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Structure

As the first Olympic season of marathon swimming dawned in 2008, the world of the open water swimmer had never been so full of opportunity. The dream of representing one's country in Olympic waters may have enticed many into the sport who might not have otherwise made the journey from the pool, but open water swimming is about much more than Beijing 2008. The biennial FINA World Open Water Swimming Championships, in its fifth season, took place in Seville, Spain, in May, 2008 and doubled up as the first Olympic qualification round. In addition, marathon swimmers also race for world titles at the FINA World Championships held for five disciplines every two years in uneven years between Olympic Games.

From April to October each year, FINA organises a 10km Swimming World Cup series, while a FINA Open Water Grand Prix series, for competitions over distances longer than 10km, provides further challenges for the marathon men and women. Both series were staged for the first time in their current format in 2007. Continental championships in open water swimming are also organised every two or four years, depending on the region. The advent of the Olympic era in the sport witnessed a growth in popularity of the 10km series, but while participation rose for that distance, there has been a corresponding drop in attendance at the Grand Prix series and discussions about the future structure of the sport were ongoing as FINA prepared to celebrate its 100th anniversary.

A year after FINA created the Long Distance Commission, the first World Cup event was staged on Lake Windermere in England. A 25km race was added to the World Championships of 1991, held in Perth, Western Australia, where the Swan River afforded a fabulous setting for the birth of a new era in the sport. Following in fast progression were the creation in 1992 of the Technical Open Water Swimming Committee and, in 1993 and 1994, the inaugural World Cup Series.

The 5km event was introduced at the World Championships back in Perth in 1998. However, the true pathway to the Olympic Games was found in 2000, when 10km races for men and women made their debut as FINA launched the first Open Water World Swimming Championships as a separate entity. The event provided an opportunity for marathon specialists at a time when the Olympic Games was still a dream. In 2001, the 10km was also added to the FINA World Championships in Fukuoka, in 2001. The timeframe of the 10km, in the order of two hours, equated well to the Olympic marathon for runners. The International Olympic Committee added the 10km event to the Games after a 2005 decision.

The arrival of the Olympic era in open water inevitably created the need to alter the competition structure elsewhere. A 10km Marathon Swimming World Cup was scheduled to be held every year from 2007, while FINA decided to refer to the 10km event officially as "marathon swimming", leaving the term open water for all other races and distances.

THE EVENTS

Olympic Games

10km for men and women, the inaugural event held on August 20 and 21, 2008 at the Shunyi Olympic Rowing-Canoeing Park in Beijing.

World Championships

Fina World Championships

Men and Women:

5km: 1998, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009

10km: 2001, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009

25km: 1991, 1994, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009

Team event: 5km – 1998; 25km - 1994, 1998.

FINA World Open Water Swimming Championships

Men and Women:

5km, 10km, 25km and team event in all three distances: 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008.

World Cup

Men and Women:

25km: 1986, 1988, 1992, 1996. Team event: 1996.

10km Swimming World Cup Series

10km: 2007, 2008.

Grand Prix

FINA Open Water Grand Prix Series
Men and Women:
Various distances: 2007, 2008.
