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## 2013 STATE OF THE SPORT ADDRESS - CHUCK WIELGUS

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*USA Swimming Executive Director Chuck Wielgus delivered the annual State-of-the-Sport at the 2013 United States Aquatic Sports Convention, Sept. 14, 2013, in Garden Grove, Calif. The full text of his address is below.*

### 2013 STATE-OF-THE-SPORT

I cannot begin to tell you how excited I am to be here with you today and share this year's State-of-the-Sport report. Our organization and our sport have never been in better shape, and the future is full of exciting new opportunities for all of us.

I'm also excited to be here for some very personal reasons. This past year a recurrence of my cancer put me back into the hospital for another round of surgeries and treatments. That's behind me now, but the experience has taught me a great deal. In short, cancer has made me a better leader.

I now see the world through a new set of eyes, and with much more compassion in my heart. I am able to cut through the clutter and barrage of daily information, and focus on the things that are truly meaningful and important. There is a healthy urgency to what I do now, and I approach each day with more vigor and optimism for USA Swimming than ever before.

So, let me begin my report to you this year with a summary of some of our successes from the last year but also some perspective on the last decade across our core objectives of Build the Base, Promote the Sport and Achieve Competitive Success.

Let's start with **Building the Base**:

For the first time in history, our total membership now exceeds 400,000. Our overall membership has increased by more than 105,000 athletes over the past 10 years; and our overall retention rate is 75 percent. Even more remarkable is that in the 13-and-over age group category, our retention exceeds 90%.

Also noteworthy is the significant increase in our male athlete membership, which has grown from 38 percent of our total membership in 2000 to 43 percent today. At a time when many other sports are having a hard time attracting boys, swimming is drawing more boys than ever before and the vast majority of these boys are staying in the sport.

Outreach membership is also at an all-time high, and the numbers of officials and coaches is the highest it has ever been. We now have more than 17,000 member coaches, up from less than 10,000 10 years ago.

Ten years ago our average club size was less than 90 athletes. Today, the average number of athletes per club has grown by more than 30 percent and is at 122; and our experience shows that clubs reach a "tipping point" of financial stability at 100 swimmers. Interestingly, our number of member clubs today is about equal to what it was 10 years ago.

My takeaway is that our member clubs are doing an incredible job of growing their own club membership and hiring new coaches to assist with the increases in team sizes. I'd like to believe this is due in part to our field services team personally consulting with more than 2,000 clubs in the last five years, more than 1,700 clubs participating in our Club Leadership & Business Management School and nearly 6,000 coaches taking part in regional coaching clinics and more.

These are all eye-popping numbers and trends. The data supports our observations that swimming is a sport that is more popular than ever before, and that the quality of the experience is keeping kids and their families involved.

In terms of **Promoting the Sport**, USA Swimming's successes have come light years over the past decade. Consider some of these facts:

- Splash Magazine is delivered to 266,000 households six times a year and is one of the most tangible benefits of membership.
- Our website attracts more than 25,000 unique visitors every day.
- Our Deck Pass app has surpassed 150,000 downloads.
- Since the inception of the Athlete Partnership Program, our National Team athletes continue to give back to the sport and have made more than 230 appearances on behalf of the sport.
- We now have at least 3 major television broadcasts on NBC every year, and an additional 5 events broadcast on Universal Sports. Additionally, 8-10 national events are webcast live each year.
- Since 2008, 100% of our corporate sponsors have renewed; and over the past 10 years we have added 6 new partners to our family of sponsors – Arena, AT&T, BMW, CeraVe, Marriott and TYR.
- We have two of the longest running sponsorships in all of sports: Phillips 66 for 40 years and Speedo

for 28 years.

- This past year we credentialed about 250 media members to cover our events.
- And our social media presence has grown to more than 275,000 followers across our various platforms – a 200% increase in the past two years.

Past investments in information technology capabilities, and keeping up-to-speed with the ever-moving technology landscape has allowed us to maintain a strong promotional position within the sports marketplace. It is important that we continue to invest in emerging technologies and platforms that allow us to remain a leader when promoting our sport in the future.

And then we come to our third core objective: **Achieve Competitive Success.**

History tells us that in the year following an Olympic Games, many top athletes either retire or take time off. This was no different following the London Olympic Games. Of course, nothing was more newsworthy than Michael Phelps announcing his retirement. The doomsayers were quick to predict that the tide would go out for swimming without its brightest star and the sport would return to the shadows until the next Olympic Games.

Those doomsayers are dead wrong. Each one of us can rattle off the name of a half-a-dozen swimmers who not only win medals in the pool, but who also have become mainstream media and pop-culture personalities. People who know nothing about swimming are still likely to know the names of athletes like Ryan Lochte, Natalie Coughlin, Cullen Jones and a host of others.

And then there's the absolutely extraordinary duo of Missy Franklin and Katie Ledecky, two teenagers who have taken the baton handoff from Michael Phelps and are elevating our sport to an even higher level.

We sent a team of 51 athletes to Barcelona this summer, and they came home with 31 medals. 17 members of the team – exactly one-third – were rookies. American swimming is in great shape for the future.

When it comes to achieving competitive success, our No. 1 priority is medals. But I'm proud to say there is much more to USA Swimming than medal production.

What truly distinguishes swimming is that we have a culture that breeds and nurtures the values that have made our country so great.

I want to take a minute to share an experience where we didn't win a medal that is just as special to me as the 31 medals we did win in Barcelona. Our men's 400 Medley Relay at the World Championships ran away with the race and touched the wall first for what appeared to be a gold medal. However, a false start by .01 brought that all back. Disqualifications are something that happens in all levels of events, even the World Championships and Olympics. But that's not the story. The story is how the team dealt with it immediately after.

Following the race, still dripping wet and out of breath, the team was pulled over for a poolside television interview. The news of the DQ had to still be sinking in. The interviewer asked about the race and the responses said a great deal about these four young men, and also about the sport they represent. Let's take a moment and listen to that interview.



Could any sport have better role models? They didn't make excuses and Matt Grevers heroically tried to shoulder the blame. This was the personification of what it means to be a teammate and it is a reflection on how we in swimming see each other.

We have a responsibility to spread the values that have become part of our culture on to the next generation of athletes, coaches, officials, volunteers and staff. Swimming teaches us values that stick. It is the values we live by that make us who we are, and the values of hard work, personal accountability and honor represent the pathway for both individual and organizational success.

#### OUR VISION FOR THE FUTURE

When I look into my crystal ball, I see a future for our sport that is rich with an appreciation for our history and full of exciting new opportunities to grow in many different ways.

Our fundraising arm, the USA Swimming Foundation, is fostering a spirit of giving back. With over \$16 million

raised to date, the Foundation is supporting programs that can be life-changing for the people it reaches. When a child learns to swim through one of the more than 600 Make-a-Splash Local Partners, the likelihood of that child ever drowning is dramatically reduced. And with the addition of Summer Sanders and Brendan Hansen to the Board of Directors, you can be sure that the Foundation's mission of "Saving Lives and Building Champions" will reach new heights in the future. We all recognize the changing demographics in our country, and we all know how important it is that we continue to work to bring greater diversity and cultural inclusiveness to our membership. In a recent survey of LSC General Chairs, 84 percent of those responding said they see opportunities for multicultural growth in their LSC.

Our outreach membership is at an all-time high and we have a first-ever partnership with Sigma Gamma Rho, a large and active national African-American sorority. But there is still so much work to be done. Going forward we will be putting more staff time and resources toward our diversity and inclusion efforts, and we need everyone in our current membership to help us to continue to reach out to others.

You have heard a great deal from USA Swimming over the past few years about our Safe Sport Program. We have done an enormous amount of work, and I believe we have finally reached the point where our emphasis can turn to education to raise awareness and reduce the risks of abuse for the future.

Every step of the way our goal has been to "Do the right thing" and put support mechanisms for victims in place. I believe our current education, training and resources support that daily.

The reality is that there may be times when USA Swimming is forced to defend itself in lawsuits that we believe to be unfair, and I understand how this might be interpreted as being unsympathetic to victims. But our advocacy for victims is perhaps best reflected in the 39 names that have been added to our "suspended for life" list in the past three years. This is not a statistic that we are proud of, but it is a sure sign that USA Swimming has no tolerance for those who use their position of power to take advantage of underage athletes with whom they work.

We are evolving along with other youth sports organizations on this topic, but I have never seen a group of leaders – volunteer, Board of Directors and staff – care more deeply and thoughtfully about decisions on a topic than this one.

USA Swimming's Safe Sport Program has now been in place for a little over three years, and we believe this is a good time to evaluate the entire program to take stock of where we are and see how we can improve. To accomplish this, we recently commissioned an independent review.

I hope this review accomplishes two things: first, validate the positive aspects of our current Safe Sport Program; and second, provide recommendations for how we can improve the program going forward. We will receive the review report this winter and it will be made public.

In today's youth sports marketplace there is vigorous competition to grow participation, and especially in the all-important 5-14 age range. Sport governing bodies are aggressively doing things to recruit kids and their parents to their sport. USA Swimming will be joining this competition with a program called SwimToday.

USA Hockey, the U.S. Tennis Association, and a consortium of the major golf governing bodies are just a few of the sports that are pouring millions of dollars into attracting kids to their sport. We don't have that kind of money to spend, but in mobilizing others in the aquatics industry, and in targeting our efforts to where we can have the most impact, we believe we can successfully compete.

Some of these organizations are making drastic changes to better accommodate younger children. For example, tennis is enticing kids with smaller courts and rackets, and larger nerf-like balls. Take a look at these two videos in which tennis stars Andre Agassi and Steffi Graf are trying to get kids to see tennis differently.



Last night, President Stratton challenged us to look at the damage that can be done when the 4-hour rule is being ignored. I know our sport is different, and I know our sport is hard and not for everybody. However, if you are the parent of a child ages 5-14 shopping for a sport we are leaving a lot to chance when that child and their family are making a decision.

Let me illustrate this. USA Swimming conducted research with the Sports & Fitness Industry Association. This research shows a huge disconnect between parents of swimmers and parents of kids who don't swim.

Parents of kids who don't swim perceive soccer to be more fun, easier to learn, better at developing teamwork, healthier, cooler and a more enjoyable experience for the parents. But, once these same parents get their kids involved in swimming their perception changes...and suddenly swimming surpasses soccer on these same measures.

Soccer is just one example, but the general perception of swimming vs. the actual experience is not in sync. The SwimToday campaign will start to breakdown the misconceptions.

Adherence to the 4-hour rule is important, but we also encourage clubs to experiment with different practice and competition formats especially suited for younger swimmers. And, when you find something that works, please let us know about it so we can share with others.

We now have the research and the data that allow us to target LSCs where there is room to grow. We also have the technology to geo-target marketing efforts to those areas where the member clubs in those LSCs can be best impacted.

SwimToday is an exciting new campaign that is being supported by our sponsors – Arena, Speedo and TYR – as well as partners such as U.S. Masters Swimming and others who will be coming on board this Fall. .

#### **2014 OPERATING BUDGET & THE PROPOSED DUES INCREASE**

In his remarks last night, President Stratton also laid out a compelling argument for supporting the 2014 operating budget and approving the proposed dues increase to take effect in 2015.

USA Swimming is a vibrant organization with thousands of moving parts. Hopefully you picked up the catalog of programs that details the many programs and services for athletes, clubs and LSCs. Our strength has been in our long-term commitment to the three guiding objectives: Build the Base; Promote the Sport; and Achieve Competitive Success.

We have never been afraid to seize new opportunities or face new challenges. President Stratton talked about the financial implications of this last night, so I want to complement his thoughts to share a vision of how this can positively impact swimming.

There are dozens of projects on our drawing board for the future. Among these are many exciting ways to enhance the quality of membership for athletes, coaches and volunteers.

Here are a six of my favorites:

1. Establish a "Leadership Program" to help identify and develop the next generation of volunteer and staff leaders. This program would be similar to the many city and community leadership programs that exist across the country.
2. Invest in new recruitment and training programs for coaches and officials working with clubs that have the potential to attract greater multi-cultural participation.
3. Produce marketing materials and then plan and lead educational workshops to empower clubs at their local level.
4. Connect with the families of learn-to-swim graduates with a "Welcome and Introduction to USA Swimming" package.
5. Invest in new programming that provides increased opportunities for more junior level swimmers to receive high performance training.
6. Expand and enhance mentoring and educational opportunities for more coaches at the LSC level by establishing a "Coach University" program designed to reach a broader base of age group coaches.

There is an old saying about leaving something better than you found it. USA Swimming was an incredible organization a decade ago ... and it's an even better organization today. Our drawing board for the future is overflowing with concepts and ideas that we're itching to bring into reality. Approval of the dues increase will give us the opportunity to do just that.

In closing, I want to share with you the perspective of U.S. Olympic Committee CEO, Scott Blackmun. He said that USA Swimming is the "gold standard" for sports governing bodies. This is a wonderful compliment, but it should also be interpreted as a challenge for us to keep getting better.

We have an enormous responsibility to not only continue to grow our membership, but also to continue to grow our influence. We have the capability to impact the youth of our country in ways few other sports can.

When a child learns to swim, they become safer. When a young person joins a swim team and begins to learn about hard work and what it means to compete and to be a good teammate, they are on the road to becoming a better adult.

Swimming gives all of us the opportunity to contribute, to help others, to improve our own quality of life, and to improve the communities in which we live and work.

USA Swimming has never been more ready to take on the future.

I want to thank each of you for being here this week. Your involvement in our sport is the backbone of USA Swimming.

I thank the Board of Directors for all they do and for sticking by me this past year. I want to especially thank our President, Bruce Stratton: a smart, warm-hearted effective leader – a man who has been such a steady and responsive leader.

And finally, I thank the staff in Colorado Springs ... they are a dedicated and talented group of people and it is an honor to serve the sport with them. I owe a special thanks to the senior staff team at USA Swimming ... these individuals are my kitchen cabinet and they are a very special group of professionals.

Thank you for your time this morning ... and GO USA!

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