

2014 State of the Sport: A Tradition of Growth

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STATE of the SPORT 2014



Every year at the United States Aquatics Sports Convention, USA Swimming Executive Director Chuck Wielgus delivers a State of the Sport address in the House of Delegates session. Below is the text of his 2014 report to the USA Swimming membership in Jacksonville.

The 2000 U.S. Olympic Team Trials for Swimming were held at The Natatorium in Indianapolis, Indiana. At the time, “The Nat,” as we all called it, was recognized as the preeminent aquatic venue in the country. More than 4,000 spectators were crammed into the building along with more than a thousand athletes and coaches. There were even scalpers outside hawking tickets.

Inside, television cameras were set up throughout the venue, and a track camera was moving up and down along the pool deck to follow the leaders. A tape-delayed broadcast was set to air on NBC the following weekend.

On the last night of those 2000 Olympic Trials, I climbed to the top of the diving tower in order to get a panoramic view of things.

Down in the pool, Eric Vendt was on his way to setting a new American Record in the 1500 Free, and he also became the first American male to break the 15-minute barrier.

The atmosphere was electric, our sport’s finest hour. As I surveyed the scene from my perch atop the diving tower I saw an event that was bursting at the seams. It wanted to grow, but we were already in the country’s finest aquatic venue, so where could we go?

The next morning at breakfast, everyone was buzzing about what a great event it had been, and they were right, it was a great event. But the challenge I gave to our staff that morning was to figure out how we would take the U.S. Olympic Team Trials to a whole new level. How could we take what was an outstanding swim meet, and turn it into a major sporting spectacle? I wanted to produce an event that would attract a wider audience. We needed more seats, we needed more promotion, and we needed live television!

This was the turning point that led to our constructing a temporary 10,000-seat swim stadium in a parking lot in Long Beach, California for the 2004 Olympic Trials. And when that event proved to be successful and people wanted to know what we would do next, we took the event to a 17,000-seat sports and entertainment arena in

Omaha, Nebraska.

The story of how USA Swimming has transitioned this Trials event into what is arguably the best run, best promoted and most exciting U.S. Olympic Team Trials event is just one way in which we have helped our sport to grow and change, and become an important part of the American sporting landscape.

With the title of this year's State of the Sport being "A Tradition of Growth," sharing this story with you seemed like a good place to start.

Many other changes have been made, and many more are still to come, but before I talk about them let's first take a look at our current scorecard.

By every metric that I can think of, USA Swimming is doing exceptionally well



- Our membership has topped 400,000; more than 350,000 of whom are athlete members, more than we've ever had before. We have more than 18,000 coach members and 2,800 member clubs.
- From 2004 to 2014 we had an increase of more than 107,000 athletes, which represents 46% growth. Our retention rate is 75%, and for athletes age 13 and older the retention rate increases to more than 90%. In today's youth sport marketplace these are eye-popping positive numbers.
- Additionally, our outreach membership numbers are the highest ever, as are the number of coach members and officials.
- Our television presence is excellent. We have more hours of television coverage than ever before in a non-Olympic year, and our broadcast partners are pleased with our ratings in what is an increasing competitive marketplace.
- Our sponsor satisfaction is high, with all eleven major corporate partners actively engaged; and their collective collaboration with the SwimToday campaign is a groundbreaking development.
- Our financial position is strong. Revenue streams are steady and expenses are well-controlled. A best practice recommendation for non-profits is to have six months of cash in reserve, and USA Swimming has reserves for seven and one-half months.
- The U.S. Olympic Committee has recently completed a research project titled "Swimming Excellence Study." This in-depth case study presents a comprehensive review of our National Team's success, with an emphasis on the culture of USA Swimming's program. The study is now being used as a resource to help other U.S. Olympic sports organizations improve.
- Our National Team athletes continue to represent themselves in a way in which we can all be proud, and their accomplishments both in and out of the water are extraordinary. USA Swimming continues to be the #1 ranked swimming nation in the world. Team USA put on a great show at this summer's Pan Pacific Swimming Championships, winning 16 gold medals and 43 total medals.



We attribute USA Swimming's success to a disciplined commitment to a business plan that has been constructed around the three pillars of BUILD, PROMOTE and ACHIEVE: Build the base, Promote the sport, and Achieve sustained international success.

For more than 15 years, these aspirational objectives have been our bedrock foundation and the guiding principles for how we prioritize our work and allocate our resources. There is no reason to change a winning formula and BUILD, PROMOTE and ACHIEVE will continue to be our core objectives as we move forward.

In line with the theme of a Tradition of Growth, I'd like to share some thoughts about how we go about our work. In particular, I'd like to focus on an essential element of our organizational character: our entrepreneurial spirit.

Growth can occur in two different ways. It can be incremental or it can be in leaps forward. Organizations, and especially non-profit membership organizations, are generally very satisfied if their growth can be steady and incremental. By their nature, these organizations are conservative and look to avoid risks.

However, where USA Swimming is different is that we do occasionally look to take a well-calculated leap



forward. These leaps come with risks and we do our best to minimize the risks through good planning. We also look to be very strategic when we take a leap forward. We want the leap to take us to a higher place, but once at that higher place we then want to maintain that new position and continue to grow incrementally from there.

At USA Swimming, we have tried to blend the upside benefits of the entrepreneurial spirit with the transparent

accountability that comes with leading a non-profit, membership organization. This blended approach has resulted in a number of major advancements for our sport.

It may not seem like a big deal today, but creating Splash magazine was a very big deal back in 1998. Published six times a year and distributed to a quarter-million homes, Splash magazine is today considered by many to be USA Swimming's most tangible benefit. It's hard to imagine a swimming family living room without a copy of Splash magazine sitting on the coffee table.

All of our major domestic and international events are televised today, but this wasn't always the case. A



number of years ago, we made a decision that having our major events on television would be critical to our future growth. We also saw this as the means for attracting sponsorship investment in our sport.

At a time when our annual operating budget was substantially smaller, and thus the margin of risk substantially greater, we took some deep breaths and made the investment to purchase television air time and pay for the production costs associated with producing a network quality broadcast.

It was a huge leap, but it was a leap that landed us in an entirely better place. Televised events raised the public profile of our sport, and introduced swimming to a wider audience of sports fans. Television has also provided a fantastic platform for our athletes to showcase their skills and become recognizable stars.



Today, it seems like a no-brainer decision, but I can tell you that there were a lot of sleepless nights in those earlier days when we worried about the return on our television investment.

Creating new events is an enormous undertaking. We created and launched the Mutual of Omaha Duel in the Pool because it gave us another stage to place our sport on network television. The Duel in the Pool is held every other year in December and broadcast on NBC.



Creating the Golden Goggle Awards was something we felt strongly about because we wanted to establish a year-end, gala celebration to recognize our National Team athletes and coaches. We rotate the event between New York and Los Angeles so that we have a high-profile presence in these major media markets.

The Golden Goggle Awards were also envisioned as an opportunity to bring together our corporate partners and major donors, and the event has become an annual fund raiser for our sport. Since the launch of the Golden Goggle Awards in 2004, we have raised more than \$2M for the USA Swimming Foundation; money which has been reinvested in the Foundation's programs to save lives and build champions. Going forward, the USA Swimming Foundation will continue to expand its national footprint with the Make a Splash initiative, and will place a growing emphasis on its support for our National Team athletes and coaches.

This year, we are taking another leap forward with the marketing effort behind our SwimToday campaign. By



now you have hopefully seen some of the elements of the campaign we call "The Funnest Sport."

We know "funnest" isn't a real word, and that was exactly why we chose the word. It's the sort of thing a kid would say, and it gets the attention of adults. And so while English teachers may cringe, "The Funnest Sport" campaign is bringing a playful bounce to the promotion of the SwimToday program; and the SwimToday program is helping to attract even more kids to local swim clubs.

So ... just for fun, let's take a look at some of the funnest sport commercials we have created. Watch ["The Walk"](#), ["Cannonball"](#) and ["Sign Language"](#)



There are many other ways in which our sport is changing and growing. We recently hosted for the first time a Club President's Summit in Colorado Springs and it was very well received. I see us hosting many more conferences and workshops that will bring together club and volunteer leaders from the local level. This deeper collaboration gives these people the opportunity to share ideas and learn best practices from each other, as well as from our staff and more experienced national-level volunteers.

We still have a long way to go, but our outreach membership is the fastest growing segment of our membership population. We are also seeing a significant increase in diversity initiatives at the Zone level. And the USA Swimming Select Diversity Camp is recognized as a best practice by the USOC and other NGBs.

Since the inception of the Facilities Development Department in 2004, we have been involved in the design and programming of 113 new aquatic facilities. Currently, the Facilities Development Department is consulting with 69 projects that are in various stages of planning and design. In 2014, we helped to open 8 new aquatic facilities.

The Facilities Development Department was created as part of the bold leap we undertook in 2002, when the House of Delegates approved our proposal to double the dues over a twelve year period of time. This initiative generated more than \$50M dollars that has been reinvested in grassroots programs and services. The core philosophy that remains intact today is our belief that the swim club is the foundation of our sport; and the best way for us to support our athletes and grow the sport is to support our club system. USA Swimming's Club Development Division is the heart and soul of this support system.

We are always looking for effective ways to establish good international relationships. In June, we hosted a FINA Officials Seminar in Miami for 110 officials from 63 different countries. It was a great opportunity for USA Swimming to shine and build new friendships at the international level.

We have brought the management of our insurance programs in-house, and our Risk Manager, George Ward has been instrumental in helping with the current efforts to bring our captive insurance company onshore. USSIC will soon be domiciled in Washington DC and we are assuming much greater responsibility with all aspects of our risk management and insurance programs. George has also been able to increase the coverages for our member clubs, while simultaneously negotiating insurance premium savings for USA Swimming..

For almost a decade now, we have talked about having an in-house General Counsel. Following our most recent study of legal expenses, the USA Swimming Board of Directors has determined that the time has come to have a full-time General Counsel on staff. I anticipate filling this position by the start of the New Year.

Our digital efforts continue. Our Deck Pass app now has close to 210,000 online users. It has become an

incredibly popular tool for our athletes and coaches.

We are webcasting more events, and we are looking to broaden our content offerings. Right here in Jacksonville this past Thursday at the start of the OIOC meeting we conducted a special webcast event in which we announced the Time Standards for the 2016 U.S. Olympic Team Trials. We are also webcasting numerous seminars for coaches and club leaders and will continue to expand these educational offerings in the future.

USA Swimming's Safe Sport program has recently undergone an independent review by Victor Vieth, a national expert on the subject of sexual abuse and prevention. Among the many recommendations in his report is that USA Swimming should establish a means for providing more support to victims of sexual abuse.

In 2015, USA Swimming will launch SwimAssist, which will be a resource program that will provide professional counseling and support services for members who have been the victims of sexual abuse. Susan Woessner, our Safe Sport Director will manage this program.

We have also just hired a Safe Sport Educational Specialist, who will solely focus on expanding our educational efforts to raise awareness to reduce the risks of sexual abuse.

As we look farther into the future, USA Swimming will continue to seek opportunities to take additional strategic leaps forward.

In fact, our next venture is already underway as we are working on the production of a documentary film about the 1976 Montreal Olympic Games. If you have seen any of the ESPN 30 for 30 documentary films, then you will have a good picture of what we have in mind.

This project is important because we are creating original programming that can expand our media content beyond our televised events. The marketplace for sports documentaries and bio-pics is rapidly expanding and there are many opportunities for USA Swimming in this evolving new space.

The working title for our project is "The Last Gold" and it refers to the last relay race of the 1976 Montreal Games when the American women came back to finally beat a doped-up East German team that had stormed through the first twelve events on the Olympic program and kept the American women from winning a single gold medal up to that point.

We plan to have the film ready for distribution in 2016, which will be the 40-year anniversary of those 1976 Montreal Olympic Games.

Recently I was invited by NBC and the USOC to participate with a working group to develop new strategies to increase television audiences and grow the participation for all Olympic sports. The work is being done under the banner of "Project 32," which acknowledges the contract that NBC recently signed with the IOC to be the U.S. host broadcaster for future Olympic Games through 2032. This is just further evidence that the search for new content and original programming will become increasingly important in the future.

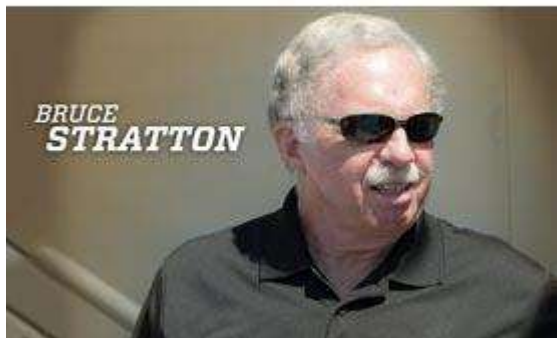
The year ahead is going to be filled with new challenges and opportunities, and we are ready. There is always much excitement in the pre-Olympic year, and 2015 will be no different.

USA Swimming will send three separate teams to represent our country at next year's major international competitions; the World Championships in Russia; the World University Games in Korea; and the Pan American Games in Toronto, Canada.

These events will provide our country's most elite swimmers with the opportunity to train and prepare for a

single international competition. This is part of our quad plan that helps to ready our top athletes and coaches for the challenges that come with international competition. The ultimate goal, of course, is to be ready for the 2016 Rio Olympic Games.

As this year's convention comes to a close, so too does Bruce Stratton's second term as USA



Swimming President. This is a bittersweet moment. The relationship between the President and the Executive Director is a necessarily close one. Bruce and I have spent a lot of time together. We have traveled to events, and spent countless hours in meetings and in conversations that have dealt with nearly every aspect of USA Swimming business.

Needless to say, we have gotten to know each other very well. Perhaps most noteworthy of all, in the four years that we have worked together I cannot recall a single instance in which we were not working collaboratively to make decisions that were in the best interest of USA Swimming.

Bruce was also very involved in our strategic planning exercises, and he brought an extremely important perspective to those planning sessions. He made our business plan better, and his involvement helped him to better explain the plan to board members and others.

Bruce Stratton's time as our President will be remembered for many things. Under Bruce's leadership, extraordinary accomplishments were realized. These include:

- USA Swimming's membership topping 400,000;
- Team USA bringing home 31 medals from the London Olympic Games;
- Providing the leadership to bring USSIC onshore and reorganize USA Swimming's insurance and risk management activities; and
- Providing the leadership to improve USA Swimming's Safe Sport program as the model for all Olympic sports.

And so now we prepare to welcome a new USA Swimming President. This is an exciting time, not only for the individual you select to help lead our NGB, but also for the senior staff team with whom the new President will work most closely.

There is always a fine line between the roles of our volunteer leadership and staff. One of the hallmarks of USA Swimming's ongoing success is that we have always respected these roles, i.e. that our volunteer leaders are focused on governance issues, policies and the general direction of the sport; while our staff leaders are responsible for the development and implementation of strategies, and management of the NGBs programs and services.

In addition to thanking Bruce Stratton for his service, and in readying the welcome mat for our new President, I

want to thank the entire staff team back in Colorado Springs. It is an extraordinary group of people, who share a passion for the sport and who work every day to provide the best service possible to our members and clubs.

I owe a very special thank you to the members of the senior staff team, with whom I work so closely. To know these people, is to know the best in our business.

USA Swimming is completing another year of great accomplishments and successes; and there is much to look forward to in the years ahead. I have enjoyed being here in Jacksonville this week, and I can't wait to get back to work in service to our sport.

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

