

1970 to 2002

Modern Times

In 1970 the Executive decided that the County Championship events would be grouped together into "blocks". The cost of these events would be covered by a "Championship Levy" on clubs - £13 for large clubs and £6.50p for small clubs as defined by the Executive. An entry fee of 10p was also charged per event. The competitions were held at Yeovil, Taunton and Weston super Mare in the first year - indoor pools being chosen for the benefit of the swimmers.

Thus the practice of auctioning the individual events came to an end almost 70 years after championship events were first started.

From 1977 another big change took place. The Age Groups competitions which had begun in 1964 and the Championships "blocked" in 1970, were brought together and this arrangement has continued ever since. In 1977 the entry fees were 60p for an age group event and 70p for a championship event - an additional 10p entry for championship events was charged for Clubs which did not pay the Championship levy.

In November 1980, the County decided to run an "Open Meet" in the Autumn half term to increase the opportunities for County swimmers to compete with good swimmers from across the Country and to increase the income of the county without increasing affiliation fees.

These meets were held for eleven years before it was decided that interest had fallen and officials in the County were becoming over-committed to swimming events at weekends throughout the year. However during this period the County gained experience in the use of electronic starting and time keeping, the use of computers and race programmes to deal with mass entries and the production of results sheets - the income paying for the computer and a photocopier operated by a succession of volunteers. All of these skills and practices enabled the County to run its competition programme to the standards only expected at national events.

A further swimming initiative in this period occurred in 1981. It was decided to run an age group event for those swimmers whose standards fell below County competition level - a so called 'Graded Meet'. The definition of the qualifying times for the event was difficult and was simplified, in effect, to those swimmers who had not swum in the County Blocks. At first Clubs were reluctant to enter their swimmers but in 1984 a very large entry led to the competition held in Taunton pool, overrunning very significantly, so much so that the presentations had to be held in the car park. The Swimming Committee decided in the following year that the event did not fulfill its expectations and no further Graded Meets were held.

In 1972, a new standing committee was formed - The Swimming Officials Panel. The increasing competition programme placed great pressure on qualified officials and it was clear that the County had a responsibility to assist Clubs by the provision of courses for County and National Qualifications. It was also judged necessary to provide seminars for qualified officials to keep them up to date with what seemed a continuous stream of rule changes which were not always well defined. The success of the Panel and its Secretary can be judged by the fact that the County in 2002 had more than 100 officials qualified to national standards including seven referees. Many of these officials have had the opportunity to act at National events.

Much of the above commentary is concerned with competitive swimming. Never the less it will be remembered that there was a Water Polo Association first. Diving followed at an early stage, much later Synchronised Swimming and later still Open Water swimming became part of the competitive scene.

The competition element of both Water Polo and Diving in the early days was pursued almost exclusively by adults. Water Polo and Diving were not mass participation activities and Clubs did not need continuous access to pools for training. It is interesting to see from early photographs, the maturity of champion swimmers, polo players and divers.

These disciplines of swimming, together with synchronised swimming, all need deep water. This led to a situation where clubs found increasing difficulty in supporting these sub-sections in their membership. At the same time local authorities began to replace older

pools and chose shallow pools for the benefit of the general public rather than club needs.

So how did Water Polo, Diving and at a later stage Synchronised Swimming and Open Water Swimming fare in these circumstances?

Water Polo

As already recounted Water Polo teams from Clubs and those representing the County had very many great successes and considerable support from the general public. Newspaper accounts of matches at Knightstone Baths in Weston super Mare recount host capacity crowds enjoyed what were clearly exciting and vigorous encounters. In the 1950s, there were sufficient Clubs playing Water Polo for a Management Committee to be formed to organise County League matches as well Inter County games and in 1958 a Somerset Water Polo Referees Association was formed. In 1989 a Junior League was started to encourage young boys to play the game and some Clubs had Ladies Water Polo sections. These initiatives were supported by an ASA led education programme for teachers, coaches, referees and officials.

Nevertheless Clubs have found it increasingly difficult to support Water Polo Sections even when water polo players train in the unsocial hours of Club water time. In the late 1980s only four Clubs had active Water Polo sections - Weston super Mare, Frome, Yeovil and Millfield and this reduced to two Clubs - Weston super Mare and Frome in the 1990s. It had still proved possible however for the County to enter Junior teams in District competitions and some players have been selected to play for District teams in National events.

A recent initiative of the ASA has been to devise a water polo game for 9 to 13 year olds - Mini Water Polo. In this game the ball is a little smaller. The goal nets can float and their goal mouth is smaller in proportion to the size of the children, the field of play is restricted and the water shallower so that the players can stand. The games can be played by boys and girls together. Obviously the objective is that young swimmers will enjoy a ball game in the pool and continue to play in their teenage years. Time will tell if there is a dividend from this new venture.

Diving

The development of Diving made progress in the 1920's - and competition described as the 'Graceful Diving Championships' took place in the County. Spectators must have enjoyed the event in quite different terms to the almost gymnastic styles of diving in present times.

The need to define measures between the height of boards and depths of pools for the safety of the competitors was recognised in the same era. The County had two very fine diving stages in outdoor pools - at Weston super Mare and Minehead but there is no record in the minutes of these being used by the County. The risks of injury from diving were seen as real by those local authorities which had indoor pools with diving boards and one after another, the boards were removed. In 1974, only Yeovil and Wells took part in the County Championships which by then included Age Group events. In March 1988 the County Diving Secretary reported that the Yeovil pool would close in the near future and that the Club diving section would close. This led the County Executive to decide that the County Diving Championships and Age Group competitions would be suspended.

Sadly, since that time no swimming pool has been built with facilities for competitive diving in the County.

Synchronised Swimming

At the beginning of the 1970s interest began to take off in this fledgling activity within the swimming fraternity. Whilst formation swimming to music had been a feature of some American movies with a swimming star in a central role, the codified format for competition called 'synchronised' (with music) swimming had started later.

In 1971 some clinics promoted by the Western Counties ASA had taken place at the University of Bristol pool and Club members from Somerset had attended. This led to a new post on the Diving and Education Committee of Synchronised Swimming Secretary - to promote the sport. Thus began the very difficult process of encouraging those interested to qualify as teachers and later on, as coaches of synchro figures. At the same time, girls in Clubs had to be persuaded that they would enjoy this new activity and Clubs had to agree to provide water time for their new Synchro sections.

This process was not easy. The County Synchro Secretary reported as much to the County Executive in 1971 describing a visit of the Santa Clara Club of America to give a demonstration and Teaching Clinic which had been attended by 20 girls from Mendip SC. It must have been successful as 8 members of the Club gained Grade 2 ASA awards in their first year.

At the 1977 AGM, when the County approved new rules for its Committee structure a Synchronised Swimming Committee was

started.

In these years the minutes record Synchro sections being formed in Keynsham, Yeovil and Taunton. Many courses were held, teachers becoming qualified and swimmers achieving their grades.

In 1981, the County Synchro Secretary and County Coach retired and Ann Reynolds from Taunton became Secretary which led on to a long term involvement at District and National level as well.

Inter club competition took place between Taunton and Yeovil in 1987 and 1988 but sadly, the Synchro section at Yeovil closed in 1989. A highlight occurred in 1990 when Helen Jewell from Taunton SC became the first Somerset swimmer to attend the Nationals - and this pattern of progress and regression from 1970 has continued.

A new Synchro. club emerged at Paulton SC in 1997 and County Championships and Age Groups were held in 2001 consisting of figures in Age Groups and solos.

Somerset has taken part in the District Inter County event since 1985 missing only one in 1988.

Synchro Swimming, like Water Polo, depends very much on the leadership of a small band of club members who are really enthusiastic about their part of the sport of swimming. It seems that these activities will continue in a minority of Clubs as long as the succession of such inspired leaders can be sustained.

Open Water Swimming

There have been a number of Clubs. which over the years have engaged to a greater or lesser extent in Open Water swimming. In the early years the County initiated competitions under the heading 'Life Saving' which were held in Open Water and involved throwing ropes to those in difficulties in the water, swimming to those in danger of drowning and recovering them to safety. Somerset swimmers were also involved in such events organised by Henleaze SC in the 1970s.

Clevedon SC has had hardy swimmers for many years who swim in the sea during the year for their 'health'. In the summer the Club still organises a race on the rising tide for its members, from a launch across the bay to the pier. The event excites considerable interest.

In 1997 it was agreed that the County would involve itself in this minority sport and at the AGM agreed a new post of Open Water Secretary who would be a member of the Swimming Committee. The small number of swimmers involved precluded a separate County competition because the cost of such events are high, as safety boats and other precautionary measures are necessary. However new competitions in the sea at Weymouth, organised by the District Open Water Committee, allowed County swimmers who entered, to use the results to determine the winners in various County categories. Small numbers of county swimmers have also entered national open water swimming events. In 1999 the times of the four best swimmers gave 5th place to the County team.

Some county swimming officials have qualified to act as officials in open water events. There being no restrictions on water time for open water swimming other than climatic ones, it would seem that this aspect of swimming should continue to expand.

Education

A remarkable feature which runs throughout the County history is the willingness with which the volunteers involved have sought to improve their contribution to the sport. From very early days the Governing Body - the ASA - has provided a structured frame work, second to none in in sport, for the qualification of teachers and coaches from tutors who themselves qualified to undertake the task. In modern times these qualifications became part of a common vocational education in which courses were approved centrally and tutors monitored to ensure common standards and value for money for the students.

The Diving and Education Committee from the beginning adopted the practice of naming courses on a regional basis, inviting the top names in swimming education to act as tutors. In more recent times the County has subsidised Club members undertaking teaching qualifications in all disciplines of swimming as the cost of courses increased.

In 1995 Wessex Water was persuaded to support a specific swimming related education programme. The Government had launched an initiative to include teaching swimming in schools to ensure that all children had the opportunity to achieve minimum standards as defined in the National Curriculum. Wessex Water were persuaded to assist this objective by funding teaching courses for Primary

school teachers and more than 250 teachers qualified as Preliminary Teachers. It was a new experience for County Officers to be part of this negotiation and the ongoing organisation of the courses. A major contribution was made by the arrival of the new ASA Regional Development Officer. It was also the first opportunity for the County Officers to have dealings with Local Authority Sports Development Officers and a useful grounding for what was to come.

Development

The "buzz" word in the County Minutes of the 1990's was Development. It had all started with encouragement from the office of the South West Regional Sports Council, which showed that funding was available for sport where Governing Bodies could demonstrate in a clearly written plan how that sport intended to develop itself in the future.

The Western Counties took up this challenge and published its first Development Plan in 1992 which covered all disciplines of swimming. In practice this meant that WCASA Committees received funding for various initiatives within the plan - such as education programmes. A second Plan was produced in 1995 covering a further 5 years. Counties were encouraged to write their own plans - with the carrot that they would receive funding from WCASA which the County would be expected to match £ for £.

The first Somerset plan was produced in 1997. As well as the continued stress on financial support of education courses, this Plan included initiatives to run a Summer Swim Camp at Quantock Lodge where young swimmers could experience the pressure of a training weekend out of the Club context. The same weekend offered the opportunity to run Lane Coach courses and hold seminars for officials and Club Secretaries. In water polo and synchronised swimming, County teams were brought together for special training sessions and for two years a gala was organised for 6th Form Colleges to stimulate the interest of young people to continue in sporting activities. Sadly this last initiative failed due to lack of support from the colleges.

During the five years of the Plan £4500 was available, 50% from WCASA and 50% from County funds.

The ASA Development Team launched a new concept for Club Development under the banner of 'Swim 21'. This concept, directed at Clubs, has been very difficult to progress because our volunteer organisations, already stressed to survive, find few people willing to work at business plans and strategies. Clubs were also asked to identify themselves as at teaching, development or competitive standard and to consider whether they might work together more efficiently than separately. The availability of the Regional Swimming Development officer to assist this task proved marginal as it became clear that Clubs needed "hands on assistance" to achieve the objectives of the scheme.

The need for close up professional support to Clubs was finally recognised through a Sports Council initiative called Active Sports. The scheme brought together Sport England, Local Authorities and County Associations. The primary aim was to provide pathways for young people with an aptitude for swimming from swimming lessons with local authorities to become Club members.

Part-time Swimming development officers were appointed - one for Somerset LA areas and one which included North Somerset, and Bath and North East Somerset LAs. For the first time the volunteers at County level who acted as Coordinators and at Clubs with a direct involvement through Festivals and Swim Camps, were part of a properly funded and resourced initiative which was seen to benefit Club development. Clearly the need for Teachers and Coaches to resource the scheme has provided the opportunity for Club development. In addition for the first time Club Volunteers have been able to sit down with LA Leisure Officers and Pool Managers for constructive discussion on swimming development.

What a positive position for Somerset ASA to end its first Century of existence.

And finally - Management

This History has described how in the early days, a small group of enthusiasts from original Clubs which formed the Association became the "Management". In due course it was recognised that the expansion in the number of Clubs meant that several clubs had no representation in running the County affairs. Rules were changed to allow delegates from each club to be part of an Executive Committee and an opportunity was created for any Club member to become President of the County.

In the last 20 years at Club and County level it has been found that very few parents of swimmers are willing to become active members of the Club as teachers and coaches or to join Club committees. This has placed severe pressure on the few who do take up these positions. A consequence of this has been that the number of Club delegates coming to County meetings has grown smaller and smaller.

Discussions with Club members showed that their expectations of County could be summarised as:-

1. To provide a high standard Age Group and Championship competition.
2. To coordinate an Education programme.
3. To promote a development programme for swimmers, officials, teachers and coaches.
4. To access maximum benefit for Clubs from outside agencies eg Active Sports.
5. To promote a modest social calendar in County.
6. To minimise affiliation fees.

The response of County Officers to these views was to introduce a Management Committee which would oversee, but not interfere with the work of Standing Committees, produce Financial Planning budgets and development plans and undertake the general management of the County business. The Management Committee would report back to Clubs in the normal manner at the AGM and consult on the Budget proposals and Development Plan at the half way point in the year.

The County has operated in this manner for two years and whilst further effort is still required to improve communications with Clubs it is believed that the change is working for the benefit of everyone.

As the Centenary Year draws to its close an Internet Website has been established and the time is now close when all minutes and other information documents including details of the Championship and Age Group programmes will be directly available to Clubs.

The future of swimming in Somerset will still as always depend upon a loyal band of volunteers who are willing to spend time on the pool side teaching children to swim!

<http://www.somersetasa.org/sasa/en/about-us/History/1970-to-2002?pdfview=1>