

Swimming in a National Setting for the first time - Connor Oates

Planning and striving for recognition at a National level had gone on since August 2009 - that had been the prime objective and target through out the year. On past performances the most likely target was to be the 200 Breaststroke with the 100 as a real possibility. Connor used various Open Meets to measure his progress and re-align his aims and objectives. These results went more or less to plan and with Ray Kearsley, the coach, doing some professional tweaking Connor continued to move forward taking the age group titles at the County Age Groups and Championships. That was an achievement in itself but the times obtained gave Connor access to the Regional Championships at Coventry, the next step on his way to the National Championships at Sheffield. Though beaten by a fingernail touch at Coventry in the final of the 200 breaststroke the time swum was a 50 metre qualifying time for Nationals and so this was mission accomplished. Look out Sheffield here we come, what's the next part of the plan.

Ray, our coach, knew what he wanted and set a programme running May to August to have a Haden Hill swimmer excelling on a national stage. This was the hard bit, no sessions to be missed, a minimum of distraction and total commitment. We came through with a swimmer giving every ounce of his strength locally whilst constantly keeping his eye open to see what was happening in the broader picture. The weeks and days were counted down until suddenly July 30th arrived and training at Haden hill was finished and on Sunday 1st August we left for the National Arena at Ponds Forge. We were constantly told this was a setting we would enjoy and it had a reputation for being a setting where fast times were created

Accommodation had been booked weeks ago and so we were eagerly looking forward to registering and then going to look at the pool. Bags were emptied across the floor of our room and a double check was made on swimming attire to make sure nothing had been left at home. Then we set off to find this pool that everyone said was so creative and offered so much positive support. In the centre of the town with trams, buses, cars and the motorway close by we suddenly found ourselves confronted by a grey concrete frontage, a huge patio and athletes of all descriptions passing determinedly too and fro. We opened the doors and there before us were information desks of all types, merchandising areas and of course food and refreshment in a hall larger than our pool area at Haden Hill. The peculiar bit was that we could find no access to the pool until we were directed to some blue doors at the back of the foyer. Through these doors and the noise level fell away and there were more corridors to follow. Suddenly there before us was the Ponds Forge Pool. It looked massive with lane ropes set out, chairs at the end of the pool and empty, but lit, administration areas. We all looked at each other as the excitement mounted and the challenge was there to be faced. Coventry we knew as a 50 metre setting but this looked massive and a totally different challenge. Connor was yearning to test the water and the feel of the pool but there was no swimmer access on Sunday and that would have to wait until Monday when Ray would be there as well. There was an eerie quietness about the place until suddenly we

became aware of some solid sounding ball game being played and as we got to the end of the pool we saw another 25metre pool with the men of the England GB water polo team trying to do serious damage to each other in training exercises or catching the ball come to them at a ridiculous speed. Can you believe these men mountains could duck and dive and legally abuse each other whilst their coach stood on the side and urged them on. If this is what Ponds Forge is for to show strength, power, commitment and a willingness to challenge an opponent then here's the mind set and it looks like the swimming will be in a different league. We left with a new determination to compete and a realisation that no quarter would be asked or given. If you think you have made it Connor it's up to you to prove it. Go home rest up and dream about what you have set yourself and how you will achieve it.

Monday morning we rose slowly and had a late brunch so that Connor would be in a fit state to work in the pool with Ray on Monday afternoon. Monday was an orientation day looking at changing facilities, the warm up pool, seating areas, the position of the coach on the poolside and a realisation that there were some determined, capable bodies turning water over to create space where they could swim fast and easily and crash in and out of turns at unbelievable speed. If the water polo players had set one standard yesterday, the swimmers confirmed that today. There was no place for temerity, get in, claim your spot and swim to maintain your spot. Ray had Connor in the water for an hour and at the end of it he had an even clearer picture of why he was here and a need for Connor to sharpen his race plan. There was a tingle within each of us as now we were to be put to the test. Now it was a case of eat, rest up and meet Ray at 9.30am on Tuesday for a warm up and a swim at approximately 11.15. The excitement of the day hit each of us hard in different ways and we were in bed early and slept a good nights sleep. Tuesday would come round soon enough.

The morning came and we each looked at each other, as this was what we had worked for. A late breakfast, check the bags and have you really got your passport safe Connor. Anyone called to doping control had to produce a passport as a means of identification. We arrived at the door and knew we had about half a mile to cover to get to the pool. Connor asked to walk so he filled his lungs with fresh air and got his limbs moving. It was a pleasant dry morning and so walking was a good option. The nearer we got to the pool the more we were surrounded by swimmers and coaches in their tracksuits with large logos and badges of distinction. We moved amongst them with our Haden Hill gear and got some strange looks as they tried to sort out who we were. The foyer was packed, there had already been two events, so there were loads of people around but standing bronzed and tall amongst them all was Ray looking calm and ready to take on the rest of the nation. Ray and Connor had a job to do and the first part of that was to get a feel of the water in the warm up pool. They emerged on the side of the big pool reinforcing what they had agreed earlier. Compared to Sunday when there was hardly a soul in the big pool Tuesday was packed to the rafters. The heat was bearable but the noise soon convinced us that everyone was there like

us and swimmers were being encouraged to draw on every ounce of strength to produce something special. Connor emerged with the rest of his heat maintaining his concentration and seeing who was around him. In the next lane he had James Robinson from the Royal Wolverhampton School but there was no other familiar face and so concentration and application were the key. Pre-race preparation with Connor was a long established practice and helped him get into the "race zone." A call to order was observed and at long last we were racing. A good start was made and everyone tried to stroke the water and pull it through their system. One thing not to do was to panic and Connor did not do that. Those of us watching from the balcony were the ones who could do that as suddenly the reality of ten swimmers with one in each lane was before us. His supporters each had different views and generally we agreed he was going along in either 4th or 5th position. Connor's strength has always been his second hundred and gradually he pulled and powered himself through the water in that critical third length. The hares were in front of him but there was the challenge and gradually he worked his way through the field and hit the wall third fastest in his heat in a time of 2.34.24. Was that good, that was brilliant Connor had submitted a time of 2.36.85 and swum to another personal best 2.51 seconds faster than his submitted time and in a long course setting. Smiles were everywhere on the faces of his supporters and the congratulations shared by Ray and Connor were of the strongest type as they had both seen the culmination of a years commitment and planning. They shared each others excitement and were thrilled with the outcome.

We all met again in the foyer and each tried to find different ways of expressing their joy and satisfaction. We sat at a table and continued to find ways of expressing our joy and excitement at the outcome. In the end we decided the day must go on and we all took our different paths home. Ray walked away prouder, taller and a very contented man. The rest of us had a leisurely stroll back through Sheffield. Conveniently Connor's Uncle Simon lived a few miles out of Sheffield and he left early to prepare a little welcome at his house. Connor had used his strength and his energy and could be seen drifting into his own comfort zone whenever he got chance. He was excited and thrilled by his experience and already planning his return in 2011.

What an introduction to Sheffield we had had but that was now and already plans were being formulated for next year. New routes must be planned so where do we go from here? Train hard and apply yourself Connor know your plan and stick with it.

Written by Connor's father whilst reflecting on their Sheffield experiences 15th August 2010.