Surveillance and Conformity in Competitive Youth Swimming

Melanie Lang
Leeds Metropolitan University
M.Lang@leedsmet.ac.uk


Abstract

After a series of unsuccessful outings by the British swimming squad at international competitions, in 2003 tough-talking then-national performance director Bill Sweetenham introduced The Swimmer Pathway (Amateur Swimming Association, 2003), a swimming-specific version of the Long-Term Athlete Development plan proposed by Balyi and Hamilton (2004), in an effort to restructure British swimming’s elite-development programme and reverse Britain’s medal drought. The Swimmer Pathway recommends that swimmers as young as 8 years old train between 5 and 9 hours weekly for around 14 kilometres in the pool, increasing to between 14 and 27 hours weekly, representing around 52 kilometres, by the age of 11 for girls and 12 for boys (ASA, 2003). Swimmers, then, particularly those striving to reach elite levels, dedicate tremendous amounts of time to their sport, often willingly sacrificing other social activities in order to train (Burton Nelson, 1996; Brackenridge & Kirby, 1997). Top swimmers power up and down the pool, over and over, for hundreds, even thousands, of lengths, for up to five hours a day (McMaster, 1999; Leonard, 2006). They train so hard they vomit, swim through pain and injury and record every detail of their training – their set times, stroke rate, heart rate. Simultaneously, at a time when social anxiety about child sexual abuse has become a moral panic (Brackenridge, 2001) and ‘safety’ from such abuse defines every act of child-adult touch as suspicious (Jones, 2004), an increasing amount of attention is being paid to how coaches interact with their athletes. Drawing on data from an ongoing study into good practice in competitive youth swimming, this paper will explore the disciplinary mechanisms at work in a youth swimming environment. The data emerged from a larger study involving participant and non-participant observation of 11 competitive squads and 11 coaches at two competitive swimming clubs in England, one elite and one mid level club. Observations were followed by semi-structured interviews with
nine coaches and one poolside helper at these clubs. Using Foucault’s (1977) theory of disciplinary power, and in particular, how this is exercised through the technology of surveillance, I will explain how some of the social practices identified in this research work to produce trained, efficient and obedient athletes and coaches (Markula, 1995; Chapman, 1997; Maguire & Mansfield; 1998; Rinehart, 1998). Data analysis identified swimming training protocols as part of a disciplinary regime that enforces swimmers’ and coaches’ embodied conformity to normative behaviour. Examples that will be discussed include coaches monitoring their and other coaching staff’s behaviour when dealing with youth swimmers and the emphasis placed on ensuring athletes swim with ‘correct’ technique. The paper concludes by discussing the significance of these findings for swimmers, coaches and youth sport more widely.

Introduction

Underpinned by a Foucauldian analysis of sporting practices, this paper identifies the disciplinary mechanism of surveillance at work in competitive youth swimming. It uncovers the ways in which the bodies of swimmers and their coaches are subject to and apply this controlling mechanism to produce embodied conformity to normative behaviour and obedient, docile bodies (Foucault, 1977). In particular, it illustrates the usefulness of Foucauldian theorising to explain two key findings from a wider study into good practice in competitive youth swimming – the obedience of swimmers and coaching hierarchies. The paper begins by setting competitive youth swimming training and coaching in England in context through a discussion of the Long Term Athlete Development (LTAD) plan used in swimming, known as ‘The Swimmer Pathway’ (Amateur Swimming Association, 2003), and Amateur Swimming Association (ASA) child protection regulations. After locating the study within this context, I discuss Foucault’s understanding of the body within the technologies of
dominance, before providing an overview of the wider study from which this paper has emerged. Examples are presented of how surveillance operates to shape swimmers’ and coaches’ bodies and, to conclude, the significance of these findings for all involved in competitive youth swimming is discussed.

**Competitive Youth Swimming in England**

With London hosting the 2012 Olympic Games and the number of international medals won linked to the amount of funding national governing bodies of sport (NGBs) receive (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2000), the pressure on British athletes to succeed has intensified. It is particularly acute among British swimmers, who were criticized by the media and other athletes after poor performances in the Sydney and Athens Olympics (Lord, 2000; MacKay, 2000; Fraser, 2004; Green & Houlihan, 2006). Most swimmers currently training to win a place on the 2012 team are of school age; 75 percent of swimmers on a squad identified as potential 2012 team members were aged 16 or under, the youngest being just 12 years old (British Swimming, 2008). Elite swimmers begin competitive training earlier than in any other sport, at an average age of 8 years and 6 months (English Sports Council, 1998), although many elite clubs accept children as young as five into their programmes. In many cases, young swimmers train year-round, for longer periods and covering greater distances than in other sports: Swimmers as young as 9 years old have been reported training eight times a week, covering 15 miles, while at age 14 this rises to 40-plus miles weekly (Leonard, 2006) – the aerobic equivalent of running 160 miles (Jones, 1999). Many of these athletes also participate in land-based fitness activities, resulting in training schedules similar to school workloads (Brettschneider, 1999).
The ASA supports an intense training regimen for young swimmers though the swimming-specific version of the LTAD plan, known as ‘The Swimming Pathway’ (ASA, 2003). The plan was introduced in 2003 by then-National Performance Director Bill Sweetenham. Sweetenham, a tough-talking former Australian Olympic swim team head coach, was hired to turn around the national team’s performance record. Branding British swimming’s elite-development programme ‘a massive flop, an abysmal failure’ (Lord, 2002b, p.47), Sweetenham set about restructuring the system to mirror the government’s new focus on developing medal-winning athletes (Department of National Heritage, 1995; DCMS, 2000; DCMS/ Strategy Unit, 2002).

Much of Sweetenham’s new regime was controversial. For example, he required British swim team members to sleep on the floor to simulate the uncomfortable conditions of Olympic villages and imposed mandatory training loads of at least 37 miles a week; swimmers who failed to comply were dropped from the team (Lord, 2002a, 2002b). However, the introduction of ‘The Swimmer Pathway’ was one of Sweetenham’s more well-received measures and the plan is hailed by the ASA as an exemplar of good practice for youth swimmers.

**LTAD in Swimming**

The LTAD plan borrows training protocols from countries with a record of international success in an attempt to create a framework for elite athlete development (Mazzucco, 2007). Indeed, although it has been argued the LTAD plan should be seen as a model for retaining people in sport (Earle, 2001), the plan’s creator stresses it is intended to develop elite athletes from youth to senior level (Balyi, 1990). To this end, the plan cautions against using adult models of training.
with children. Instead, it recognises variations in the physical, cognitive and emotional development of child athletes and emphasises that improvements in performance in response to training will occur only if the appropriate volume, intensity and frequency of exercise and sufficient rest periods are followed (Balyi & Hamilton, 2004). Similarly, ‘The Swimmer Pathway’ emphasises long-term planning for swimmers. It recommends that swimmers as young as 8 years old train between 5 and 9 hours weekly for around 9 miles in the pool, plus 1 to 2 hours on land. This increases to between 14 and 27 hours pool training weekly and around 32 miles by the age of 11 for girls and 12 for boys – distances comparable to those for adult competitors only a decade ago (Raglin & Wilson, 1999). By comparison, the England Netball LTAD plan recommends no more than four and a half hours of netball training weekly for 11 year olds (Pankhurst & England Netball, 2005).

Crucially, although the LTAD model has been criticised for its lack of scientific basis and its sports science focus (Brackenridge, 2004), little critical attention has been paid to the frequency and intensity of training required of young athletes under the plan. This is despite growing literature outlining the negative physical and psychological effects of frequent, intensive training on youth athletes. Such training in young athletes can inhibit bone growth (Booth & Gould, 1975), cause overtraining and physical and mental ‘burnout’ (Hollander et al., 1995) and increase the potential for injury and dropout (Wolstencroft, 2002; Salguero et al., 2003). Indeed, swimmers cite the emphasis on frequent, intense training as a major reason for leaving the sport (Salguero et al., 2003). Crucially, no correlation has been found between beginning systematic training at an early age and the guarantee of future athletic success (Hemery, 1988; Baxter-Jones & Helms, 1996; Starosta, 1996).
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This is not to suggest that youth participation in elite sport or that elite sport in and of itself is intrinsically negative. Rather, the concern is the lack of recognition among the ASA and other swimming stakeholders that the perversions of elite swimming, in particular the intensive training expected, can reverse the positive benefits of sports participation for young athletes (David, 1999). It is recognised, however, that sports participation is not a forced activity; swimmers and other athletes seemingly submit to such intense training voluntarily. An understanding of why athletes conform to the intense normative training practices found in competitive youth swimming is necessary if we are to develop the potential of all young swimmers without putting them at risk of physical and psychological harm.

Child Protection in Swimming

The ASA’s child protection strategy provides another framework of good practice for coaches working with young swimmers. The strategy was introduced after Paul Hickson, an Olympic coach, was imprisoned in 1995 for the rape and indecent assault of teenage athletes under his care. The negative media coverage surrounding the case cost the ASA an estimated £1 million in sponsorship (Bringer, 2002) and turned the issue of child sexual abuse within sport into a cause célèbre. To restore trust, the ASA positioned itself at the vanguard of safeguarding children in sport, introducing one of the first NGB child protection policies and coach education courses on safeguarding children.

Since then, numerous examples of child abuse and exploitation in youth sport have surfaced (Ryan, 1995; Kirby et al., 2000; Fasting et al., 2004; Gervis & Dunn, 2004) and social anxiety about child abuse in sport and wider society has become a moral
panic (Brackenridge, 2001). In this climate, where safety from such abuse defines every act of child-adult touch as suspicious (Jones, 2004), an increasing amount of attention is being paid to how adults who work with young people, including coaches, interact with youngsters. Most scholarly attention in sport has focused on coaching transgressions from the point of view of athletes. Research on the impact of this intensified attention on coaches is limited, but it has been suggested that coaches feel unable to carry out their coaching duties to their fullest ability out of a fear they will be falsely accused of abuse (Bringer, 2002).

**Foucault’s Retheorising of Power**

Athletes are often assumed to submit to intensive training regimens because they are goal driven. That athletes undergo such training voluntarily appears to support this assumption (Johns & Johns, 2000). However, critical analysis of sports culture indicates that various control mechanisms work to produce compliant athletes ‘that monitor, guard and discipline themselves’ (Eskes et al., 1998, p.319). A key objective of sport is to produce a trained, efficient, machine-like and obedient body. The centrality of the body within sport resonates with the importance placed on the body by Foucault. Foucault (1977) theorised that the body is a subject of technologies of power. Opposing conventional conceptualisations of power as a ‘thing’ possessed by certain individuals or groups and wielded over others, Foucault argues that individuals are enmeshed in a web of power created by discourse, which operates within the daily exchanges between individuals, groups and institutions. As such, power is bound to the production of knowledge and the ability to define what is accepted as ‘truth.’ For Foucault, then, the body is created by and exists in discourse, making the body a central site for the workings of power.
Foucault was particularly interested in power that was capable of controlling, judging and normalising, what he termed ‘disciplinary power’ (Foucault, 1977). Foucault argued that pre-modern societies controlled individuals by arresting and public punishing a minority of criminals in an attempt to frighten the entire population. In contrast, modern societies control individuals by utilising disciplinary power that, while less violent, is more invasive and controlling (Westlund, 1999; Danaher et al., 2000) and functions at the level of the body:

In thinking of the mechanisms of power, I am thinking rather of its capillary form of existence, the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their action and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives.

(Foucault, 1977, p.39)

Foucault argued that disciplinary processes produce a disciplined and docile body, an obedient body ‘that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved’ (Foucault, 1977, p.136). Modern sport is a site where individuals and their bodies are subjected to controlling mechanisms and, in turn, discipline themselves into productive, docile bodies – the embodiment of a successful performer (Heikkala, 1993).

**Surveillance as a Technique of Power**

Disciplinary power is exercised through technologies of dominance, which include techniques of exclusion, classification, distribution, individualisation, totalisation, regulation, normalisation and surveillance. In particular, sports scholars have applied the technology of surveillance to explore how athletic bodies become compliant and productive (Aycock, 1992; Carlisle Duncan, 1994; Markula, 1995; Chapman, 1997;
Maguire & Mansfield, 1998). Attention to youth sport is limited, aside from several analyses of physical education lessons (Hargreaves, 1986, 1987; Kirk, 1998; Webb, McCaughtry & Macdonald, 2004; Webb & Macdonald, 2007). One notable exception is Rinehart’s (1998) analysis of youth swimming lessons. Rinehart identified the pool and the swimming teacher as surveillance mechanisms that produce trained, efficient and obedient bodies. Although Rinehart alludes to competitive swim training, his analysis centres on learn-to-swim lessons rather than swimming as a sport. The apparent lack of focus on competitive swimming in the sociological sports literature is surprising given that it is the country’s most popular participation sport (MORI, 2004; Roberts, 2004).

One of Foucault’s most important insights regarding power is that it is more effective when hidden from view (Danaher et al., 2000). To illustrate this, Foucault (1977) cites Bentham’s design for a prison called the Panopticon. A circular prison with a lit central tower from which a supervisor can view inside every cell, the design of the Panopticon allowed inmates to be observed but prevented them from seeing the observer or even being certain they were under observation. Bentham recognised this innovative design ensured inmates ‘not only suspect [they are being observed] but be assured that whatever they do is known even though that should not be the case’ (Miller, 1988, p.43). Like Bentham, Foucault recognised that subjects who are watched or who may be watched internalise ‘the gaze’ and regulate their behaviours toward an accepted standard. The consequence of institutional authority being rendered invisible is self surveillance ‘to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power’ and renders them docile, useful (Foucault, 1977, p.201). It is the internalisation of this ‘panoptic
gaze’ that renders surveillance such an effective disciplinary technique (Gilbert, 1995; Webb, McCaughtry & Macdonald, 2004).

Technologies of the Self

Foucault’s emphasis on how discursive practices serve to dominate and control individuals has led to criticism that his conceptualisation of disciplinary power fails to account for individual agency or autonomy (McNay, 1992, Bevir, 1999). In fact, Foucault discusses this possibility through the ‘technologies of the self’ (1985, 1988). Foucault argues that wherever circuits of power exist, opportunities for resistance also exist, allowing for the possibility that power can be productive and transformative as well as disciplinary:

... in relations, what ever they are ... power is always present ... these relationships of power are then changeable, reversible and unstable. One must observe that there cannot be relations of power unless the subjects are free. ... That means in the relations of power, there is necessarily the possibility of resistance for if there were no possibility of resistance ... there would be no relations of power.

(Foucault, 1988, p.11-12)

Foucault defines technologies of the self as those practices that:

... permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves.

(Foucault, 1988, p.18)

Technologies of the self, then, are ‘ultimately about the role of the self within power relations – how an individual makes sense of the limitations set for him/her within the power relations’ (Markula & Pringle, 2006, p.146), and provide a useful framework
through which to understand how individuals engage in resisting practices within the web of power relations in which they exist. It is this understanding of power as both a constraining and potentially transformatory force that makes Foucault’s conceptualisation of power a useful lens through which to understand competitive youth swimming.

The Study

This paper draws on data from a wider study that explored good practice within the culture of competitive youth swimming in England. An ethnographic approach was adopted. Seventeen competitive squads at three ASA-affiliated swimming clubs in one region of England were observed for at least 10 hours each. The clubs were placed at different levels of the elite-development ladder and categorised as elite, sub-elite or low level according to their position in The National Speedo League competition, England’s largest inter-club swimming event (National Speedo Swimming League, 2005). The league, which operates similarly to the football league, is sub-divided into three competitive levels: Premier League, Division One, Division Two. The elite club, Central Seals, competes in the Premier League and members range from county- to international-level athletes. The sub-elite club, North Eels, competes in Division One and members compete mainly at county-level competitions and below. The low-level club, South Dolphins, competes in Division Two and members compete mainly in regional-level events.

All 13 coaches at the three clubs consented to be observed during training sessions and the chair of each club gave overall consent for the fieldwork. Most observations were of training sessions in the pool, although land-based training at Central Seals
and North Eels also was observed. Table 1 details the clubs, coaches and poolside helpers that participated.

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<tr>
<th>Central Seals</th>
<th>North Eels</th>
<th>South Dolphins</th>
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<td><strong>Club Level</strong></td>
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<td>Sub Elite</td>
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<td>Andrew</td>
<td>Amanda</td>
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<td><strong>Assistant Coaches</strong></td>
<td>Steven</td>
<td>Keith</td>
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<td>Jenny</td>
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<td><strong>Poolside Helpers</strong></td>
<td>Sheila</td>
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Table 1: Clubs, coaches and poolside helpers that took part in the research

Interviews were conducted with six coaches at Central Seals, three coaches and one poolside helper at North Eels and two coaches at South Dolphins. Participants were between 22 and 60 years old. The semi-structured interviews lasted between 50
minutes and two hours. Participants were guaranteed anonymity and pseudonyms, which are used throughout this paper, were used in notes and transcripts. The remainder of this article discusses two key findings, beginning with conformity among swimmers.

Conformity Among Swimmers

Training at the three clubs involved practices familiar to every athlete: aerobic sessions including repetitive drills plus anaerobic practices such as sprints and hypoxic sets. These and other swimming training protocols formed part of a disciplinary regime that attempted to enforce swimmers’ embodied conformity to normative behaviour through the technique of surveillance, resulting in (re)forming swimmers into obedient, docile bodies. Chambliss (1989) identifies discipline as a major difference between elite and non-elite swimmers. Similarly, well-disciplined athletes were a central focus of coaching staffs’ discussions in this study. For example, poolside helper Sheila defined her role as ‘making sure the children are all on task, listening and disciplined,’ while coaches also noted the importance of athletes complying with their demands:

First and foremost it’s got to be good discipline. I get a lot of new kids so the first thing you need to do is to make sure they’ve got discipline ... that they understand what’s expected of them and that they do what I tell them. (Mike)

If they want to win, rather than come eleventh or twelfth all the time, they’ve got to do the set as I tell them. (Frank)

They have to learn lane behaviour, listen when spoken to, erm, if they’re asked to do a certain intensity they do it. (Steven)
One of the biggest things is sort of like discipline to do what they’re told … I really want them to be concentrating on what they’re doing and trying to put into practice what I say. (Kevin)

Swimmers are exposed to a discourse of physical preparation that attributes certain meanings to their preparation, including that they must comply with strict training regimes and controlled lifestyles to achieve success:

The training sessions are to develop the technique, aerobic capacity and anaerobic, erm, it is to train them for competition. … We hope to teach them correct technique and the proper rules of the sport and hopefully, if they train hard enough, get them better swimmers. (Amanda)

When [Olympic medallist] Peter George joined the club he came with a bit of a reputation of, rightly or wrongly, a bit of a party animal and I had to address that head on … and I said to him “you can come but under these circumstances, under these rules” … and it was agreed that [in] Olympic year [that] nobody would drink. (Andrew)

This discourse reveals the disciplinary power evidenced by compliance of the athletes. The swimming body is disciplined by discourses and practices suggesting how a swimmer ‘should’ train; in these examples by working hard on aerobic sets, mastering ‘correct’ swimming technique and avoiding alcohol. In addition, elite swimmers from each club were commonly used to demonstrate ‘correct’ swimming technique to swimmers from lower squads. The provision of specific prescribed and proscribed training regimes, coupled with the practise of highlighting the club’s elite swimmers’ abilities as an extra incentive to improve training, worked together as a regulatory power that ‘elaborate[s] rules, opinions and advice as to how to behave as one should’ (Foucault, 1985, p. 12). The result is a ‘mechanics of power’ that:
... define[s] how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do as one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed, and the efficiency that one determines.

(Foucault, 1991, p.182)

Surveillance also was employed as a disciplinary force to enforce athletes’ conformity to the training regime. The pool operated as a Panopticon, monitored by the swimming equivalent of Bentham’s prison guard – the coach. At Central Seals, coaches observed athletes from a raised platform, while at North Eels and South Dolphins coaches monitored swimmers by pacing along the poolside. External surveillance also operated through authority figures such as lifeguards, poolside helpers and parents; between three and eight individuals monitored the poolside during training sessions. Hierarchical lane systems were used, whereby weaker swimmers were located in lanes closer to where the coach stood – closer to the coach’s normalising gaze:

There’s one swimmer in particular who I would say perhaps shouldn’t really be in Intermediates [squad] so I would definitely keep him in the first lane so I could observe him up and down easier. (Sheila)

The keeping of registers was another common disciplinary tool used to ensure athletes’ conformity to training protocols. All clubs maintained detailed records of athletes’ attendance and swimmers in the top three squads at Central Seals were required to keep records of their attendance in log books that were submitted to the coach monthly. Swimmers who transgressed from normalised training regimes were punished: Swimmers in Central Seals’ top squad were required to attend 10 weekly sessions to retain their place in the squad and one swimmer was banned from the squad during the field work for failure to adhere to this rigorous regime. The log
books were used by coaches and athletes to enforce normalised behaviour. The athlete, knowing their log book must be submitted to the coach for inspection, ‘exercise[d] this surveillance over, and against, himself’ (Foucault, 1977, p.155), internalising the panoptic gaze by attending the required minimum number of sessions per week; failure to do so would not only be noticed by the coach but would be obvious from the empty pages of their own book.

Coaches also monitored athletes’ behaviour outside of training sessions. At Central Seals coaches reported monitoring swimmers’ diet:

Some of the kids were a bit podgy [when I first came to the club] so I banned all junk food and told them that if I ever saw them with any rubbish, I’d take it off them for myself. (Steven)

We tell [the swimmers] that if they eat sweets or chocolates or crisps and the coach sees you we’ll take them off you and we’ll eat them, so we tell them that’s what’s going to happen and they know we’re watching to catch them out. (Chris)

Monthly weigh-ins, a common practice in elite swimming (McMahon, 2007), also formed part of the coaches’ repertoire of body-controlling practices. Athletes in the top three competitive squads at Central Seals were weighed and their sitting and standing heights and arm span measured.

Mirrors provided another way for the coach to monitor the swimmers. At Central Seals and North Eels, squads attended land-training sessions in a room usually used for public fitness classes. Full-length mirrors hung on three of the four walls and athletes performed stretching exercises in front of the mirrors while coaches watched from the rear of the room. The mirrors allowed the athletes not only to be monitored by the coach but also to monitor themselves and those around them (Aycock, 1992),
permitting the critical eye of the coach, other athletes and the subject to judge the degree of adherence to the training regime.

Video cameras were used to similar disciplinary effect. At Central Seals, coaches videotaped swimmers in training monthly and distributed copies of the video to the relevant swimmer for self analysis¹. Similarly, at North Eels, underwater cameras were fitted in the pool and coaches videotaped swimmers monthly. Swimmers were invited to view their recording with the coach and ‘improvements’ were discussed. Keith explained the impact of being filmed on swimmers:

> When we got the underwater camera out the first time, we just took photos of everyone and they all looked and they could see, because you can play it back and they can all look at it and say “ah right, yep I know what you’re saying now.” The camera makes it easier for swimmers to see themselves and change what they’re doing.

Advances in technology mean swimmers' bodies are no longer hidden from view when underwater. The effect of being filmed parallels the effect of training in a mirrored room: Swimmers are enabled, even encouraged by their coaches, to monitor their own bodies and the bodies of their peers for transgressions from ‘correct’ swimming technique, resulting in careful self-surveillance. This self-surveillance is the result of the anonymity of a normalising gaze that is ‘everywhere and always alert ... function[ing] permanently and largely in silence’ (Foucault, 1991, p.192), a gaze that engages athletes in a disciplinary practice to perform idealised swimming technique.

The possibility of constant surveillance ensures athletes internalise the panoptic gaze and continue to strive towards achieving ‘perfect’ swimming technique even in
the coach’s absence. In this sense, the disciplinary control of the body has also begun to control the mind; relentless surveillance has induced in the athletes ‘a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power’ (Foucault, 1977, p.201). Indeed, with up to 60 swimmers in the pool at any one time, coaches cannot monitor every athlete’s adherence to normalised training standards. The effects of internalising surveillance render this unnecessary:

If the culture of the squad is good, then they’ll see everybody else having a recording board to record their times and a heart rate monitor and doing all that. They’ll see that and they’ll want to be a part of that so they’ll want to do it so they get a bit of peer pressure to conform ... because you don’t want to be the kid that turns round in a lane when nobody else does. (Andrew)

The regulatory practices described above resulted in a ‘constant coercion, supervising the processes of activity rather than its result end’ (Foucault, 1977, p. 137) and led to swimmers’ conformity to the standards expected of competitive swimming culture, such as adherence to training and lane etiquette. The latter included regular attendance, arriving early on poolside, setting off in the lane 10 seconds after the previous swimmer, swimming hard into the wall, maintaining technical excellence and not taking toilet breaks during sets. Conformity to these regulatory practices was common, particularly at Central Seals. Swimmers in the top squads knew the standards expected of them as illustrated by, for example, never asking permission to leave the poolside for a toilet break until the end of sets. However, not all swimmers obeyed these standards. At North Eels and South Dolphins, swimmers pulled themselves along on the lane ropes during backstroke sets, pushed off the pool bottom rather than the wall, stopped swimming several metres out from the wall, and took rests to fix ‘broken’ goggles – practises coaches
referred to as ‘cheating.’ Through these technologies of the self (Foucault, 1985, 1988), swimmers exercised their own autonomy to resist normalised swim training protocols and transform their competitive swimming experience.

As noted earlier, this is not to suggest that youth participation in elite sport or that elite sport in and of itself is intrinsically negative. Rather, I am seeking to explain how and why swimmers’ submit to accepted swimming training protocols and how coaches themselves feel about the training regime. In another paper, due to be presented later this year, I will discuss the coaches’ concern that current swimming protocols suffer from an elite focus that ignores the many youngsters who either find themselves unable or unwilling to commit to the level of training expected of them under the LTAD and, as a consequence, are driving some swimmers away from the sport.

Coaching Hierarchies

A second theme that emerged from the data was the existence of hierarchies among coaches. Even small swimming clubs have several coaches: a head coach who tends to work exclusively with the top squad and several assistant coaches who work with other squads. Occasionally, clubs also have poolside helpers. In this study, the head coach’s position of authority over the assistant coaches and poolside helpers was reinforced by the practising of surveillance. Assistant coaches and poolside helpers frequently referred to the head coach ‘keeping an eye on’ their sessions and expressed awareness the head coach was monitoring their sessions:

Andrew keeps an eye on how we’re doing ’cos it’s important that we bring through good swimmers for him. He gives me advice on how to help improve my swimmers and keeps an eye on how I’m doing. (Jenny)
Andrew will often have a look at [the swimmers in my squad] and what I’m doing and say “why don’t you try this, that or the other with him because he’s not quite getting it right.” (Chris)

Every Monday, the coaching staff have every coach get up and do demonstrations and Andrew speaks to them about how good their demonstrations are. (Steven)

Like all coaches, Andrew is viewed as a ‘knowledge giver’ (Johns & Johns, 2000). As an Olympic coach with the highest professional qualification among the coaches, he has at his disposal more ‘tools’ – more technical knowledge, expertise, status and resources – than other coaches at Central Seals. Through practising surveillance on the other coaches, Andrew deploys these tools to discipline the other coaches by ‘taking charge’ over the coaching process, including the coaches themselves, exhibiting what Barth (1998, p.254) calls a ‘pervasive and reasoned compulsion to normalise individuals.’

On occasion, the head coach also felt the panoptic gaze – from the external authority of the ASA. During the field work at Central Seals, ASA officials attended the club to audit its Aquamark\textsuperscript{2} status. As Andrew noted:

There were all these people on poolside with clipboards, ticking boxes you know. It was awful, very off-putting. (Andrew)

Like inspections by The Office for Standards in Education, the Aquamark audit is a panoptic process (Perryman, 2006). It prompted the club’s poolside staff to adopt normalised behaviours. Foucault noted that surveillance functions so effectively as a technique of power because it ‘fixes ... arrests or regulates movements’ (Foucault, 1991, p.208), proscribing and prescribing certain behaviours according to some norm of social life. The presence of the Aquamark auditors prompted Central Seals’
poolside staff to exhibit what Perryman (2006) calls panoptic performativity by changing their behaviours to align with accepted social norms, in this case, coaching from the poolside rather than their usual position in the pool.

Coaching in a Climate of Fear

Surveillance was also employed by coaches to ensure professional relationships and appropriate behaviour were maintained. Coaches took responsibility for monitoring the behaviour of those lower in the hierarchy:

When I’m supervising the squad I keep an eye out and I try and advise the less experienced coaches, you know, if I see them doing things that I think is probably not suitable. (Chris)

If I see the coach of a lower squad, erm, shouting ... we used to have one or two coaches who did shout at the kids, and, erm, I went to see those kids after to make sure that they weren’t upset about it all, and I’d watch coaches for that. (Keith)

At staff meetings [head coach] Andrew always makes sure that he speaks to us [about] what’s acceptable [and] what’s not acceptable. (Steven)

Several high-profile cases of child sexual abuse within sport, including the Hickson case discussed earlier, have led Brackenridge (2001) to argue we live in an era in which social anxiety about child sexual abuse has become a moral panic. Indeed, the current dominant child abuse discourse engages primarily with the issue of child sexual abuse at the expense of other forms of abuse (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2005). Researchers working in the field of primary school education argue this climate has created an environment in which safety from sexual abuse defines every act of adult-child touch as suspicious, resulting in all adults who work with
children being positioned as suspicious and child-related settings becoming no-touch zones (Jones, 2004; McWilliam, 2001, 2003; McWilliam & Jones, 2005; Piper et al., 2006). In a climate so focused on the potential of adults to harm children sexually, coaches, like other adults working in loco parentis, have become objects of distrust.

Extracts from the coaches’ interviews suggest consciousness of the risk of being accused of abuse has become a ‘regime of truth’ (Foucault, 1977, p.131) that defines ‘correct’ social conduct when working closely with children, a ‘prescriptive text … that elaborate[s] rules, opinions and advice as to how to behave as one should’ (Foucault, 1985, p.12). The coaches recognised this and constantly tried to reduce the risks associated with working closely with children by practising surveillance on coaches lower in the coaching hierarchy. The discourse of fear in which abusive touch is conflated with caring touch, making all touch ‘suspicious,’ was evident among all the coaches. However, true to the disembodied nature of the panoptic gaze, none were specific about where this observation emanated from:

My bugbear is that the way it is now, we’re all seen as under suspicion, when in fact the number of cases of abuse in swimming is tiny. I hate that and I don’t want my staff to feel like they’re being put under suspicion. There’s too much of that. (Andrew)

You can’t be left on your own with a child anymore because people jump to the wrong conclusions even if nobody has done anything. … You’re so scared nowadays of what’s gonna be said and what’s gonna happen. (Jenny)

We don’t want anything misinterpreted. It has got to be all so above board. We have to be very careful about what we do and how it’ll be seen. … Sometimes it’s like we’re always under suspicion. (Amanda)

I only touch people with kickboards and pull buoys to shape their hands into positions. … But people talk, you know. (Steven)
I get swimmers [who] come to me and hug me, you know, and up to a few year ago I’d hug them back. Now I am aware that I shouldn’t because people might see it wrong. (Jim)

The objects of power – in this case, the coaches – know they are visible and may be being observed, even though the institutional authority itself is invisible: ‘surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action’ (Foucault, 1977, p.201). Aware of this relentless observability, the coaches internalise the behaviours considered normative in a competitive youth swimming context – standards drawn in this case from child safety discourses – and behave accordingly. They monitor their own behaviour and practise surveillance on other coaches to ensure these standards are met.

Most coaches engaged with dominant discourses of child safety that position men as more risky subjects than women:

I think from a coaching point of view parents will look and think “oh that’s a woman, they’re motherly figures, and so they’re alright” but when it’s a male it’s “oh, look where that hand is there” and, you know, “why are they doing that?” (Amanda)

I think there’s more attention, more on men and the way they handle the kids. There’s a lot more pressure. (Jenny)

I think it does make a difference being a man because you’re a bit, erm, more under suspicion ... and people might question why you do it. (Kevin)

I think everybody assumes abuse is a male thing ... I am conscious of that. (Jim)

In a study of primary school teachers in New Zealand, Jones (2004) found teachers of both sexes went to great lengths to make themselves visible in their workplace,
with male teachers especially avoiding being alone with students. In my study, coaches of both sexes discussed the precautions they took to ensure their observability, such as having another adult present. However, the female coaches expressed more concern about being falsely labelled abusive than the males, perhaps because of the unspeakable nature of sexual abuse perpetrated by women (Valios, 2000; Bunting, 2007).

So pervasive is the fear of being falsely accused of sexual abuse that coaches welcomed working in a culture of compulsory visibility:

Some of the older female swimmer might go and give Jim a cuddle. It's one of those instances that could be interpreted as harmless or the wrong thing to do ... and that depends on the circumstances ... and where it’s done. If it’s done on pool where there’s other people watching, then that’s probably OK, that’s probably the right place to do it because everyone can see what you’re doing. (Kevin)

The architecture of swimming pools enable coaches to position themselves as ‘safe’ through direct observation by others. Coaches work in a goldfish bowl; the large open space of the pool is positioned as the central vantage point in the leisure centre, surrounded by several public viewing areas and, at two pools, passers-by can see through the poolside windows. On the poolside, coaches were in view of numerous people – up to eight coaches, poolside helpers and lifeguards worked together on poolside and spectators watched coached sessions from behind glass walls or elevated platforms. The swimming pool is ‘the diagram of a power that acts by means of general visibility’ (Foucault, 1991, p.189-190), its architecture ‘permits an internal, articulated and detailed control – to render visible those who are inside it’ (Foucault, 1991, p.190). This allows exposure to the panoptic gaze of numerous
others, permitting ‘the critical eye of the coach and the other athletes to judge the degree to which [she] had adhered to [her] regime’ (Johns & Johns, 2000, p.227).

Occasions when architecture or public view could not guarantee observability, such as when coaches held private meetings with athletes or supervised closed land training sessions, were a source of particular anxiety for coaches. In such instances, coaches intensified the practice of surveillance for their own safety, going to great lengths to ensure they were perpetually visible. In doing so, coaches exposed further hierarchies between themselves and other swimming stakeholders:

I might be in here [the enclosed land work room] doing chins while other swimmers are in here, but we always make sure that we’ve got a third party present, erm, another adult like a coach or parent. (Steven)

We have teachers in the water with the beginner swimmers and people can be quite nervous about that because parents would’ve said “oh you’re holding my child,” so we make sure we’re transparent about what we’re doing and why and always have another coach around. (Chris)

I always make sure that, erm, if you’re going to be working one on one with a swimmer you have another coach there. Never put yourself in a position really of ... a difficult situation. (Steven)

You don’t ever get in a situation where it’s just you and a swimmer and nobody else about because then you’re opening yourself up to potential allegations ... It’s important that if you’re going to speak to children there’s another coach or parents there. (Chris)

The number of times we’ve been left with a kid, say a parent’s not picked them up for some reason or after a competition and everybody’s gone ... so you’re like I’ll bring them back but we’ve got to watch it and ask another coach “would you mind staying with me?” (Jenny)
In the Panopticon of the swimming pool, the safe coach, like the self-disciplined subject of Bentham’s prison (Foucault, 1977), positions himself or herself in others’ eyes by ensuring another person is present if they cannot avoid being alone with swimmers. Observability has become a normal element of these coaches’ lives. The ASA child protection policy also explicitly links visibility with safe coaches, advising coaches to, ‘Avoid one to one situations with a swimmer except in an unavoidable emergency,’ ‘Make sure you have another adult accompanying you,’ and ‘Get teachers/ coaches/ club officials to work in pairs’ (ASA, 2004, p.15). A good coach, it seems, is an observable coach.

However, the coaches in this study did not consider all external observation equal. They suggested that having another adult, more specifically another coach, present is most desirable, although a parent of a swimmer would suffice if no coach was available; the presence of another athlete was an insufficient safeguard. While it is naïve to suggest that the external gaze of another is automatically neutral and, therefore, safe, it is perhaps understandable that coaches prefer to be observed by their peers. Operating within the same discursive ‘regime of truth’ (Foucault, 1977, p.131), a coach’s understanding of ‘correct’ social conduct with children and young people will be more similar to that of another coach than to those from outside the discipline of coaching (Danaher et al., 2000). Meanwhile, that other children are not considered effective performers of the safe external gaze perhaps stems from the deep-seated notion that children commonly lie about abuse, a legacy of legal discourses that have long defined children as untrustworthy (Hudson, 1992; Bridgeman & Monk, 2000; Brackenridge, 2001).
Coaches desire to have another coach or parent present in order to ensure they are seen to be innocent. The point of another individual’s gaze, therefore, is that there is nothing to see (Jones, 2004). The second individual is there to witness that ‘nothing happened.’ As Jones (2004) notes, however, the witness is also a potential accuser and could see ‘nothing’ as ‘something,’ so even when in public view no coach can be immune from accusation and ‘the spectre of every-[adult]-as-potential abuser ... is always present’ (Jones, 2004, p.58). This tension was evident in coaches’ discussions of instances of parental complaints. For example, coaches at North Eels told of an instance in which a parent accused a coach of physically assaulting a swimmer on the poolside by putting his hand on the boy’s head. The coach was too afraid to perform his duties for several weeks and the other coaches said the incident had made them cautious of using parents as safeguarding ‘witnesses.’ This incident acts a reminder that children are not the only people who may be ‘at risk’ in sporting settings.

Foucault recognised that the efficacy of surveillance lies in its ability to turn the observed subject into the observer. While the coaches practised surveillance on other coaches, primarily those lower in the coaching hierarchy, the possibility of being under constant surveillance prompted them to internalise this gaze. They became auditors of their own behaviour at all times:

A lot of the time you have to be very, very conscious of what you’re doing. I feel that I’m quite a natural coach in terms of my coaching style just occurs and quite often I have to stop and think about what I’m doing. (Steven)

I don’t think I swear a lot or anything like that but I have to just watch it a little bit, when you get frustrated when you’re working with younger kids obviously
sometimes I shout a lot and I’ve got to make sure you don’t say the wrong sort of things because people are there. (John)

As a coach I’ve got to be so careful and I think we try to drum that into coaches here. ... I would never ever get in the water without a T-shirt and I’m always very very conscious of where my hands are. (Amanda)

Child protection is difficult for us. I have to think “should I do that?” all the time. (Jim)

The coaches became and remained the subject of their own surveillance, reflecting the gaze back onto themselves, further increasing its power (Tsang, 2000). They behaved as though they were under constant scrutiny from the normalising panoptic gaze and acted accordingly by engaging in self-disciplinary practices of monitoring their own behaviour (Jones et al., 2005). The coaches policed their own behaviour to ensure any touch could be seen both by themselves and by anyone watching, thus constituting it as innocent.

Conclusion

This paper has identified the ways in which the bodies of swimmers and their coaches are subject to and apply the disciplinary mechanism of surveillance to produce embodied conformity to normative behaviour (Foucault, 1977). The pressures of being under constant surveillance led athletes and their coaches to internalise the ‘panoptic gaze’ (Foucault, 1977) and regulate their behaviours toward accepted standards.

For swimmers, exposed to a discourse of physical preparation that equates compliance with strict training regimes and controlled lifestyles with success, these standards included undertaking frequent and intense training sessions, adhering to
strict lane discipline and, at elite club Central Seals, recording their set times, stroke rate, heart rate, session attendance and weight. Guided by a discourse of physical preparation that encourages such behaviours, the athletes learned to submit to these normalised training protocols and were sculpted into compliant, docile bodies.

The consequences of this for competitive swimming are manifold. Frequent, intensive training such as that propounded in ‘The Swimmer Pathway’ (ASA, 2003) places young athletes at risk of serious short- and long-term physical injury and psychological harm (Micheli, 1990; Donnelly, 1993; Eitzen, 2006). Meanwhile, the pressure to conform to accepted training protocols removes the element of fun that first attracts so many youngsters to sport (Engh, 2002; Eitzen, 2006), resulting in large numbers of young swimmers dropping out of the sport before they reach 18 (Salguero et al., 2003). That these practices, which risk the health, safety and long-term affinity of young people with sport, often are the unquestioned norm rather than the exception is troubling. As Shogan (1999) notes, if we are to truly provide children and young people with a positive environment in which they can enjoy sport and look forward to a long-term future within it, we must:

... encourage an active and ongoing questioning by participants of the ways in which sport discipline “normalises” practices that would otherwise be considered harmful and that produce athletes capable of and willing to engage in these practices.

(Shogan, 1999, p.91)

The findings presented here also have implications for coaches. For many coaches, particularly those working with beginning athletes, touch is an essential part of coaching, a way of showing athletes, say, how to position their hands best to gain maximum propulsion or avoid injury. Yet the potential for touch to be misinterpreted
was powerful enough among the coaches to lead many of them to adopt working practices that they consider to be contrary to their professional knowledge base and to the interests of athletes. The discourse that positions all adults who work with children and young people as suspicious placed considerable strain on coaches of both sexes, prompting them to perform according to the norms dictated by discourses of child safety in order to position themselves as safe. Fearful of being falsely accused of improper behaviour, observability had become a normal element of these coaches’ lives. But the pressures of meeting child-safety standards caused deep anxiety and left coaches feeling resentful, angry and constrained, unable to adopt the more holistic role of pastoral carer that many believe is most beneficial to their athletes. Steven echoed comments made by all coaches in this study in saying:

I just think that the relationship you have now with your swimmer feels a little bit ... coach-swimmer rather than swimmer-mentor like it used to be. You have to be so many things as a coach, particularly in swimming the funding’s not there to have a nutritionist, the funding’s not there to have a physio, the funding’s not there to have a psychologist, so you have to be a nutritionist, a physio, a psychologist, a friend, a role model, so you have to do all those things but you almost sometimes feel like your hands are tied ... and I think that’s a sad thing. (Steven)

An environment in which coaches feel unable to carry out their duties to the best of their abilities and are alienated from the young people for whom they dedicate so much of their time is neither positive for coaches nor for swimming as a whole. The majority of coaches are law-abiding, caring individuals who dedicate vast amounts of time to the sport they love for little or no remuneration. Yet working in an environment where they are under constant scrutiny and suspicion could prompt good coaches to leave the sport, while still others could be discouraged from getting
involved in the first place. This could prove disastrous for the future of swimming at all levels. Yet there is perhaps an even sadder potential consequence for coaches – that of denying adults and children one of the most fulfilling, rewarding relationships available: that between a coach and an athlete (Fox, 2007).

Notes
(1) In both cases, the consent of a parent or guardian was gained before swimmers were videotaped.
(2) Aquamark is the ASA’s equivalent of Charter Mark for swimming teaching lesson programmes.

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References


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