

Those Exuberant Dolphins

■ Orange and white heads bobbing in the Bay are a small, but fascinating part of the view from Ghirardelli Square, The Cannery, Buena Vista Cafe, and the cement bleachers at Aquatic Park.

"My God!" exclaim tourists year after year, "Look at those crazy men swimming in that freezing water!"

Years ago my girlfriend and I would take a crab, a loaf of sour dough bread and a bottle of wine to the beach adjacent to the swimmer's clubhouse and watch them as we ate. Bundled in coats and sweaters, we watched as they stood dressed only in brief blue swim trunks, limbering up, then plunging into the icy Bay. Later, they would emerge from the water removing their rubber caps, ear plugs, and goggles. They were always smiling to themselves. Then they would disappear into a building resembling a small Malibu beach house. There was a shower fixture to hose sand and salt water off, a small well kept garden, a large back porch, long wooden benches, and an old weathered pier. The swimmers were just one of many fascinating bits of San Francisco life to a recent arrival like myself.

Many years later I went back to that tiny strip of beach at Aquatic Park to photograph the men with a very long telephoto lens, but got nothing more than detached shots of anonymous swimmers. I thought I could sneak shots of them, but as the years progressed they had protected themselves too well for that. I decided to knock on their front door and ask permission to photograph the club.

A man of sixty-five or seventy came to the door and after I asked my question, he ushered me down an entry hall into a very large wood paneled boat storage room. Thus began my guided tour of the Dolphin Swimming and Rowing Club, led by Lawton Hughes, one of the club's oldest and most respected members.

The walls of the high ceilinged sixty by twenty foot room were lined with a dozen boats. At first glance the vessels appeared to be simple row boats, but after an explanation from my guide I found that they are fine old wood pulling boats, called Whitehalls, and are used in rowing competition. At the rear of the storage room was a bar that extended the full width of the room. Behind the boat room and adjacent to the

Text and Photography by Don Hogan

"A half dozen German sports enthusiasts founded the club in 1877."

private beach was a workout room equipped with an assortment of bars and weights, an exercycle, and various other paraphernalia for indoor exercise. This room was also wood paneled. From the large windows I saw ten or twelve of the members on the patio. With few exceptions they were all upwards of fifty years old and were wearing brief blue swimming trunks with the insignia of the Dolphin Club in white. They were chatting with friends, sipping refreshments, preparing for an afternoon dip, or just basking in the hot sun.

My tour continued with a walk up a flight of stairs to the upper level that contained a steam room at the rear of the club, a large locker room in the middle, and in front a general purpose lounge named after Frank Staib, a member in good standing from 1889 to 1938. Here Lawton Hughes explained the history of the club, inspired by the many photographs in the lounge. He began by drawing my attention to the oldest of the photographs, a series of individual portraits arranged around a sketch of the first clubhouse, a small shack at the end of a rickety looking pier.

The half dozen men in the photographs were the original German sports enthusiasts who wanted to begin a sporting and social club in America like the one, named Turnverein, that they had belonged to in the old country. Led by John Wieland, a local brewery owner, they founded the Dolphin Club in 1877. Its first location was at Bay and Taylor, where Fisherman's Wharf is now. It was later relocated to the foot of Van Ness. Another relocation was necessitated in 1925 when Van Ness was extended, and the building was moved to the foot of Polk. The club endured yet another move

due to the building of the Maritime Museum in 1933; it was moved to its present location at 502 Jefferson, just west of Hyde.

As I browsed through the photographs of rowing teams, annual swimming events and parties, Lawton Hughes called my attention to a photograph of the handsome young coach of a crack competition rowing team dressed in the two-piece swim suits popular many years ago. It was Hughes himself, just two years after he had joined the club in 1917.

We then walked through the boat repair room to an indoor handball court with a large spectator gallery behind the regulation hardwood playing area.

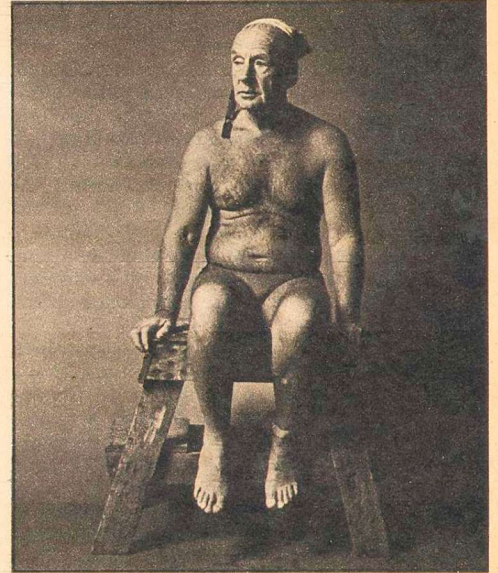
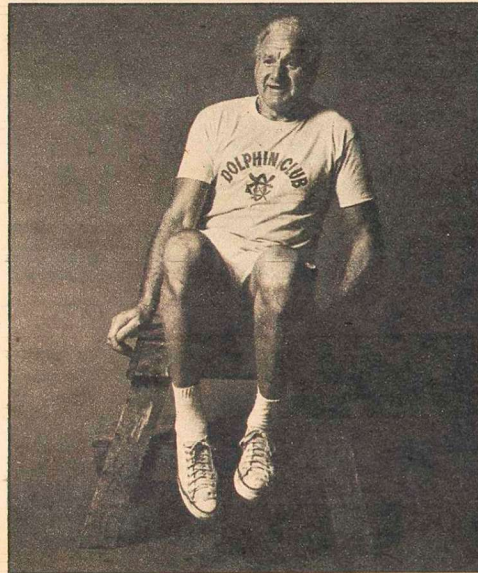
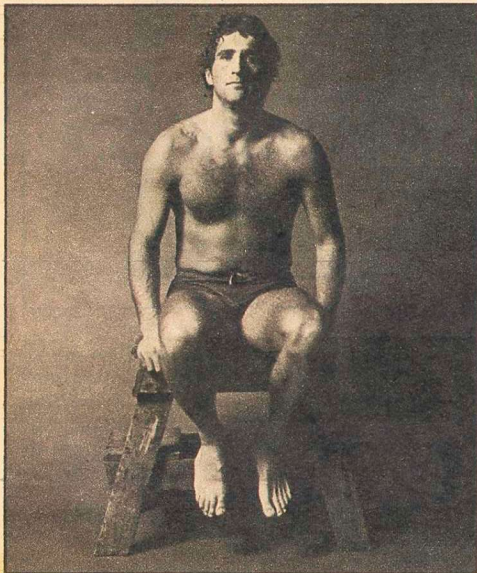
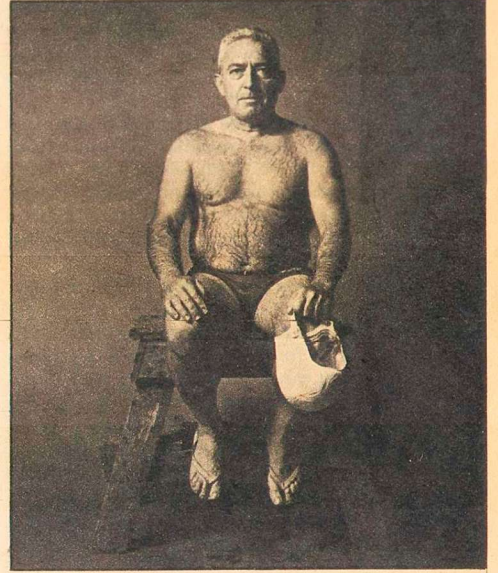
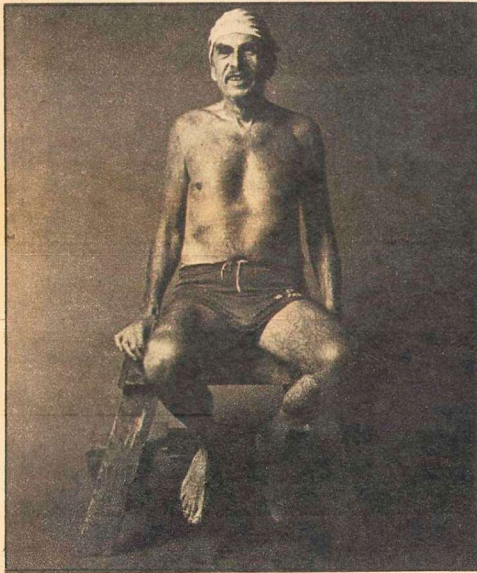
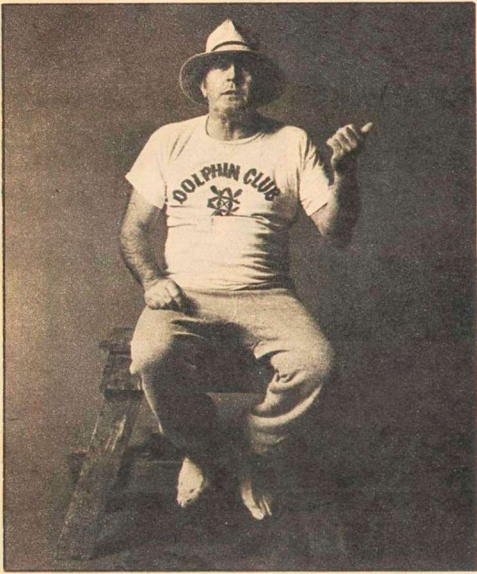
My tour ended with a brief privileged look at the peaked tower known as Hank's Room. Outside the small room were large bird cages, all empty due to sudden disease, the many birds never replaced. The room's interior resembled a finely finished ship's cabin, all of the furnishings hand crafted from wood found on local beaches by the rarely seen, very old inhabitant.

Beginning early the next morning, I spent several weeks photographing members of the club and their activities.

Usually members would arrive dressed in an assortment of styles ranging from slacks, open collar sport shirts, and wing tips to sweat pants, T-shirts and tennis shoes. They'd chat with friends, take a sip of wine, check the chalk boards for water temperature and tide information and then head for the locker room to change. They looked so different once they had changed into brief trunks that I sometimes had difficulty recognizing them.

Once in their trunks, they'd head for the beach, pulling on their orange or white swim caps and stopping up their ears with small rubber plugs. Some also used nose pinchers and goggles as protection from the irritating salt water. They'd limber up on the clean beach, then stand waist high in the small Bay waves getting used to the water temperature, which varied from forty to sixty degrees, depending on the season. Then they would plunge into the water for a swim that usually covered a minimum distance of one lap around the Aquatic Park Cove.

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People *continued*

When the swimmers returned to the clubhouse for a quick shower and steam-bath, they had looks of exhilaration on their faces and their muscles were pumped up and taut from the exercise. No matter what one does as he grows old, skin sags, muscle tone disappears, stomachs drop. But the bodies of these men in their fifties and sixties were vigorous and powerful.

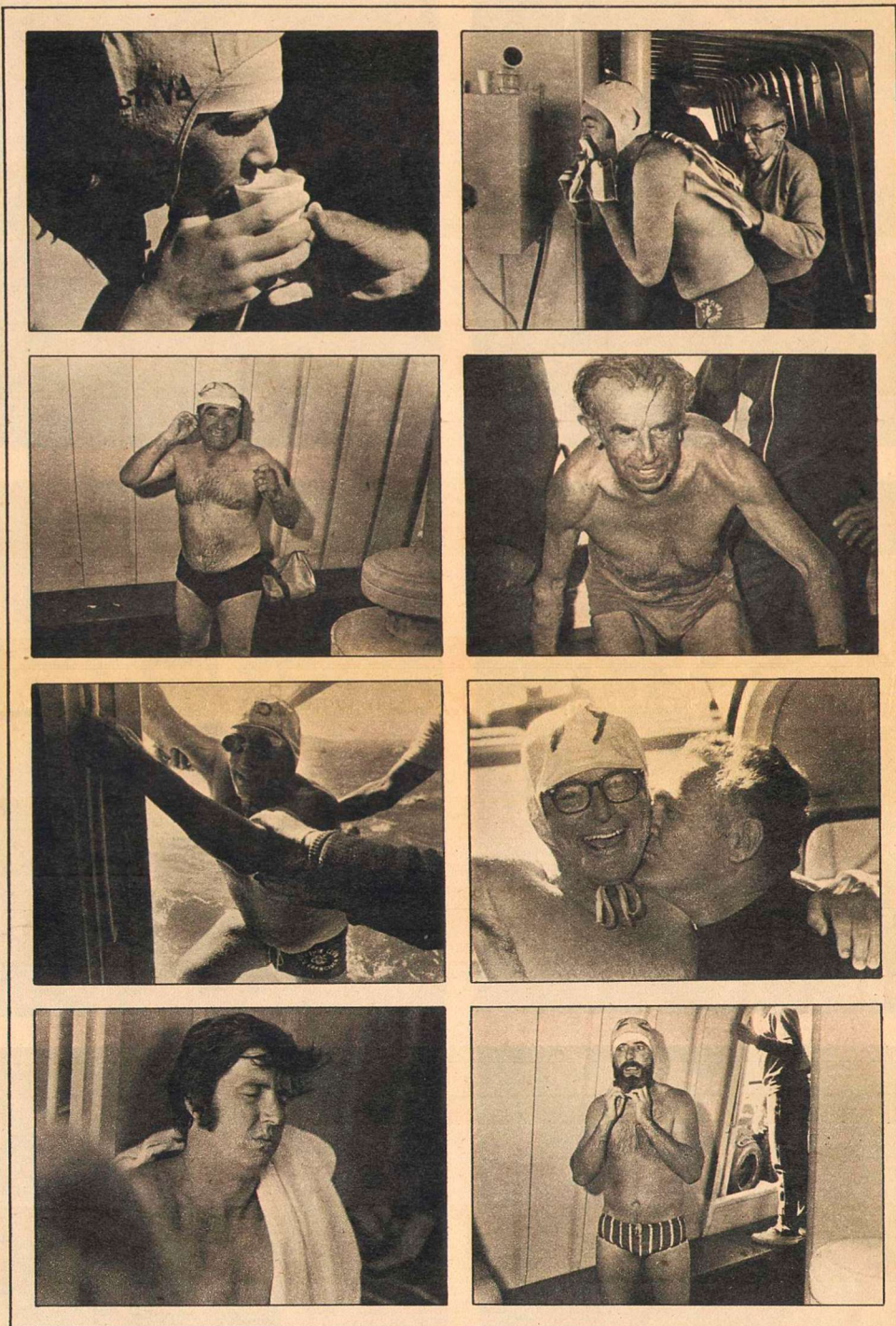
Dolphins spoke of Bay swimming as an addiction. These men didn't feel right if they hadn't had their two or three mile swim each morning or late afternoon. Some came on lunch breaks or after work and there were a few who took their dip after dark. One sixty-five year old member could only find time in the pre-dawn when he swam up and down and in between the docks and pier, afterwards peddling to a dockloaders job on his racing bicycle.

The members were all proud of the fact that the club's 350 members come from varied backgrounds. The club only turned down one application in its entire history and that was because the applicant was under age. Even then they tried to figure out some way to let him in.

While photographing the Dolphin Club, I came to enjoy the sociable, brotherly atmosphere. When members gathered in small groups for bull sessions between swims, I'd put down my cameras and listen to conversation that varied from tales of the Irish ghetto in old San Francisco to a conference concerning the proper cooking of a small shark recently caught off the club pier. One afternoon I arrived to find a clambake in progress.

The Golden Gate Swim is the largest and most popular of seventeen yearly swimming events the club hosts. The Gate, as it is known around the club, is a tradition, having taken place every year since 1917, with the exception of the years during World War II. The event consists of strolling into the surf at Fort Point, just under the old toll booths of the Bridge, and swimming the seven-eighths mile to Lime Rock at the southern tip of Marin. Since it is difficult to climb the rock onto the land, there is a boat on hand at the finish to get the swimmers out of the water and tote them back to the clubhouse.

As the day of the swim approached, excitement built among the Dolphins. It is a tradition members participated in for as many as fifty years. Men in their twenties attempt it as a test of speed, while those seventy years and more may see it as a static test of their fitness as the years pass. Some of the members were beginning to take longer than average endurance swims every day to get in even better shape. Few



of the youngest members were ever seen around the club. They really didn't take part in everyday activities. There was a growing controversy about the young "Olympic" class swimmers who appeared only at major competition events to place high in the swim, take the honors, and leave only to return for the next big event. This often precluded the older members from winning any trophies or ribbons.

The club officers decided to allow me on the exclusive swimmer's boat. Preparations increased and finally there was a briefing where swimmers were informed about various tide patterns and safety procedures by both veteran swim participants and a representative of the Coast Guard.

The morning of the swim, I arrived at the club at daybreak.

I began to shoot as the antique rowing

boats, used today to pilot the swimmers across and to pull them out of the water in case of exhaustion or unexpected emergency, were brought out on their dollies. Crisco was applied to oar locks and the tracks under the sliding seats. A case of bourbon and brandy, hundreds of jelly doughnuts and bottles of champagne were loaded. The swimmers arrived last, the look of nervousness and apprehension on every last face, young and old alike. They were taken by private bus to the starting point at the Fort Point beach.

The pilot boats were tied in a single line a dozen boats long and then tied to the swimmer's boat, a large diesel engined water taxi named Tern. I boarded the Tern, which then towed all of the pilot boats out to their positions under the Golden Gate Bridge. We then went to Lime Rock and waited for the signal that the swimmers had left the starting point. The next event was the arrival of the time clock by speedboat. Once it was started at the beach, it was then rushed to the finish line so that the elapsed times of the various swimmers could be recorded.

The fastest swimmers took a bit more than twenty minutes to get across. These youngsters had sprinted the entire distance, unconcerned with pacing and endurance. Most of them came on board cool and collected. With the next wave of swimmers,

"The Golden Gate Swim is the most popular event the club hosts."

the typical Dolphin exuberance arrived. The older swimmers were elated and anxious to tell tales of their ordeal. Most of the men, after being wrapped in blankets and robes to remove the bone deep chill, immediately headed for the doughnuts, coffee, and liquor.

The men began coming on board at a much slower rate. After a while the waiting became longer and longer between arrivals as the oldest members began reaching the finish. The fittest swimmers were guided to the rock by the spotters in row boats. A spotter will wait to the last minute to pull a man out, preferring to coax and cheer him to the finish. One of the youngest and fittest of the swimmers, attempting his first Gate crossing, quit after the first third of the distance. He sat smiling a stiff wooden smile, not able to look the others in the eye.

One seasoned swimmer performed proficiently until he was twenty or thirty feet from the finish, when he got caught in a backwash from Lime Rock. He thrashed

about, moving nowhere. People shouted at him from the boat to keep it up but it was no use. He was finally told by one member to swim toward the boat. He mistakenly thought he was being told to give up, but then understood the order and headed for the swimmer's boat. He was swiftly propelled toward the finish point by backwash from our large diesel launch.

The oldest men came on board last. Most of them were totally exhausted, and sat shaking, wrapped in towels and robes, trying in vain to hold styrofoam cups of coffee mixed with bourbon or brandy without spilling the scalding liquid on their cold-cramped legs.

The wait continued. All the swimmers hadn't been accounted for and so we stayed under the bridge. Finally, the captain decided to switch some of the swimmers to an auxiliary boat to speed things up. The trip took longer than I had expected, as we had to round up the pilot boats and tow them back to the dock.

Tired, freezing cold, and dishevelled, we were met by a gregarious crowd back at the club house.

Awards were distributed, the winners looking curiously out of place with their seemingly teenage good looks. (I would have liked to have seen one of the older "regulars" get a trophy.)

And then the celebrating began. □

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