

## Learning New Skills is Fun .. Russell Parsons, OAM, ATFCA4, ASCTA (Bronze)

Young people are much the same the world over. My sixth visit to Pallikoodam school, Kottayam, India reflects this.

Over our three week visit, over 120 students, Nursery – St. 11 were involved in a comprehensive program of swimming skills, this year introducing younger swimmers to the Learn-to-Swim special expertise of Geelong coach and teacher Fiona Skinner; a new dimension to their swimming.

It's not just about going back each year and doing a whiz-bang presentation, but delivering a program that involves staff and empowers them to pick up aspects of an approach that is leading to progression in swimming at the school.

Pallikoodam has a 6 lane, 25m pool, roofed, thereby accessing the facility to all ages despite rain (monsoonal showers daily, June-October) or, at times, the incessant and draining sun.

When I first visited in 2000, there was no roof; now students can enjoy the option of swimming throughout the year, and the school is about to build an outdoor roofed recreation area that will offer similar advantages to students in their PE-skills programs. Drills like A-Skip, alternating Butt Kicks, breaststroke kick and tumble turn development sequences are familiar .. the skill repertoire of the students is expanding. Sessions for local athletics coaches were also conducted, and DVD programs provided.

This year, we were able to complete several athletics sessions, either at the school or at nearby Nehru stadium, usually late in the afternoon. Students are encouraged to take on extra-curricular options such as traditional dance, Kathakali (specialist dance skills for boys), karate, music, drama, athletics, soccer .... Fiona and I were privileged to see a very special Kathakali presentation (literally, a story-play) at the school during our stay .. it was memorable.

But, make no mistake, **no** Australian person should **ever** complain about the facilities they have available to them; in Kottayam, students have less, but appreciate more. Students strive hard to expand their skills, value and seek academic excellence, compete for opportunities to represent themselves and their Houses, take little for granted, appreciate assistance, and, always smile.

No restrictive petty politics here .. plenty of appreciation. Progress is accelerated when open minds are encountered.

For three weeks we were able to focus on presenting the best program we could offer, usually eight sessions each, six days a week. Fiona enjoyed and amazed her youthful and enthusiastic juniors in groups of 4-5 swimmers; my Intermediate and Senior swimmers, in groups of 10-12, worked hard to extend their skills. We are proud of them all.

Every day, every swimmer received a tag identifying the skill(s) they developed, and every week a certificate. The young swimmers and athletes proudly hung laminated tags on their lanyards, others simply collecting an impressive array of achievement tags ... the record was 28 skill-achievement tags. Senior swimmers completed a multiple choice test, soon to be applied to their Australian counterparts. These NWA initiatives have been offered (free) to Australian swimming and athletics bodies as one means of motivating and rewarding swimmers and athletics .. NWA swimmers and athletes currently enjoy the benefits.

The program culminated in the Annual House Swimming Gala (Carnival) this year won by an excited Shanti House, and included demonstrations by Fiona's junior swimmers to impressed and proud parents. Fiona was Guest of Honour at the Gala, declaring the event open, and presenting medals to the champion swimmers in each division.

Over the years we have gradually developed the program, from supplying kickboards, fins, medallions, stopwatches, caps, and posters; even the competition program. Each year I leave what is taken, thereby the schools resources grow. Especially pleasing this year was the inclusion of Individual Medleys, the Open Championship featuring the 4 strokes, the age-group sections, B/K ► B/R ► F/S.

Fiona's Learn-to-Swim program was supported by teachers joining in and we have laminated a series of cards that will help teachers to apply the program in the future. Happy kids and teachers enjoyed learning new skills that cannot but enhance their self-esteem.

In 2007, I will return, again, possibly with a squad of swimmers and general athletes to implement a drills-based PE program .. the DVD's are ready, interest is growing, and an application process is to be put in place for Australian youngsters to work with and help their friends in India. Already two parents, four athletes (swimmers and runners) and one school have indicated an eagerness to be part of the program. India is a culture, totally different .. Australia is only one lifestyle.

Mrs. Roy, the lateral thinking founder and Principal of Pallikoodam, will advise me of the most suitable time for our visit, with late-November - early December a likely option, as we co-ordinate the schedules of our respective education systems.

At Pallikoodam, the aim may be to swim faster, but that is not the main priority .. it is not just about performing faster .. it's about performing well.

After all, the only important test is *The Mirror Test* ... if you can look into the mirror, an **honestly** say to the image, *I have done my best* ... that's all that matters. You can never be better than your best.

A photo report: [www.nwaswimaths.com](http://www.nwaswimaths.com) ► PRESENTATIONS ► Pallikoodam 2006

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Photos are in a separate file

Copies: ASCTA (Tony Ryan); ATFCA; Riverine Herald