Charles Batterman, 87; coach at MIT was former top diver

By Marvin Pave, Globe Correspondent | May 27, 2010

Charles J. Batterman, head coach of men's swimming and diving at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology from 1956 to '75 and the national intercollegiate and AAU diving champion in 1944 while a graduate student at Columbia University, was a mentor and inspiration to his colleagues and student athletes.

"Charlie was the consummate teacher," said John Benedick, assistant athletic director at MIT, who succeeded Mr. Batterman as head coach. "When we traveled to swim meets we often shared a room and I remember listening to him answer my questions about diving or swimming into the wee hours of the night. I was very lucky to share that time with him."

Mr. Batterman, a member of the national champion Ohio State University swimming team in 1942 and '43 and the author of “The Techniques of Springboard Diving,” the first book to apply physics principles to the analysis of dives, died March 31 at Monadnock Community Hospital in Peterborough, N.H., of kidney failure. He was 87.

"Charlie has always been a mentor to me, even though he was not aware of it. I have had his book as long as I can remember," said Cindy Potter, bronze medalist in the women's diving competition in the 1976 Olympics and a member of the International Swimming Hall of Fame. "His passing is a loss to divers, coaches, fans, and anyone who has ever wondered how divers do what they do."

A 1939 graduate of Thomas Jefferson High School in his native Brooklyn, N.Y., and of Ohio State in 1943 with a bachelor of science degree, Mr. Batterman also coached soccer, lacrosse, and water polo at MIT, where he was an associate professor of physical education.

A Belmont resident during his coaching years, Mr. Batterman, after serving as diving coach under Benedick from 1975 to '78, retired and moved to Hancock, N.H., where he lived in an octagonal home he designed. He resided there most of the remainder of his life.

"He was just a natural at diving," said Mr. Batterman's daughter, Nora Campbell of Cambridge, "but Dad was also a very accomplished potter who loved classical music, and both he and my mom [the late Ruth Lester Fink] loved to entertain friends and sing for them. They made a new life for themselves in Hancock. My parents had more fun together than any couple I've ever known.

"They loved gardening and my mom was a great cook. After she suffered a stroke, and even though he was unwell, he found the strength and will to take care of her because she had taken care of him for 60 years. He didn't want her to go into a nursing home."

Mr. Batterman met his wife when both were teenage counselors at a summer camp. She died in 2004. Their daughter Amy (Beissel) died in 2002 in a pedestrian accident in New York City.

Mr. Batterman, an honorary member of the US Olympic Team in 1944 (the Olympics were not held because of World War II), was also a well-known synchronized diver who paired with champion diver Anne Ross Fairbanks in the 1940s at the St. George Hotel’s Dragon Club in Brooklyn, which had a saltwater pool. They performed in water shows nationwide.

“One day they decided to dive in synch from the same 3-meter board, and the results were a riot,” recalled Fairbanks's daughter, Mary. “Mom was to do a reverse dive with a half twist. Charlie was to execute a standard half twist. What they forgot to plan for was which direction each would twist, the result being that they ended up arms wide to their sides, face-to-face, eye-to-eye, nose-to-nose, both with their mouths open.

"Mom said they both nearly drowned because they were laughing so hard that they had no air left by the time they hit the surface. I doubt either of them forgot that first attempt."

Because he had worked several jobs and had coached high school basketball, Mr. Batterman was denied a chance to compete on the 1948 US Olympic team on the grounds that he was a professional athlete.
In 1949 he was hired at Harvard University as an assistant swim coach. His love of coaching carried into the 1990s, when he volunteered at Keene State College in New Hampshire.

Lisa Horwitz, now a resident of South Berwick, Maine, grew up in Belmont and was taught to swim at age 9 by Mr. Batterman, who worked many summers at the pool at Belmont Country Club and knew her family.

“Polio had weakened my right leg and Charlie gave me swimming lessons at the Harvard pool on weekends. He gave me a feeling of confidence, and I had such respect for him because that was a special gift, given with a lot of grace,” she said.

Ron Keenhold, longtime Dartmouth College swimming coach, got his start in 1958 at MIT as Mr. Batterman's diving and freshman coach.

“He was fascinated with the mechanics of swimming, just as he was with diving. We spent many hours sitting in his office, discussing these mechanics and Newton's Laws. He had his own pottery shop in the basement of his home and was very creative with his hands, producing beautiful pottery pieces. He invited me to that shop and I still use the bowl that I made with Charlie’s tutelage,” Keenhold said.

“My last visit with him was in October of 2007 at his assisted living residence in Peterborough. He was in a singing group with the residents, and I sensed that he was very popular among the staff and also the other residents. I was so fortunate to have the opportunity to know and work with Charlie. He gave me the chance to start a collegiate coaching career which lasted 41 years.”

Bob Clotworthy, who won gold medals in diving at the 1960 and '64 Olympics for the United States, wrote the foreword to “The Techniques of Springboard Diving,” published in 1968 and illustrated with stroboscopic photographs taken by MIT professor Harold Edgerton, and with Mr. Batterman's own pen-and-ink drawings.

“Charlie’s help over the years made a terrific contribution to my Olympic success,” said Clotworthy, who also told one of his favorite Batterman stories.

“In the middle 1950s it was decided to give half points below five, and at a national championship, some diver did a terrible dive and Charlie awarded him one-half point, followed by gales of laughter by all,” Clotworthy said. “It was the first time in history that such a score had been awarded. Charlie was almost rolling on the deck, he found it so amusing. We all did.”

Mr. Batterman is remembered today through MIT's Charles Batterman Relays and by awards given in his name to MIT's outstanding performer at the New England Athletic Conference championships, and to the Coaches of the Year at the New England Division 2 and 3 college championships.

In addition to his daughter, Mr. Batterman leaves a son, Henry, of Florence; five grandchildren and six great-grandchildren. A memorial service will be announced at a later date.