

USMS Convention 2015 – Kansas City, Missouri

Executive Director Rob Butcher's Address to the House of Delegates

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Transcribed from the live audio recording by Chris Colburn, USMS Secretary

Let's do a quick check one time... Where's Meg Smath? Ransom Arthur winner, can you hear me? Is it working? No, I'm live on a wireless mike here, if our IT guys can check it for us? It worked before I came up here. Check. Let's do this, then. It's all about improvising, isn't it?

So, to the new delegates: Welcome. Eight years ago was my first convention, and I was asked to come up here and give an address before the House of Delegates, and stood here, and had a nice little speech, and every year since I've had a speech, and... I decided this year to go unscripted... and, Ed said "Breathe," so I'm going to take some breaths along the way, okay? Um, I thought unscripted would allow me to speak more from the heart, and... to share some stories, and to try and make this more personal. So, first thing I wanna do is, would the national office staff please stand one more time? If I say "I" along the way, I apologize: I mean "we," by extension, them, 'cause thank you guys for your service and your friendship over the years.

I love history. It's a passion of mine. And... when I was first hired with USMS, one of the first people I went to see was John Spannuth. Does anybody here know who John Spannuth is? Because another question I'm gonna ask is, who was at the very first meet in 1970 in Amarillo, Texas? We have one: Ted Haartz. (applause). So, for those of you that don't know, John Spannuth was the President (volunteer position) of ASCA in 1967 and '68, and he sent out a survey to around 2000 coaches across the country, and he asked them, "What can we do to grow ASCA? What can we do to make a bigger impact?" And in comes this report, suggestion if you will, from a guy out in San Diego named Dr. Ransom Arthur. And Ransom was a Navy medical doctor who had been suggesting that more adults, more Americans need exercise. Well, this was really a pioneering concept in the 1960s, and if you know anything about John, he's a real visionary, and the two of them got together, and said "this is a great idea. Why doesn't ASCA sponsor a committee of swimming for, at that time, adults of older ages?" And so 1968, '69 ASCA sponsored it. Then in 1970 we became a committee of the AAU, and then just like USA Swimming and just like track and field and other sports and then in 1978 when, basically the US Olympic Committee was created, USOC and all the NGBs went out on their own, Ted was one of the pioneers that led us through the incorporation of USMS. I didn't know any of this history before I was hired, but I think history is important for us as context to know where we came from and where we ultimately wanna go, and what were our founding principles that we had so many years ago. So, a little more history... In 2007, um, my mom passed away from cancer, and I had committed to taking a break in 2008. I wasn't gonna work. I was gonna deal with family

affairs. I was gonna be reflective. I was gonna try and take some time to figure out what I wanted to do next in my life.... and, along the way, in the Spring of 2008, Rowdy Gaines calls me. Rowdy and I had been friends for a lotta years, and Chuck Wielgus at USA Swimming called me, and they both said, USMS is looking for an executive director, and we know you're going through a tough time right now, but... we think they should talk to you, and we think that you might be a good candidate to visit with, and so, we'd like to go ahead and recommend you... and both those gentlemen were kind enough to do so. Um, I went into an interview process. Ted was in the room. Nadine was in the room. Jeff Moxie was in the room. Jim Miller was in the room, and a gal named Raena Latina from the Indiana LMSC who's not here was in the room. And I remember walking in and thinking "oh my God, what am I doing here?" Nadine's yelling I'm actually younger than Nadine... and I think I was the youngest guy in the room. And I thought "oh... I'm the token box that they're gonna check... We're interviewing someone under the age of 40. Yeah, cool! We did our job!" Um, but I went into it, and I had my sleeves rolled up, and... I shared some stories about what swimming has meant to me, and how it has impacted my life. And, if I can get personal even more so for a few seconds, I didn't start swimming until I was 15. I didn't grow up an age group swimmer. I was a soccer player. But, like many of you, I had a tough home life. I had a stepdad who was an alcoholic. He was abusive, emotionally, physically, and so forth. And... he was abusive to our entire family. And, the idea of following him in that pattern of behavior didn't appeal to me. But sports appealed to me. And, there was an announcement over our high school loud system which said "Hey, the swim team's looking for swimmers." So I had a younger half sister who was a swimmer, about 8 years younger than me. Some of you know her. She's in the Michigan LMSC. And I used to follow her to swim meets when I'd visit my biological dad in Indiana, and I used to think, "Dad, this is boring." (laughter from the crowd) I mean, we went to an age group swim meet for a 7, 8 year old, you know, who would swim a grand total of 30 seconds and we sit there for, and I'm a teenager already. I mean, imagine how boring that is. But what stuck with me... was the friendships that my sister had... and the way she connected with her coaches. And so, that memory was imparted on me when I was in high school, and when I heard this announcement I thought "Hey, I don't know anything about swimming but I thought this might be kinda cool so that I could go hang out with other kids." I joined the swim team, and it was a life-changing experience from that moment on. As I say, um, swimming saved my life.... in a very real sense, it did. It gave me a place where I could go, where I could feel safe, where I could feel accepted. Um, I walked down with these big old baggy shorts in Florida, and, my coach didn't laugh at me. He said, "Show me what you can do with your ankles and your feet," and so I turned 'em out like this and he goes "you're our breaststroker." (laughter) True story!

So, I was not a great swimmer through high school and college. I was just trying to survive. I was trying to go for a, find a place where... I could feel safe... and, it was there, and then, in somewhere in my senior year in high school, they gave me a little bit of encouragement and said "I think you can maybe swim in college," and I thought "Oh,

I'm in, let's do this." I was just having fun with it. So, a small school in Georgia gave me a chance. I swam there for four years... um... It allowed me to earn my degree... allowed me to get my masters degree... and I thought at the end in 1995 I was done. I said, "that's it. It's the end of swimming. Pretty cool. This was fun, a great experience. Time to go get a real job." And so I was pursuing a career as, what I thought was gonna be an athletic director, and that's when I met Rowdy for the first time in '95 at Auburn, and David Marsh who had become incredibly dear friends and mentors to me along the way. And so they encouraged me to actually swim, get this: Masters. And, Connor Bearly who's uh one of the very first masters swimmers I ever met at Auburn University. Many of you know him from your LMSC, um, was an encourager to me when I was at Auburn, and said "why don't you try a Masters meet?" And so, that started this ball rolling of swimming with Masters and ultimately qualifying for the Olympic Trials as a Masters Swimmer. Even then, when I was done in 2000 and I went off to work in the corporate world, I would swim Masters sorta recreationally and for fun. I.. I didn't know that this existed. I didn't know that you existed. I didn't know what an LMSC was. I didn't know what your committees were. No idea how many events, no idea on the history. All I knew locally was the Masters program as I was moving around the country, and I just wanted an opportunity to continue swimming. And so, with those memories in the back of my mind, and Rowdy and Chuck encouraging me to apply, I did, and I walked in, sleeves rolled up, and... I just made my best case forward to the search committee at that time, and tried to... articulate, I think, a vision. And so, as we look back from when I was hired in 2008 and began to assemble this great group of people. Listen, I'm just a steward for these folks. These are the guys, and gals, that do the work every single day. And because they do their jobs, they allow me to go out and do my job. And, there are some programs and services that I am incredibly proud of that we have been able to create that, if I can leave a lasting message, is creating a more inclusive USMS. The rebrand, that was easy. I say easy, but, to get to a vision from where we were to where we wanted to be able to invite at that time, triathletes, learn to swim people, and so forth fitness swimmers... I think we accomplished that. Our masters coach certification program... again I love history, 1999 at Convention we saw the minutes where this group and this body had said "we want to invest in our coaches" and you guys had done it along the way and I think you'd taken it, admirably, as far as you could as volunteers, but you realized if we were gonna take it further and create a sustainable program for coach education, we had to invest in professional people who could carry it and we could hold accountable for delivering it, and I think we've been able to do it. Just this weekend we hosted a Level I, Level II, Level III, and an Adult Learn to Swim Certification here in Kansas City yesterday. And we're continuing to do that. That was just an idea five years ago. We thought we wanted to do it and see how far it's come. So many of you have taken the Coach Certification Program, and the instructor programs, and why is that important? There's a philosophy that I have that I think makes a lot of sense, it's called a golden triangle, and our coach taught us this, my age group coach did. It looks like this, and at the top of the pyramid is your clubs and your venues. Over here is USMS and LMSCs. That's us. And then over here is the third partner in our equation and that is our events. And so, in the center is USMS, and

collectively, we are all trying to work together in order to try and create a better opportunity for more adults to swim. I hope you feel it through the content we're producing with SWIMMER Magazine and our .org website. For those of you that got the button when we came in, I hope you're experiencing it through the Swimming Saves Lives Foundation. We're giving away 48 grants this weekend. Forty-eight. Forty-eight grants to programs that are providing opportunities for adults to learn how to swim. We are creating a more inclusive USMS, and by giving away these grants, supporting programs that are teaching adults to learn how to swim, we're being responsible. We stand up and we say "we want you to come swim. we want you to experience all that we, We want you to experience the, the how we feel. We want you to experience the relationships we have. We want you to experience the, how, how great it is after you've had a swim practice and you can go eat anything you want." But if we're gonna do that, don't we have a responsibility, a responsibility to provide an opportunity for those who don't know how to swim to learn how to swim? That's what Swimming Saves Lives and our Adult Learn to Swim is about. It's authentic to USMS. It's real! It's actions backing up our words. And so, the next executive director's gonna come in, whoever it might be, is gonna work with these great people, and work with our Board of Directors, and work with you in order to continue to carry forward a theme of inclusiveness.

Now, it's y'all's responsibility to help us create the tools and create the policies, so that we can capture more adults and we can carry this family with us. If, I'm gonna hit a rail on this one, but I'm gonna go for it anyways... I'd love to come back, in 5 years from now... and I would love to see a consistent LMSC fee. I'm gonna hit a rail, I know I am... and it's not a slight on any LMSCs, it's not. It's not to tell you what you're doing is not great work. It's not to take away money from your bank accounts. What it's intended to do, is to create a consistent platform across the board so that we can begin to create more membership products and services, and ultimately capture more members into our family. We're investing right now in programs for college club swimming. We're doing a research and development project to see if there's a membership product that would, that we could create that would appeal to that generation. We're out next in 2016 doing a heavy R&D project with about 2 million, 2 million, recreational, fitness swimmers, who are not members of USMS, and we're asking them "what can we do? what can we offer to you as USMS to create a better swimming experience? But help us, guys. Help us with that. The across the board LMSC fees, if you add it all up it's probably 200 or so deviations. And... we can do it. It just creates a limiting factor on our ability to create more membership products and services... leading to that theme of inclusiveness. It's, um, it's one of the reasons a few years ago that... I was in support of the 25s... not because I wanted 25s and I thought they'd be really cool, but it's because I thought for the new swimmers that were coming into the sport who are intimidated by flip turns and have never done a meet before, that, boy this could be really cool! I'm gonna sign up for a 25 and I'm gonna do my first meet in the summertime and I'm gonna go ahead and get some, I'm gonna go ahead and get some confidence, and maybe I can go ahead and then migrate to another meet and use it as a stepping stone to another meet. It was also a tool for event directors. Pools are expensive. They are

very expensive. I'm seeing a lot of nodding heads on that. And it was designed to be a tool for event directors that can't afford two days of pool space, either by cost, or other scheduling issues. So the 25s were designed to create, to create a tool for an event director if you wanna offer a 1 day meet or half day meet you can and here's a tool to be able to do it. It all goes back to the inclusiveness theme.

I, um, it has been an incredible privilege to stand here... and, to lead, and be part of this national office staff and be part of our volunteers. Um, I'm, I'm flattered, I'm humbled by so many comments that people come up to me and to hear people say, "wow, you got really big shoes. They'll be hard to fill." Guys, I wear a size 15, no kidding. (laughter) But your next executive director is in great hands, and I've always believed... that the sign of hallmark leadership is when your leader... the business is not dependent exclusively on your leader. Love House of Cards but this is not a house of cards. It's a really good business. Eight years ago, it was a tough job to walk into... took a lot of fortitude... took a lot of passion. I remember my very first convention in 2008. Someone in the finance committee asked me "What're you gonna do, what're we gonna do when you quit in 3 months?" Those of you in the room who will remember that. And so... here I am and for me to move forward into the next chapter of my life... I'm privileged and blessed that I'm gonna get to continue to stay in swimming.... and, I'm gonna continue to be able to make an impact in swimming for the greater good... and, I'm gonna continue to stay a masters member, and continue to be an ambassador for this organization, for all the great work, and more importantly the great people that we have in here. And so... As this chapter for me is closing and a new one is opening, I said it 8 years ago. USMS needed me, and I needed you.... And, for that, I am deeply, deeply appreciative. So let's have a wonderful convention. Let's do a lot of hugs. I can't wait to watch the skit on Saturday night, Meg. And let's celebrate both Nadine's term as our leader here, and let's welcome in our new leadership. Thank you very much. (applause)