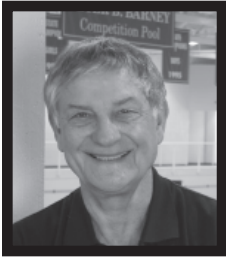


O Brave New World of Super Suits: Some Afterthoughts

by: Dave Barney, Albuquerque Academy



The best that can be said about Dave Barney is that he has some staying power. Still coaching at age 78, he will begin his 50th year of coaching independent school athletics in 2010. Beyond his coaching lies his contribution to the literature of sport. He is a published poet, essay and memoir writer as well as a national and international lecturer on the history of sport. His most

recent essay/lecture, American Genesis, presented at the Capital Institute for Physical Education & Sport in Beijing, China during the recent Games of the XXIX Olympiad, explores the beleaguered path that led American women toward their first-ever participation in Olympic competition at the VII Olympiad in 1920 in Antwerp, Belgium. He also serves the International Swimming Hall of Fame as a member of its selection committee. In addition, he continues to design aquatic facilities through his consulting work for various architectural firms in New Mexico, a career initiated by his work on the design of his own school's stunning natatorium.

More years ago than I care to remember, there came a moment in my less than sophisticated academic life, when I was able to free myself from the shackles of literary ignorance and bury myself in the sociological curiosities of Aldous Huxley's quintessential dystopian novel *Brave New World*. My recollection of Huxley's novel aside, for the moment at least, the recent phenomenon of high-tech fabric suits and their resultant effect on swimming performance is reminiscent of some of the disturbing characteristics inherent in the optimum-engineering motifs of Huxley's satirical fiction. While Huxley's scientific prophecies may not provide us with the best metaphor for what swimming performance might have evolved to had the swim suit manufacturers been given continued laboratory license to tinker further with fabrics enhancing the human body's capacity to perform in the arena (pun intended) of artificial returns, it will do so for the time being.

The omnipresence of super suits and the resulting phenomenon of astounding record breaking performances at the Beijing Olympics in August 2008, followed in short order by a Niagara of new NCAA records at various championship sites the following March, as well as an astonishing decimation of 2009 NISCA automatic All America standards, led to an American-led initiative presented to swimming's international governing body (FINA) at their annual congress meetings immediately preceding the 2009 World Championships in Rome. The initiative called for a ban of the new so-called high-tech panel-polyurethane and total-polyurethane suits. The timing couldn't have been better, since records began to fall like rain drops once the championships began in Rome. Indeed, by the time the final event was put

to rest, a grand total of 43 new world records had been posted, and, possibly, some of them in a kind of warped perpetuity at that, since it will probably take some time for many of those enhanced records to be surpassed. Framed by both textile limitations and neck and navel to knee restrictions, as well as the glib character of retrospect, I might add, it should prove fascinating for all of us in the coaching fraternity to observe during these next few years just how much and to what degree the suits impacted our suspicions.

I, for one, am proud to be a part, however distant, of the American coaching body and its collaborative effort to ban the suits. Many of us have been against them from the beginning, going back to when they made their rather dubious debut as something called "fast skins." Initially, my personal discomfit with them had to do with the cost of the suits. That factor alone seemed to enhance the notion of division or two distinct bodies of users, namely, those who could afford them and those who couldn't. Alas, many of my high school swimmers would have fallen into the former category. Now, if there is one thing that a coach, coaching at an elite athletic and academic institution, would like to avoid, it would be yet another finger pointed at what privilege can buy, in this case, clear advantage. But that particular consideration of the suits only addresses the economics of the situation, for the most part an equation which concerns college budgets more adversely than it does high school or club budgets, since the cost of those super suits is usually absorbed by the swimmer or, more precisely, his or her parents. Beyond that consideration, there existed the increasingly warped mentality of encasing even 10 year-olds in super suits, and sometimes in meaningless meets at that. Where would it all have ended, I wonder, if the suits had not been banned? Well, 8 and unders, maybe, and then aluminum bats for tee ball, most likely.

The chemistry and then the physics and then finally the resulting physiological effects of compressing muscular efficiency while diminishing fatigue potential, as well as significantly increasing buoyancy, became even more disturbing as time and distance and astronomical performance, most immediate in the echo of all those records, became merely a footnote in the rear view mirror of national and international and then high school swimming. For those of us old enough to remember something about the evolution of the fashion of competitive swim suits, we seemed initially only amused by the effect the suits had on swimming performance. After all, we had been there before, we thought, coaching through a metaphorsis of materials from wool to silk

to nylon to lycra, and even to paper suits. And then, of course, came the full body suits, a phenomenon that caused some of us, at least, to pause and reflect on what effect the suits might have on the integrity of the sport. What to do? Well, most of us settled in to listen to the huff and hype of various suit manufacturers to materialize into something concrete. Well, it didn't take long for the mucky stuff to set up, the concrete that is, but in the beginning, at least, we were more awed than alarmed. The aura of all that settled in early and especially so when we watched the Speedo polyurethane-paneled, LZR-clad Michael Phelps, capture the planet in the palm of his hand at the Water Cube in Beijing. It was riveting theater, so riveting in fact that even though the suits were playing an important supporting role in the drama, they somehow took a temporary side-seat somewhere in sight but out of mind, very much unlike what would happen a year later at the recent 2009 World Championships at Rome's Foro Italico, where the matter and controversy of the suits became more up front and controversial than even the multitude of records set at the Stadio del Nuoto.

In Beijing, one could say that the suits became almost lost in the glare of human performance, shoved to the sidelines somehow, because, really, one had to be there to truly realize how totally absorbed the people of all nations were with Phelps and his quest for eight golds and eight world records. The hype was extraordinary. Even early in the competition, it became graphically clear that Phelps did not merely belong to us Americans; he belonged to the planet and all of us earthlings collectively celebrated his performance. Even those tiring and redundant chants of USA! USA! became meaningless and muffled, then lost altogether in the thunderous acclaim accorded Phelps and each of his astounding feats. That phenomenon, by the way, was not limited to the Cube. Giant flat-screen TV's, seemingly located everywhere in Beijing, became gigantic magnets that not only drew the attention but held the awe of an international population in a common, magnetized embrace. Whereas Usain Bolt may have had his day in the limelight, Phelps invoked his magnetism early on and held the world and the Games in his fist long after the Olympic flame had become redundant.

Somewhere in the echo of all the swimming, though, remained the issue of the suits. The genie was clearly out of the bottle, so far as their known enhancement of performance was concerned. And then reality reared its ugly head, and the mumbling and grumbling began. Many coaches of firm mind and a degree of foresight rationalized, quite correctly, that if the super suits of today could alter performance as much as they appeared to do, then to what extent might the super-

super suits of tomorrow and then the day after that affect performance? The alarming answer to that question, it appears to me, might be found embedded in the laboratories of Huxley's world, where the scientific notion of test tube determinism and chemically-driven performance prevailed.

Many of us have sat through numerous championship long-course competitions in our coaching careers, and, no doubt, we have marveled over time at the ever increasing back and forth pace of swimming performance, including, of course, the recent Beijing and Rome records attained by swimmers encased in high-tech suits. But, when you place these same caliber swimmers in a short course environment, speed becomes heightened; pace becomes magnified in the abbreviated space between dive and turn and finish. During the pre-super suit era of NCAA swimming, especially, many of us coaches probably felt like displaced faces in a spectator gallery watching a tennis match, our heads turning from side to side in that predictable, calibrated and choreographic rhythm of a metronome. Well, that analogy is no longer pertinent. Those of us who witnessed the most recent NCAA Division I Men's Championship Meet in Texas last March, became engaged in an all new experience in spectatorship. The pace of things had changed dramatically. There were no tennis balls flying back and forth at College Station, only ping pong balls. It was as if we were at the gold medal final of the table tennis competition in Beijing, with our eyes trying to follow the dazzling speed of all those little white balls being smashed back and forth over a tiny table. At the stylish Texas A&M natatorium, our heads swiveled from side to side at what seemed like mach speed. Someone had turned up the metronome. Was it Speedo, Tyr, BlueSeventy, and then Arena and Jaked? Probably.

A final and hypothetical thought, albeit a disturbing one: if the super suits had not been banned, first by FINA and then by USA Swimming, the NCAA, and the Federation of High School Athletics, and if the experimentation, manufacture, and subsequent use of super suits had been allowed to continue, what then? How long would it have been before someone would have ultimately turned to the remaining part of the equation to accelerate performance, namely, the swimmer? And I'm not inferring anything about training methods here, but rather a swimmer's development in a venue other than a pool. In Mr. Huxley's world, that venue was a laboratory and a test tube, and the results were entirely predictable. What then, indeed?

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