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## A Diving Powerhouse Springs From Georgia's Sandy Soil

**By DREW JUBERA**

MOULTRIE, Ga. — Past cotton fields and peanut farms, tall pines and wiregrass, small churches and roadside produce stands is a town square loaded with regional touchstones — historic courthouse, Confederate memorial, tanning salon. All that soon gives way to a leafy neighborhood street ending with a simple declarative sign: Dive With Champions.

Beyond it, a 10-meter platform tower rises from the sandy soil of this Deep South farm town like some diving-inspired Stonehenge.

The unlikely sight, about 200 miles southwest of Atlanta, is home to the [Moss Farms Diving Tigers](#) — perhaps the country's most improbable diving powerhouse.

Started in the 1960s by Robert Moss, a local farmer known as Moose who dug a pool on his own 2,000 acres so his children could dive, this out-of-the-way program is often compared to the build-it-and-they-will-come theme from "Field of Dreams."

"This is our cement pond," said a smiling Bobby Blank, a past Moss Farms president and a commercial airline pilot whose son, a team alumnus, dives at the [University of Georgia](#). "It ain't easy to get to, but when folks get here, they love it."

Divers from this land-locked agricultural hub of 15,000, situated well below the state's Gnat Line, have piled up an extraordinary list of accomplishments.

Moss Farms has produced two world age-group champions, at least 24 junior and senior national champions, and 39 Georgia high school state champions.

Its divers, both men and women, have been named [N.C.A.A.](#) all-Americans 38 times; two were named the N.C.A.A. diver of the year, including Moose's grandson, Clayton Moss, in 2003 at Kentucky. Virtually every Moss Farms product has been offered a Division I scholarship. Recent graduates dive at Georgia, Auburn and Tennessee, where [Ryan Helms](#) was the 2009 Southeastern Conference male freshman of the year.

The program's coaches are often as sought as the divers. The former Chinese national team coach Wenbo Chen came to Moultrie in 1994 and left seven years later for Purdue. He then became the coach for USA Diving's National Training Center in Indianapolis and recently moved on to the [University of Minnesota](#). Ron Piemonte, who replaced Chen, left in 2006 for [Virginia Tech](#).

"To have a program that started in a backyard pool that's developed that many top divers, I'm willing to say it's second to none," said Dan Laak, the head diving coach at Georgia, where a Moss Farms diver has been on the roster for nearly all of his 22 seasons in Athens.

"There are a lot of great athletes down there," he added. "In Moultrie, chances are you either play football or you dive."

The man who created this diving dynasty in the middle of football-mad South Georgia, is still talked about as a kind of indigenous force of nature — almost 16 years after his death.

Moss was raised in a log cabin on the plantation he farmed. The first football game he played in was the first game he ever saw. He was a combat pilot with the celebrated Flying Tigers, who fought the Japanese in China during World War II.

Back on the farm, he and his wife, Janie, raised cotton, tobacco, peanuts and four children. When his kids wanted to dive, he built a pool in 1965 with two Olympic-quality boards. He read everything on the subject and befriended elite coaches, including Dick Smith, a two-time United States Olympic team coach.

"He'd never been a diver, but he knew physics," said the former Moss Farms coach Jay Lerew, who now heads Team Orlando Diving, in Florida. "Moose was a genius when it came to knowing how to maneuver kids in the air."

Children across Colquitt County soon showed up at Moss's remote pool — the scent of hogs often wafting above the 3-meter board — and he coached them all at no charge.

The only price: his unsparing demands. Often compared to taskmasters like [Bob Knight](#) and Bear Bryant, Moss was feared and beloved. He barked like a drill sergeant. He poked erring divers with his cane fishing pole. If a diver balked at a difficult jump, he would stand by for hours, until the diver relented.

"If you weren't serious, you didn't last long," said Camila Knowles, 30, who went on to dive at Harvard and is now the chief counsel for Senator Saxby Chambliss, a longtime Moultrie resident.

"He was tough, but he loved the kids. He was teaching life lessons: hard work, discipline, how to overcome your fears."

In 1970, Moss's daughter Peggy won a National Junior Olympic gold medal. More championships followed. Divers from everywhere competed at the annual Moose Moss Invitational, camping out in cotton fields while feasting on barbecue and the local watermelons.

But Moss had grander visions. He spent five years gathering design ideas from other diving wells, then made a proposal to the city: the team would raise the roughly \$1 million needed to build the pool, including donated materials and services, if Moultrie supplied the property and maintained the facility. He framed it as economic development.

"I thought to myself, Moose, you've kind of lost it," the longtime mayor Bill McIntosh recalled. "But you had to know him. He was an inveterate dreamer who wouldn't take no for an answer."

The diving-only Moose Moss Aquatic Center — five platforms, eight springboards, a 6,000-square-foot dry-land practice area — is now considered one of the country's top outdoor facilities.

Moultrie has hosted national and international meets, including this month's USA Diving junior and age group championships. Athletes from five foreign countries trained at the facility before the 1996 Atlanta Olympics. Over the years, nearly a dozen youths, from as far away as Connecticut and Illinois, have moved to Moultrie to dive.

Moss died in 1993, from heart failure, at 75 — only months after the Aquatic Center opened. But he set up the club to flourish long after his death, and it has.

Moss Farms is registered as a nonprofit corporation run by volunteer parents. Its \$115,000 budget is financed by fees, donations and an annual dove shoot. The coaches' salaries are competitive with many colleges — the city and school board kick in stipends, because coaches also work for the recreation department and the high school.

"Moose envisioned the best way to carry forward what he wanted," said Rick Moss, 57, Moose's son and a member of the club's board of directors.

Rick Moss farms and lives on the family land. After driving the 12 miles there from town one afternoon, he parked his white pickup in front of the original diving well.

About the size of a typical suburban deck pool, it is still filled with fresh water: Moss, who dived at [North Carolina State](#), swims laps in it almost every morning.

He then drove a mile north to Poplar Arbor, a tiny settlement (population: 4) where his father was born and is now buried in the church cemetery. The only reminders of Moose Moss's diving legacy dangle from a decorative urn atop his gravestone: bass lures left by coaches who still fish the farm's irrigation ponds when they pass through Moultrie for a meet.

“He wanted to use diving to open doors for his children, and then to open doors for hundreds of kids since,” said Moss, standing beside the grave. “His principles and ideals were more important than diving.”

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