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## ***Before Johnny Weismuller: How Chicago Swimmers Conquered the World***

The role of Chicago in the development of the sport of competitive swimming has not been fully appreciated. It is not generally known that for most of the first decades of this century the city produced most of the world champions in the sport, and that the athletic clubs that produced those champions were hailed as the foremost swimming laboratories of the world. This paper examines Chicago's emergence as the world center of swimming.

Swimming is a sport that produces exceptional athletes out of a particular training culture. In Chicago, the cornerstone of that kind of training culture was the big city athletic club—first the Chicago Athletic Association in the 1890s and then the Illinois Athletic Club in the first two decades of this century. These organizations provided facilities and professional coaches, both of which were rarities, but most of all they provided the opportunity for an athlete to be introduced to the sport, be engaged in the sport, and be trained in the sport.

In the 1890s swimming was still in a pre-modern phase of development. The crawl and back strokes were unknown, and swimmers found races of more than 200 yards so exhausting that they switched back and forth from one stroke to another. Some strokes were idiosyncratic to the point of peculiar. It would take a twenty-year process for athletic clubs and local high schools in the city and its suburbs to create the modern form of swimming competition. Chicago's coaches and athletes were extraordinarily innovative. Coaches such as Frank Sullivan and Bill Bachrach, and swimmers such as H. Jamison Handy, Harry Hebner, Michael McDermott, and Perry McGillivray played major roles in developing training methods and techniques in the sport.

Chicago worked with its junior swimmers to produce champions and all the clubs had strong junior programs. The clubs also played a crucial role in promoting competitive swimming in the high schools, notably by sponsoring high school meets in their pools. By the early 1930s the high schools and colleges had displaced athletic clubs as the generators of swimming talent. Most of the high school swim powers by this time had their own pools and the private athletic clubs were getting out of the sponsorship of high school events. In 1932, when the Illinois High School Association inaugurated a state swimming meet, the reign of Chicago's athletic clubs in producing star swimmers was over.

The sources upon which this paper is based include newspapers from 1879 to 1932; materials from the archives of the Chicago Athletic Association and the International Swimming Hall of Fame, Ft. Lauderdale, Florida; the Illinois Athletic Club's official magazine and other papers from the Chicago Historical Society; and swimming guides and other relevant early twentieth-century publications.