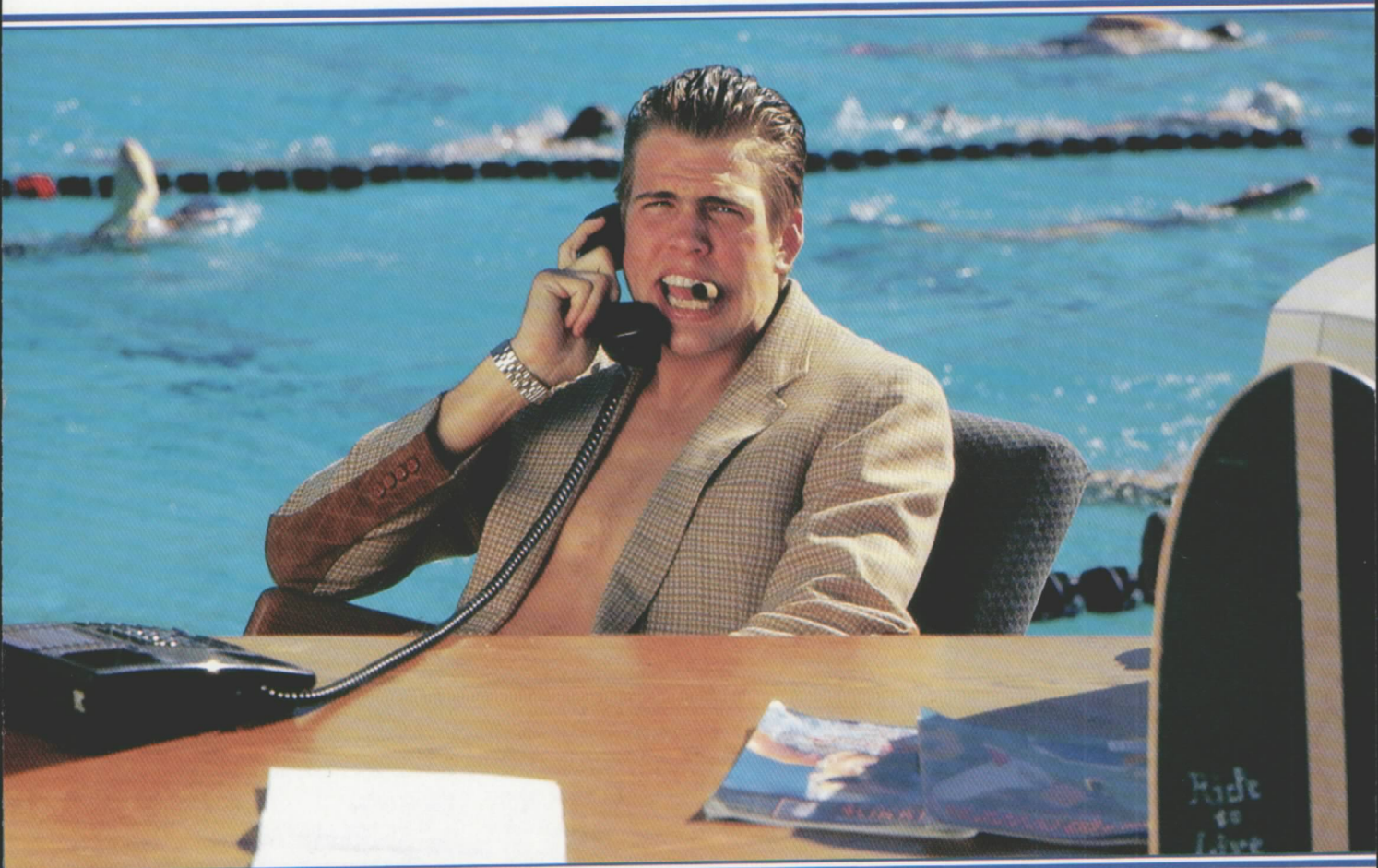


# Swimming Is Going Pro

*Slowly, but surely, money is making its way into the sport of swimming.*

*By Phillip Whitten*

*Photo by Michael Aron*



**Gary Hall means business. In his own inimitable style, Gary is leading the movement to professionalize swimming. (Ahem...the cigar is only a prop—it is not lit!)**

Once upon a time, the sport of swimming was as pure as the driven snow. Athletes swam for the sheer joy of swimming, and the bogeyman of money never raised its ugly head. When they graduated from college (or from high school, before there were collegiate sports for the fairer sex), they hung up the ol' swim suit and sallied forth into the Real World to get Real Jobs.

Swimming was for the young and relatively affluent—people who could afford to train for 20 or more hours a week with-

out worrying about where the next meal was coming from. If anyone tried to swim beyond college, he generally was discouraged. "C'mon old dude, hang it up and give the youngsters a chance."

Ah, those were the Good Old Days. But times, they are a-changing. Thanks to the efforts of a group of dedicated athletes led by Gary Hall, Jr., American swimming is being propelled into the modern era. It is a development that is applauded by most top-level athletes, but rued by many of the "purists."

More than a decade ago, a handful of swimmers began looking around at the world of sports beyond the 50-meter lane lines. What they saw was athletes in other sports continuing to compete into their late 20s and even through their 30s, earning megabucks and gaining television exposure for their sports. They saw these sports growing in popularity and respect, even while swimming—the nation's most popular participant sport—was falling off the national radar screen.

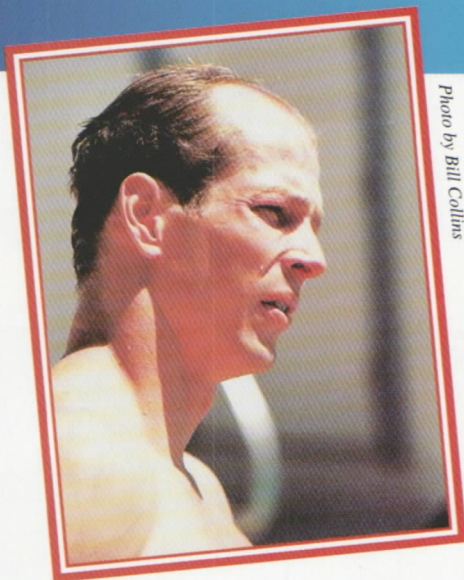


Photo by Bill Collins

So, they asked, "Why not us?" After all, they argued, there's no particular reason to believe that swimmers reach their physical peak at 17 or 18 (for women) or 21 or 22 (for men). If runners, cyclists, skaters, triathletes, basketball players and other athletes can continue at the top of their game into their 30s and earn a good living doing so, why not swimmers?

Tom Jager's was one of the most persistent of the voices asking such disquieting questions, for which he was branded a troublemaker by some. Only his achievements as a world record holder and three-time Olympian gave him the credibility to continue to raise them.

Eventually, Jager's arguments began to find a receptive audience. Why shouldn't swimmers be rewarded financially? Why not encourage them to compete beyond college? Thus, a fertile field was plowed for the growth of professional swimming in the United States.

Meanwhile, the rest of the world was outstripping us. Meets were being held in Europe, Asia, Australia and South America in which prize money was being offered. Bonuses were awarded for record-breakers, and innovative formats were developed to attract crowds and television viewers.

Most successful has been the World Cup series in Europe and Asia in which points are awarded in six different categories (sprint freestyle, distance free, back, breast, fly, IM) for placing in each race. At the end of the series, the top point scorers are given cash prizes in addition to the

money they have won in individual races.

At the recent European Sprint Championships in Rostock, Germany, prize money was awarded to European record-breakers. The Sprint Classic in Rio de Janeiro offers several thousand dollars to the winners, as do several meets in Australia. One such meet has come up with an exciting format, including a "devil-take-the-hindmost" 200 meter race, in which the last swimmer at each turn in the 25-meter pool is eliminated until only two swimmers are battling for the final 25 meters.

In 1990, Jager and Matt Biondi got together to organize a "sprint shootout" in Nashville, Tenn. The meet, sponsored by United States Swimming, featured a series of 50 meter freestyle match races with \$10,000 for the winner, \$5,000 for the runner-up and \$1,000 for third.

The results were spectacular. Jager set the world record of 21.81, which still stands, while Biondi clocked the second fastest time ever, 21.85. The event also scored a strong 4.6 Nielsen rating and was shown around the world and featured on cross-country airline flights.

The following year, after Mark Spitz announced his Olympic comeback, Spitz created and promoted another series of made-for-TV match races. Dubbed the Clairol Option Swim Challenge and held at the jam-packed Mission Viejo pool, the show featured head-to-head Jager vs. Spitz and Biondi vs. Spitz 50 meter fly races. (Actually, the races turned out to be "head-to-feet" rather than head-to-head confrontations.)

In the first race, Jager pocketed \$20,000, Spitz \$15,000. In the second, Biondi took home 35 "big ones" to Spitz's \$15K. Once again, the show grabbed a large domestic and foreign viewing audience, putting the lie to critics within the sport who claimed that swimming was boring and would never attract a large television audience.

On a continuing basis, the Kerr-McGee swim meet in Oklahoma City has led the way toward professionalization in the United States. The meet has grown in popularity—and in prize money—every year.

Last December, the fifth annual Kerr-McGee meet offered \$28,000 in cash for professionals—\$600 for first, \$300 for second, \$100 for third in each event—and over \$3,300 in prizes for amateur swimmers, according to John Brown, Kerr-McGee coach since 1982 and the man who came up with the idea for the meet format in 1990.

"This is a great way to get top athletes to a meet in Oklahoma City and give the local kids a chance to mingle with the stars," says Meet Director Jim Sullins. "It's a way to put some money in the pockets of the pro athletes, and it's a tremendous opportunity for the kids to talk to a Josh Davis or a Summer Sanders," adds Brown. "It's something they'd never have a chance to do otherwise, and it is inspirational."

Twenty of last year's 44 Olympians have swum at the Kerr-McGee meet. Each year they put on a stroke clinic with the proceeds donated to local charities.

In '97, meet organizers hope to be able to offer some \$50,000 in cash, and they expect the meet to be televised. "Kerr-McGee Corporation has been our title sponsor right from the start," says Sullins, "and they've been our club sponsor since 1963." But organizers have also successfully garnered additional sponsors: *The Daily Oklahoman*, Southwest Airlines, Speedo, the Great Plains Coca-Cola Bottling Company, the Meridian Plaza Hotel and the Jackie Cooper auto dealership.

Last May, the Phoenix Grand Prix meet—the only pre-Olympic competition in which the entire U.S. Olympic team participated—did not offer prize money but succeeded in garnering corporate sponsorship and in attracting sellout crowds every evening.

Fans were particularly excited by the 50

**One of the principals involved in helping professionalize the sport of swimming has been Tom Jager (top left); even with \$28,000 on the line for pro athletes at this year's Kerr-McGee meet, there was still time for fun as David Fox and Tripp Schwenk (center) will attest; another supporter of swimming's new trend is Byron Davis (top right).**

meter butterfly race in which the winner (Amy Van Dyken) was awarded a two-year lease on a Nissan Pathfinder, and by the 200 meter freestyle relay match-up between the U.S. women's Olympic relay team and a men's 40+ Masters squad coached by Doc Counsilman. The crowd was on its feet, screaming the entire time, and the race came down to the wire before the women won by 2-tenths of a second, bettering the world best time for the event.

Beginning this year, says Meet Director Bob Hubbard, "We hope to be able to offer prize money."

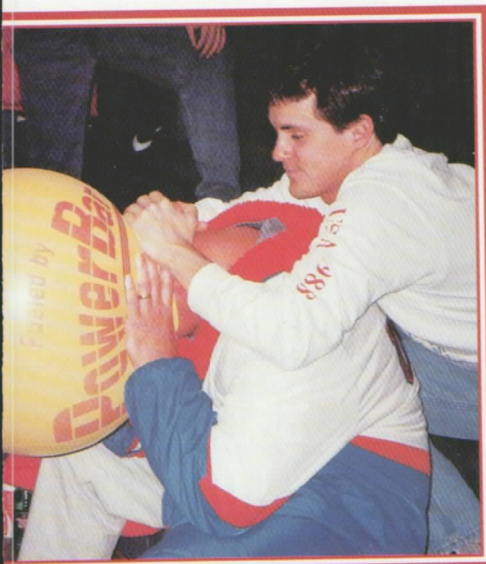


Photo courtesy of Jim Sullins

But it is Gary Hall, Jr., who—more than anyone else—has seized the initiative and come up with a comprehensive plan to bring swimming into the era of Big Time Sports. Hall has developed a three-part plan to gain corporate sponsorship, television coverage and enhanced recognition for the sport of swimming, and he has enlisted some big guns to help make his dream a reality.

Working with Jack Gilardi, vice president of the ICM agency, Hall's agent, and a successful major sports promoter in San Francisco, Hall has been talking with Nissan officials, including marketing exec Jerry Florence. Nissan is considering Hall's proposals, and all concerned are cautiously optimistic.

Here, in a nutshell, is Hall's innovative idea:

- Nissan will sponsor a group of eight to ten athletes plus a top coach under the umbrella of Team Nissan. "It's the same kind of approach that has been used successfully in bicycling," Hall points out. The 22-year-old sprinter says the team would be like the National Resident Team, "except that all the participants would be treated as pros." Hall expects that other major corporations will sponsor teams after Team Nissan proves a success.

- A meet series will be created as early as this spring in which Team Nissan will compete against other top pro swimmers from around the world. The meet will be promoted professionally and will be televised. Discussions are already underway with the major television networks. "The first year we'll start off small," says Hall, "probably just a three-meet circuit—perhaps L.A., the San Francisco Bay Area and Phoenix. Then we hope to expand, adding cities like Oklahoma City. Basically, it will be like the World Cup."

- A major televised summer meet will be held to which the top four countries plus two additional countries from the previous Olympics or World Championships will be invited. This year, Hall sees the competing countries as the U.S., Russia, Australia and Germany, plus two others: Japan, Brazil, Hungary or Canada. "It will vary each year," says Hall, depending on which countries are swimming well. A rotating trophy will be awarded to the winning team each year, "sort of like the Davis Cup." I want to recreate the excitement of the Olympic Games," he remarks.

Hall estimates that the total cost to Nissan for the program will be around \$2 million.

For the past several months, Hall's idea has been circulating around the swimming community, where it has gained almost universal support among the athletes.

Jager, the granddaddy of pro swimming, says, "I definitely support what Gary is doing. Our time has come. Swimming is the sport of the 21st century."

Jon Olsen, co-captain of the men's Olympic team last year, is equally enthusiastic. "I'm completely supportive, and now is the time to do it. We need to capitalize

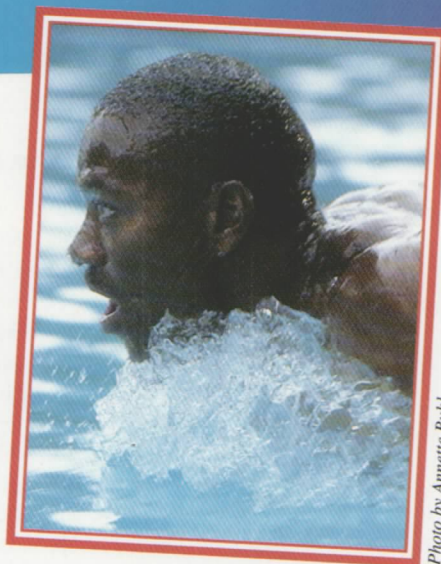


Photo by Annette Buhl

on the window of opportunity we gained from the Olympics. There's a lot more out there in terms of endorsements and appearance opportunities."

Flyers Byron Davis and Mark Henderson are also behind Hall. Says Davis, "It's a great concept. Swimming is a lot like track. We need to give the public a reason to identify with individual athletes, to cheer and support their favorites." Henderson adds: "This is the way to bring thousands of kids into the sport—by showing them it has a financial future. Gary is leading the way to a bright future for swimming."

Spitz, whose 1991 comeback reignited more interest in the sport of swimming than any other event in recent memory, is cautiously supportive. "Gary is definitely on the right track," says the man who has achieved the most success in the past 20 years in promoting swimming, "but what he's got to keep in mind is that sports programming on TV is really entertainment disguised as sports.

"You can't use an Olympic-type format. What you need," says Spitz, "is to give viewers a way to identify with individual athletes, to have the commentator talk strategy and stats with the athlete between races, and to create suspense. To do that, you need a different kind of format."

There are a number of formats that can produce that result, Spitz claims, and swimming has more than its share of creative types. "We can get our sport into the Big Tent, but we're going to have to think creatively to get there. Gary's idea is an important step toward achieving that result." ■