

Fast lane

Masters swimming is not just a passing fashion, says St Paul's Barnes SC masters coach **Tony Pearce** – and he argues that it's also at a special time in its history



No doubt about it, being a masters swimming coach today has become a very challenging vocation. I sometimes stand on the deck, look at my masters squad in training and ask myself the question, 'What is masters swimming?'

Well, here's my definition: 'Masters swimming is an organised and supervised swim practice for adults which encompasses the disciplines of senior open age group (18 years upwards), senior and masters age group (25 years and upwards in five-year age bands), open water swimming and triathlete competitive swimming.'

Just getting such a diverse group of

people to go on any semblance of a rest interval is a remarkable feat in itself.

Watermark

However, it is my considered opinion that masters swimming in recent years has completely changed. It used to be for health, fitness and fun for the somewhat elderly. But, like a high and beautiful wave, it now seems that it has broken and a watermark on the pool wall is all that is left. A place where the wave hit and finally broke back, a kind of peak that never comes again.

But now there is another wave that has opened up a new sense in people's minds. Swim to win and continue to get

better for those who recognise no limits. 'No limits' is the slogan under the Speedo training clock at St Paul's pool.

I believe that masters swimming – if you want to call it that now – has entered a new era. A spiritual era. I believe that both open water swimming and triathlon have been very integral in this somewhat organic change in our greater swimming society that we now find ourselves members of. Here's what I mean:

Open water swimming, as I used to know it, somehow reminded me of being at the Rolling Stones Free Rock concert on a sunny afternoon in Hyde Park some 40 years ago. People came together for a common purpose. To enjoy the sunshine. Enjoy the music. And, if you relate this to our modern day, to 'dig' the swim.

Professional circuit

But open water swimming is now an Olympic event. It's a big-time, professional worldwide circuit now.

Also around that time, the famous London Otter Swimming Club, later to host the first masters swim meet in this country, celebrated its 100th anniversary. It was also about this time that I witnessed a very young Mark Spitz swim in an international swim meet, sponsored by Coca Cola, at the newly-built Crystal Palace National Sports Centre.

It was about the same time that I witnessed Jimi Hendrix play his mesmerising guitar music at a nightclub in Cromwell Road, West London. The war in Vietnam was the major international event at this time.

Triathlon link

What about triathlon? Browsing through the many US masters swimming websites, there is no doubt that triathlon is now an integral part of any masters programme – and whatever happens in America always travels east. The mini-triathlon is now an Olympic event: 1500m freestyle (a competitive swimming distance), then a 40km cycle and a 10km run.

Back in Hyde Park on another sunny summer afternoon 40 years later, I attended the 2010 World Cup Series Triathlon Championship. With worldwide television coverage and Speedo signs everywhere, elite triathletes could be seen furiously chasing each other on their sophisticated racing bikes wearing their heavily sponsored racing attire. Always follow the money! No doubt about it – triathlon is a real big scene right now.

Memory lane

It's at this point that one has to consider why a swimming club should embrace a masters swimming programme. But first a little digression.

Not everyone knows that I have been an avid QPR football club fan for many years. Although I have been absent for some time (swimming is a sport that consumes you), I managed to escape one Saturday afternoon, when there were no swim meets on, of course, to take a trip down memory lane at the QPR ground, Loftthouse Road.

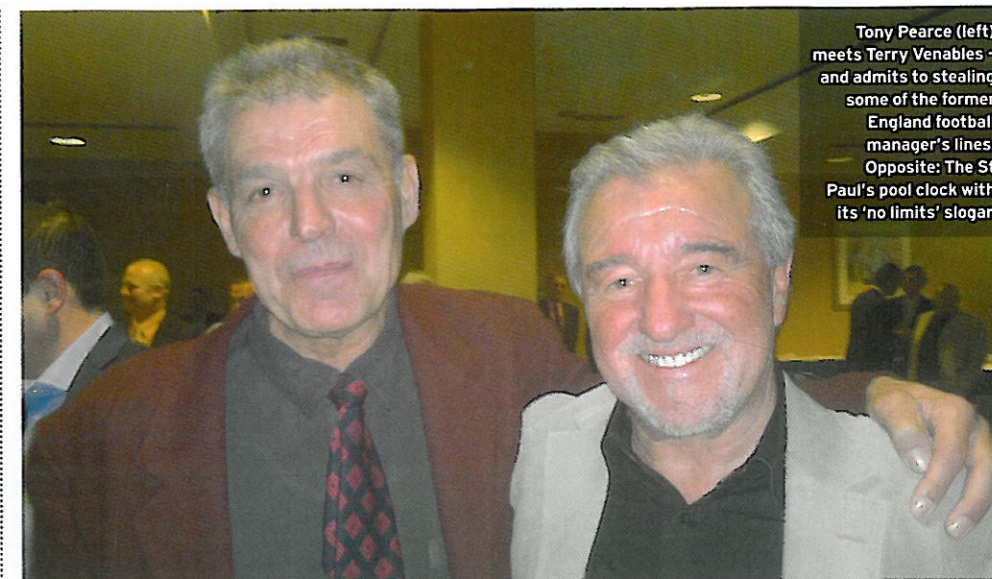
Call it coincidence or fate, but my return to active supporter status seems to have fallen in step with QPR's change of fortune, and with the club now in the Premiership I wondered whether I was becoming something of a talisman. This spurred me on to attend the club's Charitable Association's Meet the Legends dinner.

Relieved

Relieved that 'lounge suits must be worn' meant not having to wear a dickie-bow, I managed to find my shirt and tie, had my jacket dry-cleaned, bought a new pair of trousers and got my shoes shined at the little shoe repair shop down the road. I also visited the local barber's shop for a clean cut shave and a short back and sides. I have never had so many compliments both at school and at the swimming club about my new fashionable haircut.

During the course of a most pleasant evening, much was made of the great work that QPR football club does for the kids of Hammersmith. Knowing the work that our own club, St Paul's Barnes Swimming Club (together with the St Paul's School), does in terms of community links for the kids in Hammersmith, I felt deep-down some pride.

After dinner, the club's present manager, Neil Warnock, took part in a question-and-answer session. I was very impressed when he indicated that he was enjoying every moment at the



Tony Pearce (left) meets Terry Venables – and admits to stealing some of the former England football manager's lines. Opposite: The St Paul's pool clock with its 'no limits' slogan

club – a club which has become very successful, very quickly. And, most importantly, it is a very happy club too.

Again, I reflected on our own St Paul's Barnes Swimming Club. At the end of what was a very enjoyable occasion, I happened to see Terry Venables – a very successful past player and manager with QPR – and took the opportunity to meet him. For many years, I have been a big fan of his. I am a swimming coach and he is a football coach but it was as if we were talking about the same sport. Whatever the sport you coach, the language of coaching is the same.

I mentioned to him that I had stolen some of his lines and used them in my own coaching. Terry admitted, in not so many words, that he had stolen these lines from someone else too. I suspect very strongly that person was the iconic football coach Malcolm Allison.

In coaching there is really nothing new, for we all learn, dare I say it, and steal from each other. However, one must remember – always steal from the best! Thanks Tel!

Lasting bond

So why should a swimming club embrace and coach a masters swimming programme?

Firstly, it creates a lasting bond between the swimmers and their club, essential for retaining that vital 15-18yrs age group in the club. This particular age group should never be allowed to be anything less than they can be. Here, with masters swimming, our youth swimmers have something to look up to. This, in turn, nurtures the all-important teamwork necessary for a swimming club to continue to flourish – youth together with experience.

Secondly, a masters programme can create more finance for the club – although that should not be the main objective.

Thirdly, and most importantly, a masters programme can create a complete development of the swimmer from infancy to old age. And if that is not a real pathway to a global long-term athlete development plan, I don't know what is.

Encouraging people

As a masters swimming coach, what do I actually do? At this stage in my life I have now got it down to one thing. I encourage people. It really is as simple as that because what masters swimmers are doing is swimming to fit their own image.

Masters swimming is not a fashion, it's a feeling. It's where the soul drives the body. This means opening the mind to the fact that sport, like music, influences society. Forget the message. Forget the lyrics. Just play.

Somewhat profound? Not really, for masters swimming – as with our sport of swimming as a whole – is definitely now at a very special time. Yes, in swimming today there is a new genre. Yes, masters swimming has now acquired true worldwide respectability. As I stand on the deck and look at my masters squad in training, I again ask myself the question, 'What is masters swimming?' My answer now is a relatively very simple one: 'Masters swimming is now!'

Time changes everything.

Tony Pearce is the head coach to the senior and masters tri squad at the St Paul's Barnes Swim Club in West London.

British Gas ASA National Masters Champs

Swimmers have until 12 noon on Wednesday September 28 to submit their online entries for the short-course British Gas ASA National Masters Championships at Ponds Forge, Sheffield, on October 28-30. Swimmers and guests wishing to attend the pasta party on October 29 can book £10 tickets via their online entry: www.swimming.org



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