

## UK Swimming

At the Sydney 2000 Olympics, Great Britain was dealt a harsh wakeup call in the swimming pool. After 4 years of preparation, the British team came away with zero medals, and only 5 swimmers qualified for finals in their events. It was Britain's worst performance in swimming in 64 years. The results were painful for many of the young British competitors, but it especially sent a shock through British Swimming as an organization. And it initiated a major overhaul of their sport system.

Eight years later at the Beijing Olympics, the picture was vastly different. Great Britain produced 21 finalists in swimming, of which 2 won gold medals, 2 silver, and 2 bronze. Britain was ranked third in swimming at the Beijing Olympics on all three counts of gold medals, total medals, and points score. Britain also had 24 swimmers competing at their first Olympics. What had changed?

Under Bill Sweetenham, a great deal. The former head coach of the Australian Institute of Sport was hired as the new Performance Director at British Swimming in the wake of the failure of the Sydney Olympics, and he hit the pool deck in November 2000 to begin a major reorganization of everything from training and competition to coaching development and more. He was given a sweeping mandate for change, a mandate appropriate to a man who had already propelled 63 swimmers to other national swimming teams, of whom 27 had gone on to win medals at Olympics and World Championships.

What did Sweetenham do? Lots.

"An independent consultant estimated it was going to take British Swimming 66 years to get to world levels," says Sweetenham. "So I knew I had to cram it, and cram it fast. In a sport that's considered one of the fastest growing competition sports, I had to move Britain at a rate faster than the rest of the world."

Based on Sweetenham's push and his strong support for the LTAD model pioneered by sports performance consultant Istvan Balyi, British Swimming was the first sporting organization in Britain to introduce and fully apply this concept. Using many LTAD principles, Sweetenham worked on the British swimming system from the top to bottom, from high performance to grass roots. But the first thing he did was to reorganize the domestic competition schedule in Britain.

"Britain had a swimming public which prioritized competition over preparation," says Sweetenham. "Many swimmers were competing far too often in non-specific events, and they were focusing mainly on short course competitions due to the facilities provided and affordable access for training.

"It was also quite obvious that the competition schedule of Great Britain did not match the international schedule. You look at the weakest part to any situation and that's where you can make the greatest improvement, and the weakest area for Great Britain was the winter months of training and competition."

British swimmers had few domestic competitions in the September to December period, few training camps, plenty of holidays, and they were emphasizing short course.

"So I thought, how do I fortify the winter?" says Sweetenham. "And the best way to do that was to strategically place competitions and then set standards for the athletes to perform to at that time. We changed priority of the winter season to long course, knowing that if you can be competitive in long course, you can convert to short course relatively easily. And as result it turned the training calendar on its head." He added more training camps during the season and increased the ratio of training to competition at all levels.

Another element that Sweetenham addressed was the training grey-area that he called the “twilight zone”. This phrase described the groups of swimmers who were training too much to be recreational swimmers, but too little to ever be truly competitive internationally. He saw young swimmers who were training 8-10 hours per week, and others who were training 12-15 hours per week.

“If you train 8-10 hours per week, you get out of your sport health, fun, social enjoyment, fulfillment – that’s great and should be encouraged,” says Sweetenham. “And if you go to the top of the pyramid, you have the athletes training at 16 hours per week and above – for them it’s commitment. It’s high risk, high commitment, high return, high recognition.”

In between, Sweetenham says you have a transitional twilight zone.

“People who are doing more than 8 hours per week and less than 16-18 hours per week are not getting anywhere,” says Sweetenham. “They stay in that zone, and that zone is the danger zone. It’s okay to pass through it, but it’s not good to stay there for more than 2 years. You’re doing too much to have fun and feel good participating, and not enough to achieve.”

According to Sweetenham, the twilight zone athletes who are training 12-15 hours each week end up growing frustrated because they’re not well enough prepared to win events at competitive meets. When that frustration is eventually coupled with the social and academic pressures in their late teens, they frequently end up dropping out of swimming altogether. So one of the first things Sweetenham did was to identify the twilight zone to coaches and program directors, and provide training and competition guidelines to ensure young athletes spent as little time there as possible.

The other thing he did was to address the problem of early-year born athletes versus late-year birth athletes.

“When I went first to Britain, you would swim in your year of birth,” explains Sweetenham. “Those swimmers born in the first 3-4 months have a massive advantage over swimmers born in the last 3-4 months of the year. For an age group, that kills off the talent born in the last part of the year.”

The swimmers born in the late months of the year almost always lag behind their early-born peers in physical maturation, so it’s difficult for them to compete. Again, they generally grow discouraged and dropout as a consequence, and the likelihood of them developing their potential for excellence or simply staying active and healthy diminishes. In response, Sweetenham changed the competition age requirement to the swimmer’s age on the first day of the meet, and he added competitions in the back half of the year so late-born swimmers would always get a chance to swim against kids their own age and win.

At the international level, Sweetenham also successfully lobbied LEN, the governing body of European swimming federations, to increase the number of swimmers-per-event-per-country at junior and senior meets to 4, up from 2. This meant that more athletes had regular opportunities to develop competition experience, as well as provide a target for training.

The overhaul to British Swimming was extensive following Sweetenham’s arrival. Between Sydney 2000 and Beijing 2008, he also worked on coach development throughout Britain and tried to create greater access to improved swimming facilities, but probably his biggest impact was the competition and training schedule.

“One of the toughest things in all sports is to change the system of competition,” says Balyi. “It was a very positive contribution to the improvement of British Swimming.”

Positive indeed. From zero medals at Sydney 2000, British swimmers took home two medals at Athens 2004 and then six medals at Beijing 2008. In between, they made a British record-breaking medal haul at the 2003 Barcelona World Championships, followed by a British record-breaking 24 medals at the World Short-Course Championships at Manchester in 2008.

And in the summer of 2008, the new crop of British swimmers won the European Junior Swimming Championships in Belgrade for the first time ever, taking home 18 medals (10 gold, 5 silver, 3 bronze) and beating perennial powerhouse Russia.

Winning medals may not be the whole picture of sport, but it certainly provides an indication of the health of a sport system. In this case, the strides made by British Swimming since Sydney 2000 say much about the changes made under Bill Sweetenham, and it bodes well for London 2012.