

Olympic swimmers make a big Splash

Competitive swimming has changed a lot over the years, and the 2008 Olympic Games and Paralympics in Beijing illustrated just how talented many of the world's swimmers really are. Team GB's swimmers came away with a clutch of medals and plenty to be proud of, and this was commemorated at the recent Splash Awards held at the Lowry Hotel in Manchester. Karen Pickering, who founded the event in support of the Swimming Trust and British Olympic Foundation, explained why it is important to honour athletes who excel in the sport and how swimming has changed since she was competing.

Ms Pickering was a high-achieving member of the British swimming squad from 1986 to 2005. She won a number of medals during her career including eight World Championship medals (four gold), 14 European Championship medals, 38 National Championship titles and 13 Commonwealth Games medals, including four golds. She was awarded an MBE in the 1994 New Year Honours List and has gone on to appear at, and host, a variety of events to raise the profile of the sport.

Celebrating swimming success

However, during her time in competition, she felt something was missing. "Basically, while I was competing, there was nothing like this [the Splash Awards] for swimmers," she says. "Coaches and officials had similar events but I felt it was a real shame that athletes had no awards. It's important to get together and gives people the chance to look back on the year and celebrate."

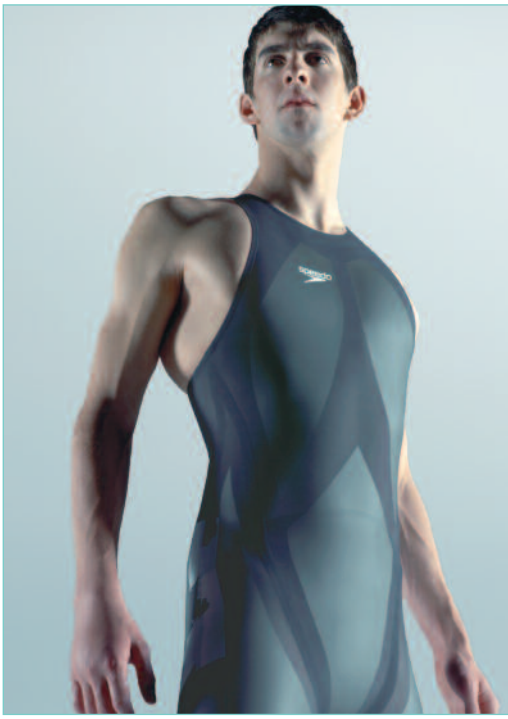
With the British Olympic team returning with six medals and the Paralympic team returning with an incredible 44, Ms Pickering explains just how important the Games are for competitive swimmers. "The Olympic year is always the most important in the calendar, swimmers work to a four-year plan," she says. "As soon as one Olympics finishes, they start planning for the next one.

"There are other championships and other goals, but at the back of your mind you're always thinking about the next Olympic Games. The last Commonwealth Games in Melbourne was a huge lift for swimming, and that was backed up by the Olympic Games."

A number of British swimmers were honoured

Many Olympic swimmers came together for the Splash Awards, which were established by former freestyle champion Karen Pickering to celebrate outstanding achievement.

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Unfair advantage?

Since its launch in February 2008, there have been a number of claims that the Speedo LZR Racer gives swimmers wearing the suit an unfair advantage over those that are not. According to Jim Wood, president of USA Swimming, swimsuits should not be permitted to cover the neck or extend past the shoulder or knee. Italy's national team coach, Alberto Castagnetti, has described the Speedo suit as a form of "technological doping", while Australia's head swimming coach, Alan Thompson, claims the suit is trivialising top-level competition.

Not only have there been complaints that the LZR is giving athletes an edge—more than 100 world records have been broken since its launch—there are also claims that the suit's high price-tag makes it unavailable to some athletes. The argument is that nations that are sponsored by Speedo have a significant advantage over those that are not, particularly as competitive swimmers must wear new suits for every tenth swim.

FINA (Fédération International de Natation Amateur), the governing body for swimming, initially rejected calls for the suit to be banned. However, as this issue of *WSA* went to press, discussions on swimwear approval at FINA meetings in Lausanne and Dubai, which could affect the status of the Speedo LZR, were ongoing.

Speedo

at the Splash Awards, which were hosted by former rugby union player Martin Bayfield. These included two-time gold medal winner Rebecca Adlington, the first British swimmer to win two Olympic gold medals since 1908. Her awards were presented towards the end of the event; one for Female Swimmer of the Year (sponsored by Invista) and one for Olympic Athlete of the Year. Other award winners included Paralympic gold medallist Eleanor Simmonds (Female Swimmer of the Year: Elite Swimmer with a Disability Award), silver medallist David Davies (Male Swimmer of the Year Award) and former silver medallist diver and now BBC commentator Leon Taylor (Lifetime Achievement Award).

Changes within the sport

While Ms Pickering clearly feels it is important to recognise the swimmers' achievements, she is also keen to talk about the way the sport has changed since she first started out. "It's changed massively," she explains. "I recently dug out some old swimsuits and the changes are quite remarkable. It was 1986 when I was first on the GB team. The fit, fabric, weight and comfort of the suits was so amateur and basic compared with now. When you dived into the pool the thing you were most worried about was whether the suit would stay on.

"The LZR [Speedo] and suits like it have really taken things to a whole other level. They are FINA-approved but they are borderline legal. Without a doubt they've completely changed the record books. Swimmers say it can save three-tenths of a second per 50 metres. But it's not just about the suit, it's about training hard, although it can also provide a psychological benefit."

She explains just how different swim apparel was when she started out. "The biggest change I remember was when paper suits came out. They were so thin but there was hardly any give. They were very rigid and almost sheer when they were on. TYR brought it out first, then Speedo.

"A version came out two or three years ago as well and I tested it for them. It took forever to get on but felt incredible. It just fitted so much better and stuck to your skin. Normal suits you can buy in the shops can be moved easily and you feel the suit when you're wearing it. But the paper suit is like a layer of skin, there's no movement."

High hopes for the future

With so much changing within the swimming arena, Ms Pickering is hopeful that the British team will go from strength to strength in the near future. However, she claims the amount of technology involved makes predicting results a tricky business. "With the technology that's available now—manmade fibres, science and testing using NASA, etc—you can't really predict what will happen; it's science not clothing! Spray-on suits maybe." She adds that regulations may become stricter as time goes on in order to make sure the sport is fair for everyone taking part.

Talking about the 2012 Olympic games, which are to be held in London, Ms Pickering reveals what she thinks will make all the difference in terms of Team GB's success. "The biggest effect is that the Games are at home. I just hope that whatever suits are out there, British swimmers will have the opportunity to wear them. We've fought hard for the right to wear the best, not just what we we're given."



The award for Female Swimmer of the Year went to gold medallist Rebecca Adlington. It was presented by Invista's marketing manager, Michelle Duncan, as the award was sponsored by the Lycra brand owner.

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