

Funding focus blurred

The second excerpt from Ashwin Desai's book *The Race to Transform* takes a look at swimming

FIRST-TIME travellers flying into any major South African city often remark on the little blue swimming pool shapes that dot the gardens of the suburbs, as well as on the dry and barren squatter camps that either sprawl next to these suburbs or climb up the nearby hillsides and dump sites. They are a telling reminder of apartheid's legacy - entrenched inequalities that confront even the best attempts at transformation.

The state of aquatic sport in South Africa today reflects this legacy, with white and middle class people continuing to enjoy representative advantage at both competitive and recreational levels over black and working class people.

Unlike cricket with its Makhaya Ntini and rugby with its Bryan Habana, swimming has not produced its post-apartheid standard-bearer. But the officials managing the national organisation, SwimSA, seem determined to change the status quo.

However, any understanding of the processes of change needs to factor in the nature of this sport.

At present, it is only young people with access to these resources, i.e. attending private or semi-private schools, who can enter the arena of elite competitive swimming, as they generally have access to in-house experienced coaches and high-standard swimming facilities.

This process has been reinforced in the aftermath of the lack of success at the Beijing Olympics in 2008, which only served to heighten to fever pitch the clamour for more resources to be thrown into the production of elite athletes.

The linking of federation funding to the success of these programmes has resulted in federations shifting their focus from investment in mass-based sport to the development of elite black athletes.

Little control

The organisational factors impeding transformation are several. Large numbers of swimming teachers are needed to promote the sport at all levels.

Although SwimSA has trained several hundred such teachers, it has very little control over where these teachers practise their skills - generally in communities that can provide some remuneration for their services. Thus, such teachers are rarely active in poor townships or at schools where they will receive no income.

Facilities and related issues also pose a major threat to transformation. Since 2000 many municipalities have made major investments in the upgrading of existing or the building of new aquatic facilities.

But these initiatives have not been backed up by community participation through the establishment of clubs.

Lack of heating

Other problems faced by established facilities include the lack of heating facilities, which means that pools go unused during winter.

Faced with these sorts of organisational complexities and the need to respond to state pressures to produce internationally competitive black swimmers, the tendency has been to identify potential black athletes and remove them to a facility within an advantaged community under an experienced coach.

This comes about at the expense of investing resources in developing infrastructure within poorer communities, a strategy which, while not likely to produce a national champion immediately, is likely to result in the long-term development of the sport, particularly in terms of coaching skills and a much bigger talent pool of internationally competitive swimmers.

Swimming remains largely an urban sport, since urban municipal-

ities with the necessary resources are more likely to have the capacity to build and maintain facilities.

One hopeful opportunity is the introduction of open-water swimming into the Olympic programme, that provides an ideal opportunity for the development of talent in rural areas, by using the presence of rivers and dams to develop and hone swimming skills. This will address the issue of swimming skills development within rural areas, where more than 80 percent of drownings occur each year.

The production of cheap, portable pools also creates an ideal opportunity for the development of swimming skills among rural residents, and for the identification of potential talent that can be nurtured.

SwimSA's Portapool Project is designed to teach learners to swim and to make the school an important part of community life.

While the immediate result might not be a black Olympic medalist, this programme will impact on national statistics, which reveal that fatalities through drowning are the second-highest cause of accidental death in South Africa. Over 50 percent of these drowning victims are under the age of 15 years

● *The Race to Transform: Sport in post-apartheid South Africa*, Ashwin Desai (ed), is published by HSR Press.

