

Masters Swimming and How to Survive It

A Series by Tony Pearce



Water. Water. Water. Who Controls The Water?

Introduction.

A Personal Journey.

In the 1970's the sport of competitive swimming changed forever the way swimming in this country redefined its culture. It evolved from the U.S. Anything that comes from the U.S goes East. It was called Masters Swimming. For here at this time, an ultimate rebel against the post-world war class system. Social unrest. Goodbye to the 1960's. The ultimate need was freedom.

And the journey of the swimmers and the coaches was as wild and revealing as the sport and its society itself. At that time being

a swimmer was like being a coach at the same time. The concept was that of an elliptical band. You twist it in such a way that you traverse both.

In terms of a design of an opportunity to describe my feeling that we are all on a journey on this planet, just travelling at different speeds. The lines cross at the intent. Water. Water. Water. Who Controls The Water?

To The Tooting Bec Open Air Lido. And Back Again.

It is the beginning of the 1950's. Post WW2 Britain. Run down. However, the sun always seems to shine. Especially at the nearby Tooting Bec Open Air Lido.

Tony, a mere toddler at the time, is taken for his first swim by his two aunts. The long line waiting under the shade of trees. The sound of the cash desk. The clicking of the turnstiles. The bombing dives off of the spring board. The splashes, The noise. The wooden lockers.

Wandering, Tony found himself taking the plunge with others from the pool edge. Luckily, being endowed with long curly hair enabled an aunt to pull him out to safety.

A Personal Journey for Tony had just Begun.

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Well, through my school, Gorringe Park State School in Mitcham South West London. Gorringe Swordfish now Merton Swordfish Swimming Club I climbed the swimming ranks. Through Surrey County Training I joined the illustrious Amphibians (now Croydon) Men's Swimming Club. Our coach was Harold Judd, to me an iconic figure, who inspired me to be a swimming coach. In those days swimming pools were quite small in number. Also somewhat run down. Believe or not most swimming pools were not open on Sundays. Harold introduced us, with me back to Tooting Bec Lido which was open on a Sunday morning. It was in essence an all-year-round club. The Tooting Bec Outdoor Swimming and Physical

Culture Club. Heroes of that era. The Great John Hardy, Peter Gunn and Brian Abbott (The Human Sun Dial) while George Aldhouse provided poolside acrobatics. A 3-mile run around the Balham horse track outside the pool, the 5-mile Norbury Hill and 10-mile Crystal Palace Runs. There was some weight training by the side of the pool. The old weights cupboard on the poolside. Then, of course was the race across the width. Freezing cold water. All through the winter. Christmas Day as well. There is a poolside memory to Harold Judd, a prominent swimmer himself, in the form of the 500 yards (5 lengths) Freestyle Trophy.

The Apprentice.

"You are not going to work in a swimming pool. Get yourself a real trade then you can do what you want".

Looking back no better advice could have been given to me at that time.

I did not achieve the end of school with particularly good exam results. Even though I had attained national standard swimming wise it was still not good enough to get me into the illustrious Loughborough P.E College, certainly not with only two O levels albeit from the London University Board, regarded as the hardest at the time. But, as fate would have it, they were in Pure Mathematics and Technical Drawing.

This enabled me to get an apprenticeship as a design draughtsman in structural steelwork. Dawnays Ltd. It was situated in the industrial part of nearby Wandsworth not the trendy gentrification of now, the very industrial albeit characterized area of Battersea. It was the film set for such films as Robbery, Poor Cow and Up The Junction. Film Stars in attendance so to speak. I had to cycle there as the early morning traffic jams limited the consistency of the bus. You could recognise when you entered Battersea. The various aromas of industrious produce. Gartons Glucose factory. Prices Candle factory. The run-down old brick buildings survived through WW2. Conveniently assembled council flats in the name regeneration. However, Youngs pubs still seemed to occupy every

street corner. Although, one monument still managed to tower above all that surrounded it. Yes, the old Latchmere Road Baths. With no less than five swimming pools under one roof. A teaching pool "The Penny Bare Bums" depicting an age of old London. There was also Wandsworth baths down the road by the river.

My bike conveniently added to time spent on a water warm-up. I was sent one day each week to attend an ONC Course at Brixton College of Building. Subjects included building construction in all its entirety. For instance, being involved in the structural design of a steel roof truss was interesting. A steel roof in Traps Hill swimming pool in Loughton if I remember. But, for want of a better phrase, all good things must come to an end.

In at the Deep End.

Well, the great day came. I got a job as a pool attendant at the Morden Park Baths in Morden Surrey in the Summer of 1967. The pool had just opened. Post WW2 Regeneration. I literally hung around that pool until I discovered that one of the staff had left. A brand-new pool overlooking Morden Park.

The 1960's. A place that existed only in your imagination. Some place far away, half remembered When you wake up You were there though. You knew the language. That was the 60s No it was not that either. It was just 1967, that's all it really was. With its trees and open spaces. Certainly, a complete contrast to the depths of Battersea. Not that far a cycle ride from home either. Yes. I knew my way around.

I purchased my own poolside clothing. White poolside sandals, trousers, bell bottomed as was the dress code style that was all the rage then. As was the t-shirt a hint of psychedelia about it too. I was going to be a swimming coach and to me this was my way to achieving that aim.

However, reality crept in. Although scrubbing the pool deck and the scum trough, then sweeping the pool bottom was the norm. Then, came the day of the inauguration of the Inter-London Borough Swimming Championships. In order to prepare for this, as

it was, a prestigious occasion, I was delegated, for want of a better word, to scrub with a toothbrush and scouring powder the uprights of the balcony downwards steps. This was to accommodate the dignitaries, London Borough Mayors, their Councillors all together with the Senior Baths Management. Members of the London Guild of Baths Managers. Heading the group was Mr A.F.Read.

He was actually the Chairman of the London Guild of Baths Managers. This group initiated the Inter-London Borough Swimming Championships. Incidentally, one of them was Alan Hime who was General Baths Manager of Barnet. Alan was an icon to me, an international swimmer, coach and the house that Alan built the Barnet Copthall Swimming Centre.

Jack of all Trades

It was the summer of 1969. The 60's were over. The 70's were about to begin. I can now see why some look back now imagining the 2020's - full of politics, economics and environmental doom -

...as a repeat of those times. For example, how many of those past era icons still retain their cultural clout in the 2020's. To name just a few, John LeCarre (Silverview), Robert Plant (Led Zeppelin) and the eternal Queen.

In a stranger set of circumstances that anybody cared to admit too I sat before the same General Baths Manager in his prestigious Head Office. I was attending a final appointment interview as a Trainee Baths Manager for the L.B. Merton. There he was. The same Mr A.F.Read. The General Manager. He directed all the pools in the Borough.

Water. Water. Water. Who Controls The Water?

My first impression.

Unpretentious but a very strong character all the same. Besides, I instinctively felt comfortable under his direction.

"Now Mr Pearce, there are three things that you first need to know about being a baths manager,

- 1, Always have a black tie in the side draw of your desk as you will be going to the funerals of your fellow managers".**

Ironically, some years later, his successor, previously the Manager at Crystal Palace NSC, died in the same office of a heart attack. I know. I was there.

- 2. Don't have your photograph taken as everyone will know who you are. Life won't be your own.**
- 3. Never shit on your own doorstep".**

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It was at that one at a time apprehensive taps on the office door where an assortment of assistant managers entered with day-to-day management matters. When he had dealt with due process, some quite tense, he turned to me, smiled and remarked "Well, That's management. Handling people!"

However, one still had to really graft to gain paper qualifications. So, here we go again, I was sent one day a week to study at SELTEC for the Diploma in Baths Management. Basically, four papers.

Administration. Pool Water Purification. Heating and Ventilation. Pool Design. There were visiting lecturers and some practising pool managers. Others were specialists. Also, there were visits to other

pools with modern adjustments. For instance, pool water purification, Ozone (O₂) disinfection together with the new Surflow System.

However, work experience. The baths department was diverse in structure. A Central Establishment Laundry. Large washing machines from a bygone age were long gone. Spin dryers and ironing rollers. It was likened to a film set of a prison where the inmates were put to work in the daytime. However, there was some respite where you were let out on parole accompanied by a guard from the fitter's shop who drove you to every school in the borough to fix all these towel machines.

Of course, their other more salubrious work locations experience such heat. The Turkish baths suite at Porchester Hall in Westminster had me working as an attendant.

Of course, such work experience could have been construed as a test of my character in terms of really being suited to the post more than anything else. By all accounts there were previous trainee baths managers who had moved on quicker than expected. Mr Read was a very shrewd man in many ways. Here are just some of them.

Back then there were what were known as slipper baths. Mainly for people who did not possess a bath or shower in their own abode was becoming obsolete. Mr Read knowing that I had building design experience directed me to design a Sauna Baths Suite out of the slipper baths. I designed a wall here and a beam there. Aligning to the modern-day sauna bath specifications. The sauna baths suite is still there today.

Handling committees I learnt the difference between delegation and survival. He would promote the department on one hand and then declare "Entire independence of the scheme" on the other. "Never ramrod a committee. Wait until the opportunity arises for you to get what you want". Particularly with the Association of Swimming Clubs he was very astute. He always delegated through the Chairman.

The New Breed

With the Thatcher Era of Politics. Private Enterprise, not such a dirty word anymore, was replaced by Compulsory Competitive Tendering. Yes, the sport of swimming became Corporate. Closing down a swimming pool to evolve into a "trendy" sports centre. Also, adult education in aquatic disciplines evolved mainly through masters swimming. Hence, we now need the pools back. Or more pools provided by "Private Enterprise?"

Meanwhile. Back to The Lido. The New Millenium. The Lido Luvvies. Yes, isn't it a real hoot to dive into cold water. Too cold? No need to fret. Wear a wetsuit. Yes. You can win and be human too!

Management? Well, give due credit. At least everyone is moving. Yes, that's it. On Site Staff Training.

"I'm due at a very important zoom conference meeting and I don't know when it's going to end!" Clutching a cup of coffee and a smartphone. Wearing trendy trainers. Screaming "It's all Online!?!?".

But wait a minute.

There is an army of Personal Trainers at the ready. Yes, they will be the answer to all your dreams. By the way, have you seen our new fitness deal? The new changing room mirrors? Yes, it's all psychological now. Your own personal perception of reality. Apt or App?

Some while ago I frequented such a pool. There I happened to notice a member of staff cleaning the spectator's balcony floor by pushing a huge scrubbing machine.

It brought me back to when I went through the same process all those years ago albeit with scouring powder, toothbrush, care of my kneecaps.

I smiled to myself.

The more things change, the more they seem to stay the same. Water. Water. Water. Who Controls The Water?

Yes.

All is well

Tony Pearce©.

N.B These are my own opinions.