

At one time,  
OU had a  
very competitive  
swimming  
program, thanks in  
large part to a  
Graham Johnston-  
led gang  
of transplanted  
South Africans.

By JAY C. UPCHURCH



Photo provided

# Still in the Swim of things

Still a world record-holding competitive swimmer at 74, Graham Johnston emerges from the water after winning one of eight straight (1993-2000) at the Waikiki Rough Water Swim.



OU Athletics Maria Palatras

Three-time All-American in the mid-'50s, Graham Johnston cuts through the water on his way to school and national records.

In the early 1950s, an era when American colleges and universities were populated overwhelmingly by homegrown students, Norman, Oklahoma, seemed an unlikely place for exotic transplants. But that perception quickly changed when South African swimmer Graham Johnston arrived in August 1952, followed over the next six months by six of his countrymen. Soon everyone associated with collegiate swimming became familiar with the University of Oklahoma's dynamic South African connection.

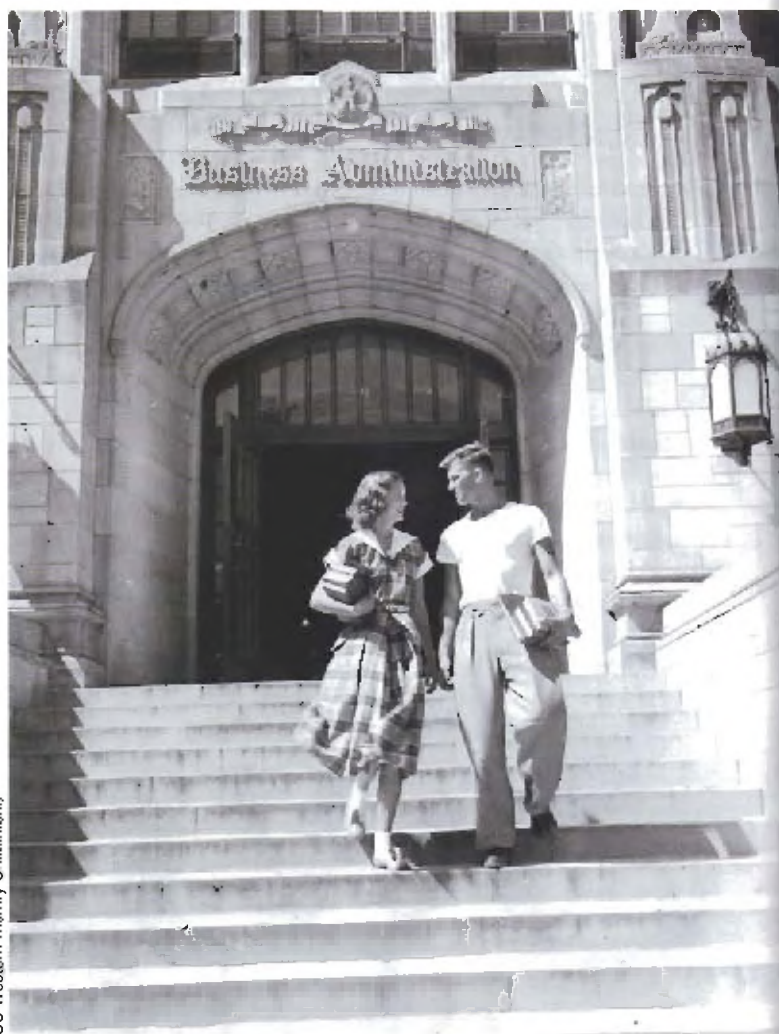
Almost overnight, OU was in the vanguard of Southwest schools integrating foreign student-athletes into their programs. The willingness of University President George Lynn Cross and Athletics Director Bud Wilkinson to internationalize the OU campus was revolutionary thinking at the time.

A half-century later—20 years after the University discontinued its intercollegiate swimming program—Johnston still has in his possession the letter from OU's swim coach, Joe Glander, promising an athletic scholarship that included room and board, books, tuition and \$15 a month. That letter resulted from several conversations between Glander and a young South African chap named Neville Price, a champion broad jumper who had joined Coach John Jacobs' Sooner track and field squad after meeting Jacobs' son at a 1951 competition.

Price and Johnston had become fast friends at the 1950 (British Empire) Commonwealth Games in Auckland, New Zealand, and the two continued to correspond after Price wound up in the United States via a track scholarship to OU.

"Bud Wilkinson and Joe Glander were like surrogate fathers to me, even though Joe left OU the year after I arrived," says Johnston. "I didn't see or talk to my parents for almost five years, so I looked up to those men quite a bit. I can't say enough about the way Bud Wilkinson treated me."

"We never lost a conference meet during my time at OU. We won the Big Seven title every year I was there, and that says a lot about the quality of talent we had at the time."



OU Western History Collections

South African Graham Johnston met his future wife of 49 years, Janis Thompson, at OU while pursuing his 1956 business degree. The Houston couple has five children and eight grandchildren.



Norman Peury Pils

Johnston (left), shown here with OU football legend Buddy Leake, accompanied wife Janis to her 50-year OU class reunion in May 2005 and also reconnected with some South African teammates.

While Johnston was largely responsible for the influx of South African swimmers, he credits Price with providing the initial bridge to OU.

“Neville was really the one who helped open the door for myself and a lot of other South African athletes, including the great group of guys who ended up at Oklahoma,” says Johnston, mentally dusting off a few memories that have been stored away for over 50 years. “If he hadn’t gotten to know Jake Jacobs’ son, none of us would probably have ever set foot in Oklahoma.”

Actually, Johnston did not have to dig too deep to recall the period he describes as “the turning point in my life.” In May 2005, he returned to Norman with Janis, his wife of 49 years, for her 50-year graduation celebration. On that visit, the 74-year-old native of Bloemfontein, South Africa, reconnected with fellow countrymen and former OU teammates Lin Meiring, Peter Duncan and Mel van Helsdingen.

“We told stories and laughed straight through for two solid hours,” says Johnston. “It was so wonderful to see my old friends and reminisce about the good old days.”

“Good” does not properly define the success OU’s swim team enjoyed during the decade of the ’50s. The Sooners won the Big Seven Conference swimming title five of six years from 1952 to

1957, thanks in part to the talented South African contingent.

“We never lost a conference meet during my time at OU. We won the Big Seven title every year I was there, and that says a lot about the quality of talent we had at the time,” recalls Johnston, who specialized in the free style 220-, 440- and 1,650-yard events.

Johnston earned All-America honors three times during his collegiate career and established several school records, as well as a handful of national swimming marks prior to his departure. From 1952-56, the quick-finned, blond Sooner was among the world’s most dominant amateur swimmers.

The lone blemish on his résumé occurred during the 1954 Big Seven Championships, as the Sooners were seemingly en route to another conference swimming crown. News that Johnston had mistakenly enrolled in only 11 hours of class credits for that particular semester came to light, thus making him a part-time student and ineligible to compete in varsity sports events.

As a result, the Sooners were stripped of the title, and two national records Johnston set during the meet were disallowed.

“That’s certainly not something I’m proud of. Neglect on my part—not knowing you needed to carry 12 hours to compete—cost the team something special,” says Johnston. “That would be the only thing I would change about my time at OU.”

It was a rare miscalculation on Johnston’s part, according to Meiring, who says his longtime friend’s hard work and attention to detail were always second to none.

“Graham has always been a fierce competitor. Early on, he dedicated himself to be as good as he could be, and the truth is, he’s an amazing swimmer,” offers Meiring, 71, a retired ear, nose and throat surgeon in Oklahoma City.

Another former teammate, Bob Leonardt, offers a similar opinion.

“It was interesting to see how Graham kind of opened the door for the rest of the South African swimmers, but the thing I remember most about him was his dedication as an athlete. His convictions ran very deep,” Leonardt notes.

So focused was Johnston that he twice transformed himself into an Olympian, competing for South Africa at the 1952 Helsinki Games. Four years later, he again qualified for the South African team but chose not to compete in Melbourne because the dates—November 22 through December 8, 1956—conflicted with his final semester at OU. Instead, Johnston completed his schoolwork and graduated with a business degree.

He married college sweetheart Janis Thompson that same December.

“Everything was going great in my life. I was graduating, I was married to a great gal, and we had our entire lives ahead of us,” says Johnston.

The Johnstons moved to South Africa in 1957 when Graham accepted employment in the mining business. It did not take long, however, for him to become disenchanted with his new job, and he began to look for opportunities back in the United States.

“It wasn’t a great situation. South Africa was going through



The 1954 Sooner Swimming Team included members who dominated the Big Seven in the mid-'50s, seven of them from South Africa (in italics). Front row, from left: Jim McKinney, John Green, David Baugh, *Peter Duncan*, *Graham Johnston*, Tom Gilbert, Dick Storts and *Julian Dyason*; top row, Coach Frank Withrow, *Ernst DeJong*, Ham Winston, *Melvyn van Helsdingen*, Curt Hackworth, Captain Earl Hallum, *Gerry DeJong*, *Lin Meiring*, Roger Coppock, Jack Hudack and Student Manager Lyle Dillman.

a considerable amount of turmoil. We really didn't want to start a family and not know what was going to happen next, so we moved to Chicago in 1958," explains Johnston, who used every penny the family had to get back to America.

"We were in Chicago for a while when I got a job offer with a construction company in Oklahoma City. I took the job, but before we could move, a better offer came in from a similar company in Houston. We went to Houston, and it turned out to be a great decision."

Johnston's passion for the pool continued over the next 15 years, but he basically was retired from competitive swimming during that period. In 1973 at the age of 41, he rediscovered the sport and dived back in headfirst. Since then, Johnston has traveled the world competing in both open-water swim events and regular meets. He has set dozens of world records in various age divisions and is showing no signs of slowing down.

In July, Johnston surged to five gold medals and three silvers at the 2005 World Masters in Canada. One of his greatest aspirations is to become the oldest person to swim the English Channel, a feat he will attempt next year when he turns 75.

"We are all in absolute awe of Graham's drive to swim after all of these years. In all honesty, he has become world renowned for his performances," says Meiring, also a member of South Africa's '52 and '56 Olympic teams. "Graham is a really nice, uncomplicated man with a constitution of iron. That has carried


him through and helped make him an amazing swimmer."

At last count, 15 of Johnston's world records still stand. When asked the secret to his success, he quickly points to his healthy lifestyle and the unending support he has received from his wife.

"It's been an absolutely fantastic journey, from my time at OU through the last 50 or so years. I have an incredible wife and five wonderful children, and I've had the chance to pursue something I truly enjoy in life," says Johnston, whose accomplishments were validated in 1998 when he was inducted into the International Swimming Hall of Fame in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida.

He continues to work out in the pool for several hours almost every day and has set a rigorous schedule for himself over the next year.

"Probably no one alive has swum farther than I have. That's pretty amazing to think about," laughs Johnston, who is retired from the construction business, but still coaches swimming in his spare time.

"But that doesn't mean there aren't still a lot of oceans to swim and records to break." 

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