

Structure

Swimming has come a long way in 100 years of official FINA history. When the founding fathers of the federation gathered in London, 1908, there was no global standardisation of rules, structures, distances and general conditions under which race competitions could be held and records set. Swimming distances were often “guesstimates”, while most events took place in open water in which no two venues offered the same conditions, some racing taking place against the tide, others with the tide, some in choppy sea, others in millpond conditions.

For the first 65 years of FINA history, the Olympic Games was the only global competition open to swimmers. If London 1908 was the last male-only Games, then it would be 88 years before women had the same number of events to race in as men in Olympic waters. From 1908 to 1956, the men’s programme – 100m, 400m 1,500m freestyle, 100m backstroke, 200m breaststroke and 4x200m freestyle – remained unaltered. Women raced only 100m, 400m and 4x100m freestyle until 1924, when the 100m backstroke and 200m breaststroke were added to their schedule.

The biggest change in the Olympic swimming programme unfolded in 1956 after the 1952 decision to split breaststroke and butterfly into autonomous strokes. Between 1956 and 1964, men raced the 200m and women the 100m butterfly, while the new stroke allowed a 4x100m medley relay to be introduced in 1960 and 400m medley for men and women in 1964. That year, in Tokyo, also witnessed further growth in the men’s programme, with 200m backstroke and 4x100m freestyle making their debut.

But it was in 1968 at Mexico City that the revolution took hold: men now had four new events – 200m freestyle, 100m breaststroke, 100m butterfly and 200m medley – while women closed the gulf to their male counterparts with no fewer than six new events to aim at, namely 200m and 800m freestyle (allowing Debbie Meyer, p126, to become the first woman to win three solo gold medals in Olympic waters), 200m backstroke, 100m breaststroke, 200m butterfly and 200m medley. As pressure grew to cut back the ever-growing number of participants at the Games, FINA was asked by the International Olympic Committee to make sacrifices. Reluctantly, it elected to remove the 200m medley for men and women and the men’s 4x100m freestyle. All three events returned for good in 1984.

The following Games, at Seoul in 1988, gave rise to the penultimate addition to the Olympic race roster,

with 50m freestyle sprints for both sexes, and in 1996 women finally had the same number of races to aim at as men, when the 4x200m freestyle made its debut. The only difference in the male and female programmes today is that men race the 1,500m freestyle and women the 800m.

That distinction was got rid of at FINA World Championships in 2001, when an 800m for men and 1,500m for women joined the party alongside 50m sprint races in all strokes. The World Championships programme mirrored the Olympic programme (barring temporary Olympic removals) until 1986, when the 4x200m freestyle for women and 50m freestyle sprints for both sexes made their debut. The programme at the World Youth Championships that began in 2006 mirrors the senior event.

As the number of Olympic and World Championship events grew, so too did the number of days over which races took place. Early Olympics featured scattered events over the course of two weeks and more but the standard for much of the first 60 years of FINA history was a five to six-day programme. That stretched to seven by the 1980s and in 2000, at the Olympics in Sydney, races spanned eight consecutive days. That was also the case for World Championships from 2001 onwards, while at the 2008 Olympic Games, the switch to morning finals and evening heats dictated that the swimming events were held over nine days. There was no precedence for morning finals, the nearest thing to that being the three days of noon finals held at the Olympic Games in Seoul, 1988.

The World Championships (25m), formerly known officially (and still widely referred to) as World Short-Course Championships, has all the same events as its more prestigious long-course cousin, plus a 100m medley for both sexes. The event was held over four days from 1993 to 2004 and over five days from 2006. The short-course World Cup series, which from the early 1990s had been held in stages over the course of the northern hemisphere winter months, was improved drastically with an agreement for the 2007-2009 seasons to host all seven events on five continents over a period of just one month. The race schedule includes every event held at the world short-course championships, minus team races.

CURRENT EVENTS

Olympic Games

Men and Women: 50m, 100m, 200m, 400m freestyle; 100m, 200m backstroke; 100m, 200m breaststroke; 100m, 200m butterfly; 200m, 400m individual medley; 4x100m, 4x200m freestyle; 4x100m medley.

Men: 1,500m freestyle. Women: 800m freestyle.

World Championships

Men and Women: 50m, 100m, 200m, 400m, 800m, 1,500m freestyle; 50m, 100m, 200m backstroke; 50m, 100m, 200m breaststroke; 50m, 100m, 200m butterfly; 200m, 400m individual medley; 4x100m, 4x200m

freestyle; 4x100m medley.

World Championships (25m)

Men and Women: 50m, 100m, 200m, 400m freestyle; 50m, 100m, 200m backstroke; 50m, 100m, 200m breaststroke; 50m 100m, 200m butterfly; 100m 200m, 400m individual medley; 4x100m, 4x200m freestyle; 4x100m medley.

Men: 1,500m freestyle. Women: 800m freestyle.
