

Pre-FINA foundations

Flying Gull taught freestyle to the world when he winged his way past a fellow Native American Indian who went by the name Tobacco – in a race with Englishman Harold Kenworthy, doing breaststroke - down one length of a 130-foot pool in London on April 2, 1844. Note the time: 30 seconds for the equivalent of 39.6 metres.

‘The Times’ archive holds a report from a nameless correspondent who may well have been the first swimming writer, 154 years before the current swimming reporter for the paper penned FINA’s Centenary book. “Their style of swimming is totally un-European. They lash the water violently with their arms like the sails of a windmill and beat downward with their feet, blowing with force and performing grotesque antics.” Flying Gull and Tobacco, of the Ojibbeway tribe and invited to England by the National Swimming Society, had gone to their heavenly hunting grounds by the time Johnny Weissmuller broke the minute using a not-too-dissimilar style in 1922, but their influence cannot be understated, and their style had, according to folklore, been used by North American Indians, South Sea Native Island natives and Hawaiians for hundreds of years and had been developed, it is assumed, out of necessity to find a way of swimming faster.

Despite the Indian demonstration, 50 years would pass before the stroke would be popularised as frontcrawl. In the 1840s, sidestroke became more popular than breaststroke in racing. Charles Wallis watched Aborigines swim in Lane Cove River, Australia, using a sidestroke with a single-arm over-water recovery. He demonstrated the style on a visit to London in 1855. In the crowd was Professor Fred Beckwith, who went on to win the English Championship using the technique in 1859 and did so again when he defeated Deerfoot of the Seneca Indian tribe in a professional race in 1861.

The big breakthrough came in 1873, when John Trugeon, after observing South African Kaffirs (others suggest he had watched South American Indians), copied their double-arm over-water action with breaststroke kick in a 160-yard race at Lambeth Baths on August 11, 1873. It was an exhausting style; one that became widely used for shorter distances, while sidestroke remained the most commonly used technique for the rest of the 19th Century.

In 1874, the Society, after a few names changes, became the Swimming Association of Great Britain. It was a year later when Captain Matthew Webb caught the public's imagination using breaststroke to become the first person to swim across the English Channel. In 1884, the Otter Swimming Club of London, the oldest in the world, broke away and formed the Amateur Swimming Union. The battle between the factions was finally settled, courtesy of the diplomatic skills of Horace Davenport, with the formation of the Amateur Swimming Association, as the ruling body for England is still known today, in 1886.

There was scant standardisation and rules rested somewhere between primitive and non-existent. Times were irrelevant. Not so in Australia, where in 1846 at Robinson Baths in Sydney, William Redman won the 440 yards freestyle "national championship" in 8:43. On February 9, 1858, Jo Bennett, of Sydney, beat Charles Stedman, of England, in what was dubbed a World Championship 100-yard race at St Kilda, in Melbourne. The first regular championships in Australia date back to 1889.

Over the next 50 years until FINA's foundation, swimming's popularity gathered pace across the world. Federations were formed in Germany in 1882, France in 1890 and Hungary in 1896, in time for Alfred Hajos to become the first Olympic swimming champion racing between ropes in the Bay of Zea, near Piraeus off Athens in 1896. In New Zealand, the federation dates back to 1890 and in the United States the first national championship, over 1 mile, was held in 1877. Scotland lays claim to a particular fame: it held the first woman's championship, in 1892, with Ellen Dobbie taking the 200 yards crown at Glasgow in 4:25, on breaststroke.

By the dawn of the 20th Century, modern freestyle was in the making. Englishman Fred Cavill emigrated to Australia in 1878, watched natives in the South Seas using a style not unlike that of Flying Gull and taught his sons. Richard Cavill won the English 100yd freestyle in 58.6sec using double-arm over-water action with legs trailing. After the race, he was asked to describe what he was doing. He said it was like "crawling" through the water. The term frontcrawl was born.

Richard's brother Syd wound up in San Francisco and taught the stroke to J. Scott Leary, the first American to swim the 100 yards in a minute, back in 1904. The style taught by the Cavills was taken up by Frederick Lane (AUS), who at 18 raced the New South Wales mile championship taking alternate arm strokes above the water and timing his pull to coincide with a scissor kick.

At the 1900 Olympic Games in Paris, Lane triumphed over 200m freestyle when swimming with the tide in the River Seine. He shattered previous time standards with a 2:25.2 victory that left him six seconds ahead of Hungarian Zoltan Halmay, whose battle with Charles Daniels (USA) marked the next phase in the development of freestyle just as FINA was about to be born.
