

Finding Their Way

Blind swimmers find supportive training environment at Notre Dame

Andy Gray

James Fetter is a funny guy. Taking time out of his hectic schedule as a graduate student to speak to *Scholastic* on a Friday afternoon, Fetter explains, is no problem. "I don't usually start drinking on Friday until about 5:30 anyway," he says.

James Fetter is also an elite swimmer. Having participated recreationally since he was very young, Fetter competed on a national level in high school and has traveled to Spain to take part in international swim meets.

Why is this so remarkable? Because James Fetter is completely blind.

Fetter, sightless since birth, was introduced to the water at a young age to ensure his safety should he ever need to swim. "I took to the water pretty well," he says. "I got involved in summer league swimming, and then moved on to more competition as I found out more about opportunities for blind swimmers." In high school, he narrowly missed the cut at national Paralympic trials and gradually left swimming behind.

Fetter arrived at Notre Dame for academic reasons, entering the much-lauded political philosophy graduate program. But once here, he met the right people to bring swimming back into his life and rekindle a lifelong dream of competing in the Paralympic games. "Annie [Sawicki, coach of the Irish Aquatic Masters/Paralympic team,] was

very persistent," Fetter says. "It got me thinking, if it's not going to happen now, it's probably not going to happen."

Fetter's swimming for Notre Dame is not an isolated phenomenon. The Masters team has three blind members, including Fetter, junior Ashley Nasheanas and alumnus Lori Miller ('97). Both Nasheanas and Miller are former Paralympians, and Miller even participated in cycling at the Sydney Games in 2000.

"It's just really odd to have three totally blind, pretty elite swimmers who are also fantastic students," Sawicki says. The three assist each other in many ways, whether they are sharing Paralympic experience or knowledge about college life, transitions and obstacles. "Being able to handle adversity with poise is what sets the swimmers here apart," Fetter says.

There are plenty of trials in store for blind athletes, especially blind swimmers. Fetter describes one such situation: "When you have two blind

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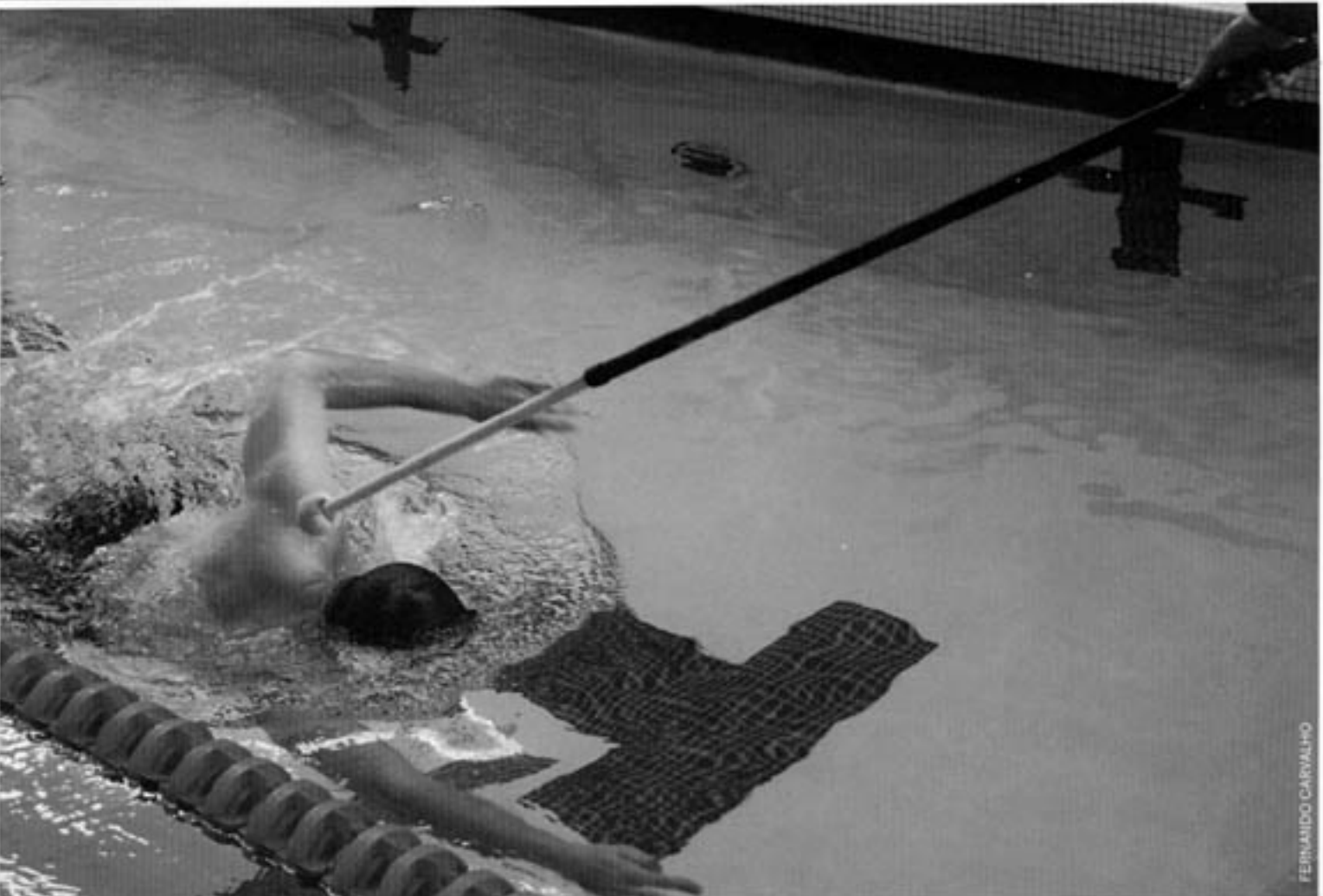
— Coach Annie Sawicki

swimmers in the pool, if one's not going straight, you're going to end up right on top of each other." But the most difficult of the obstacles for a blind swimmer is

making a turn.

Sighted swimmers must work their entire lives to perfect the turn; a well-executed turn can shave precious time off the clock. Blind swimmers, however, must depend not only on their own abilities, but also the timing and balance of an assistant "tapper." This person stands at the end of a swimming lane with what is essentially a pole with a tennis ball affixed to one end, ready to tap a blind swimmer on the head or shoulder to warn him or her that a wall is ahead.

"I would argue that tapping is almost a sport in itself," says Bruce Godzina, MBA student and experienced tapper. "It's really one of the most rewarding things I've ever done, to help out these swimmers [...] but it's trickier than it looks. You have to adjust



A GUIDING TOUCH Tappers are crucial for the safety and performance of blind swimmers, but automated tappers would allow the athletes more freedom.

for the different swimmers' preferences." There are no warm-up tapping sessions, so any time a tapper actually practices his or her job, the speed of competition and thus the risk of injury looms overhead. According to Godzina, not just anyone can do it. "We've had about a 40 percent attrition rate [among tappers]," Sawicki says, "And I think it's because you always have to be on. There's no daydreaming."

Aside from the rigor of tapping, other difficulties arise when the swimmers practice. Coordination of schedules amongst tappers and swimmers is a daunting task. Considering this, the incentive to create some kind of replacement for the human tapper is quite significant. A mechanical tapper, such as the patented device being developed and tested here at Notre Dame by graduate students Fernando Carvalho and Kyle Walters in conjunction with Sawicki, would be greatly beneficial to blind swimmers everywhere.

Fetter has participated in the testing

of the tapping device, known as the ADAPT'TAP. "It's at the point now where, with a little refinement, it could be a really nice aid in making the pool more accessible," he says. With such a machine, a blind swimmer could do laps whenever he or she had time.

But many obstacles hinder the creation and proliferation of the ADAPT'TAP. In order to test the device sufficiently, a larger group of blind swimmers would need to be gathered. Also, questions have arisen with regard to having a permanent setup of a mechanical tapper that would not disturb sighted swimmers using the lanes, as well as to the specifics of the final model. The small swimming program involved needs support that it has not been able to find.

"We're looking at about 10,000 dollars that we'll need in order to do this," Sawicki says. Hopes for the 2008 Paralympics have effectively been scratched due to the swimmers' inability

to train effectively while keeping school or work as the top priority, but assistance could make a 2012 trip to the games a legitimate possibility as Fetter and Nasheanas enter prime years of swimming.

"Notre Dame has great school spirit," Fetter says. "Here are people who are trying to compete at a high level. If you help, they will succeed more quickly, and Notre Dame's name will be attached to that." The ADAPT'TAP developed here could help international athletes reach the pinnacle of their sport.

"It's right here, facing us," Sawicki says. "We're the Fighting Irish. What will we fight for?"

If you are interested in helping these athletes by volunteering time or money, or simply want more information about the Masters swimming team, visit www.etcamsz.com/irishmasters or email Annie Sawicki at Anne.E.Sawicki.5@nd.edu.