

USLA HISTORY

The Early Years

In America, as early as the 1700s, dories were launched from shore by lifesavers to save shipwrecked people in distress. They came to be organized as the United States Lifesaving Service and eventually were to save 178,741 people from drowning. But as ships moved from sail to mechanical power, shipwrecks became increasingly rare.

In the late 1800s, as the problem of shipwrecks was fading, swimming began to emerge as a widely popular form of recreation, and the need to rescue distressed swimmers became evident. The members of the US Lifesaving Service eventually moved on to become part of the US Coast Guard, while a new type of lifesaving emerged: guarding the lives of swimmers at the beach.

Unlike in other countries, these lifeguards were typically paid employees of local governments, often organized in a manner similar to police or fire departments. At first, these beach lifeguard services developed their own lifesaving methods, sometimes capitalizing on innovations they learned from other lifeguards. The exchange of information was limited though and beach lifeguard practices tended to develop locally and regionally, with significant variations from place to place.

Surf Life Saving Association of America

Decades after professional lifeguard agencies had been established at beaches throughout America, Australia was chosen to host the 1956 summer Olympics. The volunteer lifesavers of Australia decided to hold an international, invitational competition. California lifeguards and a contingent from the Territory of Hawaii agreed to participate. The California lifeguards organized themselves under the banner of the Surf Life Saving Association of America (SLSA), although they were solely from the Los Angeles County and Los Angeles City lifeguard agencies.

The event drew a crowd of 115,000 spectators, with the legendary "Duke" Paoa Kahanamoku of Hawaii as the honorary Chairman. In addition to the Americans and Australians, teams from South Africa, Great Britain, Ceylon, and New Zealand participated.

It was as a result of this event that the rescue tube, which had been designed in California, and the rescue buoy, which had been perfected there, was first introduced to Australia. US team members also brought Malibu Bolsa Surfboards with them, the first total Australian exposure to the Malibu Surfboard. When they departed Australia, the boards were left behind, which revolutionized surfing in Australia. At the same time, the Americans learned of the superior, national

organization of Surf Life Saving Australia, and thought of the potential for a similar national organization in their own country.

After the event, LA County Lifeguard Chief Bud Stevenson decided to use SLSA in his efforts to upgrade professional lifeguarding and it became, for a time, the political arm of the Los Angeles County lifeguards. This allowed political action which was outwardly separate from that of the managers of the lifeguard service. Chief Stevenson appointed Bob Burnside as President of the nascent organization.

In 1963, efforts were commenced to expand the scope of SLSA. Burnside called for representatives from as many Southern California lifeguard agencies as possible to attend a concept meeting at City of Santa Monica Lifeguard Headquarters. In attendance were Vince Moorhouse (Huntington Beach), Max Bowman (Huntington Beach), Don Rohrer (LA City), Dick Heineman (LA City), Tim Dorsey (Seal Beach), host Jim Richards (Santa Monica), and a representative from Long Beach.

The group agreed that they should establish a truly national organization, based on the structure of the Australian association, to be called the Surf Life Saving Association of America. They established Southern and Northern Chairmen of the State of California, and a temporary Executive Board to establish a constitution, bylaws, and method of representation.

In 1964, Howard Lee of LA County designed the SLSA logo, still in use today with minor modifications. His design was influenced by a similar design that Tad Devine of the 1956 Australia team had created for the team uniform. Both are similar to the logo of the United States Lifesaving Service.

National Surf Life Saving Association of America is Born

In 1965, bylaws and a constitution were adopted, and the name was changed to the National Surf Life Saving Association (NSLSA). The first election of officers was held, at this time for a one year term of office. They were President Bob Burnside, Vice-President Dick Hazard (San Clemente), Treasurer Max Bowman, Secretary Don Rohrer, and Sergeant at Arms Tim Dorsey. The goals and objectives were identified and weekly meetings were agreed upon, rotating among different lifeguard headquarters for over a year.

A year earlier, in 1964, ABC television's Wide World of Sports had filmed a lifeguard competition at Huntington Beach. During the competition, two lifeguards lost control of their dory on a 10 foot wave and crashed into the Huntington Beach pier. It became one of Wide World of Sports' "Great Moments" of 1964, replayed repeatedly for television audiences throughout America.

This generated a level of interest that caused Wide World of Sports to invite

the NSLSA and a touring Australian team to fly to the East Coast and compete in a first ever East Coast/West Coast lifeguard competition in 1965. This televised, international event was held at Montauk Point on Long Island, New York. At the event, the concept of a truly national affiliation under the umbrella of NSLSA took seed.

In 1967, NSLSA sent a competition team to Ft. Lauderdale, Florida to compete in the first recognized East versus West lifeguard championships, continuing the national affiliation concept among all the agencies involved. Teams from New York to Miami and the West Coast team battled it out in a rousing competition.

Building on relationships begun with the competition, Lt. Jim Holland of the Miami Beach Patrol was appointed to act as East Coast liaison for NSLSA. He brought the first Florida chapters into NSLSA: Miami Beach and Boca Raton. Bob Burnside, who had stepped down to become NSLSA secretary, flew to Florida to tour Florida beaches with Lt. Holland in an effort to further increase Eastern affiliations.

In 1969 the Dade County (Florida) Board of Supervisors requested that NSLSA representatives review lifeguard procedures there in the wake of a rash of ocean drowning. Burnside and Phil Stubbs, of San Clemente, handled this task, making recommendations that resulted in installation of a communication system, new vehicles and equipment, new qualification requirements, increased funding, and the hiring of Lt. Holland as Chief of the Dade County Lifeguard Division. It was the first demonstration of the potential power of NSLSA to improve lifesaving standards nationwide. Also in 1969, the first international educational exchange by NSLSA members was undertaken with a visit to Auckland, New Zealand.

In 1971, World Life Saving was founded in Australia, as an international federation composed of the national surf lifesaving associations of Australia, Great Britain, New Zealand, South Africa, and the US. Also in 1971, recommended beach standards and certification were first completed by NSLSA for all lifeguard classifications in an effort to improve standardization and professionalism.

In 1972, NSLSA was granted tax-exempt status as a not for profit, educational organization. NSLSA also began preparing the groundwork for a nationally recognized beach training certificate to be issued to newly trained lifeguards. The following year, NSLSA organized the development of agreements on standardization of beach warning flags and the first international training officer's exam.

United States Lifesaving Association is Born

Over the years; NSLSA had been very successful in organizing national and international exchanges of information, competitions, and public education efforts to help reduce drowning. Initial progress to embrace East Coast agencies however, had languished and the organization remained largely an association of California lifeguards, with a few chapters from Florida. Some NSLSA leaders felt that the organization should remain a surf lifesaving organization, barring participation from lifeguards at lakes, rivers, and similar venues. Others felt that all lifeguards at natural, open water locales should be eligible. One of these was Sheridan Byerly, who had been a member of the 1956 Australian competition team and the more recent South African tour.

In 1977, Sheridan Byerly was elected president. A priority for Byerly was the push to make NSLSA a truly national organization. Changes to the bylaws were drafted and plans were laid to create regions throughout the United States with their own presidents and executive boards. Many though, continued to oppose opening the organization.

Halfway through Byerly's term of office the secretary resigned and Byron Wear of San Diego was appointed the replacement. In February 1979, Byerly and Wear took leave of their jobs and began recruiting work in Florida, encouraging further participation from that area. They met with lifeguards from many agencies, including Joe Wooden and Tom Renick of Volusia County.

In May 1979, the NSLSA Board of Directors meeting in Santa Cruz, California, with great debate, voted to adopt the various bylaw changes that had been drafted to broaden the scope of the organization and to remove the word "surf" from the organization's name. It was to be the United States Lifesaving Association (USLA). Members could now include any member of an ocean, bay, lake, river, or open water lifesaving or rescue service.

After the meeting, Byerly and Wear traveled east again, this time to Chicago, around the Great Lakes, to Maine, and down the East Coast. Wear returned west to assume the position of Executive Director of the newly expanded organization.

In fall of 1979, Dick Miller of Long Beach was elected president of USLA, with Bill Carey of Boca Raton elected vice-president. Byerly, as outgoing president, had the right to an Executive Board position known as Past President, but in the continuing spirit of nationalizing the organization, he asked that Joe Pecoraro of Chicago take his slot on the Executive Board instead. The 1979 board therefore became the first to include officers from outside California.

The first national American lifeguard competition under the banner of USLA was held in San Diego, California in August 1980, bringing members of the various USLA chapters together in a spirited gathering which resulted in much camaraderie. Since then, national competitions have continued annually.

The primary goal of USLA is to, "Establish and maintain high standards of professional surf and open water lifesaving for the maximizing of public safety." As such, USLA leaders have long worked to standardize training and lifesaving practices throughout the United States through various means. This has sometimes proven a difficult task.

Unlike the pool environment, which is virtually identical regardless of locale, open water beaches and their related hazards vary dramatically from place to place. Crowd conditions, water currents, dangerous animals, weather and many other factors contribute to these variations. Furthermore, the assignments of beach lifeguards can differ significantly.

In recognition of the challenges spawned by this diversity, but with a continuing desire to set minimum standards which could be implemented on a national scale, a conference was convened in 1980 at Texas A & M University in Galveston. The purpose was to develop guidelines for establishing open water recreational beach standards. It was co-sponsored by USLA, the American Camping Association, and the Council for National Cooperation in Aquatics. The other major groups represented at this conference included:

- American Red Cross
- Boy Scouts of America
- Center for Marine Training and Safety of Texas A & M
- Centers for Disease Control
- Girls Scouts of America
- National Park Service
- National Safety Council
- US Coast Guard
- YMCA

The result of the conference was a Sea Grant publication, edited by James McCloy and James Dodson, outlining the work of those in attendance. It included recommendations for the minimum age, physical conditioning, swimming skills, training, and equipment for lifeguards, as well as a number of other areas of importance. Shortly thereafter, USLA developed and published Guidelines for Open Water Lifeguard Training in concert with the findings of the conference.

Creating a national training manual that embraced the surf environment, as well as inland beaches, had long been a desire of the organization, and much work had been devoted to the project over the years. In 1981, a group composed of Captain Douglas D'Arn all of the City of Huntington Beach, Captain Don Rohrer of Los Angeles County, Captain Bob Shea of the San Diego Lifeguard Service, and Richard Marks of the City of Los Angeles, completed work on USLA's first open water lifesaving manual, Lifesaving and Marine Safety. It was immediately welcomed as the first text for all open water rescue personnel.

The first president from east of the Mississippi River was elected in 1981: Joe Pecoraro of Chicago. It was the beginning of a long presidency, for Pecoraro was

to be re-elected in 1983, 1985, 1987, and 1989, serving a total of 10 years as USLA president.

During Pecoraro's tenure, much discussion took place regarding the need for a national certification program for beach lifeguards based on the published USLA guidelines. It was widely believed that existing programs of the time were inadequate to address needs at surf and major inland beaches. Bruce Baird of Laguna Beach was appointed to this important task, but the discussions were overshadowed by concerns over civil liability and the reality of significant differences in lifeguard training in various areas of the US.

During this period, Tim Hall of Maine was appointed to head a committee seeking to revise the USLA textbook and broaden its scope. While Hall and his committee made many valuable revisions to the original text, they were stymied by lack of a publisher.

At the Board of Directors meeting in November 1991, Bill Richardson of Huntington Beach, California was elected president. Soon after, he appointed B. Chris Brewster, Chief of the San Diego Lifeguard Service, to head the USLA National Certification Committee. Richardson was eager to see USLA complete the work begun earlier on national guidelines and to develop and implement a national certification system.

Initially, the National Certification Committee aimed at the concept of a standardized training program with a universally accepted course completion card, much like that available in the pool environment. The committee soon came to recognize that the diversity of the natural aquatic environment and the many approaches to open water lifesaving defied a certification system whereby lifeguards from throughout the United States could be trained under a single rigid curriculum.

In finding a way around this problem, the committee took note of the fact that beach lifeguard organizations throughout America were already training their lifeguards locally, in many cases very effectively. They therefore resolved to create the equivalents of an accreditation system for the training programs of those agencies willing to meet recommended USLA standards.

In November of 1992, the committee completed work on the USLA national Lifeguard Agency Certification Program. It was unanimously approved by the Board of Directors. Soon, beach lifeguard agencies from throughout the United States applied to have their programs nationally certified and agreed to abide by the minimum standards promulgated by USLA.

As the new program was being rolled out, it became evident that the need for a revised and modernized version of the USLA manual was more pressing than ever. Brewster volunteered to turn his attention to this effort. He was able to

locate a publisher and convened a National Textbook Committee. The committee members agreed to gather as a working group representing seven of the eight USLA regions, to revise and rewrite the previous drafts. For five days in February 1994, they holed up in a hotel near the Chicago airport. The committee included:

Don Rohrer – California

Jerry Gavin – Chicago

Dan McCormick -- East Bay Regional Park District (California)

David Shotwell -- Ocean Grove, New Jersey

Dr. Peter Wernicki -- USLA Medical Advisor

Mike Hensler -- Volusia County, Florida

Bill McNeely -- St. Lucie County, Florida

Kim Tyson – University of Texas at Austin

Carl Martinez – National Park Service

In early 1995, after much work on the part of the many volunteers, The United States Lifesaving Association Manual of Open Water Lifesaving was published. It quickly became a mainstay for training beach lifeguards in agencies which subscribed to USLA guidelines, as well as for many other lifesaving providers throughout the United States and around the world.

There are now over 100 chapters of USLA, each affiliated with a local lifesaving service or services and composed of employees of those services. The chapters form regions, of which there are eight. Each USLA region has a president and its own board of directors.

The national Board of Directors of USLA is made up of delegates sent by the regions to biannual Board of Directors meetings. Within certain guidelines, regional representation on the Board of Directors is proportional to regional membership levels. The national president and other officers are elected every two years.

Throughout its history, USLA has been an organization of lifeguards, for lifeguards. The work of the organization has been accomplished by dedicated members volunteering their time to improve upon their profession and the safety of the beach-going public. That work continues today.

NOTE: For corrections or suggestions regarding USLA's history, e-mail brewster@lifesaver1.com

Past Presidents

Presidents and terms of office * of USLA and its predecessors have included:

Bob Burnside -- 1963 - 1967

Mike Henry -- 1968 - 1969

Phil Stubbs -- 1970 - 1973

Vince Moorhouse -- 1974 - 1975

Eric Lucas -- 1976 - 1977

Sheridan Byerly -- 1978 - 1979

Dick Miller -- 1980 - 1981
Joe Pecoraro -- 1982 - 1991
William Richardson -- 1992 - 1998
Don Rohrer -- 1998 - Present

***Note: USLA officers are elected in odd years, but take office in the subsequent even years, currently for two year terms.**

LIFE MEMBERS

Over the years, USLA has conferred Life Memberships on a very limited number of persons who have made extraordinary contributions. The minimum criteria for Life Membership includes twenty years of service in open water lifesaving, ten years active service and membership in USLA, service as a member of the Board of Directors or an elected national officer, and a significant contribution to the humanitarian goals and objectives of USLA. The following are USLA's Life Members:

Bruce Baird (deceased) -- Laguna Beach, California
Buddy Belshe -- Newport Beach, California
Gene Bergman (deceased) -- Ft. Lauderdale, Florida
Max Bowman -- Huntington Beach, California
B. Chris Brewster -- San Diego, California
Robert Burnside -- Los Angeles County, California
Doug D'Arnall -- Huntington Beach, California
Tim Dorsey -- Seal Beach, California
Roger Engemann -- Chicago, Illinois
Ed Kiziukiewicz -- Ship Bottom, New Jersey
Howard Lee -- Los Angeles County, California
Jim "Mac" McCarthy -- Ft. Lauderdale, Florida
Jim McCloy -- Galveston, Texas
Dr. Alfred W. (Bud) McKinley, PhD (deceased) -- Ocean City, NJ
Bill McNeely -- St. Lucie County, Florida
Jackie McShane (deceased) -- Chicago, IL
Dick Miller -- Long Beach, California
Bob Moore -- Los Angeles, California
Joe Pecoraro -- Chicago, Illinois
Tom Renick (deceased) -- Volusia County, Florida
Bill Richardson -- Huntington Beach, California
Don Rohrer -- Los Angeles County, California
Frank Russell -- Jones Beach, New York