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Just Add Water

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Just Add

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Blending aquatic sports with theatre, IWU's Terrapin Club made a big splash on campus for more than four decades.

Story by Nancy Steele Brokaw '71



Kip, Catalina, Periscope, Marlin, Spiral, Submarine.

What do you think these terms describe?

- a. Sandwiches at a chain restaurant
- b. Martha Stewart paint colors
- c. The latest batch of names given to the children of Hollywood stars
- d. Synchronized-swimming moves.

If you guessed the correct answer, “d,” you might just be among the hundreds of IWU alumni who took part in an extracurricular activity that went by several titles but for most of its history was known as the Terrapin Club.

The Terrapins (above) combined athleticism in the water with creative, stylized dance, as in this 1978 performance.

Each year, dozens of women (and a few male performers, too) endured months of practice and rehearsal aimed toward mounting a big water show in the spring, considered a “must-see” event on campus.

Named after a kind of turtle, the Terrapins thrived at the University for decades, from the late 1930s to the early

Marian Niehaus founded the University's first synchronized-swimming program not long after she was appointed director of women's physical education at Illinois Wesleyan in 1936. As the club's sole director for

more than a decade, Niehaus established the basic format for Terrapin shows. Groups of swimmers performed a dozen or more numbers, each set to music and featuring a single theme or storyline.

Some themes were ambitious, such as 1962's *The First Act*, portraying episodes of the biblical Creation story. Others were strictly for fun, like the 1939 show *Wesleyan Beach Hotel*. Costumes (often color-coordinated swimsuits with sequins), poolside sets, music, and lighting added to the dramatic effect.

Ruth Holbert Steele '41, an early member of the club, remembers, "It was a big deal. We really worked at it and it was fun to put on a show."

Like many of the Terrapins, Steele was a swimmer before she got to Illinois Wesleyan. She'd spent her younger years as a lifeguard. Still, Steele remembers the qualifying swim test was difficult. "They sent a person down from Chicago to test us," she says, "and I thought I was going to drown, I really did."

Steele, a speech major, participated in many IWU theatre productions and she remembers the Terrapin shows as being "on a par almost with the plays I did."

The dramatic element of the productions was a big part of the attraction for June E. Schultz '44, who participated in Terrapins all four of her years at IWU. A program in the University archives lists Schultz in the "Pale Moon" number of the 1941 *Hiawatha* pageant, which also featured such pieces as "From the Land of Sky Blue Water" and "By the Waters of Minnetonka."

An instruction sheet from the same era (one can imagine it taped to the locker-room wall) exhorts the Terrapins to "SMILE," an injunction repeated 12 consecutive times, as well as the following:

- Keep legs straight
- Keep toes pointed and knees together
- Remember that there is an audience out there
- Try not to spit or spout water (!) or breathe too heavily, even if you are collapsing

- Be composed at all times as if the spot were on you



Terrapin swimmers rehearse their trademark "floating-pattern finale" for the April 1950 show *Fraternity Sweethearts*.

Issues of the student newspaper, *The Argus*, from the late 1940s and early '50s indicate that photographing and reporting about the IWU Terrapins was a valued assignment. The swimmers are referred to in the captions as "charming bits of Wesleyan pulchritude" and "gorgeous tidbits." One caption goes on to say, "You can get tickets from (*Argus*) Sportswriter Warren Fraser, if the authorities will let you see him. Both he and the photographer are still in a state of nervous collapse."

Such depictions of the Terrapins as glamorous bathing beauties neglected to mention the activity's physical demands. Nancy Hoose Froelich '52 remembers the precision of the swim moves and how difficult it was to hear the music underwater. "We'd have our feet on the neck of the person in front of us, doing wheels in the water," Froelich recalls. "We'd do big somersaults, all together, and make designs in the water, very much like

the June Taylor dancers — that’s what it was like. Sometimes, we’d dive in together, or in succession, one, two, three, four, all in time with the music.”

Some Terrapins conquered formidable barriers to participate. Froelich’s teammate Shirley Henderson Clemens ’52 recalls, “I grew up on a farm, with no chance of ever learning to swim. We had a little creek close by. I could dog paddle but that that was it, so I didn’t even know that I didn’t know how to swim but I took a swim class [at IWU] and made the team.”

Clemens stuck with the club despite the hardships. “I had sinus problems and all those moves, the back somersaults and things, gave me sinus trouble. I wasn’t very good; maybe someone who was better wouldn’t have had the trouble, but I had headaches all the time — but I still did it,” Clemens says. “It was so much fun.”

While practices could be grueling, they had their share of lighter moments. Clemens remembers one practice in particular. “One night,” she says, “we were practicing late and one of the basketball players expected the pool to be empty. He rushed into the pool wearing absolutely nothing,” as was the vogue in men’s recreational swimming at the time.

“He practically stepped on my face, poor guy,” Clemens continues. “He was so embarrassed; he was shy, anyway. And he ended up sitting next to me in an English class. I felt so sorry for him.”

Clemens, Froelich, and Steele all share a common memory. Walking out into the chilly, winter air after practice, their damp hair froze solid by the time they arrived back home. “I heard I’d catch my death of cold,” Steele remembers, “but I don’t think it ever bothered me a bit.”



An ensemble (left) interpreted “March of the Siamese Children” for the 1978 revue, *A Splash of Broadway*.

At least the frozen hair was predictable — other aspects of performing as a Terrapin were not. Schultz, who appeared as a guest artist in several productions after graduation, recounts a memorable glitch that happened during a number called “Tico, Tico.” She and her partner glided gracefully into the pool but suddenly noticed a problem with the music — which, in those days, consisted of a 78 rpm record and phonograph, operated by Leon Vandeventer, who worked for the University as a piano tuner.

“For some reason, the phonograph speeded up double,” Schultz recalls, “and Vandy couldn’t fix it. So we started doing everything in double time, frantically shouting ‘ballet leg’ and ‘dolphin’ and the like into each others’ swim caps, between gulps of air.”

During the 1950s, Schultz became adviser to the club. In a recent interview at her Bloomington home, she confirmed that it was not easy to become a Terrapin. Requirements included diving, front and back crawl strokes, side stroke on the right and left sides, breast stroke, back dolphin kick, surface diving, sculling and swimming to music, and the ability to swim underwater as well as pass an endurance test.

Those who didn’t make the team could work poolside in script, properties, scenery, lights, and special effects.

During Schultz's tenure, a split occurred in the field of synchronized swimming. One branch emphasized technique and precision. The other allowed swimmers more freedom of movement and interpretation, a blend known as "aquatic art."

"What you see on the Olympics now is a sport," Schultz explains. "What we did was art."

"My dad [Professor W. E. Schultz, who taught English at IWU from 1934 to 1964] and I were always creative," Schultz says.

And it's clear that she loved taking her creative bent to the water.

"I remember one time [Speech Professor] Marie Robinson did the narration for a piece that quoted an Edna St. Vincent Millay poem, 'How can I bear it; buried here,/While overhead the sky grows clear.' We had a person dying in the water while she read the poem," Schultz recalls. "It just tore your heart out."

For Illinois Wesleyan President Robert Eckley's inauguration in 1968, Schultz remembers the Terrapins presented "a giant floating pattern, with everyone hooked up, foot-to-head, in geometric precision, to a playing of 'Pomp and Circumstance.'"

The 20-foot by 60-foot pool at Memorial Gymnasium (located in what is now Tommy's Grille in the basement of the Hansen Center) was standard size for the day but shallower than most pools. "It was seven feet deep instead of 12," Schultz recalls, "so when we did backward somersaults, we had to cheat a bit on the perfect circle so as not to hit our heads.

"Plus, it was hot as Hades in there," Schultz says, "and we'd hang onto the windows for air."

Still, Schultz affectionately remembers the old pool, which students had nicknamed Memorial Swamp. "I always said our pool was like the difference between a big opera house and an intimate, little theatre," she says. "Our lights came from above and went straight down and we could put gels on the lights and really color the water. It was gorgeous."

For a collection of memories compiled about Memorial Gymnasium prior to the Hansen Center opening, Barbara Krusinski Zukowski '73 wrote about a solo performance she gave for the Terrapins. "One of my friends choreographed a gymnastic sequence for me — on the railings that separated the audience. Can you imagine being allowed to do something like that in today's liability-conscious climate? Not likely!"



Terrapins (above) transformed the Memorial Gym pool into an old swimming hole for their 1955 show.

In its later years, participating in the Terrapin Club had even become a family legacy for some students. Laura Rust Dirks '81 joined the club, in part, because her mother, Peggy Minch Rust Johnson '50, had been a Terrapin. "I grew up hearing stories of Terrapin swimming," Dirks says, "and I felt like I was carrying on an IWU tradition. That was important to me."

No one knows exactly why the Terrapin Club was terminated in the 1980s. Perhaps it simply couldn't compete among the variety of sports options offered to women by that time. But it's also clear that this artistic style of swimming had fallen out of favor among college-aged students.

Left behind are the many photos and memorabilia collected in scrapbooks donated by alumni to the University Archives, as well as a few precious home-movies showing the graceful Terrapins in action. "It was beautiful swimming, just beautiful figures," Schultz says, smiling proudly with the recollection. "Nothing you can see is like it."