

Olympic Gold Medalist Anthony Ervin Leads Masters Class

The Olympic champion guided swimmers ages 18 to 84 at the Montauk Playhouse, offering a playful, technique-driven clinic that could form the foundation of a new masters program

Jack Graves
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Olympic gold medalist Anthony Ervin led a master's swim class at the Montauk Playhouse Pool on April 14.

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Anthony Ervin, who at 19 and 35 won Olympic gold medals in the 50-meter freestyle race, gave a clinic at the Montauk Playhouse's new pool last week to students ranging in age from 18 (Daisy Pitches) to 84 (Dick Monahan) who may form the core

of the Playhouse's masters swimming program that Lars Merseburg, who manages the pool, and Angelika Cruz, one the Hurricane youth swim team's coaches, are to oversee.

Merseburg, the head of Imagine Swimming, which also oversees three pools in Manhattan and one in Brooklyn, was a teammate of Ervin's on the University of California, Berkeley team at the turn of the millennium.

"He's the Lionel Messi of swimming," the Playhouse pool's manager said during a conversation that followed the clinic, which was held on April 14.

"It was great fun," said one of the clinic-takers, Jasie Britton. "It wasn't a typical masters class — he had us play around with the strokes and with being in the water."

By having his charges swim freestyle laps "without the front crawl," by having them swim without using the usual competitive strokes, and, in the case of the butterfly, "with one arm," Ervin, Britton said, "was trying to get us to focus on the flow, through practicing different ways of moving ... seeing him swim that lap alternating the breaststroke and butterfly was the most beautiful thing to watch."

"Yes, think it, feel it, do it," said Merseburg when questioned as to Ervin's intent. "He wanted to show them what they could do ... to imagine!"

He and Ervin, All-Americans before they began competing internationally, go back a long way.

"He's above everyone in the swimming world, someone like Messi. When he retired from competition [five years ago, following the Olympic trials in Omaha], I invited him to New York, and he and I have been teaching together since."

"I loved the clinic, I thought it was great," said Tara Burke. "Very uplifting. It's not every day that you have a former Olympic gold medalist working with you on the sport you love."

"It was interesting ... the balance between getting a workout and feeling relaxed at the same time ... and it was nice to be with other like-minded people."

“What’s so great about swimming,” she added, “is that, as he showed us, when you get the techniques down, you’re graceful and powerful at the same time.”

Monahan, who still guards the ocean at Kirk Park, recalled that soon after the 2016 Rio Olympics he “saw two guys go into the ocean where the jetty is at Ditch Plains, and they came flying by us in the sweep. We’d been told by the town that with a bad hurricane coming on, we shouldn’t allow anyone in the water except surfers with boards ... When they came walking back, I saw all these tats on the arms of one of the guys, and wondered if he was who I thought he was. I said, ‘By any chance is your name Anthony? Did you just win the gold in Brazil a couple weeks ago?’ Then I told them that I might lose my job, but that I was going to make an exception in their case.”

“Dick Monahan was an instructor of mine in junior lifeguarding,” said another clinic-taker, the 23-year-old Lucas Nordlinger. “I’ll never forget what he once told me, that every time he gets out of the pool he feels young again.”

His intent, Ervin said afterward, was to get his masters students to feel at ease in the water.

“Everything becomes so mechanical in our lives, even how we get through the day. I wanted to reinsert the fundamental understanding of movement in the water, to try to break up the mechanical nature of it, to get back to the liquid movement ... in the water, you plan for every breath, it can be a moving meditation.”

As for what his students had gotten out of the clinic, while he was happy to hear they had liked it, it was up to them in the end, Ervin said.

“That they continue to practice, that’s the point, that they engage in the material from which they want to learn, that they do it, not think about it.”

When this writer said he might begin to swim as well as continue to play tennis, Ervin said, “Both swimming and tennis will keep you vital and keep you going. When you swim, you’ll learn where your body is getting tied up from tennis and breathe into those spots ... moving meditation. You’ll open up your body with your breath ... open and close, open and close.”

“When I get out of the pool, I feel like a million bucks. My mood is good, my body is good, I’m hungry ... Everything is good.”

As for the Playhouse’s four-lane pool, one of the clinic-takers, Jim Conroy, said, “Imagine Swimming’s doing a wonderful job, they’re great people and the pool is gorgeous. The water is really nice, and, because of the ionization system, there’s not a lot of chlorine, so it feels really good.”

“We want the pool to be used by any and all,” said Merseburg, who goes back and forth between New York and Montauk. “The doors are open to the high school and Hurricane swimmers, and to everyone else. We want as many kids as possible, from all levels of society.”

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