



A close-up, high-speed photograph of a swimmer in a pool. The swimmer is in the middle of a stroke, with their arms extended forward. A large splash of water is visible in the foreground, partially obscuring the swimmer's face. The water is a vibrant blue, and the background shows lane lines in a swimming pool.

FIGHTING FOR FASTER WATER

THE LONG WAIT FOR YALE'S NEW POOL

by Ryan Chiao

More than twenty years on, Yale's quest for a new pool remains fruitless. With the existing facility nearing its 90th birthday—despite millions already pledged by alumni—the University's plans to construct a new pool are still unclear.

Long gone are the glory days of the Robert J. H. Kiphuth Exhibition Pool. The space longingly referred to as the “Ex Pool” by alumni now more closely resembles a “Roman ruin” than the swimming mecca that it once was, said alumni interviewed by the *News*. The broken brown seats in the upper rows of the bleachers give off an aura of a program clinging onto past fortunes, rather than one looking ahead to the future.

But it has not always been this way. Upon its completion in 1932, the Exhibition Pool was the crown jewel of American swimming, drawing spectators and athletes from around the world to New Haven to marvel in the swimming prowess of the Blue and White.

Under then-head coach Robert Kiphuth, the Bulldogs raced ahead to a record of 201 straight undefeated dual-meets from 1945 to 1961, earning Kiphuth a reputation as the winningest coach in swimming history. A total of twenty-four Olympians have called the Exhibition Pool their home, winning a combined twenty-seven Olympic medals. In New Haven, records were broken, technique was developed, and Yale swimmers became some of the fastest in the world. The Exhibition Pool helped chart the course of modern swimming and diving. Eighty-nine years on, the program risks drowning in the rising tide of technological advancement.

“The Exhibition Pool does not compare to other Division I facilities in the Pac-12 or really in any other conference,” said Caitlin Tycz ’21, who spent two years racing at nationally ranked USC before transferring to Yale. “Without a doubt, the Exhibition Pool limits the recruiting capabilities of the team, the training of both the swimmers and divers, and our ability to host championship meets. On one hand, the history and tradition of the Exhibition Pool is irreplaceable and beautiful, but on the other, it inhibits the Yale swimming and diving team from reaching our potential both in the Ivy League and nationally.”

Through a Yale Athletics spokesperson, swimming and diving head coach Jim Henry declined to comment on the state of the pool today or his opinion on the potential advantages a new pool could bring to his Yale program and the wider New Haven community.

Murmurs about a new pool first emerged more than four decades ago. Excluded from hosting anything more than dual-meets due to changing regulations on competition pools, sentiment began to lean towards either the construction of a new pool or renovation of the existing facility. Despite the efforts of alumni

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— CAITLIN TYCZ, '21

from the swimming and diving community, however, little tangible progress has been made, and donations towards a new pool remain tens of millions of dollars away from the University’s most modest targets.

Last in the Ivy League

Yale’s competition pool is the oldest natatorium in the Ivy League. The second oldest is Cornell’s Teagle Pool, which was built in 1951—almost two decades after the Exhibition Pool.

The newest pool in the Ancient Eight, Brown’s Katherine Moran Coleman Aquatics Center, was completed in 2012 and has two moveable bulkheads which can separate the 56-meter pool into three different sections, providing the team with up to twenty-two lanes of space for practice when configured for short-course yards.

Yale’s Exhibition Pool, on the other hand, has only six 25-yard lanes. With more than forty swimmers, the team makes use of Payne Whitney Gymnasium’s third floor 50-meter pool for extra practice space. Without a separate diving well and only three diving boards, the team’s divers can only practice outside of their swimming teammates’ scheduled pool time,

which has previously forced divers to practice in the afternoons, according to current diver Christian DeVol ’21. The Exhibition Pool’s lack of a separate warm-up and warm-down pool also complicates swimmers’ plans during meets, with some choosing to forgo an elevator ride up to the third floor pool to warm-down out of fear of missing another event.

According to Carl Nylander, principal at aquatic design firm Counsilman-Hunsaker, an aquatic design firm that performed an audit of the old Brown facility in 2007 and helped to design Brown’s new aquatics center, modern pools benefit from updated technology such as perimeter gutter troughs to absorb waves generated by swimmers, more environmentally-sustainable filtration systems, deeper pool depths for diving and starting blocks, and different strategies for recirculating pool water.

For Brown men’s swimming and diving head coach Kevin Norman, who spent nine years as a recruiting coordinator and assistant coach for Yale, the Bears’ state-of-the-art facility is “advantageous for [his] athletes.”

“Being a newer and bigger facility, I have the ability to spread my athletes out and give them more space in practices,” Norman said. “That, combined with all of the natural light we get here and how well the facility is kept up, certainly plays a positive role in our daily workouts, both physically and mentally. From a performance perspective, our racing course is deep with wide lanes and flow-through bulkheads, which are all key contributors to fast swimming.” Yale’s comparably outdated facilities affect more than just the development of its swimmers, however. Potential recruits may favor other, more modern, facilities over the Exhibition Pool and turn their backs on the Blue and White.

According to Karl Ortegon, senior reporter at SwimSwam and former swimmer at Wesleyan University, “A bad pool is no fun.”

“For recruits, it’s definitely easier to dazzle them with a nice new facility,” Ortegon said. “If a pool is really bad, that could be a deciding factor if a swimmer is choosing between two or three schools that are very similar.”

While Ortegon believes that other factors, such as the program’s coaching staff and reputation, are more important in a swimmer’s college selection process, “A bad pool ruled out a couple of schools [for] myself.”

As NCAA and Ivy League championship specifications require pools to have at least eight 50-meter lanes, there are currently only three programs in the Ivy League—Harvard, Princeton and Brown—who are able to host championship meets. According to alumni and

current swimmers, if Yale were to build a new championship specification facility, it not only would be able to attract top talent from around the nation, but would also again be able to draw the fastest of the Ancient Eight to New Haven.

Benefits to New Haven

A new natatorium has the potential to not only change the fortunes of Yale swimmers and divers, but also those of the surrounding New Haven community.

According to the USA Swimming Foundation, ten people drown each day in the United States, while 64% of African American, 45% of Hispanic/Latino and 40% of Caucasian children have little to no swimming ability.

Twice a year, alumni and swimming and diving team members volunteer their time to teach local children aged 4 to 18 how to swim. The Diekmann/Green Swim New Haven program works with the Boys and Girls Club of New Haven, Saint Martin de Porres Academy, New Haven Age Group Track Club, and the University community to help children overcome their fear of water and teach them how to move safely through the water.

Though classes are hosted in the Exhibition Pool, the facility was not designed with introductory teaching in mind. The pool's depth varies from seven feet at its most

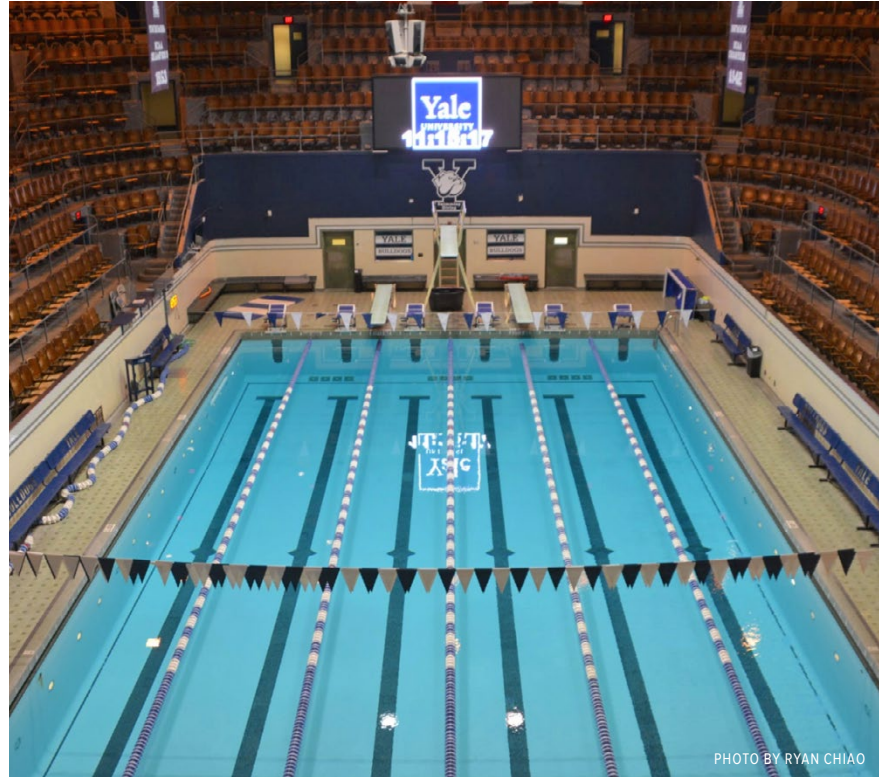


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shallow to twelve feet at its deepest, making it almost impossible for teachers and students to stand. According to Bebe Thompson '20, student leader of Swim New Haven from 2018 to 2020, new students often physically latch on to instructors when uncomfortable.

"This would be fine if the instructor could stand for support, but the instructors instead must tread water," Thompson said. "A more shallow pool would make an instructor's job easier, both physically and in terms of the comfort of the child they are teaching."

While the program was only offered biannually in previous years, the swimming and diving team, through the Swim New Haven program, plans to expand its offerings to weekly classes, according to swimming and diving association president Matt Meade '87. Though this change will allow the program to increase the number of students taught from its current number of approximately forty, it also presents the organizing team with new scheduling challenges to overcome.

"Between varsity athletics and recreational swimming, pool time and space is limited, and

community programs unfortunately do not currently take priority," Thompson said. "A new pool could facilitate an increased ability to offer swim and water safety lessons to the New Haven community."

A Lack of Direction

For more than two decades, swimming and diving alumni have pushed the University to replace the aging Exhibition Pool facilities for the Yale team and other users.

Formal fundraising for a new pool first began back in 1997, when a small group of swimming and diving alumni, led by former swimmer Thurston Twigg-Smith '42, gathered between \$5 million and \$6 million in pledges, of which \$2.2 million was actually donated. The initial flurry of donations and pledges quickly lost momentum, however, and it was not until an alumni steering committee—independent of the swimming and diving association—joined forces in 2010 to take up the pool project.

The committee, made up of former Yale swimmers Timothy Garton '64, Greg Lawler '69, Todd Kaplan '86, Lisa Rapuano '88 and

three-time Olympic gold medalist Steve Clark '65, focused on providing a vision and technical guidance to the University to encourage it to commit to the construction of a new 50-meter pool. The committee visited pools around the country, spoke to experts on natatorium design, and calculated construction cost estimates for different sites on Yale's campus. Detailed requirements for a first-class pool were drafted up. In 2013, the committee began discussions with Yale Facilities about the new natatorium.

"We were totally agnostic, and intentionally so, about where Yale should build a new pool—we weren't capable of having an opinion on that," Lawler said. "So we just said, look, we're not telling you anything about [where you should build it]; we're just telling you here are the elements you need for a modern pool."

According to Lawler, at the time, the University discussed two different options: a renovation of the existing Exhibition Pool in Payne Whitney Gymnasium or a new facility located further away in the vicinity of Yale Bowl.

Early designs by Pelli Clarke Pelli architects, commissioned by the University in 2013 and

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recently obtained by the News, indicate that such a renovation would increase the size of the 25-yard, six lane pool to 50 meters and nine lanes. A separate diving well with 5-meter, 7.5-meter and 10-meter diving platforms would be constructed, and sections of the existing bleachers and pool would remain in place. This expansion would allow the facility to gain championship-level specification.

An article in the winter 2015 issue of *ELI* made available on the Yale Athletics website and a 2015 press release on the *Giving to Yale* website suggested that a renovation of the Exhibition Pool would likely cost \$47 million. According to members of the steering committee, a separate Yale Bowl facility would likely only cost less than half that sum—around \$20 million.

The committee looked to the \$19 million Greensboro Aquatic Center in North Carolina as an example that a new championship-specification three-pool facility could be built at a relatively low cost.

“Greensboro is not an architectural masterpiece, but it’s a great swimming facility,” Lawler

said. “We were as clear as we could be with the University: You can decide where to put a new facility, but if your decision is a first class pool and out by the Bowl, we will get you to \$20 million.”

According to a 2014 *News* article, following protests from the steering committee over the administration’s unresponsiveness, members of the committee, alongside their swimming and diving association counterparts, sat down with University President Peter Salovey in March 2014 to discuss the pool project. According to the same 2014 *News* article, during the meeting, Salovey expressed both the University’s commitment to the project and its desire to renovate Payne Whitney, rather than construct a separate facility near Yale Bowl.

“As I mentioned in our [March] discussion, it is clear that we all want a pool with fast water, a facility that allows us to host Ivy Championships again and that allows our coaches to recruit against our peers,” Salovey said in an April 17, 2014, letter to Lawler obtained by the *News*. “We also want to support the broader athletic needs of Yale, and building a new pool at Payne

Whitney is the best location for us to achieve these goals.”

Shortly after the March meeting, the pool renovation was added to the University’s list of approved capital projects, according to steering committee member Clark.

In the early 2000s, Brown University, prior to the construction of the Katherine Moran Coleman Aquatic Center, similarly considered a renovation of the old Smith Swim Center, rather than a total replacement.

“The Smith Swim Center was built in 1973 and was in fair condition given its age at the time of the assessment,” Nylander, principal at aquatic design firm Councilman-Hunsaker, said. “There were components that didn’t meet current code standards, such as the deep end floor slope, or NCAA regulations, such as the overhead lighting which was approximately 20% of the recommended levels. A major renovation would have required the aquatic center to be brought up to current regulatory requirements and necessitated nearly 90% removal of the old pool shell.”

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PHOTO BY RYAN CHIAO

The new Brown natatorium cost approximately \$27 million ten years ago—almost \$31 million when adjusted for inflation. Since the March 2014 meeting with Salovey, the stance on renovation versus reconstruction seems to have shifted.

According to swimming and diving association president Meade, the University's focus has moved away from a renovation of the Exhibition Pool towards the construction of a new natatorium in the vicinity of Ingalls Rink and the Yale Health Center. Meade said that the swimming and diving association has been scouting out the area as a potential location and that the association continues to meet regularly with the Yale administration about the plans. This plan would help to alleviate concerns of inadequate structural integrity in Payne Whitney for a renovation of the scale necessary, minimize disruptions to the season during construction, and keep the pool in walking distance from most of campus.

"The Exhibition Pool is like a sports car. That

1932 car, you can do as much as you want to, but it's not going to ever be a 2021 sports car," Meade said. "I think a new facility is in the best interest of the program."

That facility would likely cost at least \$50 million, according to Meade, putting it in the same range as the Exhibition Pool renovation and making it one of the most expensive natatoriums in the nation.

Administration and Delays

In February 2018, Vicky Chun became Yale's director of athletics, replacing Tom Beckett, who served in the role for more than twenty-four years. With a new director at the helm, some alumni began to feel more hopeful about the eventual completion of the project.

According to Meade, Chun "made it very clear from the day she started that building a new pool was her number one priority."

Director of Athletics Vicky Chun did not respond to questions from the *News* on where exactly the pool stands in her list of capital

priorities, whether a site had been selected, or whether a projected timeline exists for the project. She also did not provide an answer to whether the current Exhibition Pool is a liability or asset to the swimming and diving program.

"Capital projects and fundraising have been at the forefront of our goals for Yale Athletics," Chun wrote in an email to the *News*. "In less than three years, we have made tremendous progress on those fronts, including donor funding for new video boards, playing surfaces, locker rooms, and training venues. While we continue to create new spaces and facilities, we also continue to identify areas of need for our historic athletics program and develop sound strategies on how to address them, including a competition pool."

Former swimmer Todd Kaplan '86 pledged \$1 million to the pool project several years ago. Growing up in North Haven, he first swam at the Exhibition Pool at the age of eleven. Two years later, he began training there and continued to do so through college. Like many

other alumni, his pledge was motivated by a desire to expand water access and education to the New Haven community and to update the University's obsolete aquatic facility.

"I believe that the many people at Yale focused on this project have done a fine job—and I know that the athletic department and the development office are both working hard to bring this together," Kaplan wrote in an email to the *News*. "This effort is expensive and complex—there are many other needs at Yale—and I believe that everyone involved wants this project to become a reality soon." However, not everyone shares in Kaplan's appreciation of the University's handling of the pool project.

Three-time Olympic gold medalist Steve Clark '65 feels that the University's lack of communication and coordination with swimming alumni and its "insistence on gold plating cost estimates for every option—despite reasonably priced two and three pool aquatic facilities already constructed elsewhere in the country—has seriously

deterred potential donors. "As far as I know, there is no fixed plan. I don't know how you can raise money when there's no official plan and drawings to persuade people to put their money toward," Clark said.

Former swimmer and water polo player Ted Jones '64 has been "squarely behind the new pool and [has been] angry with the University for a decade or more on their foot-dragging." And for former swimmer Alex Righi '09, the pool development plans are being implemented "far too slowly."

"It's been frustrating to see Yale let actual development of a new pool flounder for so long and, despite its many billions in endowment, put much of the onus on the swimming team alumni and/or beneficent university donors to fund the multiple millions required for a new pool," Righi said. "My hope is that the athletic administration continues its efforts to finalize plans for a new competition pool and that the broader Yale university administration prioritizes funding the project, at least in significant part, and constructing it as

According to Kristin Krebs-Dick '93, former president of the swimming and diving association, the University is continuing to work with "Fast Water"—a subcommittee of the association currently consisting of herself, Kaplan, Rapuano, Melanie Ginter '78 and Casey Whalen '96—to work out the best solution for a new aquatic facility.

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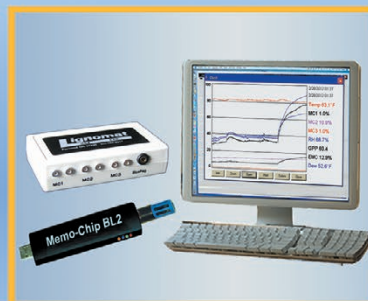
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soon as possible—I fear that anything less will be a major impediment to Yale’s ability to truly compete athletically with its peer institutions.”

Some alumni have also voiced concerns about the administration’s handling of early donations. In an Oct. 20, 2014, letter obtained by the *News*, a group of seven alumni who donated several million dollars in the late 1990s towards a new pool reached out in protest to University Vice President for Development Joan E. O’Neill over the University’s failure to invest pool donations into the endowment.

This group, which included the late former swimming and diving coach Phil Moriarty, suggested that the value of the donations in 1997 could have appreciated to nearly \$15 million. Instead, the development office told them that “they are worth their cash value when donated.”

“Several of us were explicitly promised by Yale at the time that our donations would be invested into the Yale endowment and grow until they were used for a new pool,” the seven alumni

wrote in the letter. “We have heard different explanations for this from your office, and frankly, none of them make any sense.”

According to University spokesperson Karen Peart, gifts that are restricted by the donor to cover the cost of a new building or renovation projects are not put into the endowment, because the endowment is “invested for long-term returns and its value may go down over the short term.” Instead, they are placed in a special account known as a plant fund, with the expectation that the funds will be spent in a relatively short period of time.

Former Director of Athletics Tom Beckett told the *News* in 2017 that the money was held in a plant fund because it was “assumed [it would] be used in a timely manner,” despite the relatively slow pace of fundraising and the absence of a lead donor for the project.

According to the same *News* article published in 2017, Yale Athletics, along with the provost and vice president of finance, created a University

Fund Functioning as Endowment in 2013 with the funding obtained for the pool project. The spendable yield from that fund helped fund the swimming and diving program—a decision made without approval from donors.

“On occasion, a donor makes a gift to create a new endowed fund but includes the explicit instruction that the fund be de-capitalized and applied toward the cost of a specific capital project when that project moves forward,” Peart wrote in an email to the *News*. “In the meantime, the income from the endowment is restricted to a designated purpose. There are three such endowed funds with a current market value of about \$5 million that will be de-capitalized and spent on a new pool at the appropriate time. In the meantime, the income from these funds supports the swimming and diving programs. Without instructions from the donor, the University would not consider de-capitalizing other endowed funds to construct a new pool.”



Looking to the Future

Decades after money was first donated to replace the Exhibition Pool, and despite both verbal and written commitments supporting the project from members of the Yale administration, there is little tangible progress to show.

As of October 2015, \$9.1 million had been pledged towards the pool project, according to a November 2015 *News* article. Chun did not respond to requests for clarity on the total amount currently pledged and donated as of April 2021. The COVID-19 pandemic has not made reaching the \$50 million fundraising target any easier, with no new donors having been secured since last spring, according to Meade. Still, he has received emails and calls from interested parties and has, as per standard practice, passed along their information to Yale Athletics.

Despite years of alumni-led fundraising and seven years of official University guidance, the

project has also failed in its efforts to attract an eight-figure lead donor.

“I know it’s been a source of frustration; we have a very passionate group of alumni, who, you know, want to see this pool built more than anything, and I certainly understand their frustration and their desire to turn this program, turn this facility, into the best possible opportunity for Yale to succeed in the pool—in diving, swimming, and water polo,” Meade said.

According to Kristin Krebs-Dick ’93, former president of the swimming and diving association, the University is continuing to work with “Fast Water”—a subcommittee of the association currently consisting of herself, Kaplan, Rapuano, Melanie Ginter ’78 and Casey Whalen ’96—to work out the best solution for a new aquatic facility.

Still, it remains unclear how many more years the program, the University, and the greater New Haven community will wait

for a new pool. With every passing year, the Exhibition Pool only grows older, which is more expensive to maintain and increasingly outdated in the ever-changing landscape of competitive swimming and diving. “I’d like to see [a new Yale pool] in my lifetime, hopefully,” Meade said.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Ryan Chiao is a sophomore at Yale majoring in Global Affairs. He serves as a photo editor at

the *Yale Daily News* and moonlights as a staff reporter for the sports desk. Contact him at ryan.chiao@yale.edu. This article was originally printed in the *Yale Daily News*.

Correction, Apr. 22: An earlier version of this story said that O’Neill did not respond to a request for comment. In fact, the News did not reach out to her for comment. the News regrets the error.