THE RISE OF COMPETITIVE SWIMMING
1840 to 1878
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Introduction

The main focus of swimming in the first half of the nineteenth century was simply for enjoyment and pleasure, plus its endorsement by society as a wholesome rational recreation. It was pursued at popular river sites, at the seaside, at private baths clubs or at the newly emerging municipal baths. The formation of swimming clubs, during the middle years of the century, was the beginning of a change in emphasis for swimming, from a rational, enjoyable, sociable activity to the emergence of swimming as a ‘modern’ competitive sport. This paper will examine the factors that influenced this shift in swimming from a ‘rational’ to a ‘modern’ sport. It will begin by briefly identifying the characteristics of modern sport as classified in Adelman’s typology. The emergence of competitive swimming will then be discussed, by examining the activities and races of the early nineteenth century swimmers most of whom were professional. To demonstrate the continuing modernisation of the sport an overview of the first national swimming organisations will be undertaken, followed by an explanation for their ultimate decline. The changing attitude towards swimming by both government and social reformers, which resulted in the promotion of swimming as a sport, will be traced via the establishment of a specialised swimming press and ultimately through the passing of the 1878 Baths and Washhouses Act, which enabled Local Authorities to build covered swimming pools as opposed to public baths and washhouses. Finally, a brief review of some of the first swimming clubs to be established will explore the role of the professional in their formation. The paper will conclude with an assessment of whether swimming, by 1878 could claim to have become a ‘modern’ sport.

The Characteristics of ‘Modern’ Sport

The transformation of sport from a ‘rational’ or pre-modern to a ‘modern’ state is frequently analysed using Allen Guttmann seven characteristics in
his ‘From Ritual to Record’ typology. Other typologies have also been
developed to classify the features of modern sport, most used the concept
of modernisation to offer valuable but broadly similar classifications.
Melvin Adelman’s work *A Sporting Time: New York City and the Rise of
Modern Athletics 1820–70*, also used modernisation as a framework and
identified six characteristics with which to classify ‘modern’ sport.
However, his study also explored the relationship between sport and the
urban environment, consequently his typology is more relevant to this
analysis of swimming, which is essentially a study of the changing nature
of the city and the transformation of swimming from a casual recreational
pursuit to a ‘modern’ sport. The rapidly changing urban environment
altered not just the physical contours of the city, but created the need for
new forms of collective behaviour and organisational structures.

According to Adelman, the critical connection between the changing nature of the city
and the modernisation of sport was the need to establish a rational order.
Organised sport was one method that was used within nineteenth century
towns and cities to try to establish rational order. Although as Adelman
points out, while the modern city was both a setting and a stimulant for the
transformation of sport, organised sport was not solely a by product of
societal change, each sport developed and modernised at its own rate,
dependent in part, by the combined effects of the internal growth, competi-
tion and commercialisation within each sport.

In the case of British swimming, the changing nature of the city created many of the social
situations that were required to enable swimming to evolve into a ‘modern’
sport. From for example, a shift in the nature of health concerns, to the need
for sociability and entertainment in the new alien urban environment.
Other factors also played their part, particularly the development of
science and its application to sport. However, a detailed examination of all
these factors will not be undertaken, as the focus of this paper will be a
discussion of whether, by the end of the nineteenth century, all of the
following six characteristics of Adelman’s ‘modern’ sport were in place
for British swimming and to identify key factors which changed the nature
of competitive swimming.

Table 1. The Characteristics of Modern Ideal Sporting Types

1. *Organisation* _formal; institutionally differentiated at the local, re-
gional and national levels._
2. Rules _ formal, standardised and written; rationally and pragmatically worked out and legitimated by organisational means.

3. Competition _ national and international, superimposed on local contests; chance to establish national and international reputations.

4. Role Differentiation _ high; emergence of specialists (professionals) and strict distinctions between playing and spectating.

5. Public Information _ reported on a regular basis in local newspapers as well as national sports journals; appearance of specialised magazines, guidebooks etc.

6. Statistics and Records _ kept and published on a regular basis; considered measures of achievement; records sanctioned by national associations.


**Professional Swimming**

The nature of competitive swimming changed throughout the nineteenth century, as each of the above characteristics became an accepted part of the sport. The first characteristic which had a significant influence on the development of swimming, was role differentiation and in particular the status of the professional swimmer. Swimming races whether for enjoyment or monetary reward were though not new activities which began in the nineteenth century, although an increase in the number and frequency of competitive swimming races occurred in the early decades of the century. A consequence of the interest in competitive swimming was the emergence in the nineteenth century of the job title professional swimmer or more usually ‘professor’ of swimming. The opportunity to earn a living as a professional swimming teacher and racer was a direct result of the increasing number of public and private baths that were built in the first half of the nineteenth century. The baths were built initially to alleviate some of the negative consequences of urbanisation, by providing facilities for the masses to keep clean and healthy. Many of the professionals were employed by the baths as bath supervisors or superintendents and to supplement their basic income, most also gave swimming lessons, pro-
moted and gave displays at swimming galas, swam in specifically organised challenges for prize money and wrote books and articles. The desire by the public to learn to swim and to spectate at swimming galas, increased with the building of baths, which made swimming safer, cleaner and for urban dwellers, a convenient leisure activity and provided another opportunity for urban entertainment and sociability. All these factors enabled an initially small but growing number of predominately men and very occasionally women, to find regular employment as swimming professionals.

Many of the first swimming professionals had originally been river workers. Even before the building of indoor baths, a few men had found employment as ‘watermen’ at public schools such as Eton and Harrow, 7 or as swimming masters who taught the military to swim.8 The river workers or ‘watermen’ often supplemented their meagre incomes by racing. Initially and more usually these were rowing and sculling races9, but some also took part in swimming challenges. The early swimming races or challenges were significant occasions and drew large crowds and provided much public interest and press coverage. One of the earliest documented swimming challenges took place 10th July 1827 and for a while swimming became headline news and produced some of the sports first star personalities. The race was between the rival Mancunians ‘Dr’ Isaac Bedale and Mathew Vipond, the challenge was to swim eighteen miles of the Mersey, from Liverpool to Runcorn, ‘Dr’ Bedale was the winner reaching Runcorn in 3 hours and 35 minutes.10

However, as industrialisation and urbanisation made many rivers polluted and so unpleasant or even dangerous to swim in and with the building of indoor swimming facilities, the attraction of river races quickly declined. The new bathing establishments did though provide employment for some of the original ‘watermen’, but there was also a new breed of swimming professional who had no connection with the river working tradition. One example was Frederick Beckwith, born in Ramsgate in 1821, not only was he not from a river working background, but he managed to earn a good living from swimming, despite never being a particularly good swimmer. His reputation as a professional was due to exceptional self-publicity and secret agreements or more accurately fixing of races.11 His whole family were involved in the swimming world, with his daughter, Agnes Beckwith,
in particular becoming one of the most well known professional swimmers. The public acceptance of female professionals is evidence of how far professional swimming had moved away from its riverside origins and as future research will demonstrate, swimming’s almost unique status in being approved of and actively promoted as a suitable sport for women in the late nineteenth century.

The term professional swimmer or Professor of swimming, referred to many activities, as previously mentioned, for most it was their sole full time occupation. The title of professional swimmer was also used by men who had employment outside of their swimming activities, but owing to their success in possibly only one or two races, promoted themselves as ‘champion swimmer’ and then advertised their prowess and suitability to teach swimming. ‘Dr’ Bedale success in his race down the Mersey in 1827, enabled him to advertise his ability to teach swimming from his ‘surgery’ in Manchester, as well as continuing his main occupation, that of professing to cure most illnesses. 12A few professionals had no other interest in swimming apart from competing in races and winning prize money, plus placing a bet on the outcome of a race. Although several were also professionals in other sports. Mathew Vipond for example, was also a successful prize fighter.13 Whilst an even smaller number at this time, did not compete for prize money, but solely for the status and prestige that winning brought. However, as the ability of the swimmers increased, the need to train regularly became essential and the policy of most baths in only permitting the bath supervisor to teach swimming, meant many professionals found that their only option, if they wished to continue to compete and teach successfully, was to find employment as a bath supervisor.

The pay and working conditions of the bath supervisor or superintendent during the second half of the nineteenth century, has been clearly documented for Liverpool.14 The weekly wage of a bath supervisor in 1856 was 40 shillings and for a male bath attendant it was 24 shillings, but many were laid off during the winter months when the baths were closed, 15 indicating that the wages cannot have been much greater than the average manual wage at the time. The ability to earn extra through competing in and promoting swimming galas or ‘aquatic shows was though a profitable business, not only on account of the admission fees but also because of the bets placed by spectators’.16 With evidence of thousands turning out to
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watch aquatic shows, such as the 4000 people who crowded into the Mount Street baths in London in 1840.17

The necessity to offer the paying and betting public something over and above straightforward swimming races, resulted in ever increasing bizarre feats being attempted in swimming pools18. To also attract the public children often formed part of the entertainment, as was the case with the children of the Beckwith family, where Agnes and Charles were part of their father’s aquatic shows from a young age. And Emily Parker the eleven year old sister of Harry Parker, the supervisor at the Barbican Baths, London, was also often included in the programme of his aquatic entertainments19.

The ability to keep staging ever spectacular shows, to hold the paying public’s interest, against competition from an increasing variety of new urban entertainment’s, led many professional swimmers to seek their fortunes abroad, most went either to America or Australia.20 The professionals that remained though were to have a significant influence on the development of competitive swimming in their subsequent roles as club coaches. Firstly however, the professional needed to legitimate his claim to be the ‘champion’ swimmer, before an increasingly knowledge public, via the expanded reporting of all sporting events in the press. This gave the impetus to the professional swimmers to organise their races and activities on a more structured basis and was the first step towards a formal organisation of swimming and a further characteristic in the sports modernisation.

First Swimming Organisations

The first body claiming to represent the activities of swimming nationally, for which there is documentary evidence was the National Swimming Society (NSS), which was founded on 30th June 1837 by John Strachan.21 Strachan’s reasons for forming the society are not clear, for he was not a professional swimmer himself, but according to Strachan the NSS was formed for ‘teaching and promoting swimming throughout the empire’.22 With this objective he approached the professional swimmers of the time and devised a federal framework for races, as well as a model calendar of events.23 The first report of a race organised by the NSS appears in Bell’s Life in August 1837, by 1839 12 local committees had been established to
organise races in each locality, with each geographical region then sending its winning representative to London to compete for the ‘National’ title. In 1840 the winner was reported as a Mr Hounslow who swam the 400 yard river race in 7 minutes 9 seconds. The significance of this race was not the actual time achieved but, that a measured pre-set distance had been covered and a time recorded, for it illustrates a new preoccupation of comparing swimmers by time had became important and is further evidence of the increasing modernisation of the sport. By the mid 1840s most of the races organised by the NSS were held in pools, where distances could be more easily standardised and the external factors of tides, currents and weeds could be neutralised. Holding the races at swimming baths also enabled the NSS society to have some control over the commercial aspect of the sport, by restricting entry to those spectators who were prepared to pay. However, the increasing cost of organising these events and the weakness of the central administration, with just Strachan in control, ultimately led to the collapse of the society. A possible further reason for the NSS decline was that a second society the British Swimming Society (BSS), had been formed in 1840, its objectives were ‘to promote health and cleanliness by encouraging swimming and gratuitously giving instruction in the art’. Although both societies had different objectives, both tried to claim legitimate representation of swimming nationally and it was this that ‘probably diminished their validity and impact on swimming and on public opinion’. A third attempt was also made to organise swimming nationally, with the formation of the National Swimming Association (NSA). This however, never had the same recognition as the NSS. It was founded by the swimming professional and baths supervisor at the Laven-dur Bay Baths, London, Frederick Cavill and was considered more as a quest for publicity than a serious attempt to organise swimming on a national basis. Although all three organisations had claimed to represent swimming throughout Britain, all of the events they organised and most of the professional swimmers who competed in them were from England. Despite the fact that Scotland by the last quarter of the nineteenth century had a significant number of swimming clubs and professional swimmers, who competed in a variety of races. The need to organise and legitimate national championship races in Scotland came to a head in the summer of 1873. During that season clubs from Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen had all promoted their own ‘Quarter Mile Championship of Scotland’. To clear up the confusion, a meeting of all Scottish clubs took place in Perth.
in February 1875. They agreed to establish a national organisation, called the Associated Swimming Clubs of Scotland (ASCS) in order to regulate Scottish Championships. The demise of the ASCS occurred in 1881 when it had failed to expand its membership, due to conflict with amateur swimmers and to therefore maintain sufficient funds.

The failure of all these early swimming associations, in both England and Scotland, to maintain their membership and keep control of their organisation, was largely due to the changed moral climate of society. For by the 1870s a distinction was being made between amateur and professional swimmers and the dominance in these early associations had been from professional swimmers. When amateur swimmers began to extend their power and influence, conflict was inevitable. One last attempt to create an efficient national professional organisation was made in 1881 with the Professional Swimming Association, but the continuing struggle for control of the sport by amateur swimmers had, by this time, resulted in the formation of the Swimming Association of Great Britain (SAGB) in 1869, which was to become the Amateur Swimming Association (ASA) in 1886. And the inauguration of the Scottish Amateur Swimming Association (SASA) in 1888. The debate surrounding amateur v professional status continued to dominate the sport for many decades, but it did not cause a decline in the popularity of swimming. Professional swimmers had failed to create an efficient national organisation partly due to the moral climate and disdain for the professional sportsman. Also, a change in emphasis from government and social reformers, which now endorsed the value and benefits of sport for its own sake, resulted in greater demand for knowledge and information on all sporting activities. This created a renewed enthusiasm for swimming and by the last quarter of the nineteenth century it was sufficient to create a specialised swimming press.

Swimming Press

A specialist swimming press was claimed to have been initiated with the swimming paper ‘The Swimming, Rowing and Athletic Record’ published by Robert Watson in 1873. The paper was promoted mainly to Londoners and was only marginally successful, by the third edition the paper had changed its title to ‘The Swimming Record and Chronicle of Sporting Events’ and was a weekly publication. This was not enough to
make it a success, as although Watson attempted to cover all aspects of the sport and to equally promote both professional and amateur events, his editorials clearly supported the professional swimmer, at a time when their popularity and numbers were declining.31 Backing the professional ranks possibly alienated the greater number of amateur swimming readers, so with insufficient subscribers Watson was forced to cease publication in May 1874. He however, continued in his quest to edit a specialist swimming paper and went on to change the title of his swimming paper a further five times over the next 13 years, but when in 1886 his last publication failed he had to admit defeat. The inability to maintain a specialised swimming press at this time was not a lack of potential readers, but more to do with the failure among swimmers, professional and amateur, to agree on a national structure for the sport. It was one characteristic of a ‘modern’ sport that swimming found hard to sustain. In the last decade of the century the weekly magazine Swimming was published in 1895, again this was clearly aimed mostly at the London public,32 and later in February 1910 the weekly, Athletic Field and Swimming World made a brief appearance, but was discontinued by the May of 1910.33 Ultimately, a specific swimming press was only sustainable once national swimming organisations were in place. When magazines were produced as official organs of an association, such as the 1914 Swimming Magazine of the Royal Life Saving Society (RLSS).34

The 1878 Baths and Washhouses Act

The demise of a specialist swimming press in the 1880s, actually coincided with an increase in the popularity of swimming. Economic and social conditions enabled more of the population to take part in sport. Government and social reformers had also changed their attitude and were by this time, actively promoting sport. In swimming the effects were mainly felt through the amended 1878 Public Baths and Washhouses Act. Previously public baths had been built for the utilitarian purpose of enabling the masses to keep clean and healthy. The facilities provided in the early establishments generally consisted of individual private baths plus a small plunge bath, which were not designed for swimming. However, with the permissive legislation of 1878, government enabled and encouraged local authorities to build covered swimming pools. This was a clear indication that public baths were now considered as places for physical recreation and
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sport. Although initially many towns could not afford to take advantage of the Act, by either updating their existing baths or building new ones. The situation soon changed and by 1880 we see a rapid increase in the number of swimming baths being built. With just 83 public baths in existence in England in 1880 this rises to over 343 by 1915.35

In Scotland the 1878 Act was not applicable and neither had been the earlier 1846 Public Baths and Washhouses Act. It was 1892 with the Burgh Police (Scotland) Act before Scotland had similar legislation, so Scottish local authorities were relatively late in building public baths. This however, was of benefit to Scottish swimming and also to the English towns which used the later 1878 Act, because from the outset these towns had public baths which made ample provision for swimming.36 The 1878 Act had clearly confirmed a more enlightened national attitude to the provision of public swimming facilities.37 With these improved facilities came an increase in the number of swimmers and subsequently the development of competitive swimming with the rapid formation of numerous swimming clubs.

Early Competitive Swimming Clubs

New facilities undoubtedly encouraged the development and popularity of swimming clubs, but it was paradoxically the professional swimmer who had the most influence on the initial development of swimming clubs. From their position teaching local people to swim and as bath supervisors they often suggested forming a swimming club and generally became promoted to the position of club coach, for which they were paid.38 This trend even began with the very first river based clubs, in Scotland for example the first swimming clubs developed around the popular local river swimming sites. Bon-Accord swimming club in Aberdeen began in 1862, from the ‘Pottie’ on the River Dee, when Archie McFarlane the ‘Rescue’ at Aberdeen beach suggested to the young men he had taught to swim that they should form a club.39 The clubs initially enabled local men, with the time and money to swim on Saturday afternoons and weekday evenings the opportunity to improve their swimming and diving skill, with instruction from a ‘professional’.40 As club members became more proficient, intra club races took place and eventually an annual programme of events were established. With the improvements made in transportation and commu-
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communication from the mid 1860s inter-club and ‘All-Comers’ races also become popular.41 The river based clubs and competitions continued to thrive in Scotland for many years, until the pleasures of swimming in the rivers became significantly diminished with the increase in shipping and pollution from the expanding industrial sites along the river banks of the major cities.

In England river based clubs were also in existence during the first half of the nineteenth century and at certain locations river, lake and sea swimming clubs remained popular throughout the nineteenth century.42 But with the much earlier provision of municipal baths in England, the establishment of swimming clubs from these facilities occurred from the 1820s. The precise date of the first swimming club is difficult to verify, although there is some evidence of the Huddersfield and Lockwood SC in 1825.43 Documentary evidence exists of a swimming club at the first municipally owned baths the St. George’s Baths at the Pier Head in Liverpool, with the club forming in the same year that the baths were opened 1828.44

Once established the continuation of a swimming club was dependent upon many factors, with good organisation and funding essential requirements. Those clubs that secured a generous patron or the backing of a successful local business were the ones more likely to survive. Swimming clubs were in competition with numerous other leisure activities and club members often belonged to several other sporting and leisure organisations. The biggest source of revenue for most clubs was the annual swimming gala, which if it was sufficiently attractive and well promoted could attract several thousand paying spectators. For many clubs it was impossible to sustain this level of interest, consequently some clubs were only in existence for a few years. However, once most towns had a municipal bath and particularly after the 1878 Public Baths and Washhouses Act, Public Baths Committees were encouraged to give assistance to swimming clubs and make price concessions for the use of the facilities.45 Membership of the local swimming club was financially and locally accessible and was popular for a relatively wide section of the urban population. Swimming pools often had several clubs using their facilities on each weekday evening, with the clubs having been formed around a variety of agencies - the work place, churches, political associations and neighbourhood
groups _ all enthusiastically taking part in what became a fairly standardised form of aquatic participation. By the 1890s a regular competitive swimming season had been established that began in April and continued until early August.46

**Conclusions**

The nature of competitive swimming in Britain changed throughout the nineteenth century, but by 1878 most of the characteristics of Adelman’s typology of ‘modern’ sport were an established part of the sport. Swimming took place most often in purpose built indoor facilities, where the standardisation of conditions and recording of results and records could be more easily controlled and statistics kept. Although river, lake and sea swimming clubs continued to thrive in many places well into the twentieth century. A specialised press had emerged to publicise results and fixtures, but it was unable to maintain a regular loyal readership and therefore proved unsustainable at this time. Many clubs had been formed and provided regular competitive opportunities for their members and inexpensive weekday entertainment for many other town and city inhabitants. While club membership also provided opportunities for sociability in the new urban environment. Agreement on the rules and regulations of competitive swimming, in particular the vexed question of amateur and professional status was still to be resolved and the confirmation of national and international fixtures had not been accepted by everyone, but attempts to form a national organisation and structure had begun. As a result of all these developments, by the 1880s competitive swimming had arguably progressed sufficiently to be classified as a ‘modern’ sport.

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Notes

1 Guttmann, 1978, p54

2 Dunning and Sheard (1979) Barbarians, Gentlemen and Players.

3 Adelman, 1990, p.6

4 ibid. p. 7
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5 ibid.
6 ibid. p.5
7 McIntosh, 1952, p.59
8 Terret, 1995, p.18
10 *The Manchester Guardian, Notes and Queries*, 1/11/1875
11 Terret, 1995, p.19
12 *The Manchester Guardian, Notes and Queeries*, 1/11/1875
13 ibid.
14 Annals of the Liverpool Corporate Baths Dept., 1952
15 ibid. p. 29
16 Terret, 1995, p. 24
17 Goulstone, 1999, p. 35
18 Terret, 1995, p. 21. Many programmes advertising aquatic entertainments gave details of attempted feats in water such as, cooking, dressing and undressing, flying kites, staying under water, performing ‘rescues’ and so on.
19 Kiel and Wix, 1996, p.6
20 Cavill family went to Australia, Capt. Mathew Webb, Channel swimmer went to USA.
21 Reference to the NSS appears in Sinclair and Henry, 1893.
22 Kiel and Wix, 1996, p.8
23 Terret, 1995, p. 21
24 ibid. p. 22
25 ibid.
The editorials written by Watson in *The Swimming Record and Chronicle of Sporting Events*, in 1873/4 and titled ‘A Retrospect’ are particularly in favour of professional swimmers.

32 Keil and Wix, 1996, p.271

33 Copies of most of the specialist swimming papers can be found at the British Newspaper Library, Colindale, London.

34 Copies available at the ASA Library, Loughborough.

35 Campbell, 1918, p.4

36 Bilsborough, 1988, p.5

37 ibid.

38 Terret, 1995, p.23

39 Bilsborough, 1988, p.2

40 ibid.

41 Ibid. p.3.

42 Some examples would be the Serpentine Club, London; Belle Vue Lake, Manchester.

43 Keil and Wix, 1996, p.5

44 Ibid.

45 Ellison and Howe, 1997, p.32

46 Bilsborough, 1988, p.9