The International Swimming Hall of Fame is full of aquatic memorabilia, film clips and quirky artifacts.

**Take a deep dive in Fort Lauderdale**

By Bobbi Slawow

Memories are my favorite thing to jog and swim at the beach. When the sun’s up, I seek cover and culture, and Fort Lauderdale, Fla., offers an ideal spot.

Soaking in the beach-side promenades that curve along a sandy white wall, I pace cocomut palm trees, drifters about sea turtles lurching steps in the sand, the W Hotel’s stunning pool over the Beach Club & Hookah Lounge, the Echo Room’s glass walls, and Barnacle Betty’s, a black cat, my destination surfaces: a large swimming pool and live-aboard yachts bobbing in the Intracoastal Waterway.

The International Swimming Hall of Fame’s oval-shaped building with a collection of vast, it overflowed into the pool shop’s critic. I expect photos, mementos and back stories related toImportant story events, strokes I’m still trying to emulate, from Fort Lauderdale-based swimming legend Natallie Travini to four-time Olympic champion Mark Spitz. It’s this surprise that anchors me here for years.

The first surprise: encountering Bruce Wilges, who makes the South Jersey beach home, where I swim as a kid. We went on to become a competitive swimmer, a diver, a water polo player, and a marine biologist, so aquatic historians and, finally, the Hall of Fame president.

Wilges suggests starting with a short film that reveals how Olympic freestyle gold medalist Matt Biondi honed his skills swimming in open waters alongside dolphins. Artifacts such as coins dating to ancient Greece who account for the ancient mysteries saving swimmers and shipwrecked sailors.

Those dolphins would have helped in early-20th-century America, when laws requiring heavy full-body “bathing gowns” kept women from learning how to swim. A “Swimming in Distant” exhibit illustrates this little-known chapter in women’s rights. Morals believed that female bathers corrupted men and hastened the fall of the Roman Empire. Their rules prevailed until the street of swimmer-water ballet actress Annette Kellerman on a Boston beach in 1907 for “indecent exposure”—posing a men-style one-piece bathing suit. The judge dismissed the charges, and public support vanquished the Victorian law. “The Diving Lady” continued making waves, producing “Merman’s Daughter,” supposedly the first $1 million-grossing movie and, in her next film, diving nude from a cliff.

Women’s swimming rights paved the way for the right to vote.

The first widely seen two-piece swimsuit was created by Gertrude Ederle to reduce chafing while she practiced to swim across the English Channel. A U.S. flag adorned the top. The tailoring nearly helped. In 1926, Ederle broke records set by male Channel swimmers—by nearly two hours. This was the first time that women could compete in strenuous (and strenuous) sports. Several exhibitors document how some celebrities gained fame through swimming exploits. Benjamin Franklin dangled spectators with a four-mile swim in the Thames, but for the swim pole he was invested in age 11. Ronald Reagan captained his college swim team and reportedly saved 7 lives as a lifeguard. Another display revealed that John F. Kennedy swam on the first Harvard team to beat Yale.

As far more stories, Johnny Weissmuller, a major donor of memorabilia to the hall, shattered swimming records before diving into the role of Tarzan. Buster Crabbe began as an Olympic swimmer. Then there’s Esther Williams, who was in comp in the water, canceled 1940 Olympics before she went on to achieve silver-screen swimming stardom. Speaking of movies, one display exposes the secrets of the physics-defying “Triple Flip” dive that was the climax of the 1952 movie “Back to School.” The toughest challenge? Rodney Dangerfield’s stunt double had to perform the dive in a fat suit. Seemee subjects get equal time.

Decades, swimming was considered a “white sport,” but before 1955, AfricanAmericans and Native Americans were revered for their aquatic prowess. Starting in the 1950s, enslaved Africans practiced sports off Venus’s roof. In the 1970s, freed slaves lured Mau Mauistant for his vigorous swims along the Pomoac River, a reproduction of his portrait painted by Charles Wilshire Peale, who was swardecroyed by Mau’s mere: his hair, neck, and should in the museum, vintage photographs fast-forward me to America’s beaches and pools that remained segregated into the 1960s.

Other artifacts run gas warmer posts depicting archeologically swimming pools from Rockeckaver, N.Y., to Slovenia, seashore from New York’s 1939 World’s Fair Aquatics (music hall, bathing beauties, cleavage!); rings and movie swimming costumes; medals dating to the 1896 Athens Olympics, exquisite sculptures, historic surfboards. I learn about the evolution of strokes, the butterfly, considered a novelty suit for competitions, was added as an Olympic event in the 1956 Summer Games (fancy thing for Michael Phelps, decade later). Synchronized swimming, women’s bath, (imagines racing two miles a match, often at 15 mph), and record-shattering competitions take on in films and news clips.

After real museum immersion, I walk back to the promenade. At the elegantly landscaped entrance to the Gore Park, a historical marker recalls 1961 “wetsuits” staged here by civil rights demonstrators. The wade-in led to real beach segregation the next year. Such a pivotal event occurring so close, in time and place, to the Hall of Fame’s 1965 opening adds to this swimming pool in the depth.

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