Origins

Open water is both the youngest and oldest of FINA’s disciplines. In Beijing it will be the fifth sport under the guardianship of the international swimming federation to join the Olympic family when the inaugural 10km marathon swim unfolds on August 20, 2008, but the journey actually began in ancient times.

Man has always had a passion for returning to the source of life. In terms of competitions, the Japanese can point to evidence that open-water races were held 2,000 years ago.

For many civilisations, swimming had more to do with bathing for health. The Romans had a mortgage on the past-time. It is said that 13 aqueducts supplied the city and its people with 300 gallons of water each a day. Ancient Greeks promoted the healing powers of spring water, while even in Egypt rudimentary shower baths have been found in archaeological digs. Fast-forward through the Dark Ages, when so much that might have been recorded was lost, and you arrive at 1615, when Queen Anne of England paid a second visit to the spa at Bath and declared the whole bathing experience one that would improve health. Prevailing socio-economic conditions dictated that swimming was often the preserve of the privileged and the annual pilgrimage of British royalty to spas such as Bath (site of an ancient Roman spa) and the seaside to “cure” their ailments and improve their health with a daily dip, was followed by high society far and wide. That led to swimming as an activity being discussed not only at the dinner tables of the wealthy but in academic journals. In Sir Thomas Browne’s Pseudodoxia Epidemica, the author considers swimming in a scientific light.

Various events at the highest levels of society kept swimming the the headlines. In 1726, while on a boat trip down the River Thames in London, Benjamin Franklin stripped off his clothes and took the plunge, swimming from Chelsea to Blackfriars and performing tricks for onlookers as he went. Races off piers into the sea and in long rivers are recorded to have taken place in England as early as 1791. But 1844 was the most significant year on that score (p36-37).

Today, doctors prescribe bathing in salt water to cure all sorts of ailments. Marathon swimmers are doubtless very healthy then! If there was one single event that popularised swimming in open water more than any other it was the achievement of Captain Matthew Webb in 1875. He swam breaststroke to become the first person to swim across the English Channel. With this feat, a great tradition was born. A contemporary of his was J. Arthur Trudgen, an English swimmer and coach who lent his name to the Trudgen stroke, which used a breaststroke kick but an overarm action that he had seen used by South American Indians.

FINA has only ever known Olympic competition in dedicated pools but the first three modern Olympic Games all staged swimming events in open water. In Athens, 1896, a 100 metres (or thereabouts) race between three Greek sailors across the Bay of Zea near Piraeus (not far from a place where cave drawings offer evidence of an ancient sport) started with rivals jumping from a rowing boat. The winner was Ioannis Malokinis in 2:20.4. The open event, not restricted to the Greek Navy, was much faster: Alfred Hajos, of Hungary, was the first Olympic swimming champion in a time of 1:22.2. That historic moment unfolded in front of 20,000 spectators.
In Paris 1900, swimming took place on the Seine and included an obstacle race and one where the point was to swim the whole distance under water. The races were held with the tide, thankfully. That helped John Arthur Jarvis (GBR) claim the gold in the 4,000m (almost half way to that inaugural marathon in Beijing) in less than an hour. St Louis in 1904 offered a venue that used pontoons and took on the feel of a pool, though the first true Olympic swimming pool is as old as FINA, both born in London 1908.