

Sydney in 2000, Britain had just four individual finalists, one relay, and only 13 percent of swimmers managed best times because they were simply not capable of racing faster in heats – no finals, no best times, no medals. That’s a tradition that has lasted since 1912, when women were first allowed to race at the Olympic Games, and the last time British swimmers won an Olympic swimming relay title, and then mostly because no one else was swimming – we are trying to break a tradition that has lasted since 1912. So don’t tell me Britain got it right.” Some who lived only in their time had difficulty seeing it. Mid-term, Sweetenham noted: “We have a group of athletes now who can stand in the ready room, look their rivals in the eye, and say ‘I’m here to beat you, you’re not here to beat me.’ The train has left the station. Some will get that train, a train now heading full speed down the right track. That train was on the wrong track. I had to change that, and I badgered and harassed everybody. The swimmers accepted new philosophies really well, while some coaches found it very difficult and still do – but they’re doing it. I’ve provided a system and a pathway to success, but lasting success will only come if everyone gets on that train and works to the same end.” Britain, with its six Intensive Training Centres and coaches such as Bud McAllister and Doug Frost working alongside home-grown talent, has never been a more cohesive force than it is now, with a home Games in London 2012 looming.

PHILIPPE LUCAS (FRA):

The entry on our list of the mentor and coach to Laure Manaudou is there by right, for showing France that it was possible to take on the world and win, and symbolically, a representative (albeit an anti-establishment presence) of the commitment to excellence that has taken hold in French swimming during the past decade. The male sprinters and their coaches have made the headlines, for obvious reasons, but progress is to be found wherever Manaudou, and Lucas, led the way. Neither he nor we, it might be said, got to see Manaudou at her best, life’s distractions and a reaction to all the hard work combining to take the most successful French woman swimmer ever to pastures new before she

defended her 400 m crown in 2008 and left the pool with an eighth place to tag on to a career that had better to offer. Patricia Quint is now the national France coach for the women’s team, her task to build on the legacy left by Manaudou among the rank of French women swimmer. This month Quint was to be found spreading the word in the Cote d’Azur region on a tour of programs across the nation. The likes of Denis Auguin, coach of Alain Bernard, Frederic Barale, Fabrice Pellerin, Lionel Horter, Fred Vergnoux, and others are part of a league of swimming minds that have helped France to rise from a 1.8% share of Olympic podium prizes among the top 10 nations in the 1990s to a 4.9% share in the past decade.

ALBERTO CASTAGNETTI (ITA):

The loss of their head coach will be felt by Italy for a while yet. Castagnetti, who died last autumn after heart surgery, was the steer, the guide, the mastermind of the national program, the glue to a national team long fed by ranks of juniors who consistently put up a strong show in European youth waters. Domenico Fioravanti, Massimiliano Rosolino, and Federica Pellegrini stem from that system. There have been controversies along the way, such as the CONI report of 2000 (that cast a shadow on Italian sporting success with information that was never supposed to have seen the light of day but did) and the 2008 coining of the phrase “technological doping” by Castagnetti. The head coach summed up neatly the unease many felt in Europe in an Olympic year that had delivered suits never seen before in the race pool and not available to their own charges months out of the Games. The response of the Italian federation was one that screamed “two wrongs make a right”: with leading officials taking hold of a financial interest in a company that had never been a player in the race suit market before, the Italian federation dumped long-term sponsor and investor in swimming, Arena, for the promise of a shiny suit made by Jaked. That had an obvious effect: Castagnetti’s charges were now also to be found wearing what he described as “technological doping” and suit wars set in with a vengeance. As was the case with so many tales from

the race pool in 2008-09, the suits saga masked better news. Italy under Castagnetti’s leadership increased its shares of Olympic podium prizes from 1.9% in the 1990s to 5.4% in the first decade of the new Millennium, counting the share of spoils held among the top 10 swimming nations in each of those decades.

NORIMASA HIRAI (JPN):

Mentor and coach to Kosuke Kitajima, Hirai’s influence extends to several levels. Here, we consider him in the light of how important it is for a coach not only to spot weakness but strength – and then work with it. In 2003, a few months after Kitajima had become the first sub-2:10 200 m breaststroke man, the coach told reporter Hideki Mochizuki: “His strength is that he really has strong ankles.” He likened the ankle snap that he had witnessed as a natural phenomenon in his charge early in his career to a baseball pitcher’s wrist. “He had it naturally. He originally had this ability, so we put more attention to developing it. When I met him for the first time, I knew a lot about the strengths and weaknesses of his swimming techniques, but I thought the ankle snap was really a strength for him. So I encouraged him to develop the ankle snap instead of finding out his weaknesses. I know gliding is a really important factor to have higher speed, but when I met him and saw his strengths, I knew that the ankle snap could be applied to him. I just put more attention on developing his strengths rather than changing his weaknesses.” Hirai added to that natural building block the “strengths” that Hungarian coach Jozsef Nagy had seen in Mike Barrowman (USA): a strong glide from a kick time with pull to reduce the dead zone inherent in the stroke to a minimum, if not to remove it altogether. Kitajima and Leisel Jones (she above all of either gender, perhaps) led the class during the 2000s. Hirai estimated that most specialists could be found lapping in 21 to 24 strokes. He got Kitajima down to 18-20. Hirai is now working with Cameron Van Der Burgh (RSA), a bomb-blast in poly last year and among those most likely to live up to billing in textile too in the years ahead as he takes on Hirai’s home hero, now training in the United States. ④