

Tales from the Natatorium

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It seems like plebe year we spent an awful lot of time in the Natatorium. Early in plebe summer there was the sorting out of the swimmers versus the non-swimmers. I remember Coach Higgins teaching us the basic breaststroke. I also remember a big pot belly hanging over his Speedo but I just found out this info about him

John Herbert Higgins (May 8, 1916 – August 1, 2004) was an American competition [swimmer](#) and swimming coach. He competed during the transition time, when [breaststroke](#) swimmers were allowed to combine and swimming the [butterfly](#) arm stroke with the usual frog kick. Using this technique, he finished fourth at the [1936 Summer Olympics](#) in the 200 m, and set two world records in the 100 m breaststroke event in 1935 and 1936. During the Olympic trials, he set a national record in the 200 m breaststroke that was unbeaten until 1948. During his career, Higgins won 11 national titles and set 10 world records in breaststroke and medley events. In 1971, he was inducted to the [International Swimming Hall of Fame](#).

Also it seemed that our swimming days were always when the weather was frightful. Wearing our reef coats, carrying poncho and

an armful of books we'd trudge to McDonough Hall and the Natatorium where it never felt much warmer than outside.

Remember floating in our khakies and trying to make floats out of the pants.

But the two things I really remember about the Natatorium are the tower jump and the forty minute swim. I had swum since I was a little tyke and was a lifeguard during high school so the water didn't phase me but I never cared much for heights. All through plebe summer I would stare up at that darn platform thirty feet up in the rafters and wonder if I would make the jump. Now consider classmates who feared both water and heights. It had to be a terrifying proposition.

Well finally the day came for us to climb the rope ladder up to the tower and make the leap using approved abandon ship technique or else be assigned to the dreaded sub-squad with the promise of having to climb to the tower every day until finally able to jump. Our squad jumped into the pool and swam over to the rope ladder and one by one started climbing the swaying rope. I remember Cole Lindell reaching the top and doing a flip off the tower into the pool. I followed not even liking climbing the ladder until I reached the tower and cautiously toed my way to the edge. At this point for the first time in my life I discovered the power of peer pressure. There was no way I was going to let my fellow mids see how terrified I was and I stepped off the tower and one second later hit the water. Never again was I afraid of heights. It went that way for most, but a few just couldn't handle it and wouldn't jump. They had to climb back down the treacherous ladder and alas be put on the sub-squad. I really felt for them for it could have been me.

The other experience I remember was the forty minute swim where we had to swim some required number of laps around the pool and never touch the sides or else we were disqualified and, bingo-off to the sub-squad. I don't remember if we were in clothes or swimming suits. As I said I was a decent swimmer so I was charging around the pool intent on getting a 4.0. Suddenly I felt a firm hand on my head, which pushed me under the water. I thought; another bored swimmer

who wanted to mess around. So I reached up and grabbed his leg and pulled him under. Oh no! The hand that submerged me belonged not to a strong swimmer but to one of those barely able to float who was floundering along trying to make at least the minimum number of laps. He choked and gasped and flailed over to the side of the pool where he was immediately disqualified. For fifty-five years I've felt terrible about that incident.

My final Natatorium memory is from I think first class year. If we could swim four hundred yards in some specified time we could validate the whole course of instruction. This should have been a piece of cake for me, but I had never swum for time. I started out like I was in a race and by about three hundred yards I had exhausted myself and sheepishly dropped out, meaning I had to go to every darn lesson. I counted that as a personal failure.

I'm sure others have memories from their time in the pool, but these are mine.

Steve C. '63