

SWIMMER Magazine  
Mar-Apr 2024



## The Gladiator

Palm Beach Masters' Cheryl Ann Silich returned to swimming after 40 years away that included a star turn on "American Gladiators"



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Photography by: Jim Rassol

The Freshman Wonder climbed out of the pool 40 years ago, but she's back on the blocks now, after open heart surgery, with the need to stretch her heart muscle and learn to breathe again.

Silich often asks people, "How do you become a winner? What's your definition?" Silich's definition of winning isn't about a time on the scoreboard or points scored. It's about experiencing meaning and purpose every single day. After four decades out of the water, for Silich, just getting back in is a triumph.

And so she jumps back into the pool. Her first thought: There's no place like home.

**Before we get** to the heart surgery, "American Gladiators," and "The Wizard of Oz," let us introduce you to a little girl from Hobart, Indiana. Middle child, working class. Dad was an ironmaker, mom was a homemaker.

Her dream was gymnastics, which she first discovered after she found her dad standing on his head just because. She would walk on her hands throughout the house and dream of buying a unicycle because then she could cycle her way straight to the circus.

But the circus didn't come to Hobart. There was, however, a pool, and swimming was cheap enough and didn't require equipment or expensive coaching. That's where she shined.

When she got to high school, it was only the second year her school had a team. Silich, now 60, was an instant sensation. The Freshman Wonder, the papers called her. A breaststroke phenom. Eventually, she says, she had an opportunity to swim at West Point.

But you can't be what you can't see, as civil rights activist Marian Wright Edelman says, and Silich couldn't see it. She'd always been a loner, fiercely independent, head-down in one thing or another. The idea of following an expected trajectory or someone else's ideas about who she should be was as far away as the flight to New York. Much to her parents' horror, she declined and moved on.

Valparaiso University was nearby and there she was a top recruit. But she didn't see a future in swimming, not when she was overwhelmed by school and had zero role models for college. She saw a chance for an education and a better future. She chose to focus on her brain over her body and left the team.

After graduation, she ran a gymnastics and dance school. She threw herself into her work, succeeding with effort and discipline. She was 24 and also the executive director of the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation in Indiana. She was young, putting on big fundraisers, and punching above her weight.

But she was still an athlete at heart, and she was looking for her next challenge when she learned of auditions for "American Gladiators."

**The line in 1989** stretched 20,000 deep, bitter cold in the Chicago wind, and it took 3½ hours just to get to a stairwell. The show knocked out most of the field, asking the guys to do 25 pull-ups in 30 seconds and the women to do seven. These were gladiators after all, and they needed to be strong.

Most of the people present couldn't do it. Silich did 12 with time still on the clock. The girl from Hobart woke up in Hollywood, perm bigger than her biceps, but the shine was back on her.

For a time, “American Gladiators” was one of the most popular TV shows. The idea was to pit amateur athletes against each other and against larger-than-life stars who went by Nitro, Titan, and Zap. It was a proto-reality show. Silich lost in the semifinals of the first season but won a special alumni show in season two 42-10. “I came back to win,” she said on the show following her win. “I felt it when I got off the plane to get here. I felt it all along. I felt like winning. I really wanted to win this time.”

Silich was a champion, a gladiator.

Gladiators keep going, so that’s what she did. She created an educational show called “The Body Perfect by Cheryl.” She became a personal trainer at a gym she owned in Indiana.

But she felt something was still missing. The Freshman Wonder, the girl who earned varsity letters in swimming and track and was part of the school’s first weight-training program for girls, had not reached the end of the yellow brick road.



*Image: Jim Rassol*

**Before we dive** back into the pool, we must take a small detour to Oz by way of Hobart.

Silich’s mom was always in the kitchen, always had her back to her, always chopping, cooking, and doing everything for everyone else but herself. Silich’s mom was an orphan adopted by parents who came through Ellis Island and found their way to Gary, Indiana. Silich always felt

a sadness about her mom. But her mom would say if you always smile, you will always be young, always be beautiful.

“The Wizard of Oz” came on once a year in Hobart, the day after Thanksgiving. Her mom smiled when Dorothy clicked her heels and so Silich smiled and the day after Thanksgiving became their day. It was the most special day of the year. They sat together on the love seat, the best seat in the house. For 112 minutes, it was just the two of them. Requests for food, for time, for attention, fell by the wayside. It was just mother and daughter, together.

And so she started collecting, one thing after another, memorabilia, more than 3,500 pieces from Oz: a bedroom door that plays “Somewhere Over the Rainbow,” a Wicked Witch of the West light switch, and everything in between. Her collection even had a run as the premier display at the Judy Garland Museum in Grand Rapids, Minnesota. People come up to her and just give her things from Oz so they can have a proper home. She created “Adventures in Oz With Cheryl,” a reimagining of the story for childhood audiences that focuses more on fitness.

Silich is dedicated, if nothing else, as her agent Milt Thompson points out. She’s a competitor. She’s the kind of person who walks into a meeting with Thompson, a former star college baseball player, and challenges him to an arm-wrestling competition. She’s not afraid of showing off her tools, he says. From swimming to collecting, it doesn’t matter what it is. She just powers through and blows people away.

**Lying on the** floor, feeling as if a million 8-inch needles were poking at her heart, Silich was at a loss. She didn’t know it, but she had had a heart defect since birth, a lower lobe deformity. On this day after a workout, it decided to blow out. Everyone’s got a pugil stick in life that knocks them off balance and this was hers.

Open heart surgery, which she underwent in March 2019, isn’t routine and complications abounded. Her heart was thick and hard and not flexible enough to receive oxygen. She had been on “American Gladiators,” her husband, Don Stafford, says, and she needed open heart surgery. The irony is apparent.

So it would be two years on oxygen, all day and all night. She had been knocked down and her heart wasn’t expanding enough. She went from bodybuilding to trying to build her body back.

There are few sports as interconnected with breathing as swimming. It can force your heart to stretch. And so the Freshman Wonder stepped back onto the block and picked up where she left off 40 years before.

Jupiter, Florida, is a long way from Hobart, but when she joined Palm Beach Masters, it felt like home. Silich found camaraderie, togetherness, competition, and purpose.

The pool is her home. After 40 years, the water was still there waiting. Liquid prayer, she calls it. Effortless, floating, one stroke after the other.

So she drives 45 minutes twice a week to Jupiter to swim. She became part of a team, something she hadn’t been a part of for a long time. And when you’re on a team, when someone encourages you a little bit, it can do wonders.

Her life, she says, used to be all about her body. She was the Freshman Wonder, the gladiator. Now with her body betraying her, she’s fighting back. Sure, she’s still about her body, about fitness and well-being. But, in the end, she’s all about heart.



*Image: Jim Rassol*

Despite the open heart surgery and not having trained much, Silich is competing and starring again. At last year's Summer Nationals, she finished fifth in the 50 breaststroke and was part of three relays that placed in the top 10. Two months later, she finished first in the 25 and 50 breaststroke at the Rowdy Gaines Masters Classic 15. She went from barely being able to walk around her neighborhood to winning gold medals. "If I can do it once," she told her husband, "I can do it again."

Thompson, her agent, says she always strives for more, even when whatever she does is good enough. But it's more than being good enough; it's about proving the world wrong. Doing things in spite of what other people think she can't do. If her heart is going to tick, Thompson says, she's going to make it tick harder.

Her friends haven't seen her this happy for years. Her college roommate, Rika Beckley, thinks Silich is back, back to herself, that her heart surgery helped her to get her back to the pool.

Sure, Silich sometimes feels as if a baby elephant is sitting on her chest. She doesn't know if her heart will ever work properly again. But she will always be a gladiator.



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