

Britons no longer just fools in pools as Davies leads quest for honours

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David Davies is considered Britain's most likely winner of a swimming gold medal in Beijing. Photograph: B Birchall/PA

Speak to those involved and it appears the despair that characterised British swimming after the Sydney Olympics has all but vanished. It has been a difficult journey back from rock bottom - Britain failed to win a single swimming medal in 2000, the first time that had happened since 1936 - but following a period of consistent success, and two bronze medals in Athens four years ago, hope has been rediscovered. Before Beijing there is even talk of a first gold in the pool since Adrian Moorhouse's triumph in Seoul 20 years ago.

Credit for this turnaround has been shared among many parties but it seems all roads lead back to Bill Sweetenham, the uncompromising Australian who was appointed British swimming's performance director after Sydney and given the brief of sorting the mess out. Sweetenham's methods were simple - work harder and practise longer.

His ways made him unpopular with many members of the team - Mark Foster, who will be competing in his fifth Olympics in Beijing, described him as a "dictator" for making the team practise at 6am - but there is little doubt he established a legacy of success.

"Bill gave British swimming a greater level of professionalism, work ethic and positivity, he drilled into all of us what we had to do and what sacrifices we had to make to get to the very top," said David Davies, one of the bronze medal-winners in Athens and seen by many as the best hope for gold in Beijing. "Bill was a revolution for British swimming, he has made us tougher and more determined to succeed."

Sweetenham resigned last September, complaining that not enough support had been offered following an accusation of bullying of which he was eventually cleared. But having been

nurtured by the Australian for much of the last eight years it is perhaps no surprise that Davies, now aged 23, still refers to him as "the boss".

Feeling that he was losing motivation at the most crucial moment of his career, Davies moved from his base in Cardiff to the high-performance centre at Loughborough University last year so he could be in an environment where the pursuit of excellence remained a constant theme.

"I couldn't afford to go stale so close to an Olympics and I felt that was happening to me in Cardiff," said Davies, who will be competing in the 1,500m freestyle and the newly created 10km open water event in China. "My routine hasn't changed much, I'm still swimming about 50 miles a week, but my mental approach has definitely improved, I feel invigorated."

Davies' dedication is only one indicator of Sweetenham's impact - as well as two Olympic medals, Britain's swimmers won 18 World Championship titles, in 2001, 2003 and 2005, and between them broke close to 100 domestic records during his seven years in charge. He was replaced by Michael Scott, another Australian but in most other ways a total contrast to his predecessor.

Reserved in manner and prone to using management-speak, Scott is more office boss than dictator but on closer inspection of his cv that appears to be the point. Whereas Sweetenham was chosen for his coaching credentials Scott, who worked as chief executive of the 2007 World Championships, is seen as the man who can broaden the progress made since 2000 beyond this country's elite swimmers.

To that end the 51-year-old has appointed Dennis Pursley, who spent 14 years in charge of USA Swimming, as the new national head coach and will appoint a separate development coach and open-water performance manager in October, ensuring he is freed up to oversee other projects. These include the creation of five high performance centres to nurture elite swimmers and coaches, which are also to be announced in October, the enhancement of the Amateur Swimming Association's grass-roots participation programme and liaison with the government regarding its free-swimming initiative.

"I definitely have a different skill-set to Bill. He was very technically orientated while my expertise is in setting up structures," said Scott. "Bill got British swimming to arguably its highest point and I couldn't imagine doing what I am without his hard work. But now it's about continuous improvement. We expect our athletes to swim faster and for that to happen the system has to get better."

But the immediate focus of course remains Beijing and alongside Davies, Rebecca Adlington, a gold medal winner at this year's World Championships, Joanne Jackson, a double gold-medal winner at the 2006 Commonwealth Games, and Liam Hancock, who also won gold at the same event, have all been spoken of as potential medallists. But, unlike Sweetenham, Scott refuses to make predictions.

"Medal targets is not a philosophy I subscribe to for the simple reason I can't control how fast the Americans and Australians swim," he said. "My job is to make sure our athletes are given all they need to perform at their best."

Whether Britain's best is good enough to win a gold remains uncertain. In terms of rankings, domestic swimmers remain in the shadow of their Australian and American counterparts and

there has been little movement in the past three years to suggest that will change anytime soon.

"There's no chance of us becoming the leading swimming nation in the world," said Foster, the most experienced member of the current squad. "The collegiate system in the US and the emphasis the sport has in Australia means they will always be way out ahead."

Despite his pessimism Foster believes progress has been made and even admits Sweetenham must take significant credit for that. "His decisions have moved us forward a long way," he said.

A gold in Beijing may prove elusive but, eight years on from their collective nadir, Britain's swimmers at least appear to have the talent and belief to ensure they do not return home empty-handed.