational swimmers—and an even greater need to reach children in minority groups, who often don’t have adequate access to places to take the plunge—to start swimming.

“We can inspire competitive swimmers to be better swimmers by telling them the stories of the great swimmers, but what we really want to do is inspire everybody to swim because you live longer, you live healthier and happier.”

Early Entry
Wigo’s passion for the water and what it can do for people stems from being an active participant in aquatics for most of his life. “I’m glad to be a swimmer. I don’t know what I would do if I weren’t a swimmer,” he says.

Wigo started swimming at the Germantown, Pa., YMCA when he was five. His family also summered at the Jersey Shore, so being competent in the water was a safety issue. “Swimming was just a part of our life,” he says.

In his teens, Wigo lifeguarded in Ocean City, N.J., alongside some of the greats such as Sid Cassidy and John B. Kelley. Wigo says he wasn’t a great swimmer when he was young—though he was named a high school All-American and swam for the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He also was an accomplished diver and an avid water polo player.

Wigo first came to prominence on the administrative side of aquatic sports during his tenure as executive director of USA Water Polo. In 1991, the organization was struggling with financial and management issues and hired Wigo to help turn things around, a stint that was supposed to last about six months but ended up as his career for the next 13 years.

During his tenure, membership grew from 7,000 to 30,000, through the introduction of better benefits and services to membership. “We had to make it about more than just joining to play. We had more events, better publications and educational materials, so that there would be a reason for people to join.”

Wigo’s credentials for getting the job with USA Water Polo lay in his own background in the sport and his children’s interest, as well as a law degree from Widener University in Chester, Pa. “I had volunteered to be the head of the Northeast region as the zone chairman—I was a water polo dad and was involved because my kids were in the sport.”

Wigo’s eldest son, Wolf, is a three-time Olympic water polo

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player. Wigo’s two youngest children—twins Drac and Jan-
son—followed Wolf to Stanford, and all three were named All-
Americans all four years, “which I guess must be some kind of a
record,” he shrugs.

Wigo’s daughter, Lauren, also played water polo, but did not
continue as far into the sport as her brothers because of a lack of
scholarships available to female players, Wigo says. Perhaps not
coincidentally, in his role at USA Water Polo, Wigo was instrumen-
tial in having women’s water polo added as an Olympic sport.

An Aquatic Anthropologist
Wigo’s interest in the history of swimming and the
people who have shaped it emerged in the late 1970s while
he was studying for the bar exam. Wigo was a member of
the famed New York Athletic Club and studied in the club’s
library in Manhattan. When he needed a break, he’d browse
the shelves looking for a bit of historical entertainment.

“I’d look at old magazines from the 1800s, and was just
fascinated about what I didn’t
know about the history of swimming,” he says.

That interest continues to
grow, and fits well with a major
initiative at ISHOF: to catalog the
history of aquatic sports.

Wigo has taken that directive
to heart with the recent comple-
tion of a large-format pictorial
history book, “The Golden Age of Swimming.” In his book,
Wigo presents some potentially controversial facts about swim-
ning’s role in everything from the
fall of the Roman Empire to the civil rights movement, even
women’s suffrage.

“The first right women won
in the U.S. was the right to swim,
and that paved the way for them
to get the vote,” Wigo says. “We
were like a Muslim country
100 years ago, with the mental-
ity being, ‘Don’t let women get
out. Keep them covered.’ It took
swimming to change that.”

Wigo recounts the story of
Australian swimming champ An-
nette Kellerman, an early pioneer
who dared sew leggings onto a
man’s bathing suit in an effort to
adhere to the letter of the law of
women’s swimming attire—which
required a woman to cover her
legs—while still achieving some
level of functionality in her swim-
wear. For her audacity, the antipo-
dean sex goddess and swimming
queen was arrested on Revere
Beach near Boston in 1908.

Wigo’s book is a treasure
chest of old-time photographs,
newspaper clippings, artifacts and
postcards presenting the story of
swimming in all its many permu-
tations. With this work, Wigo is
attempting to preserve the legacy of swimming as a cultural force,
not just a sport. And he’s not just
focused on the memories of the
fastest swimmers, either.

“Do we want to remember the
heroes’ like Johnny Weissmuller,
who was married six times and
was an alcoholic who didn’t
take care of himself financially?”

Wigo asks, “Or is it more about
cultural history? There’s so much
cultural history associated with
swimming,” a history that spans
gEOGRAPHY and RACE.

“Every culture embraced
swimming until some impediment
came up. In the Western world,
that was the fall of the Roman
Empire because of the vices that
got on in the baths. The church
basically condemned everything
to do with the baths, and for
1,000 years, Europeans lost the
art of swimming.”

During this time, many Euro-
peans came to fear the water and
the display of skin that typically
accompanies bathing. Victorian
Era prudishness further discour-
gaged swimming, but a few brave
souls like Kellerman helped start
a revolution in the sport that saw
swimming steadily gain in popu-
larity from the mid-1800s until
its peak boom time in the 1920s
and ‘30s. This growth in swim-
ning’s popularity caused a shift
in culture that loosened up cloth-
ing restrictions and the binds on
women, but may have added fuel
to the fire of segregation.

Where gender-segregated pools
had been a hub of social life in a
culturally integrated way, gender-
mixed facilities became strictly
segregated out of fear and hate.
Wigo writes, “Once whites redis-
covered swimming, the thought
of black men interacting with
white women (and vice versa) on
a beach—where erotic voyeur-
ism and physical contact were
possible—stirred up the murky
waters of sexuality and popular
prejudices resulting in the radi-
cal segregation of swimming in
America, and, for most African
Americans, the loss of their rich
aquatic cultural heritage as swim-
mers.” Segregated swimming
facilities were just another addi-
tion to the list of grievances that
blossomed into the civil rights
movement by the 1960s.

From reading his book and
speaking with him, it becomes
clear that Wigo sees swimming
as a component of virtually all
of the most important turning
points in human history, influ-
encing events in unexpected and
underreported ways.

Take for example something
as seemingly cut-and-dried as
King Phillip’s War, a major
conflict that erupted in 1675 be-
tween several Native American
tribes who overlooked their own
differences to rise up together
against the unwelcome British
settlers in New England. Accord-
ing to many historical references,
the source of friction was Euro-
pean encroachment on Native
American ancestral lands.

But there’s more to it that that,
Wigo says, and swimming—or
rather the white man’s prejudices
about what being able to swim
said about a person—caused the
ignition of the bloody confla-
grant that decimated both the
native and settler populations in
New England.

“One of the chief’s wives was
canoeing down the river with her
infant, and some drunk British
sailors stopped her and wanted
to ‘see if these babies can swim.’
They tossed the baby in the river
and she dived in and brought him
up dead. Her husband was so an-
gry when he found out what hap-
pened, that he went around incit-
ing the other tribes to start King
Does Fabio Swim? Yes!

Though he originally intended to practice law upon graduation, Wigo found another calling that paid well. A strapping, chiseled diver, Wigo was a natural in front of the camera. His virile visage marketed products from Zest soap to Michelob beer, and he appeared in more than 100 commercials for Amtrak, Revlon, Avon and others.

“My wife likes to say I did the Fabio thing,” he says. Wigo means he posed for photographs that were then rendered into romance novel covers. “They take these photos of you wearing a costume and hugging a busty woman, and the artist modifies it. It’s more about acting skill than modeling,” he says. Wigo fell into this unusual line of work serendipitously. “While I was in law school in Philadelphia, I was doing a deposition involving a film director who was shooting a commercial. After the deposition, he invited me to an audition. I made more money from that one commercial than I did from the whole deposition. So I kept doing it because it paid a lot more than substitute teaching.”

Once he moved to New York, Wigo had additional opportunities to model and act while practicing law part-time. When he moved to Fort Lauderdale, he had every intention of taking the Florida Bar exam after finishing with USA Water Polo, but never got around to it. For the sake of water polo and swimming, it’s probably good that he didn’t.

But that story line changed over time as whites rediscovered and came to dominate the sport and access to swimming venues. “We pushed the Native Americans off their beach-side properties onto dusty reservations. And we pushed African Americans into inner cities with no swimming facilities. It’s become this psychological thing that swimming is a ‘white sport,’ which is just ridiculous. It was Africans and Indians who were the great swimmers in history.”

But progress is possible. Using his position at ISHOF, Wigo aims to improve access to the water for people who currently do not or cannot participate. For his efforts, he was named one of Aquatic International magazine’s “Power 25” in February 2010.

Making the Water Safer

However, unlike the ease of upping the number of fitness joggers, swimming requires certain safety measures and a level of skill before it can become a viable health regimen for anyone, particularly if the venue is open water. “If someone faints while jogging, someone will see them. But it’s harder out in open bodies of water. Unless you have two eyeballs on him all the time, you’re not going to see him slip beneath the surface,” Wigo says.

Part of providing equal opportunity to aquatics means making the water a safer place, and Wigo has endeavored to do just that by inventing a device called “SafeSwimmer,” a fluorescent air bladder tethered to a swimmer’s waist via a short leash. The watertight sack does triple duty as a highly visible marker for boaters and safety spotters, as a convenient carryall for the swimmer’s gear and as a flotation device should the swimmer get in trouble.

Wigo’s concern for safety was forged by a near-tragedy in his own family. His oldest son, Wolf, was practicing underwater drills in the backyard pool one afternoon several years ago when he lost consciousness. Thankfully, the other boys in the pool soon realized that something was wrong and summoned Wigo from the house. He retrieved his son from the bottom of the pool and was able to revive him, but Wolf spent a few days in the hospital afterward for observation. It was a close call that can happen to anyone, Wigo says. “No matter how good a swimmer you are, things can go wrong.”

Despite the need for additional care around water, Wigo seems to see the solution to most of life’s greatest problems out there, just beneath the surface. And providing access for all potential swimmers is his life’s mission. Making swimming a fun and safe experience is just part of his plan to bring the masses back to their intended place in the water and the river of history.

Elaine K. Howley is a freelance journalist and open water swimmer hailing from the Boston area. She enjoys the cold water in New England (yes, really!) and was the 32nd swimmer to complete the Triple Crown of open water marathon swimming.