

For Swim Parents-“The Big Deal About SwimSuits”
by John Leonard,
Executive Director, American Swimming Coaches Association.

Over the past 18 months, the swimming world has been a frenzy of controversy over the emergence of technology in swimsuits. At the recent World Championships in Rome, the constant and overwhelming refrain about suits, echoed the volume and intensity of the last time we were in Rome for a World Championships, when the topic was doping....drugs distorting our sport...in 1994. Fifteen years later, the emotional topic was the new high tech suits that have swept through the sport from the World Championship level down to the local park district championships in the summer league. The parallels were impossible to miss.

FINA (the international governing body of swimming), in an unprecedented move at its Congress in Rome, banned the use of all “non-textile” materials from suits beginning in 2010, and limited the coverage of the body to “knees to navel for men” and “knees to shoulder straps” for women. 168 nations voted in favor of the restrictions, against a mere 6 in opposition (who apparently did not understand the word “textile.”) This in the face of strong opposition to the move by the sitting President and Executive Director of the FINA organization. Amazing and never seen before. The USA delegation initiated the restrictions and led the opposition. Why such a strong reaction in opposition to the existing plastic and rubber suits?

A parent new to the sport, from a middle class background, might well say “hey, why not? Technology marches on! Equipment gets better. Why not let my son/daughter wear one of the fancy new suits and swim faster?”

It’s a valid question that requires a thoughtful answer. Here it is.

The answer revolves around two words, with of course, a considerable amount of “side data” that adds to the intensity of the discussion and the strength of the resolution to end the problem worldwide.

Those two words are “Maximizing” and “Enhancing”.

Quality lane lines “maximize” the opportunity of the athlete to swim fast, with minimum turbulence in the lane. (you should have seen the waves in the pool back in the 60’s and 70’s.)

Good goggles allow the athlete to see the turns, see their competitors, and comfortably compete -- to say nothing of allowing them to train hard for hours which was impossible in the chlorine pool without goggles and in the old days, yardage and performance was a fraction of what it is today. Goggles Maximize the opportunity of the athlete to work hard.

Evolution in coaching techniques in training and biomechanics allow the athletes to maximize their ability to benefit from their time in the sport.

Swimsuits, up until approximately the year 2000, and certainly until early 2008, were designed to maximize the opportunity of the athletes to go fast. The manufacturers designed suits to “get out of the way of the water”. Less suit, less friction with the water, less drag, tighter fit, and better materials MAXIMIZED the ability of the athlete to perform to their highest earned level.

Beginning in 2008, manufacturers took advantage (and must be applauded for doing so, within the existing rules, which were close to non-existent) of the idea of designing suits to ENHANCE the ability of the athlete to swim faster. A line had been crossed. Designed suits incorporated plastics, rubberized material and new design criteria, to enhance the ability of the athlete to be buoyant in the suits (riding higher makes you faster), wrapped more tightly (compressing the “jiggly parts” makes you MUCH faster) and shed water from the plastics and rubber materials much more effectively, thereby reducing the drag of the suits remarkably.

Since February 2008, 158 world records have been set by elite athletes. Their ability to perform has moved from being “maximized” by their swimsuits, to being “enhanced” by their swimsuits. This rate of improvement is absolutely farcical in the historical context of over 100 years of our sport. At the world championships, new world records were receiving polite

applause akin to the “golf clap” for a good shot, rather than the historical roars of appreciation that a swimming crowd used to provide when a human barrier went down, as it infrequently did, by great athletes at the peak of their power.

How does this translate down to the local pool?

Pretty simple. The manufacturers don't make any money by selling suits to the elite athlete. They give the suits away to them. They count on age group swimmers watching the “big guys” and wanting the same suits and equipment.

And lo and behold, the same miraculous benefits accrue to 12 year old Sam and Samantha when they put on the “magic suits” in their local championships. The time drops are miraculous, the smiles are, literally, “priceless” and child, mom and dad are all happy.

“Wait a second. That suit just ripped. Wow. How did that happen? How much did it cost? Wow! You paid \$500 for a suit that Sam just put his foot through, rendering it a \$500 broken garbage bag? Uh-oh., well, honey, get him another one. We can't have Joe Jones's son Pete beat him in the 200 free tomorrow.” Teeth Grit. “This is a kids sport? We now have \$1000 in suits so far”.

And of course, all those magic benefits only last 7-15 swims, so good for maybe 2-3 meets, unless it's a championship and your child swims 6 events and makes finals in all events, in which case its \$500 a meet.

“Let's see, \$500 a meet, we go to 2 meets a month, 10 months of the year....Honey, it's gonna cost us \$10,000 Just for Samantha's suits this year!”

Well, the solution is simple....just wear the suits for the championship meet and wear your regular suit the rest of the time. OK. Good.

But, Samantha's 58.5 100 free with the magic suit on, just became a 1:02 100 free with the old suit on. Smiles gone. Gone. From Samantha, from Mom. From Dad. Oh well.

And of course, there are some other objections as well.

First, the magic suit deal is like paying for your child to have instant improvement. Is that what you want your child to learn from the sport? Or do you want them to learn to persevere, EARN improvement with hard work, attention to detail, paying attention to the coach and, shall we say it again...“Working Hard?” Or do you want them to learn that you can always “pay your way” with cash to what you want?

“Earn it, or buy it.” Which do you want to teach? Answer carefully, parents.

Second, the suit does not affect everyone the same. The thin, fit swimmer will benefit marginally by it. The overweight swimmer will swim like a young seal in it. Spending the same \$500 on two children will yield radically different results. Not a fair competition at all. Is that what anyone wants?

Third, and it seems unnecessary to say this, but if you just buy 3 suits a year, that's \$1500 or MORE. (Today, purchasing one of the great European suits online from the US will cost you \$900...with no guarantee of fit, durability or return-ability, and about 30% of them RIP on the first attempt to put them on...no refund, folks.) Do we really want age group and high school swimmers to have to spend that kind of money to BUY success rather than work for it? It doesn't make our sport a middle class sport, it makes it a sport for wealthy families.

Are you pooh-poohing that? Wait till your son or daughter gets beat the first time by someone whose mommie or daddie could afford a more expensive piece of plastic and rubber than you can. The bitter taste in your mouth is not fun. Not much in the way of “sport” there.

So, in answer to the local official who asked, “Why are “they” [FINA officials] wasting time with worrying about THAT? Don’t they have better things to do?”

The answer is “NO.” The suit debacle is the most important thing that any of us can attend to. It preserves the heart and soul of our sport....which is reverence and appreciation for the hard work, attention to detail, courage and teamwork required to be a fine competitive swimmer and to learn to succeed with those life-skills instead of with your Daddy’s wallet.

The Congress (not the Ruling Bureau) of FINA took the rules into their own hands after the Bureau had time and again failed to establish the rules necessary to keep our sport vital, credible and important. Bravo for them.

All the Best,
John Leonard
jleonard@swimmingcoach.org