

The Fairfield Four

Brothers' rep Tuolumne County in Virginia, set new relay swim world record

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Four brothers, ages 75 to 86, members of Tuolumne County Aquatic Masters club at Sonora Sports and Fitness on Mono Way, just set a new world record in the 4x50-meter freestyle relay in their combined age group — 320 years — on Sept. 7 at the Virginia Senior Games at Bridgewater College in Bridgewater, Virginia.

The Fairfield brothers, also known as the Fairfield Four, are David Fairfield, 86, a resident of Sonora; John Fairfield, 84, a retired Air Force combat fighter pilot in Vietnam and a resident of Warrenton, Virginia; Ralph Fairfield, 77, of Maryville, Tennessee; and Paul Fairfield, 75, of Adamsville, Tennessee.

Their combined ages add up to 322 years, and they've been swimming since they were toddlers in Oakland and Carmichael in the 1940s and early 1950s.

In recent interviews, David and John said their mom, Barbara Jean March Fairfield, who swam competitively in the 1930s in the Ivy League for Jackson College for Women at Tufts in Boston, got all four brothers into swimming at early ages.

"Our mother was a star swimmer at Tufts College in Boston, Massachusetts," David Fairfield said.

Barbara Fairfield was a strong, confident athlete, so sure of herself that in 1937, when American open-water distance swimmer and 1924 Olympics champion Gertrude Ederle — the first woman to successfully swim the English Channel — came to Tufts, Barbara Fairfield challenged Ederle to a pool swim. Ederle accepted the challenge.

Ederle had achieved her historic first in August 1926, by swimming from France to England in 14 hours and 31 minutes, a time that beat the previous men's record by almost two hours and made her an international celebrity. The press called her "Queen of the Waves."

By 1937, Ederle was in her 30s. She'd come to Tufts to brag about her achievements. Barbara Fairfield was 21 and earned herself a bit of sporting celebrity by defeating the world's most famous woman swimmer in a 200-meter freestyle contest.

"She challenged Gertrude Ederle, the first woman to swim the English Channel, and she beat her," David Fairfield said.

Two years later, Barbara Fairfield was pregnant with her and her husband's first born to-be, and she kept swimming right up to the day she gave birth.

"Mother went body surfing the day David was born," John Fairfield said.

Barbara Fairfield and Donald Fairfield raised David and John in their toddler years in Oakland, and Ralph and Paul grew up mainly in Carmichael, Sacramento County, where the family moved in 1950.

"My mother thought it was important for us to be water safe, so she got us all swimming lessons in Oakland and Carmichael," David Fairfield said.

David and John took Red Cross swim lessons before they turned five years old at Diamond Park swimming pool in Oakland. Ralph and Paul also took Red Cross swim lessons at early ages in Carmichael. The four brothers have been swimming ever since.

Fast-forward 75 years to 2025 and by earlier this year, the Fairfield brothers wanted to get together in the pool and do something memorable.

"Three of the four of us had had serious health problems, so the reason we did this — try to set a new record — is we wanted to do something before one of us died," David Fairfield said. "We were talking and this swim meet in Virginia came up, where John lives."

John Fairfield flew so many missions in supersonic-capable F-4 Phantom fighter jets and pulled so many G-force inducing maneuvers — dives, loops, and climbs — that by last year he had developed life-threatening blood clots in his lungs and legs, David Fairfield said. John Fairfield earned the Distinguished Flying Cross twice in the early 1970s when he flew with the Thailand-based USAF 435th Tactical Fighter Squadron during the Vietnam War.

"The doctors were saying, 'Hey, this could kill you man,' and they went in with a little drill and a little TV camera and they found the blood clots and drilled them out and sucked them up," David Fairfield said.

Meanwhile, Paul Fairfield had sustained two strokes, the most recent one about a year ago.

In addition, David Fairfield said, he had L4-L5 back surgery two years ago, followed by cataract surgery, and he had a cancerous growth taken off his nose earlier this year.

“So three out of four of us were having health issues,” David Fairfield said. “We decided to get together before one of us croaked. We said, ‘Hey, let’s try to do something, let’s do something unique and fun before we meet the maker.” David Fairfield has been in Sonora since 1997. He’s a retired teacher and coach with 35 years at Alameda High School, where he taught biology, Japanese martial arts focused on jujitsu, counseled students, and coached swimming, water polo, tennis and basketball. He’s a master swimmer with Tuolumne County Aquatics, which he joined in 1997.

Paul Fairfield first came to Sonora in 1970 and worked 30 years for Tuolumne Utilities District as a water meter reader until 2022. He joined Tuolumne County Aquatics in 2003. Paul’s three sons — Peter, Lief, and Ben — all went to Mother Lode Christian School.

Ralph Fairfield and John Fairfield joined Tuolumne County Aquatic Masters club this year when the four Fairfield brothers decided to go for the 4x50 meter relay record.

“David invited us to join him as he planned to visit me and swim in the Virginia Senior Games,” John Fairfield wrote to The Union Democrat. “We all agreed to accept his challenge, and it was a life-changing experience. Brother Ralph joined in and trained hard to be up for the challenge. Not only did we all get in physical shape, but mentally and spiritually, we felt the results of love and support.”

They researched existing records and discovered there was no claim for the 4x50 meter freestyle relay record in the combined age group 320-359.

“We trained separately for six weeks and came together in Virginia as a team,” John Fairfield wrote in early September from the Virginia Senior Games. “The meet director, Clyde Smith, certified our relay accomplishment, which established our claim for the 4x50 meter freestyle relay record for the 320-359 men’s age group.”

In addition to their historic fraternal relay record, David Fairfield set seven individual age group records, John set two new records, Ralph set five, and Paul set one individual age group record, John Fairfield said.

“Not a bad day and one that hopefully inspires others to become involved with a healthy sport that will benefit the individual while encouraging others,” John Fairfield said. “As we swam as members of the Tuolumne County Aquatic Masters, everyone in Virginia has a new focus on a remote California county that builds world champions.”

John Fairfield signed his note to The Union Democrat with his name and “Lieutenant General, USAF (Retired), #2 brother who has been in awe of #1 brother since birth.”

The 2025 Virginia Senior Games, presented by the Virginia Recreation and Park Society, are sanctioned by the nonprofit National Senior Games Association,

organizer of the world's largest multi-sport events for adults 50 and over. The biennial National Senior Games are staged every two years.