

Sierra Nevada, 17th June 2010

Dear swimming club,

This letter is intended for all swimming clubs who work to improve Danish swimming and who have an interest in developing our common talents. In my position as a National Head Coach I would like to put forward my view on some of the criticism raised on the challenges of Danish swimming.

At the beginning of April 2010, all the club coaches involved in the national junior and senior national team activities had a meeting with the elite department. Another meeting was held in December 2009 with coaches involved in the national senior team. Many items were discussed during those two meetings and in the end we agreed on several items, among them:

“We all are going to do an effort to talk with each other instead of talking about each other”.

Now two months later a new discussion started in some of the news media and again we are talking about each other instead of with each other.

Many people involved in swimming like board members, parents, swimmers and age group coaches read these news media and receive a particular point of view from several coaches, and then they perhaps wonder what is really going on. Personally I am not willing to discuss in these media. I tried to answer some questions from a newspaper journalist but saw that he did not reflect my general ideas and unfortunately he also misunderstood quite a few words.

It might be important that I write a little bit more about the plans we have for Danish swimming in the elite department. Too many people in too many occasions are using my name to express ideas and plans for the future, even about my personal plans; and even quotes are being interpreted on in a way that I often cannot recognize if this information would really come from me.

Days go by and we are getting closer to the European Junior and Senior Championships. We need to concentrate on these competitions to be able to help the swimmers the best we can. The swimmers need to be focused and it would be nice if we could “save” the discussions a few months in order to be able to prepare in “peace and harmony”. We all need positive energy, and the swimmers need to see us working together.

Where are the talents?

Related to this I want to emphasize once more that there is not such a situation called: "danger to be left without talented swimmers after 2012". The average age from finalists in Olympic swimming finals is around 21 years in female swimmers and around 24 years in male swimmers. That means that we should look especially for the swimmers born in:

	Female born in	Male born in	
London 2012	90 – 91 - 92	87 – 88 – 89	+ - one year.
Rio de Janeiro 2016	94 – 95 - 96	91 – 92 - 93	
Olympic Games 2020	98 – 99 - 00	95 – 96 - 97	

This doesn't mean that older or younger swimmers cannot qualify nor have success, it is just that they belong to the exceptions on the rule. As a small country, we need to make a good plan and to be able to work with a good plan and we need to put our goals according to this. Related to talent development we need to make sure that the swimmers in particular ages are available and well prepared.

Right now in the NTC we have only one girl and one boy in the ideal ages for 2016. I, therefore, find it strange that some clubs and coaches blame the NTC for removing talents from the clubs so that they cannot work with long term talent development. Probably more than 90 % of the swimmers who should perform in Rio de Janeiro are training in the clubs.

It is very important to note that most of the swimmers who could make the 2020 Olympic team are already present as swimmers in the many different club programs round the country. This is a big responsibility for all of us. Together we should try to prepare them better than the previous generation that we are all working with now.

Senior swimming in Denmark

Another item that needs some back ground information is the senior environment in Danish swimming. Historically there have been only a few clubs able to create and maintain a senior group. It is interesting to try to analyze why some of them disappeared and at the same time, try to find out why we have so many age group programs and so few senior programs.

Let me make a short list of some of the many things you need to consider and be aware of to make sure that senior swimming in a club can be developed:

1. You need to start with 8, 9, 10 year old swimmers.
2. You need around 8 talented swimmers from each age to make sure that 2 of them are still in the game when they arrive at the senior age. We all know that many swimmers stop too early (some lose interest in swimming, some do not develop as good as we would like, some of them have to study a lot, some of them fall in love with a "no swimmer", some of them get injured or fall too much ill, etc., etc.). That means that you need 8 boys and 8 girls in every each age, which makes 16. If you

then start with 9 year old swimmers and calculate up to 14 or 15 years you will need to have about 100 swimmers in your competitive age group program, and about 20 in your junior program. Of course these are very general and very rough estimates, but if you can manage to follow this principle you will be OK in the end. Entering into the senior age should then only be real top swimmers from your programme.

3. The training and competition program should be progressive. Increasing the hours, volume, intensity, number of competitions year after year. A swimmer needs to improve year after year to stay in swimming; it is all about being motivated and in swimming progression is motivation.
4. There should be different programs for each group (learn to swim, kids program, age group IV and III, age group II and I, juniors and seniors). It is not necessary to have different coaches for each program. With a good schedule where groups train at different times, one coach can train different groups or be responsible in one group and assist in another group.
5. The age group coach should be the best coach in the club, or at least a very good coach. All the basic work should be done “perfect” in order to be able to reach a high level in the specific skills. It is very important that the age group coaches receive total support and help from the clubs and the head coaches from the clubs.
6. Every club should have a complete dry land program and thus also dry land facilities and equipment.
7. The older the swimmer, the more important it gets to be able to combine the study with swimming. Clubs should openly help the swimmers to make special arrangements in high school or university and tell about the good examples that can make it work. In recent years I think that more 15 senior swimmers moved to the USA to combine study and swimming. That should not be necessary.
8. The same goes for challenge and individual coaching. There should be a possibility to train at a more normal time in the morning, for example from 7 to 9 or from 8 to 10. Coaches have to be willing to make extra hours in order to keep the older swimmers in the program and in order to train them at a higher and more individual level.

9. "Older" swimmers need to grow and become adults. They need to be more independent from their parents and coaches. That means that they should receive some kind of funding or economic support. They do not have time to work but they need some money to drive a car, to go to the movies, to go out and eat (or party once in a while). It is not pleasant and good that adults from 19, 20, 21 or older have to ask for money to their parents. Perhaps clubs can help by offering certain jobs within the club (learn to swim program), by finding personal sponsors or by making a bonus system where the swimmer can earn money by performing at a high (always) senior level.
10. Smaller clubs could organize all kind of activities together to increase the level of performance, motivation, etc.
11. Every club should have a head coach (in Danish "cheftræner") who is responsible for the whole range of development within the club. From talent scouting up to the senior level. The same coach should be in charge of the training and coaching of the best junior and senior swimmers. If there are no junior or senior swimmers, he should coach the oldest age group team and bring them further, until he has a junior and senior team. In many clubs there is nobody responsible for the overall picture, and coaches in the same club run different programs with different training philosophies.
12. Swimmers have to work with goals, so do coaches. The board has to set challenging goals for all their coaches, goals that will make it possible to evaluate the work of the coach and to set new and stimulating goals for the future. They should also develop a bonus system for the coaches, related to their work input and goal achievement.
13. When I talk to board members in Danish swimming and I ask them what the main goal is for their club, many say that they want to be the best club in Denmark. That is good to hear, but not so easy to achieve. Every club should have a Long Term Development Program (LTDP). To be able to keep senior swimmers in the program you need almost everything I mentioned/listed above. If you miss a part you should try to organize it. If you cannot make it (lack of space, lack of money, lack of coaches, lack of talented swimmers, lack of university, etc.) you should adjust your goal setting. Maybe instead of aiming to be the best club in Denmark you could start with aiming to be the best age group IV and III club and so on. It is not a shame to have an age group club, it could be a shame if 4 or 5 years from now you still do not have any senior swimmer in the team.

NTC and the mechanisms of Danish swimming

Many things have been said and written about the NTC being responsible for the lack of good senior swimmers in Denmark. I hope that what I have listed about above can make clear that the discussion should be more wide and broad. With probably more than 30 professional coaches and many, many part time coaches, Danish swimming should be able to have at least 4 junior and 2 senior swimmers in each of these clubs. That makes up to 140 junior and 70 senior swimmers with an interesting level.

Let me give some more background because it is important that we all have a clear overall view of the challenges.

The goal should be; increase the number of talented swimmers who reach the junior and senior level and at the same time, increase the number of clubs who have a complete program. During the last 4 years as many as up to 50 swimmers moved from smaller clubs to the bigger clubs. For example, SIGMA received app. 14 swimmers, West Swim and Farum app. 12 and Kvik around 10. Of course, in the elite department we believe that junior and senior swimmers should move to a better environment provided that their “home” club cannot offer them what they need to develop their talent, dreams and goals in swimming. But what is happening within the bigger clubs who receive these swimmers? They receive the swimmers, and they should at the same time keep close focus on producing their own swimmers from their own “feeding program”. Is it then possible to focus enough on both the incoming swimmers, and on developing a motivated and progressive program where own swimmers can see that it is worthwhile being promoted in the talent system?

The point of the elite department is here that all swimmers should be allowed and supported to move on to clubs and environments that fit the needs and goals of the swimmer better. And perhaps then when looking at the numbers of swimmers moving between the clubs mentioned above and considering the potential amount of swimmers I mentioned further above (140 junior swimmers and 70 senior swimmers), we should perhaps not be so critical about an average of 10 swimmers training at the NTC.

We all would like to have the possibility to create for example 3 high performance centres and every one of them supported by up to 8 development centres. Probably in this way we could “produce” twice as many international high level swimmers than we do today. But right now the problem is another one.

Many clubs with professional coaches do not produce junior or senior swimmers.

Team Denmark, the main partner and economic supporter of Danish swimming, can support top level (talented) swimmers. In Denmark we only have a small number of these swimmers together with a relatively limited budget. Hopefully in the future we can increase and improve the structure but right now, we should try to use the structure we have as good as possible. All swimmers in Denmark have the same options, and probably this is the only country in the world where the swimmers from the NTC have to pay the same as the club swimmers. High level club swimmers have the same support as the high level NTC swimmers.

Focus on co-operation and coaches' development

Next season we will try to organize regular training sessions where the best club swimmers and the NTC swimmers train together. That could increase the motivation and the collaboration among swimmers and coaches. We have to learn to support each other to make the structure we have right now even better. If we increase the number of talented international junior and senior swimmers, and if we improve the results, we might be able to get more financial support. Then we could make the structure bigger and even better.

Next season we also start with a different competition structure where swimmers and coaches have a challenge during the whole season. Everywhere else in the world swimmers have their most important competition in the summer, the end of the season. International Danish swimmers have the same. It is very important that swimmers and coaches get used to perform at their highest level in the summer. We also try to change the long course championships in March / April. Next season we call them "trials" or Danish Open, and the swimmers have to try to qualify for the important competitions during the year. There will also be an age group II and I winter championships. Both competitions are related. We should try to keep the age groupers as long as possible in age group swimming and at the same time we should try to offer a "serious" competition to our junior and senior swimmers. In the beginning we might have only a small number of swimmers compared with the actual winter LC championships but hopefully that number will increase in the near future.

And finally, sorry that this letter is already way too long, we are aiming to increase the support for the coaches. We want to increase even more all the things we offer to the age group coaches. We need to help the junior and senior coaches to get more experience. Right now we have only 3 coaches with international medal winners and only 2 of them with Olympic experience. If we want to increase the junior and senior level in Denmark, at the same time we need to improve the level and the experience from the coaches. It is far away from a perfect situation but it is a nice challenge for everybody involved in Danish swimming to improve this.

We then also work intensely on preparing an "elite +" certification system for elite clubs. The aim of the elite department is here both to offer our experience to elite clubs, but also to work to improve the knowledge about managing and working professionally with club head coaches and swimmers.

The level of swimming in Denmark has been improving lately; many international "experts" are quite impressed. We could, however, be much stronger in the future but we should try to support each other in this difficult and highly competitive task. We clearly need each other and that means that we have to be respectful with each other.

I work many hours a day and a huge amount every week. That means that I make a lot of mistakes, even trying to do the best I can. We all should take a good look in the mirror and be aware of our responsibility in this “game” called swimming. Many things could be done even better, both in SVØM as well as in the clubs.

I often ask for positive critique and I hope that we can all try to be more positive with each other. We should not “fight” like enemies but fight the “enemy” TOGETHER.

And then I would also like to make clear that it is not my plan, it is not even in my mind, to leave Danish swimming after the London Olympic Games in 2012. My wife and I enjoy the work and the living in Denmark and I might continue in SVØM, if they are still happy with my work.

Few things help an individual more than to place responsibility upon him and let him know that you trust him. - quoted by B. Washington (From Up from Slavery)

Kindest Regards
The Danish Swimming Federation

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