

Swimming: Changing Times (Wayne Goldsmith)

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If the first reaction is starting a sentence with "BUT" .. such a response is part of the problem, and, the respondent is unlikely to be part of any solution

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Written in 2004, the article brings together a number of issues that confront not just swimming, but all sports. It is lengthy document that Wayne has presented as a keynote speaker at various conferences, but, if you are eager to contribute / help your sport ... take the time to read and appreciate. Sure, there are issues provoked by his comments, but specific details do not over-ride the basic message.

If you are not riding the wave of change .. you might end up under it.

(Some sections of the article have been deleted .. but, **no changes have been made to the thrust of the message** .. read on)

Introduction – Why write this article?

In the past 15 years I have worked with swimmers, coaches, sports scientists and administrators across Australia and around most of the world ... I usually write about sports science or testing or technique, and do so with passion and enthusiasm.

I decided to take a break from drills and heart rates and write a far more important article ...

The future of the sport hangs in the balance ...

One could be fooled looking at the performances of elite swimmers around the world in the lead in to the 2004 Olympic Games that all is rosy with the sport.

The reality is .. it isn't.

There is no doubt that with the increase in funding and focus given to high performance sport over the past ten years and the impact of sports science, coach education, recovery and training techniques, that the elite end of the sport is looking fast and furious. But this represents about 1% of the sport. And, if the other 99% isn't going well, eventually even this elite 1% will struggle.

The common response from most national swimming administrations is to drive some form of junior development initiative with a focus on non-competitive swimming, fun and enjoyment, e.g. "GET SWIMMING" "TRY THE WATER" "SPLASH & FUN" type programs.

These programs have had some short term impact, and I applaud administrations for the effort.

Getting them into the water is one thing – the bigger issue is – what are we doing to keep them in it? What are we doing to create an environment which stimulates and entertains the kids, and helps them develop a life long passion for the sport?

To try and solve this issue, national associations around the world are putting in place some form of club development program: programs aimed at lifting the standards of governance, competition scheduling and athlete and family support at grass roots level.

Again, great initiatives, and only time will tell how effective these programs will be.

So, what's wrong with the sport?

Kids are different today

Talk to coaches in any country and they will tell you that it is becoming more and more difficult to "sell" swimming to kids. The traditional values that the sport embodies ... are out of pace with "fast food" attitudes of kids and parents in this century.

Start talking about commitment, responsibility, integrity, work ethic, selfless teamwork, sacrifice, dealing with pain and discomfort, learning to deal with competitive pressures, and coaches will find themselves communicating with the mirror – and no one else.

The truth is - kids ARE different. The basis for that difference lies in the entertainment driven society we all face. From young ages kids are given a stimulating environment of television, video, DVD, computers, internet, games, on line learning, Harry Potter, theme parks ... it's a great time to be a kid!

But take these kids and try to convince them that ploughing up and down a pool twenty hours a week for ten years to (maybe) become a national level swimmer is a pretty cool thing to do, and see how far you get.

Not all issues or circumstances can be addressed in one article, but, in my view, there are many home truths, and, not just for swimming

Media focus on other sports

In England and Scotland, the back five pages of the daily papers are football (soccer). It's the same in France, Portugal, Italy, Spain. Buy a paper when you hit Los Angeles, turn to the sports section, and you'll get basketball, baseball and US football..

South America .. football (nothing else).

South Africa .. rugby and cricket. Central and Northern Africa ... soccer.

In Australia ... it's football (AFL or one of the rugby codes, or, in summer, cricket and some tennis; (and, increasingly, soccer).



We all love reading the sports pages, but in terms of the future of swimming, what does this media focus on other sports do? How does it impact on swimming (or, athletics)?

1. Talent Drain

If you were a 12 year-old in Spain, or Italy or Brazil or England, who had great speed, power, flexibility and athletic ability, why would you choose swimming over football?

If you were a ten year-old, tall, explosive, lean, and athletically gifted in Chicago or Detroit, or Dallas or Los Angeles, why would you get out of bed at 5.00 a.m. six days a week to swim, when you could be out playing basketball with friends after school, and enjoy sleeping in.

If you were a fifteen year-old in Melbourne, Australia, tough, talented, determined, strong and a great competitor, why would you choose swimming rather than Australian Rules Football which offers 2-3 times per week training, and a chance to make a good income if you are among the top 300 players in the game?

The best athletes in the world are playing football (or, maybe basketball). This is not to say swimmers are less talented or less gifted than athletes in other sports, but the reality is, with the power of the media and the exposure football gets around the world, when it comes to making decisions about which sports to choose, swimming is not the top choice for the majority of kids.

Truth is, swimming (and athletics) are being out marketed, and out promoted ... by football, and to a lesser extent by basketball in most parts of the world.

(Other place-specific examples offer a similar outcome.)

2. Sponsorship

Some sponsors are true philanthropists. They have a genuine desire to help and develop young kids to achieve their potential.

However, the nature of business is **cost – benefit**; that is, if I spend this money, how does it benefit the business?

Ask yourself this question: if you had a million bucks to invest in sport, what would you do? (You may have a swimming background and therefore a degree of bias in making your decision .. however, for a moment, stand outside your sport (swimming or athletics) and look objectively at that sport from the perspective of a potential sponsor.

Swimming ..

- (i) The sport gets little publicity or media coverage outside of major international championships.
- (ii) The athletes, outside the real superstars like Phelps, Thorpe, Hackett, Coughlin .. get little recognition.
- (iii) The athletes look great and present a positive image. But, outside of the few real superstars in the sport, who can improve the sales of my product-service if it isn't swimming related? .. i.e. swimmers can "sell" swimming gear, but what about cars, televisions, breakfast cereal, air conditioners and holiday destinations?
- (iv) If I (the sponsor) put money into football, I get national exposure on a weekly basis, plus the print media and ground signage, players' team gear, playing equipment, and so on.

Now make an informed decision on what to do with your million.

That's the decision sponsors and potential sponsors all over the world have to make when swimming associations, clubs, coaches and athletes approach them for support.

3. Recognition

While in an ideal world, people would do things for the pure thrill and love of what they do and to strive for excellence because of an inner drive and determination to do so ... this is not an ideal world.

People are generally motivated by recognition .. parents, family, friends, colleagues, the public or the media. With swimming competing with so many other sports and news worthy stories for media coverage, recognition of all but the super stars is hard to achieve.

That leaves a lot of very hard working, talented kids and coaches unrecognized, unheralded, and generally unappreciated.

So, here's the common response .. "it's the *media's fault* .. they don't promote swimming (athletics)".
"If the media got behind us and promoted swimming the same way they promote football, we could solve these problems" ... this is the common cry.

Well, here's the news ... **they aren't going to!!!**

The culture of football is so strong in some nations it represents a significant proportion of the national identity. The industry of football is worth billions around the world .. thousands of media writers and broadcasters make their living promoting and commenting about football. It is estimated that **of all sport televised around the world, almost 90% is dedicated to soccer.**

That leaves 10% ... for basketball, cricket, rugby, motor sport, horse racing, swimming, tennis, athletics, ... to fight over.

No matter how great swimming is as a sport, as a life skill, or as a life changing experience (and many sports can be vehicles for the acquisition of life skills), we will not change the culture of professional sports dominating the media landscape. And, as with any landscape that you can't change, you have to learn to work around (within) it.

Tough Question

Now, here is the tough question ... if you feel there is something wrong with swimming (your sport), and things have got to change: **what are you doing about it?**

This is not a FINA problem. This is not Swimming Australia's problem. This is not ASCTA's problem.

This is a problem for all of us ... everyone involved in the sport.

This problem is bigger than political barrier between associations .. between State and National bodies .. between National bodies and FINA.

It may surprise you to know that in every country, in every town, at every club, you hear the same stories:

- Numbers of registered swimmers are down
- We can't compete with other sports
- Kids drop out of swimming when they turn 15 to concentrate on school
- The local/state association is backward; they run meets the same way they did 20 years ago, and when you ask them why, they say: "That's the way we do it here".
- It costs too much to get pool space and there is not much of it anyway.
- We need a heated long course pool for year round use, and it's the governments fault we don't have one.



So, you sit down with people who are concerned and involved and talk about solutions, about a positive way forward, about working together in the interests of kids and the sport. Guess what the response generally is?

**"You don't understand. It's different here. Those things wouldn't work here.
This club (or town, or country) is different."**

Well, it's **not** different. You are the same as everyone else in sport around the world and you want the same things:

You want more kids in the sport

You want them to stay in it longer.

And, you want them to commit to all the sport has to offer while they are in it.

Let's be honest. The biggest limitations to the future success of swimming (your sport) are now, as they have always been
personalities and politics

In swimming's case, not only does the sport have to deal with limited resources, publicity, media promotion, and now dwindling numbers, but we then add to the problem by arguing and fighting among ourselves over petty political issues.

I have seen rivalry between swimming clubs or between other factions within the sport ... bordering on the type of hatred usually reserved for major religions or nations at war.

Wake up ... we are all about the same things

Get over it ... the sport (and kids and families) is suffering because of it.

If we can't work together towards a common goal, how can we possibly compete against other sports and other activities to which kids are drawn? Why not just give football and basketball the names and addresses of our registered swimmers and finish the job?

Solutions - what are we doing about it?

The solution to any problem can generally be sought from three different approaches:

1. Accept It – don't do anything

This is fine. Keep doing what you are doing, and don't worry about the future of the sport. Just stop complaining about what's wrong with it.

2. Leave It – get out of the situation and away from the problem

Plenty of jobs in other sports and other industries. Like an ostrich, if you can't see the problem, then there isn't one.

3. Change It

Mad? Angry? Passionate? Determined? Enthusiastic? We want you! Read on

Swimming .. what have we got to sell? (Of course, many of the "selling" points can be claimed by other sports as well .. swimming must quality control and sell better young people who have a basic interest in the sport.)

- Swimming is an outstanding sport. It is a pure sport – little or no equipment required. Just athletes, swim suits, some goggles .. add water.
- Swimming teaches life lessons that create great people, not just great athletes.
- Swimming teaches team work, confidence, self-belief .. and athletes develop goal setting abilities.
- Swimmers learn how to overcome adversity, and learn how to strive for excellence.
- Swimmers learn about health, physical fitness and nutrition.
- Swimming helps prepare athletes for life.
- Swimming saves lives ... learning to swim can save your life and the lives of people you love.
- Swimming is non-weight bearing exercise that is great for joints and cardiovascular fitness for all ages.

- Less than 1% of swimmers ever make it to a national team.
- Fewer than 1% of those (who do) ever win a Gold Medal at a major international championship.
- And, only a **very** small number of those who win, will become superstars and household names.



So, if we agree, it's a **great product** ... **what needs changing?**

We do !!

Some suggestions to think about:

1. Not every kid has to be (wants to be) an Olympic Gold Medalist

Yet, we persist in selling the dream to every swimmer at every level that nothing less than an Olympic Gold medal is being successful. It's like saying to everyone who ever held a job "unless you become a millionaire, you are a failure", or, like telling every kid in school that unless they get a PhD they are an idiot.

This is one of the biggest issues in swimming. We talk the talk about other values and the virtues swimming teaches .. about developing team work and life skills and self-confidence, but **when it comes down to it, we are about medals.**

We need to turn this upside down.

We need to make a real commitment to the process of developing people, not just athletes.

Medals do not make great people ... great people, with a strong sense of integrity, hard work, self-belief, honesty and sincerity are often medal winners.

2. Not every program has to be built on 2 x 2 hour sessions, six days a week

Why do we persist with this twice a day – six days a week model? Because it has always been done that way!

If this type of thinking persisted in all fields of endeavour, we would still be driving Model T Fords.

I am not suggesting for one minute swimming is easy. I am a passionate believer in the importance of hard work, commitment and dedication to be successful.

However, there seems to be an unwritten rule that every program is about getting the swimmers to swim twice a day, every day, as soon as possible in their development. Most of the world is using the same model. Are there no other options?

Think .. Examine and react positively and creatively to your circumstances

- Why not shorter sessions, more often?
- Why not longer sessions in the afternoons mixed in with more variety in training options, including homework or meal break as a team?
- Why not skip a full day mid-week to give kids time to do other things, then go three times on Saturday and Sunday?
- What about training twice a day for three days, then a rest day, then another three days only training afternoons for three hours?
- How about putting whole family activities in place – workouts for parents, lessons for younger kids, cross training activities around the pool area and/or gym?

The people we are alienating most with the obsession of training early mornings and late afternoons, six days a week, are parents.

The economics of the western world largely depends on both parents working full time.

This means people who are tired, often under pressure and with no chance of their own personal exercise program have to commit to 5:00 a.m. starts, six days a week, and maybe even have to cut out of work early to make the afternoon pick-up. Over the course of a season, we then have parents who are exhausted, and the demands of the sport of choice of their children may influence their health, work performance and relationships.

Swimming is a family commitment. Parents drive kids to training and meets at inconvenient times, and pay for the privilege. Parents get roped into time keeping and lane judging for no money and limited recognition on weekends and at club nights ... and still have to pay to get in.

Twice a day every day, might be perfect for fitting maximum training time in around school. It might be great for allowing maximum recovery time between sessions. But, it is lousy for dealing with the realities of family life in this century.

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- And, only a **very** small number of those who win, will become superstars and household names.

3. Outdated competition schedules

Think about what we do to kids.

Imagine an eight year-old girl looking to become a swimmer. She joins a club. She trains for a while and is encouraged to go to her first competition. Mum and Dad, excited about new challenges the sport has to offer, also commit to going to their first meet.

So, what do they see?

The child (and their parents) sit and watch 31 heats of 9 and under 50 backstroke; 18 heats of 11 and under 50 breaststroke; 29 heats of 12 and under 50 freestyle; then “they” (child, supported by parents) get to swim their own heat of the 50 butterfly, which takes all of 40 seconds.

Then, they sit in the stands while Mum and Dad watch another 44 heats of 7 and under freestyle, etc. etc.

This goes on for two days.

And, we charge the parents for the privilege of sitting there (usually done in an uncomfortable setting, like an overheated indoor pool, or hot outdoor pool in summer).

Now ... think about what the family sees when they go to soccer, football, hockey, basketball, tennis,

- The child is constantly active and moving
- The game is over in 40-90 minutes
- They can usually watch the game from the sidelines for nothing in a local park.
- They only have to watch one game – the one their child is involved in.

Again ... put yourself in the parent’s position. If you were looking for a sport to choose to support, which one would you choose?

Why do clubs, districts and states, and even nations, continue to promote outdated competition programs for swimmers?

The answer is simple – time, convenience and money. Putting on all day meets is easy because you pay one set of pool hire fees, organise one group of caterers, etc. - we do it because it’s the easiest way to do it.

- Why not meets for backstroke only? Or only distance events?
- Why not meets for 6-9 year-olds, and hold the meet for only 2 hours maximum, with all kids swimming 5-6 times?
- Why not events for 16-18 year-olds only?
- Why not more fun events?
- Why not events where the total results of the team or club are the only ones that count?
- Why not encourage swimming more events by counting the combined total time in all events in the age-group?
- Why not have the meet going all day, but 6-9 year-olds in one 2 hour block, 10-13 year-olds in another 2 hour block, and 14 years and older in another block of time, so pool space booking is efficient, but everyone does not have to stay all day?
- Why not provide other activities and entertainment for families with more than one child attending?
- Why not provide age related prizes for competitors, rather than just ribbons or medals for age-groups?

The actual meet format can be one of a million choices. (The most appropriate ideas may be place-specific, but, the range of ideas is only limited by your imagination.)

The point is that unless parents and kids are presented with competition formats that are entertaining, innovative, and less demanding on family time, we will have a battle putting together any types of meets in the near future.

Surely, the problem is inherent in Athletics (Senior and Little); others can better decide than I the extent to which other sports experience similar issues.

4. **Outdated Reward Systems** (special note)

So think about our 8 year-old, again.

See NWA **Presentations** and **Programs** for examples; the current record (Dec. '05) for collected swim Skill-Award tags is 186

Imagine she (and her parents) survive 6 or 7 years of these two day torture tests we call competitions.

She is now a teenager with an enormous range of choices to make – school, boys, maybe part-time work, other sports, other activities, etc.

When she was eight, and swam well, she was rewarded with ribbons and medals.

Now, she is a teenager and swims well; she is rewarded with the same ribbons and medals. And, she still has to sit for two days watching 57 heats of the nine and under backstroke.

Meanwhile ... her friends are out enjoying life, earning and spending money, spending time working on extra credits for school, etc.

Is it any wonder most competition programs read

Event 1: 35 Heats, 9 Years & Under 50 Metres Backstroke

Event 2: 29 Heats, 10 Years and Under 50 Metres Butterfly

Event 3: 1 Heat, 16 years 100 Metres Freestyle (and there was only five in the heat so they combined it with the next age-group)

Sound familiar?

Coaches, clubs and administrators often ask, *“Where do all the swimmers go when they get to 15 or 16 years of age?”*

Does the question really have to be asked?

If you were designing another product, i.e. other than swimming, to sell to kids, would you design the same product for eight year-olds that you also hope to sell to sixteen year-olds?

Even if you designed the same product for both age-groups, would you sell and market it the same way to both groups?

Yet, this is what we do. And we do it all over the world. And we all wonder, *“Where are the kids going when they turn fifteen-sixteen?”*

We blame school. We blame other sports. We blame hormones. We blame parents.

We'll guess what ... It's our (the world swimming community's) own fault.

We basically plan and conduct meets for our own convenience, and not to meet the needs and demands of the people we are trying to attract to the sport and keep in the sport; i.e. *“you fit in to our way of doing things, or go somewhere else.”* More and more people won't fit in .. and they will go somewhere else.

*People think with their brain;
but, vote with their feet*

Summary

The easiest way to go insane or die bitter and angry, is to hold on to your passionate beliefs, resisting all change, and wait for the world to change its way of thinking to yours.

If you believe something is wrong – do something about it.

If you believe more needs to be done – do it yourself.

If you want more media coverage of swimming ... get to know local journalists and feed them good stories. And, if they say “no”, ask them again. And again. And again. The “squeaky wheel gets the most oil”.

If you don't like the politics of your sport, get yourself on to a committee and change things.

Coaches: If your swimmers are leaving your program for another sport, challenge yourself to change your program to be a more stimulating environment ... one that is more in touch with the entertainment driven lifestyle kids now face all over the world.

Get behind your coaching association and help drive it forward. Take an active role in the decision-making process, and lobby them to get things happening.

Administrators: If registrations are falling, challenge yourself to revamp and revitalize your competition programs, and offer a “product” that is appealing and stimulating to swimmers and their parents and families.

Support your State and National associations. Lobby them, help them, give them ideas, help them with fund-raising, and work with them.

Forget the past – or we have no future.

For those who have read this far .. well done; you have demonstrated your interest and commitment to dynamic growth.

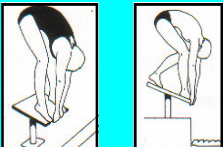
Wayne has highlighted a few things that can be discussed and addressed. Many place-specific aspects need to be appreciated and discussed.

Try not to dismiss, out-of-hand, suggestions or scenarios that may seem to have little application.


For example, the suggestions regarding outdated competition schedules and outdated reward systems are clearly in evidence in many sports.

e.g. NWA has been trying **for many years** to address both issues (e.g. many examples of motivational and skill tags are on view in Presentations and Programs.

NWA Swimming **6**

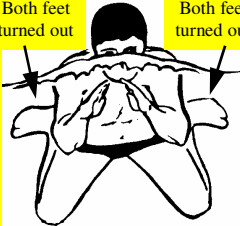


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