

people to know

WORLD CLASS

Bender-roller George Wendt strives for gold in the swimming pool and the curved steel industry.

FIVE DAYS A WEEK, Chicago Metal Rolled Products president George Wendt wakes up at 4:45 A.M. and heads to the pool to swim 4,000 to 5,000 yards with the Chicago Masters Swim Club at the University of Illinois at Chicago. After his morning swim, he dives into his work at his bender-roller facility just a few miles from the pool.

While Wendt's career in the steel industry didn't begin until later in life, his love of swimming started quite early. He swam competitively from age 5 through age 20, when he earned All American status at the University of Minnesota. After college he returned to his alma mater, Fenwick High School in Oak Park, Ill., where he taught English for eight years, became chairman of the department and earned a Masters degree. He then taught English and communications at Benedictine University in Lisle, Ill. for three years while earning a PhD. in English literature. However, teaching, graduate school and raising a family of three with his wife left little time for swimming, so Wendt ended up taking a 16-year hiatus from his sport.

Little did he know that around the same time, his career path would begin to bend in a different direction as well. In 1981, Wendt's mother asked him to help out with the family business, a structural bending-rolling operation founded in 1908 and purchased by her father in 1923. Soon thereafter, his brother, Joe, also joined the company and now serves as vice president of sales.

"We struggled at first, but the fear of having our grandfather's company fail on our watch was a strong motivator to succeed," says Wendt. And the company continues to this day as a family-run operation. Wendt's mother joined her sons in the business, where she served for 20 years. Wendt's own son, Dan, started with the company 14 years ago and is now vice president of operations. Most recently, Wendt's sister, Ginny, has been helping out in marketing.

"I told my students that they would never know what skills they will need in their lives, so learn all you can," says Wendt. "I also told them that a good education would teach them how to learn. At Chicago Metal, I read, studied, learned and started applying—with the faith and trust of our shop and office—the lean manufacturing techniques we call 'world-class manufacturing.'"

Soon after joining Chicago Metal, Wendt returned to swimming. "At first, swimming was part of my stress management system," he says. "I trained but did not need the additional stress of competition."

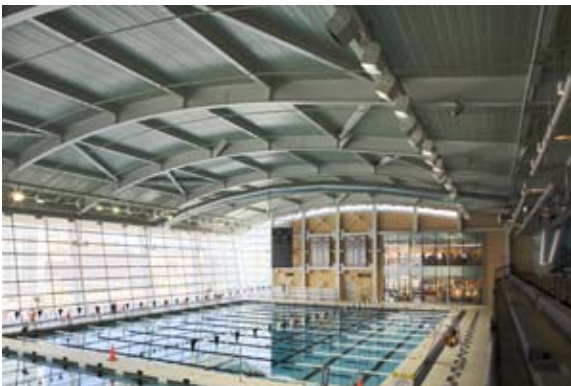
But prompted by his teammates, Wendt eventually returned to racing in U.S. Masters Swimming, which is organized into five-year age groups starting at age 18 and extending to over 100. "When you are in the 13-14 age group in almost any sport, you want to be 14," he explains. "However, when you are in the 65-69 age group, you want to be 65. Most swimmers get slower as they age. My goal is to get slower *slower* than the other guys."

Wendt competes in several events, including the 400m, 800m, 1,500m and 5,000m freestyle; the 100m and 200m breaststroke; the 200m backstroke; and the 400m individual medley. In recent years he has set six individual national records and six relay national records—and even one individual world record, with a time of 19 min, 7.93 sec. in the men's 60-64 1,500m freestyle—all in his age group. He has competed in all 22 of the annual Big Shoulders swim races on Chicago's lakefront (one could argue that the event is architecturally and structurally significant, as it takes place in front of such iconic steel structures as Mies Van Der Rohe's lakefront residential towers and the Hancock Center). The event has grown to 1,000 swimmers and last year, Wendt finished 40th among all entrants in the 5K race, with a time of 1hr, 9 min., 31 sec.

With an interest in both swimming and curving steel, Wendt and his family try especially hard to supply the curved steel for any swimming pool projects on which they bid. Their rolled beams cover the San Juan Natatorium in Puerto Rico and Ratner Athletic Center at the University of Chicago, the latter of which won an AISC Engineering Award of Excellence (now the IDEAS² Awards) in 2004—as well as the UIC Flames Athletic Center, where he trains.

"At practice, I can point to the roof trusses and say to my teammates, 'That's what I do!'" he laughs. "Or, 'I'd tell you what I do, but it's over your head!'"

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◀ Wendt's firm, Chicago Rolled Metal Products, curved the steel for the University of Chicago's Ratner Athletic Center; Wendt has also trained there.