Talent in sport and of course in swimming is a hot topic and coaches, parents, the media, sports scientists, sports managers and sports administrators are all on the lookout for kids with talent.

The obvious indicators of talent are ostensibly what can be seen and measured, i.e. physical talent, but physical talent is only one indicator of a swimmer’s potential to perform successfully at the highest levels of the sport. It takes a rare combination of physical, mental, technical, tactical, cultural, genetic and environmental factors to make a champion swimmer and even then uncontrollable factors like "luck", selection issues and officiating decisions can all play a role in determining success or failure. There are no certainties or guarantees when it comes to swimming success and talent, however, an important goal for the coach is to strive to increase the likelihood of success through quality coaching.

Real talent, i.e. demonstrated talent that has the potential to win an Olympic Gold Medal or break a world record is harder to hide than it is to find.

Young swimmers with real talent – particularly those with outstanding physical gifts are easily identified once they start regular swimming training and competition.

However as performance is so much more than physical talent alone, it is the role of the coach to plan the systematic development of every aspect of the swimmer’s performance potential over the swimmer’s career.

An Introduction to Sporting Talent:
We see sporting talent on show in sporting competitions every day.

The sprinter crossing the line with her arms in the air having broken the world record.

The footballer kicking a goal from a seemingly impossible angle. The cricketer effortlessly hitting a ball out of the stadium. The swimmer winning the gold medal at the Olympics leaving the opposition in his wake.

We see talent every day. We marvel at it. We admire it. Some people even worship it.

But what is sporting talent?
Talent is difficult to define but in sporting terms, talent could be described as possessing the physical, mental, technical and tactical potential to achieve success.

When people talk about talent, most of the time, they mean potential.
Young swimmers with the potential to perform well are everywhere. What’s not so common are coaches with the ability to inspire talented young swimmers to realise the uppermost limits of that performance potential.

No one wins by giving anything less than their best. Winning happens when swimmers and coaches consistently prepare and compete at their full potential. And this is the real gift that all the great coaches possess – to be able to turn involvement into commitment – to be able to turn desire into action and to be able to turn potential into performance.

Potential is one thing...but turning potential into performance is something very different.
Turning Potential into Performance.... what does it take?
Everyone has a level of potential to perform tasks, activities and sport.
However, possessing potential is only one piece of the swimming performance puzzle.

Think of it this way T.A.L.E.N.T:

T - Training: Possessing talent without also possessing a commitment to consistent hard training is like owing a Ferrari but never taking an advanced driver training course; you have the potential to be great but you will never fully realise that potential;
A - Attitude: Great swimmers have a "can-do" attitude. They believe that anything is possible and they strive to improve every aspect of their preparation and performance every day;
L - Learning: The desire and capacity to learn is a critical skill for all swimmers to possess. Learn more and learn it faster means you improve faster and win sooner;
E - Environment: Swimmers with talent need the right environment that can provide the opportunity for their talent to be fully realised. This includes regular access to quality great coaching, excellent facilities, practical applied sports science, sports education programs and the right equipment;
N - Nurturing: Even the most talented swimmers are only athletes for an hour or two each day. But for 24 hours a day, they are human beings. Talented swimmers need the support of a network of family, friends, sporting peers, their coach and mentors;
T - Toughness: Being talented does not make a swimmer immune to set-backs, injury, disappointment and bad luck. Talented swimmers need to develop the same qualities of resilience, persistence, perseverance and mental toughness which are essential for all athletes to succeed.

Talented or Just Big for their age?
Coaches and parents will often make the mistake of labelling a young swimmer, i.e. under 12 years of age, as "talented".

In the majority of cases, swimmers who demonstrate prodigious talent at a young age do so because their rate of growth and development is superior to that of their peers. Numerous studies have found that early swimming success is often a very poor indicator of success as a senior swimmer, or as one leading coach said recently, "Early ripe, early rotten".

General Talent vs. Specific Talent.
Another area of controversy on the topic of talent is that of general talent vs. specific talent. There is one line of thinking that talented athletes have the innate ability to perform successfully in any sport in which they compete. There is another philosophy about sporting talent which suggests that talent is specific to one sport and that an athlete's genetics will determine if they are going to be successful in cycling but not in hockey or in football but not in swimming.
Regardless of the argument, genetic talent alone is not enough to achieve peak swimming performance. A swimmer who is identified through genetic profiling or talent identification testing protocols to have the raw potential to be a world class swimmer but who lacks the uncompromising drive, desire and passion to be successful is unlikely to ever make to the international swimming arena.

Nature (Natural Talent) vs. Nurture (Environment).
There is also the philosophical debate of nature vs. nurture, i.e. are swimmers born great or can they learn to become great through years of hard work, technical development and disciplined training.
The best of the best have both: they are genetically predisposed for excellence in their chosen sport and they also have the other important factors which support their natural physical talent: they have the people, the places and the passion to support their potential.

The Nature – Nurture Matrix: Are great swimmers born or made?

Swimmers who lack talent, who have limited performance potential and who don’t have access to the right environment required to achieve sporting success are highly unlikely to do so.

Conversely, swimmers with talent and who also have the opportunity to prepare and perform in the right environment, can achieve remarkable things.

This is where the art of coaching is important.

The science can easily identify “talent” through genetic profiling, talent identification testing and other measures of physical ability.

The art of the coach is to create the training and preparation environment where every swimmer in his / her program, regardless of their measured physical talent has the opportunity to realise their full performance potential. More than just skin [and muscle deep].

Talent has traditionally been spoken about in terms of physical abilities like size, strength and speed.

However, success in swimming comes as a result of the integration of a number of factors including:

- Physical abilities; e.g. size, strength, speed, endurance, power, flexibility.
- Mental skills; e.g. self-confidence, ability to focus and concentrate, ability to relax under pressure, T.U.F. Technique Under Fatigue, mental toughness.
- Technical abilities; e.g. mastery of the basic skills and techniques of the sport.
- Tactical abilities; e.g. decision making, “race-craft and the understanding of how to thrive in the competitive environment.
- Cultural factors; e.g. the culture which surrounds the athlete at training and competition and coaching.
- Genetics; the athlete’s genetic profile.
- Environment; e.g. where the athlete lives, their socio-economic situation and family dynamic.

The real challenge for the practicing swimming coach is to manage and balance the systematic long term development of each of these factors so the swimmer’s performance potential can be fully realised as they grow and mature.

Ultimately, the name of the game is finding a way to win, where “winning” is defined as that moment when a swimmer realises the full extent of their performance potential.

A swimmer with outstanding physical talent, may “win” through their size, strength, speed, power and endurance.

A swimmer who may be less talented physically but who possesses a strong sense of self-belief, courage and mental toughness under fatigue and pressure conditions, may learn to “win” mentally.

Like all successful people, swimmers succeed when they learn how to maximise their strengths and manage and overcome their weaknesses.

And when a swimmer has “it all”: when a swimmer has the total performance potential package, great things are possible...

The Total Talent package: The Ian Thorpe story.

5 times Olympic Gold medallist Ian Thorpe is an example of the total potential package.

Thorpe’s physical size and strength allowed him to achieve significant success as a relatively young swimmer. This led to the popularly held belief that it was his physical talent alone which saw him rise to the top of world swimming in the late 1990s and early 2000s.
However, consider the other factors that led to his Olympic, World Championship and international swimming success:

- Ian’s older sister Christina had been an international level swimmer so his parents understood what it took to support and nurture a world class athlete;
- Ian’s coach Doug Frost was a very senior coach with over 30 years’ experience working with talented swimmers and with a reputation for hard work, high level technical knowledge and discipline;
- Ian had a strong sense of self-belief and self-confidence;
- Ian’s swimming technique was excellent and he was able to maintain excellence in technique at high speed and in high pressure competition situations;
- Ian’s work ethic and desire to succeed were extraordinary.

Thorpe’s story is not unique. Michael Phelps and other world class swimmers who have dominated the sport will often demonstrate this total performance potential package where natural talent is supported and nurtured by great coaching, an excellent training and preparation environment and a balanced approach to unleashing their full potential.

**The Talent Trap:**

It is tempting to try and explain talent as one thing or the other but in reality, success in swimming arises when many different factors come together at the right time to produce an optimum result.

Coaches can fall into the trap of believing that there is one way – one solution to the Performance puzzle, e.g. gym training OR mental toughness OR hard physical training OR sporting supplements.

There are multiple dimensions to every swimming training session. Most swimming workouts are written from a physical perspective: a standard combination of volume, intensity and rest interval, e.g. 20 x 100 freestyle on 1:50 holding 1:25. By adopting a broader, balanced, integrated approach to even the simplest swimming workouts, coaches and swimmers can progressively develop all aspects of their performance potential, e.g.

20 x 100 freestyle on 1:50 holding 1:25 (physical), concentrating on relaxation and control over the final 25 of each 100 (mental), maintaining a consistent stroke count and stroke rate throughout the set (technical) and using a bilateral breathing pattern (breathing every 3 or 5 strokes) over the first 50 of each 100 (tactical).

Talent alone is not enough to produce swimming success. Swimmers with even the greatest genetic gifts need to complement their talent with quality coaching, the loving support of family and friends, hard work, dedication, self-belief, discipline, commitment and numerous other factors to realise their full potential.

**Summary:**

Building and growing a successful swimmer takes time and patience...and it takes careful, thoughtful, considered planning with the long term in mind.

Being a successful swimmer is so much more than just possessing the physical abilities to swim fast. It is so much more than speed, strength, power and endurance.

Coaches need to adopt a broader, more holistic approach to the swimmer’s long term development and consider the mental, emotional, cultural, educational, family and environmental factors influencing the swimmer’s development as well.

Coaches should systematically develop all aspects of a swimmer’s performance potential and include training activities which progressively build towards the swimmer’s ultimate performance potential every day.

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