

# Swimming San



Sickie gets paid to whirl around the deck of a glimmering La Jolla swimming pool on a scooter adorned with a toothbrush, whistle, and foam soda can holder. Sickie brings chips and salsa to the pool on Cinco de Mayo. Sometimes Sickie shows up for work dressed like Howard Stern – or Gumby.

Sickie's hair is an electric craze of kinks – the blown-out, sun-bleached mop of a man who spent the last 25 years in the San Diego sunshine coaching swimmers just like you. Fit swimmers. Out-of-shape swimmers. Non-swimmers and champion swimmers-to-be. Of his job, Sickie says, "My socks have never matched. I wear aloha shirts every day. I keep people entertained." Sickie loves analogies: A properly rotating swimmer is like a chicken on a barbecue spit; humans are like injured racehorses – "Get them in the water and they just feel better."

Everything about the University of California-San Diego's legendary coach, Ron "Sickie" Marcikic, captures the exuberant, welcoming spirit of San Diego's vigorous swimming scene.

Over the 40 years he's been coaching – two and a half decades of them at UCSD – the wiry-framed 58-year-old has seen San Diego-area swimming

explode in popularity. Sickie, who still goes by the nickname picked up from junior high teachers who could not pronounce his last name (mar-SICK-e), started San Diego's first Masters swimming program in 1978 with one swimmer.

Masters programs provide organized swimming workouts and competitions for adults. Today, as director of UCSD's Masters programs, Sickie oversees workouts for over 400 swimmers.

Swimming is huge in San Diego. Last year, UCSD razed a parking lot and replaced it with a second 50-meter pool to accommodate demand for swim workouts. Imagine that – displacing automobiles for swimmers! And UCSD's aquatics program is just one of more than 60 pools in San Diego affiliated with Masters swim workouts.

According to 2008 research conducted by the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association, there are about 18 million active swimmers in the United States. Of those, more than seven million swim once a week or more. In San Diego, the sport is especially popular due to a confluence of circumstances: good weather, a culture that celebrates active lifestyles, and the city's role as the

*Continued on page 56*

# Diego



PHOTOS BY MARK JOHNSON

Working out in the pool or ocean is part of the city's love affair with active lifestyles

By Mark Johnson

Coach Ron "Sickie" Marcikic patrols the UC-San Diego pool by scooter and embodies the exuberant swim scene.



San Diego's organized swim programs date to the birth of triathlons and the desire of triathletes to swim faster.



Swimmers in wet suits at La Jolla Cove, one of many jumping-in spots for an ocean workout.

birthplace of triathlons.

"San Diego is unlike any other part of the world," Sickie said. "We swim outdoors 12 months of the year. Camp Pendleton separates us from the rest of the world – and that makes a difference." Marc Lee, a 55-year-old who started swimming three times a week in 1983 when his doctor told him running was destroying his knees, said San Diego is unique "because of the huge number of pools. Anywhere you are in San Diego, there is a pool within a few miles of you." Plus, Lee said, "socially, swimmers are welcoming." Unlike hard-core cyclists, who are aloof to beginners in their midst, "swimmers invite you into your workouts."

San Diego's palpable absence of snow and ice and its physical and psychic separation from Los Angeles's smoggy intensity has made it a hotbed for active, health-minded people. Triathlons started here with an informally cobbled-together bike, swim, and run event on Mission Bay in the 1970s. Many triathlon-related industries and publishers have their corporate headquarters here. And in many respects, the birth of triathlons led to the creation of organized swim programs that serve the needs of people who either want to swim fast in triathlons or simply look and feel as fit as the people who go fast in triathlons.

Since its rag-tag beginnings, triathlon has grown into a multimillion-dollar industry. The number of people who took out a USA Triathlon license to race in triathlons in 2007 grew to 283,432 from 64,277 in 1994. According to the trade magazine *The Sports Business Journal*, Ironman Triathlon-licensed products and races generated \$500 million in sales in 2007. All that activity translates into scores of people jumping into San Diego's pools and ocean for swimming workouts.

Bob Babbitt, a San Diego publisher of endurance sports magazines including *Competitor*, *Inside Triathlon*, and *Triathlon*, has had an insider's view of this growth. Babbitt, 57, contends

*Continued on page 58*



The fact that the sport provides aerobic exercise without pounding joints makes it a powerful antidote to aging.



**Masters, or adult, programs group swimmers according to skill levels.**

that “at least 80 percent” of the growth in Masters swimming programs in San Diego was driven by triathlons. There are at least nine 50-meter pools in San Diego – a big number considering that 50-meter pools, while better for competitive swimming, are more expensive than 25-meter pools to build, heat, and maintain. “The fact that Masters programs generate revenue makes it economically sensible to build 50-meter pools,” said Babbitt – who started swimming with Sickie back when he had to scramble to put together swim workouts at the handful of pools available in the 1970s.

Of course, not all swimmers are triathletes. San Diego has a flourishing swimming community because the city sucks people into the vortex of its active lifestyle. Cami Stark swims in the ocean at Fletcher Cove in Solana Beach – just up the Coast Highway from the Del Mar track. Yet before she moved to San Diego two years ago from Salt Lake City, she didn’t swim. Stark, 38, recounts that after interviewing for a job in San

Diego, her boss included surfing lessons with her employment package. “He made it part of my job offer when I moved here,” Stark recalled. To cash in on that job perk, Stark had to learn how to swim in the ocean. Doing so “was scary at the time,” she reflects while stripping out of her wetsuit in the Fletcher Cove parking lot after a workout with a group of regular Friday morning swimmers. “But I’m trying to get over it. It’s so fun to be in the ocean, and it’s a powerful thing. What a wonderful way to start the day – and then we get to go have breakfast!”

Yes, swimming burns calories, and the fact that the sport provides aerobic exercise without pounding joints and bones makes the sport a powerful antidote to aging. San Diego attorney Jamie Brierton started doing triathlons 20 years ago and swims six to eight hours a week when training. When Brierton recently turned 65, he reflected upon the 20 years that had passed since

*Continued on page 60*

he started doing triathlons at the age of 45. On his 65th birthday, he vowed to complete an Ironman distance triathlon 20 years hence, at 85. Brierton feels setting a goal to finish a 2.4-mile swim, 112-mile bike ride and 26-mile run 20 years in the future “is a good way to fight off all the bad stuff that happens to you when you stop exercising.” Brierton, who swims in a pool in his backyard and at La Jolla Cove, notes that “swimming is therapeutic. It’s a good way to recover from running. You really can’t beat it for staying in shape.”

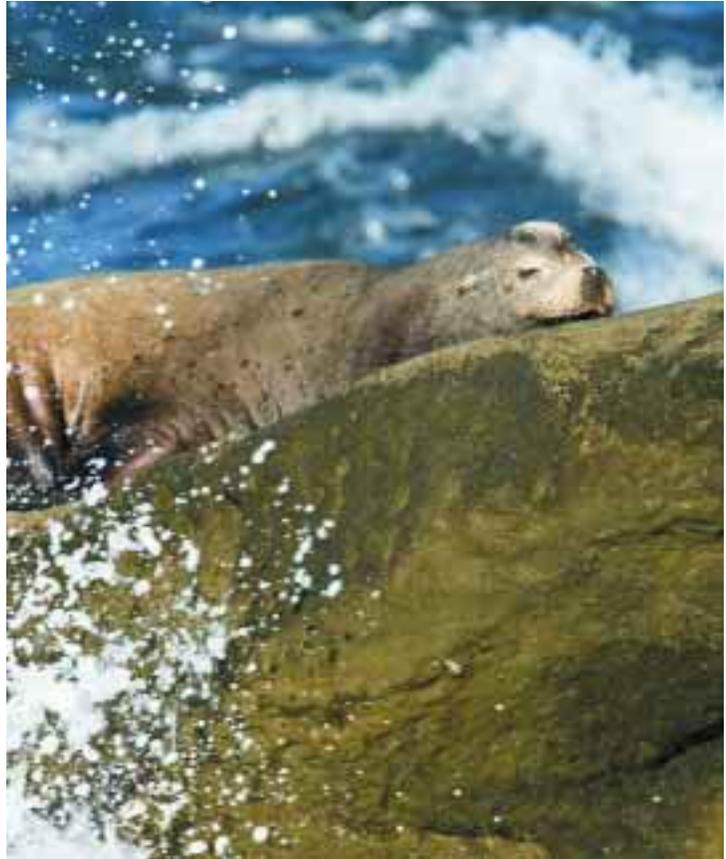
Brierton’s sense that swimming keeps an aging body going strong is borne out by recent research. Every hour 330 Americans turn 60. According to the most recent research conducted by the American College of Sports Medicine, by swimming regularly people can fend off into their 90s the well-documented loss of flexibility, muscle, bone, and strength that sets in with age. Further, according to the ACSM, vigorous aerobic sports like directed swim workouts reduce the likelihood of heart disease, hypertension, type 2 diabetes, cancer, anxiety, and depression. Along with the American Heart Association, the ACSM recommends that we get a minimum 30 minutes of moderately intense exercise (hard enough to increase heart rate and break a sweat) at least five days a week. Swimming fits the bill nicely – especially organized swim workouts, where swimmers get a good mix of moderate and vigorous exercise beneficial to the heart.

One of the greatest challenges we face is how to squeeze in those weekly hours of exercise. With all its structured swim programs and all the swimmers constantly plying the waters off the city’s 70 miles of beaches, San Diego has a deep community of swimmers whose collective camaraderie and support will help get you in the water regularly. Drop by La Jolla Cove after work on a Friday and you’ll find upwards of 100 swimmers in party-colored swim caps streaming past the seals, birds, and rocks that frame San Diego’s iconic cove.

Many of these swimmers are from the Triathlon Club of San Diego, but anyone is welcome to swim under the watchful eye of a team of La Jolla Cove lifeguards. Tyler Clark was at the cove on recent Friday afternoon training for the Aug. 5 Tour of Buoys five-mile cove swim. “With the cove at your fingertips, you can’t possibly get any better location than San Diego for training,” he said. Plus, Clark noted, San Diego’s large community of swimmers keeps him motivated to swim. After moving to San Diego from his native Los Angeles, swimming “was a good way to meet people.”

In addition to Masters swim programs, San Diego boasts annual ocean swim events that bring hundreds of swimmers together. Each August, the La Jolla Cove Swim Club sponsors the five-mile La Jolla Cove Tour of Buoys swim while September brings in the wildly popular three-mile La Jolla Rough Water Swim.

Jumping into a Masters swim program might seem



A special camaraderie brings crowds of swimmers to La Jolla Cove, framed by seals, birds, and rocks.



Annual ocean swim events include the five-mile La Jolla Cove Tour of Buoys in August and the La Jolla Rough Water Swim in September.

*Continued on page 62*

The swimming community has rebounded after the almost unheard of killing of a triathlete by a shark.



intimidating for the novice, but the programs accommodate all levels of swimmers. Swimmers of similar speeds and skills are grouped into the same lanes. Sickie says he gets the most satisfaction out of working with beginners because they remind him of the fundamentals of swimming – like the fact that you must push your hands backwards to go forwards. “We look at our swimmers as friends rather than customers,” Sickie said of his program’s guiding philosophy. “And when you get in the water, everyone looks the same.”

At a recent Friday morning swim at Fletcher Cove, triathlete Joe Esposito marveled at how supportive and welcoming San Diego’s swim community is to newcomers. “I’ve traveled a lot and nothing is like San Diego in terms of the number of drop-in swim programs there are,” Esposito said, referring to the number of pools that allow anyone to show up and pay a onetime fee to drop in on a Masters workout. “There are so many people that get together to swim. It’s a nice group of people and they really encourage you here.” Esposito then rattled off the daily informal ocean swim workouts anyone can participate in: Monday night at La Jolla Shores, Tuesday and Wednesday mornings at Del Mar’s Powerhouse Park, Wednesday evening at Carlsbad’s Tamarack Beach, Friday mornings at Solana Beach’s Fletcher Cove, Friday night at La Jolla

Cove, and Sunday morning at Powerhouse Park.

The death in April of 66-year-old triathlete David Martin brought San Diego’s swimming community even closer together. The retired veterinarian was killed by a shark while swimming with a group of triathletes at Fletcher Cove. While the attack thinned the number of ocean swimmers in the weeks following the highly unusual event, the swimming community seems to have rebounded. Indeed, on Fridays after work a stream of swimmers as thick as traffic on the I-5 crawls past the lounging seals at La Jolla Cove. The grassy park above La Jolla Cove is abuzz with swimmers of all shapes and sizes going into and coming out of the ocean. “It’s their ocean,” reflected Sickie of the ocean and its inhabitants. “We are just borrowing it.”

Marc Lee admits that the probability of being killed or injured is much higher driving to the beach than of being hit by a shark while swimming in the sea – the last previous fatal shark attack in San Diego County was in 1959. Alex Ter-Vrugt swims at Fletcher Cove, and wants nothing to do with pool swimming. “I don’t like the chlorine and the artificiality,” he said before heading out for an early morning swim. “In the ocean, you are out in nature and there’s more to

**At Fletcher Cove in Solana Beach, there is an informal swimming workout every Friday morning.**

*Continued on page 64*



A phalanx of birds lines the rocks as a swimmer cuts through the waves of La Jolla Cove.

Even a former Navy Seal can learn a thing or two from the area's roster of accomplished swim coaches.

see. There's a greater sense of freedom."

San Diego is also a unique spot for swimming because it is thick with accomplished swim coaches. Along with the venerable Sickie at UCSD, Alan Voisard is one of the most respected swim coaches and long-distance swimmers in the country. Voisard, 48, coaches Masters workouts with his wife, Alison Terry, at the Mission Valley YMCA. Last year, Voisard joined a group of only 18 people in the world who have completed the long-distance swimming triple in a single year: swimming the 21-mile English Channel, the 28 1/2 miles around Manhattan, and the 21-mile Catalina Island Channel. In 2006, Voisard swam 100 miles over five days off La Jolla Cove to raise funds to support San Diego's inner city swimming programs. Voisard, who also teaches disabled people how to swim, has been coaching swimming for 27 years, and his wife swam for the US National team. Another Mission Valley YMCA coach, Nico Kintz, swam for his native France in the 2000 Olympics in Sydney and the 2004 Olympics in Greece.

Brierton pointed out that even though he was a Navy Seal, by tapping into San Diego's elite swimming coaches like these, "I am just now beginning to feel like I'm becoming a good swimmer after 20 years." The attorney compares swimming to snow skiing in that swimming strokes require constant refinement and professional analysis to improve one's swimming. "It takes years to become an accomplished swimmer," he said.

UCSD's Sickie notes that the availability of accomplished coaches in San Diego makes it easy for both experienced and novice swimmers to get advice on how to slice through the water with more power and efficiency. Sickie said that it's important even for beginning swimmers to swim with an organized program such as Masters where a coach is there "to talk to you and keep your spirit up. If you swim on your own, you might not have that."

So why wait? Dive in. Swimming in San Diego is all about having fun and getting fit at the same time. "You are weightless," Sickie said. "And you get to swim with people."

How great is that? ■

*Mark Johnson is a freelance writer and photographer based in San Diego.*

# Where to get wet

The following is a selection of San Diego pools with Masters swim programs. Most pools offer one-on-one coaching sessions where a coach like Ron "Sickie" Marcikic or Alan Voisard will analyze and help improve your swimming technique. For a complete list of San Diego pools, visit [www.simastersswim.org](http://www.simastersswim.org).

## POOL SWIMMING

### Carmel Valley

Pacific Athletic Club, 12000 Carmel Country Rd., San Diego, CA 92130. Two 25-yard pools.

858-509-4944; [www.pacsandiego.com](http://www.pacsandiego.com)

### Chula Vista

South Bay Family YMCA, 1201 Paseo Magda, Chula Vista, CA 91910. One 25-yard pool.

619-421-8805; [www.southbay.ymca.org](http://www.southbay.ymca.org)

### Coronado

Coronado Municipal Pool, 1845 Strand Way, Coronado CA 92118. One 50-meter pool. 619-522-7803

### Encinitas

North Coast/Magdalena Ecke YMCA, 200 Saxony Rd, Encinitas CA 92024. Two 25-meter pools.

760-942-9622; [ecke.ymca.org](http://ecke.ymca.org)

### La Jolla

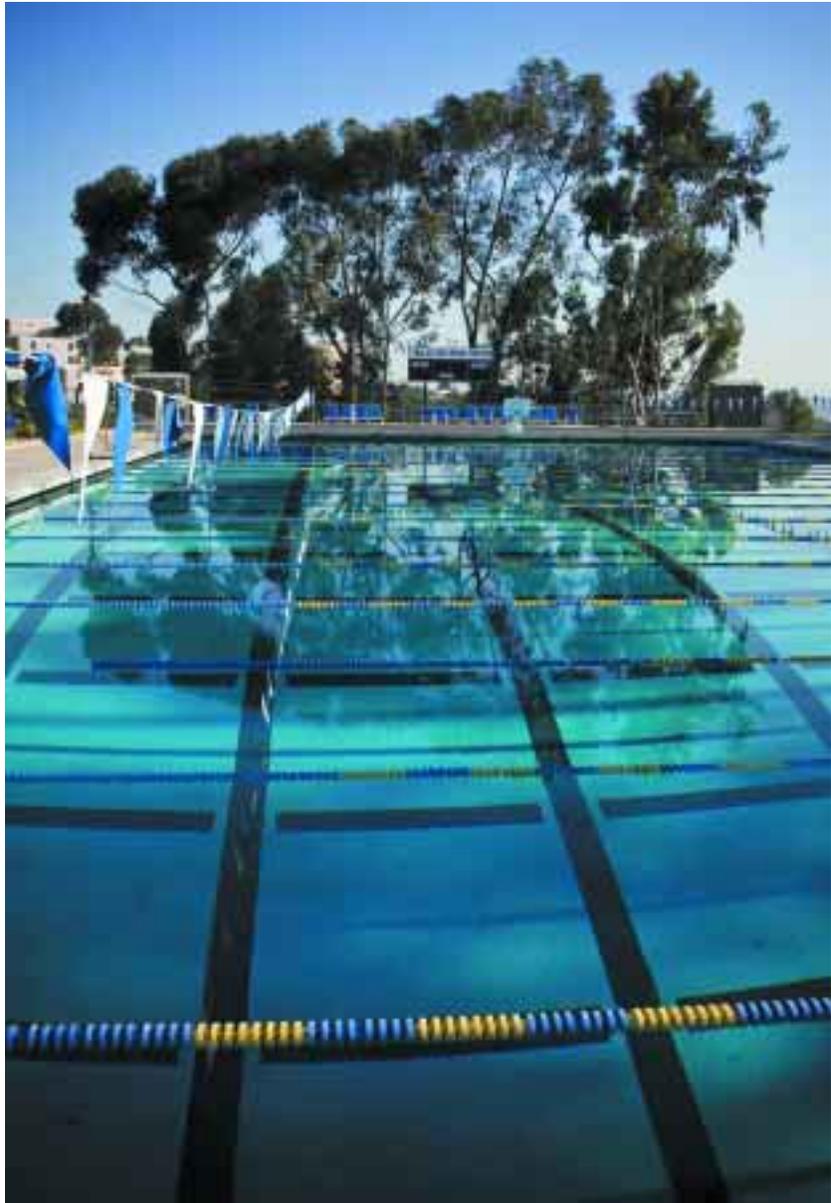
Coggan Family Aquatic Complex, 800 Nautilus St, La Jolla CA 92037. (Next to La Jolla High School). One 50-meter pool. 858-456-0945; [www.cfaquatics.org](http://www.cfaquatics.org)

Larry M. Lawrence Jewish Community Center, 4126 Executive Dr, La Jolla, CA 92037. One 50 meter pool.

858-457-3030; [www.lfjcc.org](http://www.lfjcc.org)

University of California, San Diego Canyonview Aquatics Complex, Voigt Drive, La Jolla, CA 92093. Two 50-meter pools. 858-534-6034;

[recreation.ucsd.edu/aqua/](http://recreation.ucsd.edu/aqua/)



UC-San Diego's 50-meter pool at the Canyonview Aquatics complex in La Jolla.

### Mission Valley

Mission Valley Family YMCA, 5505 Friars Rd, San Diego, CA 92110. One 25-meter pool.

619-298-3576; [missionvalley.ymca.org](http://missionvalley.ymca.org)

### Solana Beach

Boys & Girls Club of San Dieguito Doug and Marianne Pardee Aquatics Center, 533 Lomas Santa Fe Dr., Solana Beach 92075. One 25-yard pool. 858-755-4904 ; [www.positiveplacesd.org](http://www.positiveplacesd.org)

## OCEAN SWIMMING

While you can swim just about anywhere along the San Diego coast, La Jolla Cove on La Jolla's Coast Boulevard is the unquestioned queen of

ocean swim destinations. Take off from a secluded sandy beach and you can swim out and back to buoys set at various distances under the watchful eye of lifeguards. Ask the lifeguards about the distances. The cove is a marine sanctuary so you can count on seeing bright orange Garibaldi, swooping rays, and swaying kelp as you swim. On Fridays, the Triathlon Club of San Diego ([www.triclubsandiego.org](http://www.triclubsandiego.org)) holds regular swims at 6 p.m. The La Jolla Cove Swim Club also has daily swims and sponsors events like the August Tour of Buoys and New Years Day Polar Bear Swim ([www.lajollacoveswimclub.org](http://www.lajollacoveswimclub.org)).

— *Mark Johnson*