

Metro

San Diego Communities

Sunday, June 2, 1991

The San Diego Union

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Neil Morgan

NOTEPAD: The New York Times gave big coverage of Murray Callan's swimming school. An all-sports coach in San Diego city schools for 30 years, Callan has taught swimming here for 45 years — to kids starting at 6 months old. ... Now fax machines are making romance. This newspaper's classified department doesn't publish phone numbers with personals ads — but does accept fax numbers. ... In the month since he opened Lamplight Books in Gaslamp, Dave Smith has sold only two copies of Kitty Kelley's book on Nancy Reagan. Both buyers wanted the book wrapped in brown paper.

Alison DaRosa assists with the Neil Morgan column.

Sunday Currents

Longtime swim instructor has vast pool of disciples

By Mike McIntyre
Staff Writer

Many of Murray Callan's pupils learn to swim before they walk. He says it's only natural.

"We're 80 percent water," said the owner of the Murray Callan Swim School. "We are the water."

Callan, 66, has been teaching San Diego children to swim for nearly 50 years. He maintains that infants are born with an involuntary swimmer's reflex, developed during nine months in the womb. His soft-touch method reinforces the reflex.

"It's a weightless technique," he said. "We touch a baby like wet seaweed. It's body language that conveys the fluidness."

The idea to teach babies to swim struck Callan while in the Navy during World War II. Stationed in the South Pacific, he saw natives giving birth in saltwater pools at low tide. When the umbilical cords were cut, he said, the newborns took off like tadpoles.

Callan came to San Diego in 1947 to attend San Diego State University on a football scholarship. He later spent 30 years as an all-sports coach in several city schools.

Also, he gave swimming lessons. Callan first worked private pools, then the La Jolla Country Club for 25 years. For the last 17 years, he has run his own swim school in Pacific Beach.

He keeps his pool heated at 95 degrees year round. In the summer, 12 instructors teach up to 450 kids a day. In addition to training his in-

FACE ♦ TO ♦ FACE

With Murray Callan

structors, Callan still teaches four hours a day.

After almost 50 years in swimming pools, he's not sure how many children he has taught to swim.

"Oh gosh, thousands," he said. "Thousands and thousands."

Question: When did you learn to swim?

Answer: I always loved to be around the water, but I never learned how to swim until I was 10 years old. We were on a Sunday picnic in Santa Cruz County, in a little beach town called Capitola. Every summer, they would dam up the creek, which made a lagoon. Then people would get out there in canoes and rowboats. This was back in about 1934.

I was out there wading around in water maybe waist-deep. And I looked out and there was this little girl and she was about 3, and the water was right up to her nostrils. She was on her tiptoes, with her fists clenched, just trying to keep her nostrils above water. In other words, she was literally drowning. So I walked over, and I picked her up and carried her over and set her down in an area where she could get her feet down and get her face out of the water.

So then I walked out in the water with a couple of guys my own age

and I looked down and I saw this red bathing suit. It was on the bottom. And I looked down and I saw this leg (of another girl). I could put my face in the water, but I couldn't swim. So I put my face in and I reached down and fooled around with her foot with my foot and got a hold of her ankle and hauled her out and dragged her up by her legs into shallow water, where it was maybe six inches deep. Then the lifeguards ran up.

And they grabbed her and went to carry her, and she was drowned. She just slithered out of their arms like a wet mackerel. They couldn't even hold her. That impressed me. I'd never seen anything like that before. She flopped down on the wet sand and the lifeguards applied artificial respiration and brought her around. And the next day, in the *Santa Cruz Bay Sentinel*, it said that such-and-such a girl was saved by some unknown boy.

That terrified the hell out of me.

So what did you do?

There was an area that was about 300 or 400 yards from our house. There was a creek down there. The high school kids used to dam the creek up in the summer and make a swimming hole. So I went down there and I literally taught myself to swim. I tried over and over again. I

remember there was a log and a rock, and they were about 10 feet apart, and the water was maybe four feet deep. And I just practiced back and forth and back and forth. And hell, within a couple weeks I was swimming.

And, of course, the creek bottom slanted. You could seek out your own security level. So that's why I designed my pool this way. I've got all these big wide shallow steps. And all the steps slope. So anybody, any age, any height, can seek out their own security level by getting their feet on the ground.

How did you get started teaching swimming?

I was in boot camp in Idaho in 1943. There were some guys from the Midwest who couldn't swim, so they came around to me and said, "Hey, Callan, if we give you our dog tags, will you take the swimming test for us so we can graduate from boot camp?" And I said, "Well, hell, OK." So they gave me five bucks, which was a lot of money in those days. And I practically drowned myself doing it, trying to make it look real. Then afterward, after hours, I gave them swimming lessons for 50 cents a lesson. I was 18 years old then, and that's actually where I got started teaching.

What's the ideal age to learn how to swim?

The sooner the better and it's never too late. We start them out at

3 weeks, as soon as the umbilical cord falls off. It's probably the best age. As soon as they come out of the birth canal, the swimmer's reflex is very, very strong. Their ability to swim, all the movements they have in the womb to get around. Their movements are lateral — this hand will go this way, and this hand will go that way. And then the legs move alternately. So they just move through the water. They learn to be the water.

Why is it so critical to teach kids to swim so young?

If I can get babies in this program by the time they are 6 months old, they will not only swim, but they will own the water ... If they fall in, they can get out.

Any other reason besides safety?

Parents who have their kids in preschool come back by the droves every year and tell us how well they're doing in preschool, as opposed to kids who are not in this program. Every time you hold your breath, you force more oxygen through your carotid arteries into your brain. That means that your brain is nourished with more oxygen. And oxygen is brain food.

The kids are so young. Are they ever afraid?

You rarely ever see a kid cry in here. The only time they cry is when they have to leave.



■ Murray Callan:

"As soon as babies come out of the birth canal, the swimmer's reflex is very, very strong."

■ **Vital stats:** Age, 66. Married, with three children. Home: San Diego.

■ **Occupation:** Owner of the Murray Callan Swim School, Pacific Beach.

■ **Background:** Grew up in the Santa Cruz area, moved to San Diego in 1947. Graduated from San Diego State University, with a degree in physical education.