



DuSable Seahorses, full team, all levels, 1948

# The Incredible Story of the DuSable High School Swim Team of Chicago, 1935-1952

BY ROBERT PRUTER

For some 15 years in Chicago, from the late 1930s to the early 1950s, the predominantly African American DuSable High School usually ranked as the second best swimming program in the Chicago Public High School League, behind Lane Technical High School. The 30-school league at that time had only three predominantly Black schools. DuSable's swimming achievements were looked on with pride by the city's African American community. The team's success in these years belied negative stereotypes and prejudices long held in American society concerning African Americans' supposed aversion to and inability to swim.

DuSable High opened its doors in the fall of 1935, in the heart of Chicago's Black South Side. The high school was built with a swimming pool, and its athletic department immediately instituted an ambitious swimming program under Coach William T. Mackie. The coach introduced a 10-mile swimming marathon for the swim team, in which each student swam so many lengths of the 60-foot pool every day until they reached  $9\frac{3}{4}$  miles. Then, in the last quarter mile, they would compete in a race for their positions on the team. The 10-mile marathon program helped immensely to build a highly competitive swim team at the school. Reflective of the hard practices the coach put the team through, the team adopted the name Seahorses.

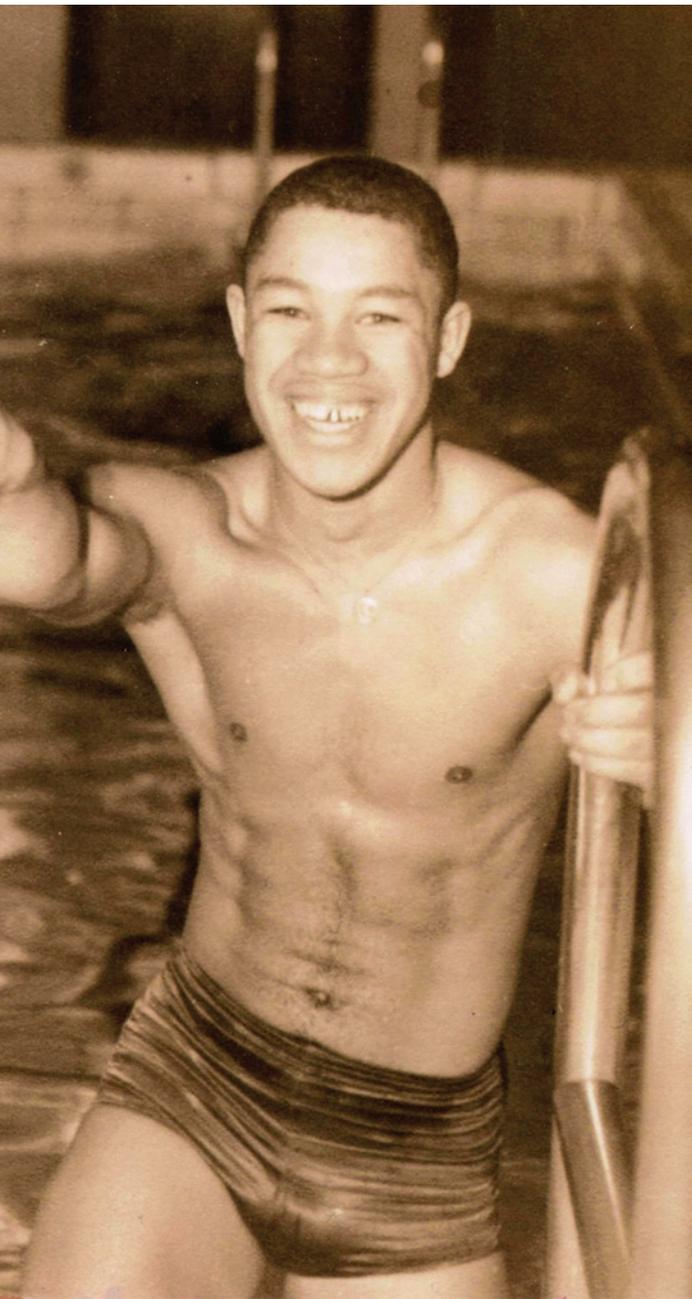
DuSable's success in swimming began with an undefeated dual meet season in 1935, beginning a streak of 53 dual meet victories that lasted until 1943. While a laudable achievement, DuSable never had a dual meet competition with the top area teams, notably Lane Tech in Chicago and New Trier in the suburbs. All the other

schools that competed against DuSable were essentially white high schools in the city, which, to their credit, overcame prevailing racist views of the day to swim against DuSable.

Racism in the Chicago Public League schools brought the issue of DuSable competing with largely white schools to a boil in November 1941. The Public League program was initially just two meets—in December and in April—with all the high schools in the city. Dual meets between schools were arranged by the schools on their own. But some coaches on the South Side felt the need for more regular competition and decided to form a dual-meet league. These coaches had resisted scheduling DuSable in the past and were not willing to let the virtually all Black school into the newly formed league. The Chicago Defender reported, "These coaches...don't want competition against Negro swimmers." A few weeks later, however, the Chicago Board of Education put an end to the "lily-white swim league," as the Chicago Defender headlined it. The Public League eventually formed dual-meet leagues throughout the city. DuSable competed in the Central Section league, usually being the only Black school.

DuSable was highly competitive with the white high school teams it did face. In February 1943, the team beat the Harrison team 42 to 24 for its 53rd straight dual-meet win. In the 1947-48 season, the school went undefeated in dual meets and won the Central Section title, yet in the city-wide meets Lane Tech was always dominant.

Lane Tech had emerged as a swimming power around



Eddie Kirk, national all-star, 1950

the same time as DuSable, under Coach John Newman. Lane was the technical school for the whole North Side, and by the early 1940s about 7,000 students attended the school, all male. Each year Newman had the pick of some 2,000 freshman boys enrolled in the swim classes. DuSable, by contrast, had local community enrollment boundaries, with a total enrollment of boys and girls of around 3,500 students, so there were hardly 2,000 boys in the entire school. This disparity in student numbers kept Lane Tech dominant in the city-wide meets.

DuSable's regular competition against predominantly white schools in the Central Section league, unlike in the early 1940s, showed no published reports of hostility or resistance from those schools. Most of the DuSable swimmers did not see any conflict or sense animosity. Commented DuSable star swimmer Eddie Kirk, "We knew them and they got to know us pretty well. It was just like a group of fellows getting together and swimming. Wherever I went...it seemed as though I was welcomed everywhere I went." On the other hand, Kirk's teammate, Floyd "Billy" Ray, when asked about whether he sensed any hostility at the white schools, said, "Oh yeah," and asserted that he heard names yelled at the team when their bus pulled up to the school, but added, "After we won the meet they didn't call us nothing."

The success in swimming that DuSable was experiencing in these years was not only due to the training regimen imposed by their coach. The swimmers he had were highly dedicated to swimming and augmented their in-school training outside the school. Team Captain Eddie Kirk, who worked as a lifeguard at the Wabash YMCA, said, "There were seven of us, and I was bringing the fellows to the YMCA pool at least three times a week, practicing, and that's what helped us along...because we were like doing double practice." Kirk and his teammates also got extra practice as members on the Catholic Youth Organization (CYO) swimming team.

The DuSable swimmers in their practices and training were going beyond most of their competitors at rival schools, which not only helped the team become better swimmers, but undoubtedly helped to bond the team

together. "We worked together as a whole and did things together," related Kirk, "And as time went on the team got stronger and stronger."

For the 20-yard Public League city-wide meet in December 1949, DuSable was peaking as a team and had its best-ever opportunity to overtake the Lane Tech team. DuSable was loaded. The Chicago Defender understood that DuSable had a genuine chance of ending Lane Tech's 14-year string of 20-yard titles. The day before the finals, the Chicago Defender ballyhooed DuSable's chances with a sizable story and a large headline, "DuSable Girds to Upset Lane in Tank Meet." Lane Tech qualified seven individuals and one relay team for the finals, compared to DuSable's five individuals and two relay teams.

Thus, the two teams were evenly matched for the finals—and clearly DuSable was posed for an incredible upset—but the mainstream papers did not take notice, asserting that Lane was favored to continue its string of titles. Lane did indeed win the meet, but it was the closest outcome ever in Lane's string of victories, with Lane Tech edging DuSable by just five points, 46 to 41. Now belatedly, the theme of the mainstream dailies was that DuSable had been a genuine threat to take the title from Lane. Said the Herald-American, "DuSable put a scare in the Lane seniors." Said the Chicago Daily News, "[The Lane Tech] squad was hard pressed by DuSable to win their title."

DuSable's results in the 25-yard meet in the spring of 1950 were not too shabby either, with the school taking second with 33 points to Lane Tech's 45 points. Eddie Kirk that year took home the only medal the school ever won in the state meet, winning the individual medley in the annual March meet. The 1949-50 school year, thus represented the high-water mark of DuSable's achievement in swimming, so to speak.

With the 1950-51 school year, DuSable had another successful season, taking the Central Section for the fourth consecutive year. A bit more glory was rendered to DuSable with the publication of the Amateur Swimming Guide in early 1951. Eddie Kirk was named to the 1950 All-American interscholastic team, the first African

American in the country to get named to the team. The 1951-52 season marks the last time DuSable garnered any kind of league-wide achievement in swimming, when it took second to Lane Tech in the annual 20-yard meet. Thereafter, DuSable High was no longer a factor in the city-wide swim meets. The decline accelerated, according to DuSable swimmer Floyd "Billy" Ray, who said, "After DuSable's basketball team went downstate to play in the championship game in 1954, none of the students wanted to swim; they wanted to play basketball."

During the years of DuSable's tremendous success in the Chicago Public School League program, it was only a story in the Chicago Defender. The Defender recognition was typical of the day, in which African American publications were dedicated to telling their readers the achievements and exploits of African Americans. The Chicago mainstream papers did not seem to notice the story—a story that dramatically disproved the prejudices of the day regarding African Americans and swimming. DuSable swimmer Donald Clark said, "There was some kind of belief that African Americans could not swim, I think the success we had at DuSable disproved that." The basic truth that comes out in this story is that DuSable swimmers succeeded not only because they had a good coach, but because they worked harder than opposing teams, practiced more, and learned more in off-school hours.

Lastly, the story of the DuSable swim program should be understood in the context of sport history, which in its narratives on race has been long devoted to the strictly empirical "recovery" of the missing history of African American achievement. The DuSable swim program and the great athletes, now deemed "recovered," thus constituted an important legacy of African American achievement in swimming history that we should forever remember and recognize.

**Robert Pruter** is a long-time sport historian who has a particular interest in the history of high school sports and early amateur sports as they relate to women and African Americans.