

## Making a splash outside of ophthalmology

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### About the doctor

**Shlomit Schaal, MD**  
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Dr. Schaal, a competitive Masters swimmer, has received national medals.

Source: Shlomit Schaal, MD

For Shlomit Schaal, MD, her renowned retina work is just one of the passions she engages in on a daily basis. Another is competitive swimming. Dr. Schaal was actually afraid of the water until she was 12, despite the fact that she grew up in Israel where there's year-round sunshine and water sports predominate. It was her father who pressed her to learn, especially because it is a potentially lifesaving skill.

She ultimately learned to swim and by high school had gotten into the competitive aspect of the sport, specializing in the breaststroke. "I chose that because I knew other people rarely choose the breaststroke as their focus and I had a chance to excel in it," she said, adding that a lot of thought goes into executing the stroke perfectly, which appealed to her.

While swimming in high school, she met her future husband, Maor Schaal. "I met him at the pool, and we've been swimming together ever since," she said.

Dr. Schaal moved to the U.S. in 2005 and became director of retina at the University of Louisville. She found the atmosphere there dovetailed with her love of swimming. "Louisville is a big swim town," she said, noting that several Olympians hail from that region. "I had the chance to take lessons from prior Olympians who shared their style and experience."

Dr. Schaal excelled at the Masters level of swimming. She said her "greatest achievement" was coming in fifth in the U.S. when she was 41 years old.

In 2012, she had the opportunity to swim in a Masters competition in the new pool in Omaha, Nebraska, where the Olympic trials were held. "When I was standing at lane number 1, I could see all the way to lane number 10 because the water was so crisp and clear," she said. It was a rare opportunity to swim in the same pool the Olympians had. The pool was dismantled after the meet, making Dr. Schaal one of just a handful of swimmers who had that opportunity.

"[Swimming] brings back memories of my parents standing in the bleachers and cheering," Dr. Schaal said. Even when they couldn't be there in person, her parents always supported her efforts. "In 2013, my mom was very sick. I competed at the [Masters] nationals in the U.S. It was live-streamed and my mom watched it from her bed," she said. "She passed away about 3 months afterward."

Dr. Schaal's swimming evolved when she became a department chair at UMass Memorial Medical Center and the University of Massachusetts. She had new responsibilities and found that swimming in Worcester was not as competitive as it was in Louisville.

Both she and her husband took a new step: swimming outdoors in the many area lakes. "I never thought that I could swim in open water," Dr. Schaal said. The idea of swimming "free-for-all" was very scary for her because there are no set lanes; instead there is a throng of fervent swimmers in close proximity to each other who could unintentionally cause someone to go down in the water.

Yet Dr. Schaal found she enjoyed competing outdoors. "When you're in the pool, you focus on the distance, your speed, your stroke," she said. "When you're outdoors, there is a beautiful sunset, the water changes colors, and there is a calmness in being in this big lake."

There is also a meditative quality to swimming. "There is no email, no phone calls. There is nothing," she said. She added that this quiet time opens the opportunity for new ideas and thoughts, often centered around her ophthalmology goals.

Dr. Schaal hopes her drive in competitive swimming encourages others to follow their passions. She recalled how she motivated a patient to try competitive swimming and how the young woman then also got her brother into the sport. "I think that if you like music, if you like painting, or if you like dance, whatever it is, do it," she said. Then you can talk to your patients about that and perhaps they are also going to be inspired." 🍷

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