

The World Swimming Coaches Association Newsletter

Vol 10 Issue 3

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A History of Australian Swim Training

PART 1 OF 4

By Forbes Carlile - October 9, 2004

A presentation at the World Swimming Coaches Clinic in Indianapolis, Indiana, under the auspices of the American Swimming Coaches Association.

[I would like to thank ASCA for the invitation and opportunity to present here at the world's premier Swimming Coaches' Conference. I agree with Nort Thornton that "the older one gets it seems the less one knows." This became clear to me as I prepared this paper. Presenting the history of Australian swimming training in one hour is a daunting task. My delivered speech was a shortened version of the prepared text that follows.]

The development of Australian swimming has very much depended on what happened in England from the mid 1830s, and later in the twentieth century in the USA. Australia has certainly made important contributions to swimming, but especially in the early stages, progress came from England. Later, it will become evident that it was American coaches and swimmers who had considerable influence on world competitive swimming.

Historically, training to swim was driven largely by necessity, for example, in warfare to cross unfordable streams. There always has been the power of circumstance, the influence of climate, the availability of suitable water, and dependence on social attitudes that have influenced the sport's development.

In antiquity, it is known that the Greeks and the Romans built many pools and indulged in swimming as a form of exercise, education, and recreation. The legendary Leander is said to have swum the Hellespont to meet with his beloved. However, in the Dark and middle Ages, water often, and probably rightly so, was blamed for the scourge of deadly epidemics that swept Europe. Wars, living conditions and long working days, were not conducive to sports, especially swimming in open, and usually cold, water. Even for the most enthusiastic, swimming most of the time would not have been a particularly pleasant experience. In 1836, we know the first swimming races were held in the Lambeth Baths, London. In 1846, in the former penal colony of Sydney, Australia, the earliest swimming races were held in the harbor near the Botanic Gardens.

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At that time the stroke of choice was the *sidestroke* with both arms submerged and the legs propelling with a wide scissor kick. Old records tell us, many ventured to swim over a mile into Sydney harbor, from Woolloomooloo, just around from where the Sydney Opera House stands today, around Garden Island and back. However a fatal encounter with a shark dampened this enthusiasm and prompted the construction of the first shark-proof harbor swimming enclosure in Australia in 1850. It was a meshed area, at a spot called Fig Tree in Woolloomooloo Bay.

This was 30 years before the Englishman, "Professor" Fred Cavil, father of the famous Cavill family of swimmers, in the 1880s built Sydney's first "floating baths" in Lavender Bay. The first NSW championships were held in 1889 in the long- since demolished Sydney Natatorium, an indoor pool near Central Railway Station. It was filled with salt water pumped two miles from the harbor.

Early Training

A recent search through early swimming books and aging newspaper files provided few details of how training was carried out in early days of competitive swimming when, both in England and in Australia, racing in enclosed pools and in open water was becoming increasingly popular. It can be surmised that the centre of attention was on improving the efficiency of swimming techniques because of the obvious progress which could be made by swimmers who over a period of more than three-quarters of a century successfully experimented with and adopted new, and faster, swimming styles. The comfortable and time-honoured breaststroke gave way to the underarm sidestroke, and then to the one-arm-over the water sidestroke. Next came the "Trudgen", with both arms recovering over the water with the scissor kick, often called the "double overarm." This was followed in Sydney in the early 1900s by the revolutionary stroke from the South Seas, the Crawl stroke. With the evolution of new stroke techniques major gains resulted. At this time there appears to be little concern for training (physical conditioning).

The "professors" of swimming offered some advice. During the second half of the nineteenth century, their primary training advocacy mainly was support for what was regarded as a healthy lifestyle, for example, leaving one's bedroom windows open at night and eating the "right" foods.

The first book on competitive swimming was the highly acclaimed work of Charles Steedman, published in 1867. Steedman, born in 1830, was a professional champion of England and later in Australia having migrated to Melbourne. He died there in 1901. Ralph Thomas (Swimming, 1902) says "Steedman informed me that he never trained and there is little doubt that other champions of his day (1850) did not either." Thomas quoted William Wilson, from the Swimming Instructor (1883) in its day another influential treatise on competitive swimming, after listing foods to avoid, "One must be temperate in all things, in food, in drink and exercise." Good advice no doubt, but there was not too much about swimming training.

An Early Training Model

Specifically, Steedman (1867) advised a model training schedule (Cecil Colwin, Breakthrough Swimming, human Kinetics, 2002, pp. 124-125.) This is my abstract of the model.

5 AM Rise. Then, following walking a mile briskly, run up a hill for a half-mile as rapidly as possible, followed by four miles at moderate pace.

7 AM Breakfast. Rump steak or mutton chop, underdone without fat and a small piece of stale bread followed by rest or take very gentle exercise with dumb-bells for the remainder of two hours.

9 AM Walk two miles at moderate pace. Swim sharply for a quarter of an hour or 20 minutes [this would be not much more than half a mile]. Either plunge at once into cold water or have a sponge bath; be well rubbed down with a dry, coarse towel; dress quickly and eat a dry biscuit or a small piece of stale bread. Then walk three or four miles at moderate speed, lie down on

a bed for half an hour and on rising take a glass of old ale or sound sherry, and eat a hard biscuit.

1 PM Walk four miles. Exercise for 1 ½ hours to develop the muscles of arms and trunk; Rest for half an hour.

4 PM. Dinner. Rump steak or mutton shop, one or two mealy potatoes and a little greens; no pastry or cheese. Rest until 5 PM.

5 PM Walk a mile sharply. Run a half mile at top speed and walk 4 miles at moderate pace followed by a half-pint of old ale or wineglass of sherry, and a hard biscuit. Gymnastics for arms and chest until 8 PM.

8 PM Rest, amusing conversation or light reading.

9 Pm Body to be well rubbed down with coarse towels and bed until 5 AM the next morning.

A booklet published in 1915 by the English Swimming Association, *Swimming by Champions of the World* included an article by Professor Tom Hatfield, a prominent long distance swimmer and leading coach of his day. His advice as a "first matter to be strictly observed is ... to sleep in a well ventilated room (with a window open) and remember always to keep the bowels regulated."

"Fifteen minutes daily of kneading of the muscles," he claimed to be essential together with the warning that "late night dancing and other excesses" should not be indulged. There follows the advice not to smoke, "especially cigarettes." Contrary to suggestions by Steedman and earlier trainers, Professor Hatfield warned "to abstain from alcohol."

The "extreme" swimming distance in a day's training advocated by Hatfield was one mile. His words then however were prophetic. Tom Hatfield wrote, "It is necessary to practice distance swimming both for sprint and distance ... a man can then stand more punishment than one who has confined practice to sprinting." Most of us would agree with that today.

Australia's First "Golden Age"

I have not found any detailed training schedules of great Australian swimmers of our first "Golden age" of swimming, after the turn of the twentieth century. Then there were swimmers such as Fred Lane, winner of the gold medal for 200-m freestyle at the Paris Olympics in 1900, the trail-blazing Fanny Durack, winner of the first Olympic swimming event for women in 1912 at Stockholm, and other outstanding swimmers such as Barney Kieran, Frank Beaurepaire, and Cecil Healy, the latter being a swimming scholar and prolific writer who pioneered the use of stylized Australian 2-beat Crawl stroke with regular breathing. It seems very little was ever written about their training or conditioning as it might have been called in those days. Writings were about technique, but very little about training.

An Australian swimmer became prominent at the Paris Olympic Games of 1924. At 16 years of age, Andrew "Boy" Charlton won the 1500m in world record time and established himself as an icon in Australian swimming. Riding high in the water with what may best be described as a Trudgen crawl stroke with a sideways and vertical kicking action; it is known that Charlton swam for only 3 or 4 months of the summer. He seldom covered more than half a mile as well as a few laps of kicking in a typical daily training session.

The belief was, at the time, that more than this would lead to over-training and the few Sydney coaches, including Charlton's coach Harry Hay at the Manly harbor pool, advised through most of the 1930s that to swim further was to invite "staleness".

Australia's Decline in the 1930s

In the USA and in Europe during the 1920s and 30s there were increasing numbers of club and college indoor pools built for year-round swimming. Australian competitive swimming slipped backwards until by the time of the 1936 Olympic Games the country had only five swimmers selected for Berlin and only one made a final with backstroker Percy Oliver finishing seventh. Australians had disappeared from the list of world record holders. They were in awe of American and Japanese swimmers.

In Sydney, where for years the majority of Australian swimming champions had been spawned during the summer months at beaches and harbor pools, there was only a 20-yards long indoor pool, at Tattersall's, a private club in the city. It was built in the early 1930s as a replica of the pool at the Illinois Athletic Club, Chicago, where Johnny Weissmuller trained. It was not until the late 1960s that even a handful of Sydney swimmers could train indoors during the 6-month "winter" period. The situation was a little better in Melbourne but there were no indoor swimming facilities in other Australian cities, so in the 1930s we watched as the Americans and Japanese swimmers practically swept the Olympic Games medals in 1932 and 1936. Both those countries, with very much better facilities and many times our population, had collegiate competition and in the summer outdoor training. The competitive gap widened between us.

Searching through old documents and newspaper files at the NSW State Library I came across a swimming program for a Mosman Amateur Swimming club carnival held at Clifton Gardens, a harborside pool, which like most of the original open water pools is now long gone. There, included amongst the names of starters in a 50m-handicap race was one F. Carlile. The date on the program was March, 1931. This was 72 years ago with I was 10-years old. I think this was my first appearance at a swimming "carnival" as such meets have long been called in Australia. So, swimming has been an important part of my life for a long time.

As a schoolboy in the latter years of the 1930s, periodically during the summer, I "trained" in a fairly haphazard manner at the Spit Baths in Middle Harbour and eventually became the Spit Club's junior champion and captain. It was at the Spit I remember watching the Hawaiian-American distance champion Keo Nakama give an exhibition swim amongst the jelly fish in this tidal pool (demolished many years ago). At the North Sydney Olympic Pool, which opened in 1936, I watched American Jack Medica, winner of the 400-m freestyle at the Berlin Olympics give an exhibition swim. We had no Australians who could give him a good race. A later US visitor was Ralph Wright who demonstrated what seemed an efficient low recovery of his arms in the breaststroke (butterfly), which I taught John Davies who later went on to win an Olympic gold medal.

Johnny Weissmuller

In "Swimming the American Crawl" (1930), Johnny Weissmuller, voted America's "Greatest Swimmer of the First 50 Years of the 20th Century" made the bold statement (p. 56), "If my records are beaten to any great extent in the near future, it will be due to superior physical development coupled with perfect execution of the stroke as now conceived." It was generally thought then that he had a near perfect technique. In this much read book, there is reference to the fact that Weissmuller's training as a rule consisted mainly of a *quarter mile swim*, in a 20-yard pool.

Throughout the 1930s in the USA the competitive swimming scene was buoyant although it was clear that the Japanese, at the Olympic level, very largely with their college groups were well in front in men's freestyle. Reported as swimming up to 5 miles (8 km) a day, they were far out-training the Americas with a zeal, which their rivals called *fanaticism*.

Coach Robert Kiphuth of Yale University

Bob Kiphuth at Yale University and Coaches Ulen and Larcom at Harvard wrote in the late 1930s about a total of a mile or less training daily during the three-month college season. All the evidence I have reviewed suggests that in the USA the consensus around that time was that at the most covering a mile in a day was what was required for high-level performance. Stan Brauning, from the mid 1930s to mid 1940s coach at the Chicago Towers Club and coach of the American swimming hero Adolph Kiefer, spoke of the training of his star team, "My kids swim a mile every day – sometimes more than that." It seems that only about a mile of swimming was the norm.

Jimmy McLane

By 1944 Coach Harry Minto of the Akron Firestone Club developed a youngster who won the US long distance, open water National Championship and was runner-up to Keo Nakama in both the 800 and 1500m national championships. Nakama, the middle distance freestyle champion nurtured in Coach Sakamoto's group in Hawaii would almost certainly have been doing many training miles. However, what startled the swimming world at least on the mainland was the knowledge that the 13-year-old "boy wonder" Jimmy McLane, besides having big feet and above normal "flexibility," was regularly covering the almost unthinkable distance of three miles a day.

Up to the mid-1940s in Australia, we continued to look to America for swimming inspiration. We picked up dryland strengthening, which Yale and US Olympic Coach Bob Kiphuth had his swimmers working on. His "callisthenic" exercises included pulley-weight-strengthening, and medicine-ball training.

Australia still had very few indoor facilities although Municipal Councils were beginning to build outdoor pools for summer use only. They were mainly 55-yard "Olympic Pools" with diving towers and often a diving facility and a children's splash pool. However, the water in those pools as a rule was unheated and the pools were open for less than six months of the year.

The 1945 Renaissance

In 1945-46 a handful of us, very much aware that Australia was embarrassingly a very long way behind the

USA, were determined to do something about it. I believe that period represented a watershed in the revival of Australian swimming. The leader of this group was Marsden Campell, an outstanding freestyle sprint swimmer and backstroker who was friendly with famous former Olympic swimmer Frank Beaurepaire and Coach Bob Kiphuth. In an effort to promote swimming as a sport, he persuaded the NSW Swimming Association to cooperate with his entrepreneurial effort of promoting swimming carnivals, which were a mixture of swimming races and other entertainment. He also was the prime-mover in having the Speedo company sponsor the production of a clubroom wall chart explaining "How to Train." The information on this chart was largely gleaned from prominent American coaches. This chart represented an underlying ferment aimed at having Australia reach a higher place in world swimming and to approach its past glories.

Professor Frank Cotton

As a young and ambitious Honorary Secretary and Chief Coach of the NSW Swimming Association Coaching Committee, I swam and coached as an amateur. My "day job" was Teaching Fellow in the Physiology Department at the University of Sydney. My boss there was then Senior Lecturer, Frank Cotton, D. Sc., with whom as an Honours student I had become closely associated. He had been an outstanding competitive swimmer having just missed selection for the 1920 Olympic team. He was affectionately known in swimming circles as an "eccentric" for his physiological approach, which included the taking of heart rates at poolside.

During the Second World War, Frank Cotton led a scientific project for the Royal Australian Air Force, directing research into the development of the anti-gravity suit aimed at reducing blackout of pilots in fighter aircraft during tight turns. By the mid-1940s, Frank Cotton had determined to divert his academic interest away from the human circulatory system to exercise physiology. He became Research Professor of Physiology, and was soon appointed to the full Chair and Head of the Department. He began work, which was to cement his place as the "Father of Sports Science" in Australia.

I happened to be in the right place at the right time. Professor Cotton was to have a lasting influence on my life, set during the 10 years from 1945 to 1955. This was cut short by the Professor's premature death in September, 1955, one year before the Melbourne Olympic Games.

Long discussions in the professor's office became a daily occurrence for me. It was as though I had daily tutorials. Our aim was to help produce athletes of high enough standard to gain selection for the 1948 Australian Olympic Team. Training ideas were discussed and principles articulated, many of which, I believe, have become part of the history of sports coaching in Australia. I concentrated on coaching swimmers.

Training in the Mid-1940s

We advocated very much more swimming than in the 1930s when the popular version of training had been small daily amounts of continuous swimming, with sometimes an added few laps with the legs tied or on the kickboard, and occasionally some sprints thrown in at the end.

More training became the norm from the mid 1940s in Australian pools. The descriptions of the training items we recommended, such as “basic” swimming, “efforts,” “broken swims,” and “tapering” were decided on in Professor Cotton’s office. Much of this training terminology is still in use today.

Fifty years ago I wrote a booklet, which outlined our training from 1945. These were the items, which were built into the training of most of the Australian team at the London Olympics, of which I was appointed coach. An interested parent, a director of a book company, produced the booklet for me. The following are from *Training for All Sports* (Dymocks, 1953).

“The greatest distance covered in training will usually be basic work for both sprinters and distance people. Both the sprinter and distance person will benefit from any amount of easy swimming but too much fast work will spoil both types of athletes.

The bread and butter training for all distances should be analogous to walking during everyday living... The greatest distance covered in a training session item will usually be this “basic” work.

It is the interesting fact that slow work will not bog down the sprinter but too much fast work will spoil both types of athletes. There should be a blending of various types of pace work.

2. RACE PACE – WITH BASIC: *The full distance should be divided by four and each quarter swum, run, or rowed at approximately the speed of the race – not faster. Every second “recovery” quarter should be at slow (recovery) pace.*

3. “BROKEN” SWIMS: *Alternately 50m, nearly (but not quite) all out, and 50m slow recover. Swimmers cover about a half-mile daily of this at a session.*

4. EFFORTS *are repeated at the athlete’s race distance at distinctly less than all out speed.*

The instructions continued: *“To get the utmost benefit from this training plan, 100% efforts over the full race distance should be a relatively rare occurrence. Athletes have individual amounts of nervous energy, which should be reserved for big occasions. Realise this, and cover the miles a day and you will be well on the way to reaching your best. Being too keen to go ‘flat out’ has ruined many an athlete.”* [This was an early version of setting a training base of aerobic training.]

From the mid-1940s in Australia some training groups, including those I coached, were swimming as far as 5 miles (8km) a day, albeit much at an easy pace. •

SWIMMING AUSTRALIA STATEMENT

April 14, 2010

Swimming Australia has been presented with the final independent investigation into anonymous allegations of inappropriate behavior made against former Head Coach Alan Thompson. On the basis of the investigation conducted by Louise Donohoe SC, there was no evidence found to support the allegation of inappropriate behavior made against Mr Thompson, as alleged in an anonymous letter referred to Swimming Australia through media sources whilst he was National Head Coach.

The final findings were presented to the Swimming Australia board on Monday of this week and an out of session board meeting was held last night to discuss the findings.

This matter is now closed and Swimming Australia will be making no further comment on the investigation.

My Man Dan...

By Mike McCauley - Head Coach of Premier Aquatics, February, 2010

I drove to the pool that Monday afternoon, and I got a text from one of my swimmers. "I won't be at practice today...I'm at the hospital..."

And as I come to the end of the season, with all my swimmers in prep mode for their various championship meets, it always gets a little tough. We, coach and athlete, are plagued by the unforeseeable. What's going to happen?

I always get excited during this period because I know that, in the end...succeed to a certain degree or fail big...my kids will be forced to handle the outcome, no matter what. And how they handle each outcome is what helps to drive their character development and long-term success chances. Maybe they will be arrogant, maybe they will throw a fit...or maybe, just maybe, each of my athletes will use their various experiences as motivation to become better. Become better where? In school, with their parents, in training, in their future jobs...everywhere! If I can get them to solve a riddle that plagues most, then I get to taste a little success as their coach. What's that riddle you ask? Here it is: How do you turn success, failure, or hard times, into an empowering situation?

Back in my car...naturally I called him right away. No answer. Dang it! What's happened? I got a text response to my call. "They think I have diabetes." What?!?! DIABETES?!?! You can imagine all the things that went flying through my head. That's impossible. It can't be right. That's not fair. He was just tearing up last Friday's workout, shook my hand, told me thanks for the workout, and went home...nothing out of the ordinary there. What's going to happen?

Now I find it interesting that I asked myself the same question, only now, I suddenly didn't care about what used to be at the forefront of my mind. Swimming, what? My priorities shifted quickly, a 180-degree turn to say the least. My man Dan...what's going to happen?

Obviously my role was to relax my swimmers when I drove up to the pool. I was sure they already knew something. So I walked in, gathered up my kids, and told them about their teammate. We had a good workout that day...a tribute to my kids rolling with something unexpected but able to stay focused on the

task at hand. They all wanted to help, but understood that there was nothing at the immediate moment to do for him, except complete a good workout.

The next morning, I drove down to Texas Children's Hospital. On the way down, I called a dear friend of mine, one that could give me some good information on diabetes, then another for directions. I finally found my swimmer lying in a hospital bed on the 14th floor... room 1435.

When I walked in, Sudoku book and a goofy pen in hand, I had a plan for my man Dan: Laugh, talk shop, and then show him that the lessons he learned through swimming were being tested right here, right now.

I was fortunate enough to sit with his parents and listen as doctors and dieticians delivered a barrage of information. We all asked questions, trying to wrap our minds around the depth of this unfair diagnosis. Unfair. That's what it was. If I could, I would have reached into his body and ripped it out...everyone was thinking the same thing.

We talked about the Olympic swimmer Gary Hall, Jr., and how he has diabetes. We looked through the Regional psych sheet, and talked about Sectionals. We discussed the lessons of swimming applicable to this scenario. And then I tried not to look while he gave himself his first injection.

And yet, through all of this, he was calm, not panicked. What? Could this be right? I watched a little more. He's rocked that's for sure, but he was unbelievably calm. My mind did a back flip! Are you kidding me? Here he is, learning how to cope with an unexpected, life-long disease...yet he's not crying, he's not shouting, he's not blaming anyone, he's not arguing; He wasn't looking for a way out; he was looking for a way through!

I smiled all the way home from the hospital. What a remarkable young man! Put through an emotional gauntlet and still, he did not back down. My man Dan...he solved the riddle! Right there in that hospital room, under the most unlikely of circumstances, he solved it. What's going to happen? I think I know... and so does he. •

Rebuilding Trust, Can it Be Done?

Five Lessons We Can Learn from Toyota

BY FC Expert Blogger Roberta Matuson

Is it possible to rebuild trust, after you've made some huge mistakes? Only time will tell for companies like Toyota, who recently recalled millions of Toyota and Lexus vehicles due to "run away cars." Right now, I don't believe Toyota will ever regain the trust of their loyal customers nor do I think they will be able to repair their valuable brand. This is not because it's impossible to do, as companies like Tylenol have proven that trust can be rebuilt if you do so in a thoughtful and genuine manner. But I haven't seen Toyota do one thing right that indicates to me that anyone will trust them again.

Here are five lessons managers can learn from this whole situation:

1. When you make a mistake, own it the minute you realize something is not right. Toyota allegedly knew about this problem several years ago and even made some fixes for their cars being sold in Japan. If they had done this here in the US, people might have been more sympathetic. Fortunately, most of you are not dealing in life or death situations. More than likely, you will be forgiven if you are honest with those around you.
2. Take responsibility for your mistake - Own it with an "I" statement. By that I mean, begin your apology with "I" rather than using words like "corporate" or "the bank." In the end, you are ultimately to blame. Few people are going to forgive an inanimate object like a corporation, but they will certainly consider forgiving someone who appears to be human.
3. Vow to make things right and then do so - Toyota keeps vowing to make things right, as they continue to reveal more information that indicates they are not sure if the problem has really been corrected. If you are unable to make things right, then tell people so and explain to them why you are unable to do this right now. The last thing people want to hear is more of the same. If you are able to immediately begin to fix things, keep people informed as to exactly what you are doing along the way in order to regain their trust.
4. Re-define expectations - Let people know exactly what they can expect from you as you move forward. Right now many people, including myself, are scratching their heads wondering how things with Toyota will be different as they move forward. That's because they've yet to really take responsibility for this situation and they haven't answered this question. If you've seen their recent television ads, you know what I mean. You have some American guys working on the manufacturing line with a voice over saying why we should put our trust back in their company. I want to know where the heck the executives are. Are they hiding underneath their desks? They should be the ones on camera speaking to the people, taking responsibility and stating exactly what we can expect from them moving forward.
5. Do what you say you are going to do. Keep the commitment - We can't really say how well Toyota has done with this as only time will tell. However, you can certainly do this. Trust is based on commitment to a shared vision. Without it, there is little left to support the foundation of any relationship. Do what you say you will do and in time you will regain trust. •

"Open communication and sound PR practices seem to have bypassed the Toyota leadership, and ultimately, it will cost them. Your five lessons for managers are spot on, but I would add one more specifically for Toyota: act and speak like a human being who cares about your consumer, not like a corporate executive trying to forestall a crisis."

Loraine Antrim,
Core Ideas Communication

Teaching Technique

What We Know, What We Think

We Know, and What We Do.

By John Leonard

One of the more common questions that parents have, is when/how the coach teaches the technical aspects of swimming to the athletes. First of all, we know that swimming is a “technique limited” sport. Which means that without good technical strokes, starts and turns, effort and hard work will only carry you a very limited way... the fact that water becomes more resistant as you go faster, means that perfect technique is rewarded and impaired technique is punished with less speed for more effort. This is age old wisdom that is accepted by all experienced coaches and athletes.

We think we know, that we can teach good technique. Coaches spend countless hours learning not only WHAT a swimmer should do, but HOW to teach them to do it. It appears, in non-scientific terms, that when coaches spend time teaching technique, technique improves. We hope that means there is a direct correlation between our teaching and the athletes learning. It's a reasonable belief.

Our friend Dr. K. Anders Ericsson at Florida State University, is the world's leading authority on “becoming an expert” in any domain. Part of his research, written about in popular literature, is that it requires 10,000 hours of dedicated practice (which he terms “Purposeful practice”) in order to acquire “expert” status in any domain. Interestingly, if the ordinary swimmer begins practice at age 8 and follows a normal curve of increasing practice hours each year to age 17-18, with the long held “truth” among coaches that it takes 10 years to “make a swimmer.” Science meets experience right in the middle, and both are validated.

Now “purposeful practice” is time that is focused on specifics and exacting detail in performance. It has constant and realistic and expert feedback from the teacher, and feedback again from the athlete to the teacher. The entire effort is hard work, not much fun, and mentally focused and exhausting effort.

Is that what we do in swimming? Not for most of us. When swim coaches teach technique, it is typically “to the team” or a group of the team, almost never is a sustained 30-60 minute burst of one on one teaching. (Essentially a private

lesson.) My friend Guy Edson, who edits and distributes this newsletter, describes it as working to “get in the same neighborhood” as a good stroke, with most of his novice swimmers. Not necessarily in the right house, much less in the right chair in the living room... just getting in the neighborhood. Swim Teams, by their very nature, of being “A TEAM,” do not allow much one on one teaching... or what Dr. Ericsson would call “deliberate, or purposeful practice.”

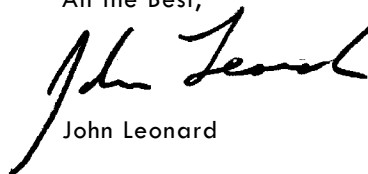
Of course, years of successful age group swimming would tell us that we're being successful “somehow.” Perhaps at certain ages, “getting in the neighborhood” of a great stroke is enough. As the child matures, additional purposeful practice gets the athlete more finely tuned, and eventually, if they are purposeful and studious enough to warrant a lot of one-on-one attention from a coach, they will have the opportunity to personalize that perfect stroke for them... deliberate and purposeful practice at its best.

To be successful in swimming, we need to not only learn, but also to improve our physical state... training. Both are needed for top performance at all ages. So those 10,000 hours of practice we put in may not all be “purposeful and directed learning,” but many of them qualify as contributing to our eventual expertise.

The question for coaches? How to incorporate more of that deliberate and specific practice to improve strokes? And the question for parents and athletes? How to best apply the “training time” to swim the stroke in the patterns that have been taught by the coaches... so they become habit and ingrained skill.

Improving the quality of our practices will improve the speed of our performances.

All the Best,



John Leonard