

Aquatics Pioneer Receives USSA Distinguished Service Award

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“I think it is unbelievable,” Spannuth said about winning the award. “I have so much admiration for the United States Sports Academy and President Dr. Thomas P. Rosandich.”

Rosandich referred to Spannuth as “a longtime friend of the Academy” and said the award is given for his “outstanding work in the Kingdom of Bahrain as well as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.” Both countries have been the sites of numerous sports management, coaching and physical education programs developed by the Academy.

In Bahrain, Spannuth established a national aquatic program to train Bahrainis to administer aquatic programs. He worked with pool managers, swimming instructors and lifeguards while acting as national advisory swimming coach. In that capacity, he had six assistant coaches whom he would train to coach the national swimming team.

“At the sports academy our job was to educate, especially in basic fundamentals. The more excited they get about fundamentals, the more likely they are to train the children in the sport.”

Spannuth has been a leader and innovator in aquatics for nearly half a century. He was aquatics director of the Reading, Penn. YMCA in 1956. He has since served as aquatics director and head swimming coach for Phillips Petroleum; national aquatics administrator for the AAU, where he organized the first Masters national competition; and the International Director of the Special Olympics.

Spannuth founded the World Swimming Coaches Clinic in 1969, which is now directed by the American Swimming Coaches Association. He founded Masters Swimming in 1970, where he implemented Ransom Arthur’s ideas and decrees to begin a competitive fitness program for adults. He also started the Master’s Synchronized Swimming (1975), Water Walking as a program (1986), the National Aquatics Directors Certification program (1996), the National Programs Award for aquatics, Top Water Fitness Programs (1990), Top Aquatic Programs (1997), Top Water Exercise Programs (1998), the National and State Leadership Awards (1990) and the National YMCA Masters Aquatic Championship (1976).

“When I was president of the American Swimming Coaches’ Association, I was trying to get people excited about being a chairperson,” Spannuth said. “There were seven committees at the time and I was chairman of six. I sent out a questionnaire to people to try to get them more involved.”

Dr. Ransom Arthur, who at the time was commanding officer of the Navy Medical Neuropsychiatric Research Unit in San Diego, Calif., responded by suggesting that a program be developed for older swimmers. He also suggested a competitive swim meet for people over 45. Spannuth organized the meet, which had 45 swimmers the first time, but it has since expanded to include more than 45,000 swimmers from age 19 to 90. Each age group in 10-year increments has its own division. Spannuth later persuaded the Amateur Athletics Union (AAU) to make Master’s Swimming an official sport when he was national aquatics administrator for AAU.

The inspiration for Spannuth’s involvement in the development of aquatics was a conversation with then-Howard University aquatics director Clarence Pendleton (who later served as chairman of the Civil Rights Commission under President Ronald Reagan). He told Spannuth that most aquatics programs were developed for “young, healthy white children.” Spannuth developed the philosophy that everyone in America should be in a swimming pool, including people with various disabilities.

In 1977 Louise Priest wrote a book, *Adapted Aquatics*, for the National Red Cross. *Adapted Aquatics* is the process of teaching aquatic skills to people who have physical and multiple disabilities. Spannuth served on the editorial committee and promoted *Adapted Aquatics* nationally and internationally afterwards.

Spannuth worked successfully with a wide variety of national organizations at the first ever National Adapted Aquatics Summit in Fort Lauderdale in 2001, which he organized and directed. He went on to champion the cause of physical education and sports for people with disabilities when he conducted a conference on the subject with the U.S. State Department and United States Wheelchair Basketball Team in Brazil.

Spannuth serves on the advisory board of the Disability International Foundation (DIF). As Executive Director of the International Special Olympics, he wrote some of the general rules and sports rules for Special Olympics competition.

The Distinguished Service Award is given annually to those individuals who have made outstanding contributions to national or international sports through instruction, research or service. Each nominee must possess an extensive background in sports. This means that the individual must have had significant dealings in either instruction, research or service in sports for more than 10 years.