



Image: NATTC

SWIMMER Magazine | Nov-Dec 2025

## It's a Wonderful Pool

About that unexpected swimming scene in a holiday classic

Many families' treasured holiday tradition is watching the 1946 Christmas fantasy drama "It's a Wonderful Life," directed by Frank Capra and starring James Stewart and Donna Reed.

Loosely based on Charles Dickens's 1843 novella "A Christmas Carol," "It's a Wonderful Life" follows George Bailey (played by Stewart) as he wades through an existential crisis and is turned away from the idea of suicide when his guardian angel, Clarence Odbody, intervenes and shows Bailey how many lives he's touched over the years and how the world would not be as good if he hadn't existed.

As familiar as that storyline might be, there's one particular scene early in the film that causes many people to do a double take: What movie-making sorcery is responsible for making it look like there's a swimming pool under a retractable gym floor that partygoers tumble into?

The scene takes place in the high school gymnasium in the fictional town of Bedford Falls, where townspeople have gathered to celebrate the graduating class of 1928. George's younger brother, Harry (played by Todd Karns), is a member of that class.

A fine party is in full swing when the scene opens, with drinks and food, up-beat music, dancing, and laughter aplenty. George, who is preparing to spend the summer traveling abroad before heading back to college, reconnects with other townspeople. A friend asks him whether, as a courtesy, he'd dance with his younger sister, Mary, played by Reed.

George knew Mary when they were younger, and she idolized him. As soon as he lays eyes on her—now 18 and all grown up—it's a love connection. Dancing will be no chore for the pair, and they fall into sync. Just then, Harry announces it's time for the Charleston contest, and with a giant silver cup at stake, George and Mary hop to it.

They dance and dance, as Freddie Othello, a jilted would-be suitor of Mary played by Carl "Alfalfa" Switzer of "Little Rascals" fame, looks on forlornly. But then, his helpful buddy Mikey, played by Mark Roberts, presents him with an idea.

"Did you know there's a swimming pool under this floor? And did you know that button behind you causes this floor to open up? And did you further know that George Bailey is dancing right over that crack? And I've got the key."

The lightbulb lights up, and Othello presses the button. The floor begins parting as startled dancers squeal and sidestep the growing crack. But so wrapped up in their dancing are George and Mary that they don't notice. In fact, they think all the screams from other dancers are because they're dancing so well, so they pick up the tempo and inevitably dance right off the edge of the moving floor and into the pool below.

Surprised but unharmed, they continue dancing in the water, determined to win the contest. The rest of the celebrants soon jump in after them, turning the dance party into a pool party.

As outlandish as the scene might seem to our sensibilities today, it's not faked. The "Swim Gym"—a full basketball court with a 25-yard pool underneath it—really does exist and has long been a fixture at Beverly Hills High School in Southern California.

According to a 2020 article in *Aqua Magazine*, each half of the court is anchored to rows of 2 x 4s atop steel I-beams. At the turn of the key, "motors roll the platforms underneath the arena bleachers, where huge exhaust fans mitigate moisture."

The innovative, space-saving design by architect Stiles O. Clement was built in 1939 as part of the Works Progress Administration during the New Deal. That program led to the construction of many pools around the country (see "Ending the Great Depression With Swimming," July-August 2023), but this one was unique in being underneath a basketball court.

The Swim Gym was considered a cutting edge marvel at the time. Today it's still pretty impressive and remains a functional, creative solution to saving space, swapping seamlessly between tip-off and splashdown in just a few moments.

This holiday season, when you settle in to rewatch George Bailey's decidedly human fumble toward redemption with your loved ones, spare a thought for the architect who designed the Swim Gym. Do you suppose he earned any wings for his ingenious idea that gave swimmers a place to romp right in the school gymnasium?

---

## Also in this Issue

## **How to Do Starts With the New Blocks**

## **There's Something About the Water**

## **It's All in the Numbers**

## **Free-Styling**

## **10-Minute Dryland Workouts That Fit Into Your Busy Season**

## **When a Good Thing Goes Sideways**

### **3 Mistakes That Lead to Swimmer's Shoulder (And How to Fix Them)**

## **The Paradox of Asthma**

## **Beef Burgundy Over Noodles**

## **Ask the Coach: Rob Duguay**

## **From the Center Lanes: Ally Howe**

## **Recovery Tool Box**

## **My Second Life**

## **Like Mother, Like Daughter**

## **Ed Saltzman Receives 2025 RJA Award**

## **It's a Wonderful Pool**

## **The Importance of Video Review**

## **Holiday Gift Guide 2025**

© 2025 U.S. Masters Swimming