

Why An Elite Athlete in Swimming Should Want The Focus on Themselves and Not on Technology.

By John Leonard

Posted: October 31, 2008

The Olympic Sport of Swimming has always been characterized by one outstanding feature...it is FAIR.

Athletes line up next to each other, each having prepared as well as possible for the "big moment". They have abided by the rules of the game, done their legal best to be ready to give all they have to give in pursuit of personal excellence and achievement.

Then the gun goes off, great performances ensue and accolades follow...and the next morning in the paper, a substantial amount of the credit goes to a swimsuit company? This radical change in the sport, dating from January 2008, is perverting the entire outlook of our sport for the future.

No longer will the athlete who has trained the hardest, learned skills the best, steeled their nerves best to the demands of high level competition, necessarily win the race. Instead, superior suit technology, produced by research and development by scientists in labs, likely determine the winners.

Worse, not all suits are equal. The "fitted suit", made specifically for the individual athlete and their body, is a far superior innovation compared to the "off the shelf model" of the same suit that is tried on by myriad athletes before one decides "this fits well enough". In point of fact, there is considerable debate in scientific terms of whether a non-fitted technical swimsuit is in fact better than good fitting older suits.

This means that 99% of the athletes competing at the World Championships are at a disadvantage to the few athletes who are indeed measured as the prototypes of the suits. A serious disadvantage.

The next consideration is the issue of where praise SHOULD lie. Does the sport want praise to be for the money to develop new technology, or old-fashioned hard work, attention to detail and competition hardened experience?

Next, every child-swimmer wants to "be like Mike" and the other international heroes of our sport. They will naturally ask their parents to spend \$300-600 for a technical suit and many, not wanting to be seen as "bad mommies or daddies" will capitulate, at least once....(or until they discover that the suits have a very limited useful shelf-life...who wants to spend \$500 for a 12 year old that will be useful for a dozen swims? pretty expensive swims!)

The more subtle and much more destructive influence will be on those athletes whose parents cannot possibly afford a suit of that expense. Now their children are relegated in large part to the back of the pack, the essential "fairness" of the sport is lost, and children will leave the sport in DROVES, if success in swimming is now perceived to be something you can BUY for your child. The fine-tuned sense of fairness of the child will immediately see that winning can be purchased. And they already know who's parents have all the money.

The Olympic Sport of Sailing has it right. Every Olympic Sailor sails the exact same boat. The emphasis is on the skill and abilities of the sailor. Swimming needs to change its rules to eliminate high tech suits and keep the emphasis of our sport where it has always been...on the effort, skill and preparation of the athlete.

Ski jumping is the same case. Years ago, commercial companies started making jump suits that acted like sails...the governing body said "NO" loudly and firmly and now regulates the suits that jumpers may wear. The athlete, not the attire, is the focus of the performance.

The argument has been made that if the companies can't sell these high tech suits, they can't afford to financially support the athletes. This is nonsense. They supported athletes before the new tech suits came out, they support them now, with the suits limited NOT FOR SALE and only available to the world-level athletes, and they will support athletes in the future because they need the elite athletes to endorse their product, in order to gain marketing advantage. Mr. Phelps could endorse a burlap bag if it had a Logo on it, and still be richly rewarded by the company and should be.

Finally, our swimming athletes should realize that vast numbers of golfers and tennis players are sponsored by equipment companies, despite the fact that equipment in both sports are strictly regulated. The commercial companies need the endorsement of swimming's top athletes just as they do in every other sport. All existing records and results should be unaffected by a change in these rules since they conformed to the rules existant at the time of performance.

The latest nonsense is that Parents or Companies will "sue" someone if they create rules that retain a level equipment field. This is utter nonsense. Most every sport regulates equipment. Do you see parents suing little league so their kids can wear metal spikes? Any governing body has every right to decide on appropriate attire and equipment and enforce those rules.

Where do we want the emphasis in our sport? On the manufacturers or the athlete?

Please support the roll-back on suit rules to an earlier, simpler suit for men and women.

John Leonard
American Swimming Coaches Association Executive Director
