

# THE TERMINATOR

She's a dominant figure in masters backstroke and still holds European 200m records across four age groups – but now world records are the measure of her success. **Verity Dobbie** meets Jo Corben

Right: Jo Corben with one of her gold medals at the recent British Masters Championships in Sheffield; opposite: Jo in backstroke action



**D**uring an after-dinner conversation with Mark Salway, chair of Mid Sussex Masters, at Spencer's recent 'Fun in the Sun' week in Lanzarote, the topic came around to Jo Corben. I mentioned to him that I had a feature to write on her and, as usual, was procrastinating. I was keen to learn what his opinions were on the Fareham Nomads backstroke phenomenon.

Mark confessed that his view was a little coloured by the fact that he'd been humiliated by her in a

number of competitions when he'd been swimming in the next lane. Despite this, adjectives such as 'incredible', 'talented', 'lovely' and 'humble' poured from his mouth. Then he stopped, thought a bit and said: 'Actually she's a bit like Arnie in *Terminator* when his skin begins to fall off - all of this softness on the outside but so hard on the inside.'

I thought a bit about this and realised that he'd very simply encapsulated the impression I was left with when I caught up with Jo at the recent British championships. Jo aged up last year and set eight British

and four European records, finishing the season with some impressive swimming when she captured four British records at the ASA nationals, in the 50 and 100m back and the 200 and 400m medley.

With her sights firmly set on the Europeans in London, Jo has produced some brilliant early-season form including setting her first world record in the 200m backstroke at the South East Regional Championships in January with 2:25.12 and then shaving a further 0.15sec off the record with a 2:24.97 at the British masters in Sheffield.

Such is Jo's domination of the longer backstroke event that she currently holds the European 200m backstroke long course record in four age groups - from 30-34yrs through to 45-49yrs - and in three age groups in the short-course pool. She also features in the world top five all-time performances for the event.

#### National consciousness

Jo Corben forced her way into the national masters consciousness as a 30-year-old in 2000 in what she describes as her 'breakthrough year', winning the 100 and 200 backstroke titles at the Munich world championships. Since then, she's gone on to be our pre-eminent women's backstroke swimmer, and amassed an impressive collection of records and titles along the way.

I was interested in Jo's early swimming history, and she explained that she had swum as a child. She qualified for age-group nationals and long-course and short-course nationals, was a county junior record holder and at one time ranked in the >



'Actually she's a bit like Arnie in *Terminator* when his skin begins to fall off – all of this softness on the outside but so hard on the inside'





training. Jo's current regime includes 10 hours of pool time a week, and two land sessions for an hour each, completed in her garage. She reveals this information in a very matter-of-fact way, commenting that there's 'nothing glamorous' about it. Jo swims with Nomads' top squad and also the masters squad, often in a four-lane 25-yard school pool which at times she describes as 'the washing machine'.

In training, she covers roughly

25,000 metres per week, and it's all pretty good quality swimming. She will do a maximum of around 4.7k in a 90-minute session. She readily admits to loving threshold sets, when you are able to knock out repeat after repeat in a controlled and very easy manner. We discussed that holy grail of swimming training, the concept of 'easy speed' and the satisfaction that comes from being able to hold a seemingly impossible repeat time through a set, again and again and



Above and opposite: Jo Corben at the British Masters Championships

top eight in the country.

Jo stopped swimming at 16 and, as is all too familiar, took a 10-year break, returning to the sport after the birth of her son, James. Her return was a little unconventional. A friend in a similar position suggested it would be a good way of getting back into shape and they ended up starting a club in a 20-metre pool in the roughest part of Gosport.

Jo demonstrates a deep respect and knowledge for the sport and the swimmers involved in it. She explained that she was aware of masters having watched Moscow 1980 Olympian Jane Admans swim and been inspired by her. Jane became a masters world record holder in the 200m backstroke in 1987 and her 2:25.98 almost 30 years ago is still good enough for a slot in the world all-time top 10 in the

25-29 age group.

Jo shakes her head in disbelief as she recounts how, with very little work behind her, she entered the Hampshire masters and swam some ridiculous time. She just 'loved being back in that atmosphere' and, spurred on, she started training by herself on a Tuesday and Thursday.

It wasn't long before news of her return reached her old coach, Stewart Crowe, at Fareham and he invited her to come back and swim with his squad. It was an invitation she readily accepted, as at that time Jo was looking up to Totnes swimmer Kate Veale, someone she had followed and admired for years and her aim at that time was to beat her.

Mission accomplished at the Munich world championships when Jo and Kate came first and second in the 100 and 200m backstroke to give Jo

her first world titles. Since then Jo's been an almost constant feature in British masters.

#### Watchful eye

After a six-month break from swimming in 2014, she returned to Fareham under the watchful eye of Stewart, and is clearly coming into her own in the 45-49 age group. Working her way through an impressive series of British and European records in 2015, she produced a real statement of intent this year with that first world record at Crawley.

It is evident that Jo's a swimmer who loves the sport and is driven by her need to succeed. Incredibly skilful, with a supreme work ethic and a very tough mental attitude, she knows what it takes to swim fast and is totally dedicated to her

**'Jo is great company and a delight to talk to. She simply loves swimming. She's self-effacing, grounded and keen to deflect praise to others. This lovely exterior belies her internal mental toughness'**



again. Her personal favourite is swimming sets of 50s @ 35 seconds and hitting her 200m pace.

#### Day job

This enthusiasm, focus and love for swimming extends into her professional life. Her day job is, perhaps unsurprisingly, running a swim school. Starting from scratch in 2005, she and her business partner Caroline McCulloch now teach up to 800 swimmers a month, from babies through to adults, in their award-winning private swim school Aqua Academy with a simple yet highly >





Jo cuts through the water at Ponds Forge

◀ successful formula: 'small classes' and a 'quality product'.

Jo generously attributes much of her success to other people. There's her coach Stewart, whom she describes as 'old school'. He was delighted that her hard work had paid off but, in that back-to-business manner engrained in swim coaches, commented: 'The setting of a world record was the main target for the European Championships in May. She can now prepare for these championships with even more belief that she can go even faster.' Then there's her swim team, including assistant Fareham coach and masters swimmer John Molyneaux. Last but by no means least there is her husband, Tony, a 200 fly specialist.

Watching the video of Jo's record-breaking performance at Crawley, it's Tony you can hear in the background screaming encouragement and

whooping with delight at her success, and Jo readily recognises that she 'couldn't do it without him'.

The British championships far exceeded Jo's expectations. Her goal for the year was to set a world record in the 200 back and she clearly wasn't expecting the 2:24.97. However, she's now even more motivated by her 100 back time, which was a mere 0.17sec outside the existing world mark of 1:08.11.

Jo didn't believe that she could get that close in the shorter event and with a new goal she comments: 'It's back to hard work now to focus on the Europeans. I'm going there hoping to swim fast it's all about just getting your head around it.'

Despite this single-minded determination, you're left with the impression that Jo is a person who doesn't take life or herself too seriously. If you follow the Corbens

on social media, you get to know their family dogs and love of red wine. During our discussion, she was relentlessly positive about everything and looking forward to London.

### Self-effacing

Jo is great company and a delight to talk to. She simply loves swimming. She's self-effacing, grounded and keen to deflect praise to others. This lovely exterior belies her internal mental toughness and willingness to graft. She's a woman forced by her own success to recalibrate her goals for the year, and set what for most people would be impossible goals even higher.

I can see what Mark Salway was driving at with his *Terminator* analogy, and one of her age group rival's Nic Latty eloquently summed her up in two words: 'Truly awesome.' Hasta la vista! 📺

**'The setting of a world record was the main target for the European championships in May. She can now prepare for these championships with even more belief that she can go even faster'**