

Jo Jackson reaps rewards of Bill Sweetenham coaching methods

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By Simon Hart

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Of all the hurtful headlines that were fired in Bill Sweetenham's direction during his turbulent period as performance director of British Swimming, there was one that really penetrated his thick Australian skin.

It had nothing to do with the unproven accusations of bullying that soured his tenure and which, in all probability, hastened his return to his homeland in 2007 due to "personal reasons".



Happy days: British Swimming is looking in good health following Beijing Olympics Photo: GETTY IMAGES

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It followed the disappointment of the Athens Olympics in 2004 when Britain's swimmers failed to live up to expectations and came away with just two bronze medals. Sweetenham was appalled at the ignorance betrayed by two shocking words published in a British tabloid: "Kill Bill".

This was worse than a personal attack. This was professional - a gross misunderstanding of the long-term structures that he was putting in place to turn the country into a competitive swimming nation. Not in 2004 but in generations to

come.

Five years on, as he sips from his tinny back at home in Australia and clicks on his computer mouse for news of his former charges at the British Gas Championships in Sheffield, Sweetenham is entitled to feel a little smug about the rewards British swimming is now reaping.

For make no mistake, this is a sport that Bill built. The biggest Olympic medal haul in a century, the world records, the new £15 million sponsorship deal with British Gas. None of it would have been possible without the big man. Just ask Kevin Renshaw.

Renshaw is the coach of Jo Jackson, the Loughborough University student who set a 400 metres freestyle world record in Monday night's thrilling duel in the pool with Rebecca Adlington.

When he first encountered Sweetenham in 2001, his coaching horizons did not stretch beyond the sides of the swimming pool.

"Swimming was very isolated and swimming coaches thought, 'We're in the water and no-one else is, so we only need to know about our sport'," he said.

"Bill changed that. The really big thing he did for me personally was to send me off to learn from sports coaches in a whole range of sports, and I took a lot from that."

Renshaw, whose education under Sweetenham also took him to the University of Florida to study the techniques of the world's most successful swimming nation, believes his own experience, replicated by numerous other leading coaches in Britain, is Sweetenham's most important achievement.

While the end product is the sight of athletes such as Jackson and Adlington standing on the medals podium, it is the creation of a world-class coaching network that is the real engine room of Britain's success story.

Sweetenham always said as much. "Swimmers are only as good as their coaches," was one of his many aphorisms.

Michael Scott, another Australian who now occupies Sweetenham's old seat as performance director, agrees.

"I always say that the fundamental thing is that you've got to have good coaching," he said. "That is the legacy of Bill Sweetenham. We've built on that and now we're taking it a step further.

"We were definitely left with a strong foundation of the fundamentals - great young athletes and coaches who had been given the opportunity to develop their skills."

And now the last piece in the jig-saw has been put in place. Having spent years railing against the pitiful "third world" swimming facilities in Britain and calling for new high-performance centres, Sweetenham's vision became a reality at the end of last year when five start-of-the-art 'intensive training centres' finally went on stream in Loughborough, Bath, Swansea, Stockport and Stirling.

At the latter, Sweetenham's influence lives on. In charge of the centre is Doug Frost, the man who coached Australian superstar Ian Thorpe until 2002 and whose decision to swap Australia for Scotland at the age of 65 speaks volumes for the foundations put in place by his pal from Swimming Australia.

"Obviously Bill and I go back a long way so the first thing I did was to get his opinion on whether I would be a benefit to the programme," said Frost.

"He gave me his full support and told me to grab the opportunity with both hands. That's why I'm here, because he told me he thought I could do a pretty good job."

From what Frost has seen so far, the country still lacks strength in depth and is at least 10 years away from rivalling his homeland in the pool.

But even the possibility of taking the fight to the old enemy is something that would have been too ridiculous to contemplate not long ago, and for that Frost says Britain has Sweetenham to thank.

"I think the sport is on the rise and in the long term it's very positive," he said. "I do believe Bill has made some major,

major improvements to the sport of swimming in this country."

Why Britain is on crest of a wave

Cash: The sport received £20.7m of public funding prior to Beijing, and a further £25.6m is promised in the run-up to 2012. **Facilities:** Once branded "third world" due to the lack of 50m pools, the country now boasts five state-of-the-art 'intensive training centres'.

Coaching: Britain's elite coaches are rated among the best in the world due to Bill Sweetenham's coach-education programme.

Athletes: The new wave of world-beating swimmers have benefited from years of top-class coaching and Lottery funding.

London 2012: The lure of a home Olympics has driven performances upwards and there has been no post-Beijing drop-off.

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