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Bill Sweetenham's way reaps rewards for GB team in Beijing

Halting the terminal decline of British swimming has been like turning the QE2. Progress has been possible only after the entire shambles was brought to a halt and then restarted and pointed in the right direction.

By Brendan Gallagher

Last Updated: 1:35AM BST 12 Aug 2008

Australian coaching legend Bill Sweetenham was appointed after the Sydney Olympics when Great Britain failed to win a single medal, and cracked the whip with typical Australian vigour. He stood down last November, but his work and approach are beginning to bear fruit.

Sweetenham instilled a professionalism which, with the exception of a small number of self-motivated individuals, was largely alien to the British system.

From now on swimming was to be a 'career' choice, not an excuse to avoid getting a job.

He instigated a cadre of expert coaches and a year-round training camp in Queensland, with emphasis on the future. He also stamped out the 'party' culture.

Predictably it did not make him very popular with some, but he persisted and slowly the results have improved.

The Athens Olympics were disappointing but since then the new generation have emerged, the green shoots of recovery being visible at the 2006 Commonwealth Games.

Gradually GB have started to consistently place swimmers in world and European Championship finals again with encouraging silver and bronzes from the likes of Kirsty Balfour, Liam Tancock and David Davies. Now, one or two of those could turn to gold.

Here in Beijing, Rebecca Adlington has another good chance in the 800 metres on Saturday, the women could go close in the 4x200m freestyle relay, while Balfour and Davies have medal hopes.

Against the US and Australia, Great Britain are always going to struggle. But at least now we are not sinking.



Fruit bearer: GB swimming was in rapid decline before Bill Sweetenham tightened the ship Photo: Frank Coppi

Post-war gold medallists

- 1956:** Judy Grinham, 100m backstroke, Melbourne.
- 1960:** Anita Lonsbrough, 200m breaststroke, Rome.
- 1976:** David Wilkie, 200m breaststroke, Montreal.
- 1980:** Duncan Goodhew, 100m breaststroke, Moscow.
- 1988:** Adrian Moorhouse, 100m breaststroke, Seoul.

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