With three Olympic gold medals to her name, Brooke Bennett knows just how far the right team can take you. Throughout her successful career – 14 U.S. Championship titles, handfuls of international medals, the International Swimming Hall of Fame – she’s never lost sight of how she got there. “Your friends and family and coaches,” she says, “we rely on those support groups, on the teams we put together.”

Bennett has applied this team mentality to everything she’s done, from sportscasting to personal training to the various charitable organizations she supports.

Among those organizations is Swim Across America (SAA). What started as a single swim in Nantucket in 1987 has grown to include dozens of annual swims across the country and has raised more than $46 million for cancer research. Bennett did her first SAA swim 17 years ago and was integral in launching the Tampa swim in 2012.

In their search for a Tampa beneficiary, Swim Across America organizers hit upon Moffitt Cancer Center. “They described their developments in melanoma research, and because we’re in the Sunshine State and we’re an outdoor sport, it’s a perfect fit,” Bennett says. During the event, which is a half-mile, mile or 2.4-mile swim held at Clearwater Beach each May, Moffitt’s Mole Patrol® is out in force. The Mole Patrol includes doctors and nurses who set up skin screenings at community events around Florida to provide participants with melanoma prevention information and, if necessary, follow-up recommendations that can be taken to their primary physician or Moffitt Cancer Center.

Tampa’s first Swim Across America event in 2012 raised $100,000. In 2013, attendance increased and donations jumped to $150,000. The May 31, 2014 event broke last year’s record, and as this magazine went to press Swim Across...
America presented Moffitt with a check for $165,000. Because SAA only has four employees (located in Boston) and everything else is done via local volunteer committees, every dollar raised for the Tampa event goes straight to Moffitt.

A portion of these proceeds goes toward tumor-infiltrating lymphocytes (TIL) immunotherapy clinical trials being run by Moffitt’s own Amod Sarnaik, M.D., and Shari Pilon-Thomas, Ph.D., who participate in the SAA event each year. With SAA participants’ generous donations, Dr. Sarnaik says, Moffitt is “able to treat 18 patients who wouldn’t have been able to be treated through traditional funding mechanisms.” Without SAA, there would be no funding for the trial, and traditional funding mechanisms would not support this type of trial, adds Dr. Pilon-Thomas.

The investigators are studying the safety, side effects, and benefits of therapy with TILs in patients with metastatic melanoma.

The balance of the funds raised goes to the Adolescent and Young Adult (AYA) Program, which supports cancer patients who fall into a care gap between pediatric and adult age groups. Damon Reed, M.D., who established and directs the three-year-old program, says, “We wouldn’t be as far along today without Swim Across America. It almost immediately legitimized the AYA Program.”

For Bennett, Moffitt’s direct participation lends immediacy to the event and epitomizes the community aspect of Swim Across America. The latter is the rewarding part for Dr. Pilon-Thomas, too. While the money is certainly important, she says, it’s the energy of the event that “makes me want to come back to work and get this therapy going.”

Dr. Reed believes a lot of that energy comes from Bennett herself. “She brings a certain excellence to it,” he says. “It’s neat having someone who’s so clearly dominant in her sport and so clearly a fantastic personality wrapped into one.”
For Dr. Sarnaik, having adolescents, teenagers and their parents all come out for a fun-filled event adds a new dimension to raising cancer awareness. “It’s outstanding,” he adds, “the way Brooke’s leveraged her charisma and prestige as an athlete to give back to the community.”

This sense of giving back is stronger than ever for Bennett. She’s set her sights on the open water 10K at the 2016 Olympics in Brazil, bringing her involvement with Swim Across America full circle. The 10K wasn’t around when Bennett won her golds, but she’s been swimming in open water since 1997 – when she did her first SAA swim in Boston. “Essentially,” Bennett says, “Swim Across America gave me my passion to pursue what’s now an Olympic event.” Whether or not Bennett qualifies for Rio, her Olympic clout brings much-needed exposure to the fledgling event – which Bennett sees as an “opportunity to do something great for a sport that’s provided me so much.”

It’s that back-and-forth – that giving and receiving – that makes the partnerships in Bennett’s life so meaningful. Whether an individual is training for an Olympic race, or participating in a community event like SAA or receiving the next round of chemotherapy, Bennett stresses the importance of remembering we’re all in this together. Seeing survivors at Swim Across America events gives Bennett that “extra push” when the workout hurts or the race feels too hard; knowing that the inspiration goes both ways makes the partnership particularly rewarding. “If those watching the events see the love and the heart and the passion that we have to help them get better,” Bennett says, “then maybe when they feel like they have no fight left, they can find that fight through what we’re doing.”

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