

MY WAY TO A PERSONAL COACHING PHILOSOPHY: PART ONE

Tony Pearce recalls his first steps in a lifelong coaching career that began in the 'swimming sixties'

A little while ago I happened to come across *My Learn to Swim Book* written by Ray Cayless way back in 1973.

Ray was one of the early ASA national technical officers (NTOs), the original being the late, great Bert Kinnear, a coaching educational guru, or if you like a coaches' coach.

Kinnear influenced the beginning of an era in British competitive swimming where, in my opinion, conditioning began to strongly influence the progression of style. This philosophy became evident with the success of the GB team at the 1960 Rome and the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games.

The 'bible' of the swimming world for us in the UK was the *ASA Handbook of Teaching Swimming*. In order to pass your ASA Teachers' Certificate, you had to quite literally learn it off by heart, word for word. It became my 'Little Book of Swimming'.

Written examination

An ASA Teachers' Course was hard to find. What tutors there were would merely recite from the *ASA Handbook* for you to annotate into your notebook and, more often than not, never the brains would meet. The written examination required a thesis for each question. I vaguely remember a homework question which read something like: 'Using the breaststroke as an example, explain the difference between rhythm and timing.'

The practical examination consisted of a teaching plan, neatly written, followed by teaching a class of at least a dozen children; at the same time, you had to show that you could divide up and cater for the different ability groups. Warm-up, introductory activity, main theme (whole-part-whole). Not forgetting, of course, those positive teaching points and a contrasting activity.

As candidates, those examiners looked intimidating to say the least, but the tutor would reassure us that they were nice people really. So, wearing the stereotyped attire of that era - clean poolside shoes, white socks, pressed tracksuit trousers and the latest sports shirt - I would walk on to the deck with a big smile on my face.

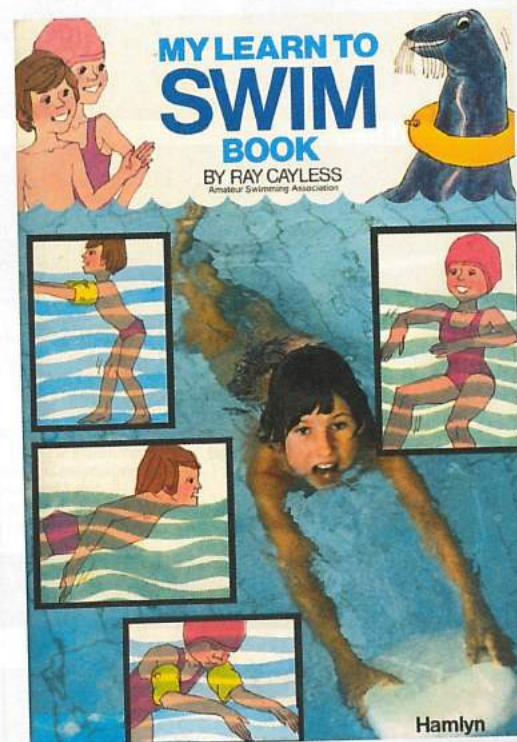
Pool attendant

Not having a higher educational background, my coaching career began, in essence, from the very bottom of the swimming coaching career ladder as a pool attendant at Morden Park Baths in Merton in 1967, the 'summer of love'.

While working as a pool attendant, I

continued my own swimming training alongside assisting the head coach with teaching and coaching at my club, Croydon Amphibians. In my spare time, I would avidly read anything I could find on swimming. I was living in my own personal swimming paradise. Eventually, after the third try, I passed my ASA Teachers' Certificate, the initial and very important step to becoming a qualified coach.

It was now for the Advanced Teachers' Certificate and then the exalted ASA Coaches' Certificate. A few years earlier, I had served an apprenticeship as a draughtsman in a steelworks in Battersea, then a heavily industrialised, working-class area, not the gentrified suburb it is now. At that time, the vogue of thinking, as to becoming a swimming coach, was words to the effect of 'You can't earn a living at swimming. Learn a trade first to fall back on, and then you can do what you want!' Looking back, these were wise words indeed.



Left: Ray Cayless's book; above: members of Barnes SC's masters squad, which Tony coaches today

'The thinking was you couldn't earn a living at swimming. You needed a trade to fall back on'

Then a rule change took place. Holders of the ASA Teachers' Certificate could now take a newly constructed ASA Club Coaches' Certificate before being eligible to take the full ASA Coaches' Certificate.

The newly built Crystal Palace National Sports Centre with its ASA Educational Summer School provided the opportunity to take such a course. It was then that I came across Ray Cayless, who was one of the course tutors.

Cine-camera

Throughout most of the course, Ray had a large cine-camera on his shoulder for analysing strokes. However, at that time, the cine-camera was still an early type of slide projector as far as swimming coaching was concerned. Lights out. Lectures consisted of

cine-camera film reel with a buzzing noise and accompanying flickering light. I would hang on to Ray's every word.

But although conditioning was coming to the fore, stroke analysis then was still a cornerstone of swim coaching education. Well, we candidates were lined up on the poolside edge, stroke analysis sheet on our clipboards at the ready.

A swimmer, swimming a specified stroke and speed, would swim up and down in front of us while we would furiously list down in order: body position; leg action; arm action; breathing and timing. Ray would mark us A+, A, B+, B etc, with C being a bare pass.

At the end of the course, our marks were added up to assess what we had learned courtesy of a long list of standardised faults and corrections.

Yes, we were being moulded by a series of thought processes which shaped our approach to coaching swimming. I believed that this was the best approach in the world. In some ways, I still do, but I will come back to this later.

Then, on a hot summer's afternoon before our final assessments, I distinctly remember that we were all exhausted. We had been burning the midnight oil writing out our schedules of work, the yearly plan and profiling the swimmers to whom we had been allocated.

We were all sitting out on the grass by the Crystal Palace NSC Hostel. Ray Cayless then

talked about stroke analysis using the index finger and thumbs of both hands locked together in a square like that of a camera screen. He would vary the distance by isolating a small part of the stroke, blowing it up in relation to the whole stroke. Whole-part-whole. And then came the magic question: 'What did you see in the stroke?' Words I remember to this day.

The Crystal Palace NSC had an underwater viewing gallery. I was then of the understanding that its function was to do with engineering work, and nothing to do with the novelty of viewing 'fish' in an aquarium.

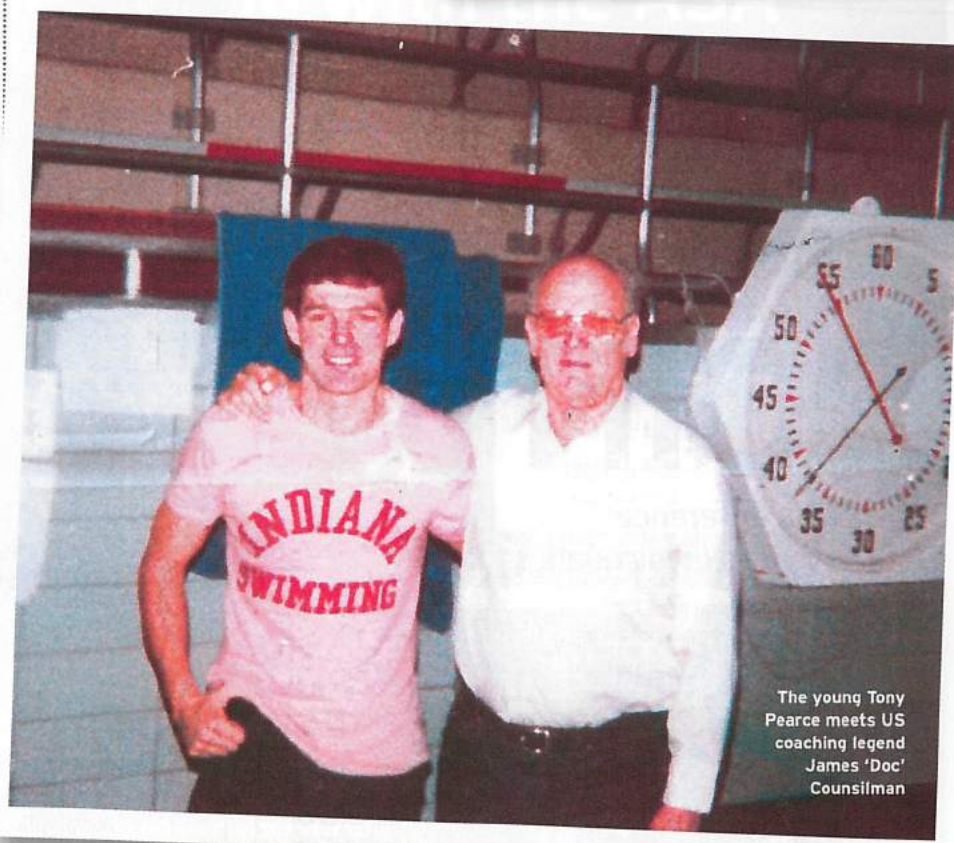
But it was not necessarily the stroke mechanics of what was happening above the water but below the water that was important in swimming more effectively. However, this comparatively new dimension of stroke mechanics still had not really been appreciated as an integral part of stroke analysis.

It was around this time that the famous US Olympic coach James 'Doc' Counsilman of the University of Indiana published his book, *The Science of Swimming*.

Stroke analysis had now entered a whole new dimension and Counsilman's book soon became my new 'swimming bible'.

Continued next month

• **Tony's Masters Swimming website:** www.mastersswimming.co.uk



The young Tony Pearce meets US coaching legend James 'Doc' Counsilman