

THE IMPORTANCE OF SWIMMING IN CHINA

By Bruce Wigo

I recently spent six weeks in China, beginning with the FINA World Championships in Shanghai and ending with the World University Games in Shenzhen. During this time I had the opportunity to visit a number of pools, meet with facility managers, swimming coaches, teachers and talk with ordinary people who swim for fitness or fun and these are my observations about the present and future of Chinese swimming.

The first thing that struck me while swimming in pools like the Water Cube in Beijing or in the South China Sea resorts was that I saw almost no one swimming the crawl. For the majority of Chinese adults, swimming means the breaststroke. It is the stroke Chairman Mao used in his famous river swims and it is the primary stroke that is taught in swimming schools.

Where pools are available, swimming is taught to primary school children as part of their physical education classes. I observed large group lessons in both Pudong (Shanghai) and Shenzhen and they were all about the breaststroke. Instructors are very proud to claim nearly a 100% success rate after only 10 lessons. It's not today's competitive stroke, but reminiscent of the style and teaching methods used in America in the 1950's.



If a student shows exceptional talent in the water he or she may be invited to attend a special provincial sports school, which may be close enough to remain at home with parents or if too far to commute, they can board. There are no additional

incentives, but because sport training takes priority over subjects like math and science, many parents decline the invitation, as they have higher aspirations for their children than life as a sportsman. For those who do accept the invitation, financial or other benefits may come as early as age 12, the age when a swimming instructor from Jinan University in Shandong Province says she started receiving money for swimming. With an average factory worker's salary being about \$250 a month, there will still be millions of parents with dreams of their children emulating Sun Yang's superstardom.



In the People's Republic of China there are 33 administrative districts, known as provinces, municipalities, autonomous or administrative regions. In each the government has built at least one world-class, multi-pool aquatic training center, in addition to other pools. Each province also has an age group swimming championship. In Shandong Province this year, for example, there were approxi-

mately 400 swimmers, male and female, competing in age groups from 8 & under to 18 & under. A tiny number for a province that has a population of over ninety-five million people, but which reflects a system that relies upon talent identification and incentives, rather than a large talent pool like in the USA.



The importance of a sizeable talent pool may have been demonstrated by the success of the US team at the 14th FINA World Championships in Shanghai. Americans once again dominated the swimming events, bringing home 32 medals, including 16 Golds to China's 5. However, a large base seems to be less important in the minor aquatic sports where China's talent ID reliant system has achieved remarkable success in diving. Using the same principal of identifying talent and working full-time with small groups and high coach-to-athlete ratios, China has also become a power in both synchronized swimming and women's water polo. There may be no more than 250 females of any age playing water polo in China, compared to approximately 15,000 in the USA, but in Shanghai China finished ahead of the USA.

The difference between the USA and China, according to US Diving coach Hongping Li, is that in China athletes and parents look at sports from an early age as a serious profession, while most American athletes start in aquatics as a fun hobby or part-time sport. As for diving, says Li, "China has an unbeatable state-run system. Divers with the best bodies and best physical condition are selected and brought together for intensive and time-consuming training. Compared with them, US divers are amateurs who have spare time for study, work and socializing."

The question is, can the system that has led to China's success in the three minor aquatic sports be replicated in swimming? So far the answer is no, although the Chinese are becoming increasingly competitive. If they adopt a broader based system and attract more talent from their population of 1.3 billion, the world had better watch out and that may be starting. You can see it in the number of world-class aquatic facilities that are being built across the county, in the celebrity and wealth accruing to Sun Yang, whose billboard sized image and appearances on CCTV could be seen all across China within hours and days of setting his first world record - and in the great desire by the government to achieve international athletic success.

Diving, synchronized swimming and women's water polo may provide a glimpse of what may be coming to swimming as the size of the talent pool and number of facilities grow - and where the old style breaststroke may soon be replaced by the butterfly, backstroke and crawl in the swimming pools in China.