

MASTERS SWIMMING – AND HOW TO SURVIVE IT!

“Gold in the Water” - The Book by P.H. Mullen

A Personal Review

by

Tony Pearce

Introduction – The Fan

The U.K Swimming Magazine asked me to write a personal review on P.H. Mullen’s book “Gold in the Water”. Mullen has sub-headed on the cover of this book, “The True Story of Ordinary Men and their Extraordinary Dream of Olympic Glory”. But for me, this book is not only about the swimmers. It is also about their coach.

During my life in swimming there have been many people who have had a positive influence on me. But the one that had the most profound effect on me, as both a master swimmer and a young aspiring swimming coach, was Dick Jochums. In 1976 I decided to go to view the coaching situation at the famous Long Beach Swim Club in California. It was there that I first met Dick Jochums. He was the Coach. Later, in 1981 after competing in the U.S Short Course Masters Nationals in Irvine, California I travelled to the University of Arizona where Dick Jochums had moved to as Coach. I thanked him as I attributed my success in masters swimming to him. Years passed and as I became successful in swimming coaching, I learnt that Dick had been fired from the University of Arizona and, as a result, was out of swimming coaching completely. I was deeply saddened to say the least. However, in 1996 I discovered that Dick Jochums was back in swimming coaching with the Santa Clara Swim Club in California. It was shortly after this in 1998, after competing in the World Masters Games in Portland, Oregon, that I travelled down to Santa Clara to see him again. I felt like Eric Clapton being humbled by B.B King. I told him that I had learnt through him my methods of training. I again thanked him. Always steal from the best.

1. Desperado

At first Mullen’s book seems to resemble a Hollywood film script. It is a story about a man. A man for his time and place. Now, the story that unfolds with this man, a once great legendary coach, now disgraced and washed up, is that quite by chance and circumstance he is employed by the Santa Clara Swim Club. This once great legendary club, now devoid of swimming talent and deep in debt, barely hired him. You got it. Nobody else wanted the job and he was the last man standing. He was desperate to get back into coaching again. He crawled. The star role of the coach is played by Dick Jochums (who else?). His Assistant Coach is played by John Bitter. Incidentally, John received a special award for this role as Best Supporting Actor. He seemed to have been supporting everybody - including Jochums. The main swimmers were played (in alphabetical order) by Tate Blahnick, Kurt Grote, and Dod Wales. Oh Yes! There is also a special guest star appearance of Dara Torres. However, the Best Young Actor award went to an unknown by the name of Tom Wilkens, Jochums’ top swimmer.

The film set was that of an old run-down swim pool at Santa Clara. A low-budget film, it was rented cheaply from the City of Santa Clara. Later, the film set had to be moved. This was due to a sighting of a large sack of the swimming club’s money supposedly flying over the pool’s padlocked back gate one dark night, resulting in a police and IRS investigation. (Jochums and Bitter were completely exonerated.) In order to complete the film on time and escape the authorities, the set was moved to Indianapolis where, quite conveniently, the Olympic Trials were being held.

Unfortunately, things got even more serious so the set had, once again, to be moved “down under” to Sydney, Australia where yet again, conveniently, the Olympic Games were being held. Hey! Wait a minute; I’ve introduced enough, let’s get on with the review!

2. In the Fast Lane

Yes, at first this book does seem to resemble a Hollywood film script, but then you realize. Film as we know it is now dead. No colour, no music, not even a script. This is not **reel** life - it is **real** life. No, this is not fantasy – it is reality. This is why Mullen’s sporting book may be the first of its kind. It is a black and white video film documentary. And, it is of the highest quality. This “Blair Witch” project is a genuine quest for objectivity together with a desire to minimize bias and distortion. There are, however, some inaccuracies in his historical research (Tim Shaw from 192 to 170lbs? Naaah!). But these are far too few to mention for there is an obvious amount of genuine effort, which deserves the highest amount of praise. It is because of this that it achieves the whole truth. It is an exercise in the dedication to reality. **But, before reading this book, the roles of both the swimmer and the coach in such a film need an initial screen test.**

Firstly, we have the role of the swimmer. Swimming is an absolutely reasonable activity. But before you attempt to be the best that you can be, a decision is required. You, the swimmer, as a consenting adult, are responsible for such a personal action. You are swimming for yourself. Not for your parents and least of all for the coach. Swimming tends to deceive people. In Mullen’s book Jochums’ swimmers’ thoughts during their crucial races are excellently depicted. It is here that one realizes that in reality the ‘tired’ swimmer does not run out of gas. The swimmers thought that they were tired. An excuse provided by the sub-conscious. For the ones who have trained properly, tiredness is purely psychological for in a real swimming race when you dive into the pool you are there to participate in a contest of wills, not as such, of abilities. Therefore, the swimmer has a choice to either be beaten or get tired, look awful and win. So, you have to be in great shape in order to know when to break away from the anonymity of the pack. This is swimming. This is life. Don’t roll over easily for anybody even if they have the upper hand. Let them think they can do whatever they want then make your move. That’s how it goes. Everybody bides their own time.

Now we come to the swimming coach. Once again, as with swimming itself, swimming coaching tends to deceive people. In Mullen’s book, Dick Jochums tends to be portrayed as some sort of magnificent anachronism; a representation of another time. The old school. The “hard ass” coach. Break glass only in the event of an emergency. A male chauvinist with a penchant for offbeat or gnomie remarks. Therefore, where there is decent obscurity, at times what seems to have been left is an indecent celebrity. But such remarks are instinctive metaphors, which are economical, astute, and cut into the middle of what was absurd in a particular situation. A real sense of balance in the estimate of changing events under extreme pressure. To attempt to decipher whether Dick Jochums is just acting is not really important for anybody else to know. It is only important that, as a partnership, he and his swimmers know. The grid of such an interaction is a construct theory that is difficult to perceive, let alone be part of and describe. This is where there is really no point in trying to understand Dick Jochums because the more you get to know the less you will understand. However, there are a few clues:

Firstly, one has to realize that Dick Jochums is by no means an unintelligent man. He graduated from the University of Washington in 1965 with an MS Degree and then

the University of California, Berkeley in 1971 with a PhD. Over this period of time one of his mentors was Franklin Henry (1968)¹, one of the great paragons of physical education.

Secondly, his style of coaching was strongly influenced by such coaching icons as Sherman Chavoor, George Haines and Don Gambril. Dick worked under Gambril at Long Beach before taking over as head coach. Later, in 1975 he finally realised the concept of quality into distance freestyle training resulting in his star swimmer, Tim Shaw, dominating world record freestyle swimming. This “Agonistic Training” (1974)² was based on the philosophy of Greek mythology. The process (Agon) is more important than the outcome (Arête).

3. The Twenty-first Century Man

These shades of “Tom Brown’s Schooldays” lead to the third clue where you have to go back to Dick Jochums’ childhood. “My parents raised me to believe that I could be anything that I wanted to if I worked hard enough” (2001)³. It was about at this period of time, at twelve years of age, that he always wanted to be a swimming coach. This is what he has always defined himself by. Here I am. This is my courage. The pure warrior. Although loathed to admit it, if he ever has to stop coaching it will kill him. Mind you, given Mullen’s vivid portrayal of poolside scenes where Jochums is seemingly killing his swimmers, the profession of swimming coaching may well kill him. This is where you realise that, in the partnership of the coach and his swimmers, the process of “Agon” works both ways. Interestingly, in most such scenes the ghost of Tim Shaw seems to come back to revisit him. Jochums admits to over training Shaw resulting in Shaw only winning silver instead of gold medal at the 1976 Olympic Games. This perceived failure still haunts him to this day. In Jochums’ office there is a picture of Tim Shaw. Aptly, it is in black and white.

This is why, in my opinion, Dick Jochums chose not to take a safe option when he took on the Santa Clara Swim Club. It was not just about being desperate to get back into coaching again. This was not about money and redemption. No, he took on an assignment where, anything other than securing an Olympic gold medal at the end of it would be deemed as failure. At first you would think that there was something rather admirable in all this. At 54 years of age Jochums took a last chance to add something to his curriculum vitae. Success at Santa Clara Swim Club would make the Jochums legend almost true and that Jochums couldn’t resist. It would seem that he was seduced by his own myth. Not quite. Dick Jochums is now coaching for the championship of himself. He knows that Santa Clara Swim Club could be the coaching job for which history will finally recognize him by. It is here that, albeit on only two points in this superb book, that I disagree with Mullen.

Firstly, Mullen has cited that “all sports build character” (2001)⁴. I disagree. Swimming does not build character. It demonstrates it.

Secondly, Mullen has cited Dick Jochums as “one of the Great American motivators of the twentieth century” (2000)⁵. To my mind, having read this book I would already cite him as “one of the Great motivators of the twenty-first century”. Why?

Unlike his contemporaries, Dick Jochums has not tried to reinvent himself and despite criticism of his supposedly abstract training methods, he has consistently produced Olympians over a period of three decades. Tim Shaw in the 70’s, George DiCarlio in the 80’s and now with Tom Wilkens to name a few. This is because of his philosophy of coaching which believes in the courage to choose to work towards being the best that you can be. That nothing is for free. That you have to work for it while

being responsible for one's own actions by seeing things as they really are. The process is more important than the outcome.

It is in this respect that I know that if I had a daughter or a son who was a swimmer with sufficient talent, maturity and desire to swim to the highest level, I would have no hesitation in recommending Dick Jochums as being the coach for them. Yes, to the sport of swimming today, he is truly a man for his time and place. He is the 'Twenty-first Century Man. It is both a pleasure and an honour to have been asked to write this personal review.

Bibliography

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 3. 2001 "The Swim Coaching Bible" by Dick Hannula and Nort Thornton – Chapter 18, Freestyle Distance Training by Dick Jochums – page
 4. 2001 "Gold in the Water" by P.H. Mullen – Introduction: Sink or Swim – page xiv
 5. 2001 "Gold in the Water" by P.H. Mullen – Introduction: Sink or Swim – page xvii
- Visit www.goldinthewater.com

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Editor's Note. Tony is the Master in Charge of Swimming at the St. Paul's Boys School in Barnes, London, England and Head Coach of the St Paul's Barnes Swimming Club with special responsibility to the Seniors and Masters Tri Squad. This article was written in January 2003. The accompanying photograph is of Dick Jochums and Tony at the Santa Clara Swim Club standing either side of the poolside statue of George Haines. This photograph was taken in 2006 during the 2006 World Masters Swimming Championships at Stanford.