



Chad Le Clos and Cameron van der Burgh are yet again the standout names at the SA championships in Durban. The new swimmers, with few exceptions, are not coming through; the times are not improving. If we can't keep our swimmers active, what chance do we have, asks **David Isaacson**

TROUBLED WATERS



STILL MR DEPENDABLE: Cameron van der Burgh remains a big star

SOUTH African swimming needs to grow up.

The average age of the country's nine Olympic swimming medallists since readmission in 1992 is 23 years and five months.

For the two women, Penny Heyns and Marianne Kriel, it averages 24 years and two months; the seven men are a year younger.

Yet only 12 women at the senior national championships in Durban this past week were 20 and older. Just three were 23 and older.

The senior men numbered 54. "This is strange for me because in Europe, for example, [the average] age at a national [gala is] 22, 23, 24," said Andrea Di Nino, the Italian coach of Chad Le Clos and Cameron van der Burgh, among the oldest swimmers in action this week.

"How much talent do you [lose]? And why [does] this happen?" Nobody questions the potential of the juniors, but in SA the system is failing to keep most of them after school.

Since the glory days of Heyns and Kriel in 1996 and 2000, SA's female swimmers have failed to qualify for the 2004 and 2016 Games.

At Beijing 2008 three made finals while at London 2012 only one made the top eight.

On current statistics, 14-year-old starlet Rebecca Meder, winner of five golds here, is more likely to fade into oblivion than scale an Olympic

Swimming supply lines grow thin in SA

"It is a problem," admits national coach Graham Hill, who faces a myriad troubles in the sport.

There are too few local universities offering swimming to entice school-leavers.

"I think our problem also lies on our school system." Schools focus on 50m racing in the four strokes, an absurdity because freestyle is the only 50m event at the Olympics.

There's also a serious lack of funding, the result of Swimming SA (SSA) losing a lucrative corporate sponsorship five years ago and the lottery tightening the purse strings a year or so later.

"To be able to put a structure together ... and do camps, it's very difficult without funding."

A lack of cash meant top backstroker Christopher Reid was unable to fly to Durban from his University of Alabama base.

He told the Sunday Times the institution funded its swimmers to

get to one major meet a year, which could have got him here.

But had he qualified for the world championships in Budapest in July, he would have had to contribute to that trip, with partial self-funding now the norm for SSA.

It wasn't feasible for Reid, who must also fund his stay at the university because he's not on a full scholarship.

"I would have to make some financial sacrifices and that could potentially set me back and delay me from getting my degree in April 2018."

Eight swimmers landed A-qualifying times this week — Le Clos (100m & 200m freestyle, 100m & 200m butterfly); Van der Burgh (50m & 100m breaststroke); Myles Brown (200m freestyle); Brad Tandy, Doug Erasmus and Zane Waddell (all 50m freestyle); Brent Szurdoki (1500m freestyle); and 19-year-old Tuks student Tatjana Schoenmaker (200m breaststroke), the sole female.

SSA will accept lesser B-qualifying times for the first time since 2012, targeting swimmers who are young, or female, or black.

"For us to bring a whole new generation through, we've had to go this route," said Hill.

"There is no other way. If we don't, who knows? We might not even have those swimmers hanging around for another three years."

Le Clos approached Di Nino after splitting from long-time mentor Graham Hill last year



FEELING STRONG: Chad Le Clos says he can go another eight years

Pictures: GALLO IMAGES

THE problem with Chad Le Clos is that outside the pool he's been a fish out of water.

His new coach, Italian Andrea Di Nino, believes the dry-land training programme he's put him on will help get him back to winning ways after a disappointing Rio Olympics last year.

"He's a great swimmer, there's no question about it. He's a genetic fish," the 44-year-old mentor said this week at the national championships in Durban where Le Clos delivered strong performances in the 100m and 200m freestyle and 100m and 200m butterfly races.

"But outside the water, he doesn't have the same level that he has in the water."

Di Nino has surrounded Le Clos with a nutritionist who used to work for the Barcelona football club, a biomechanist, a sports psychologist and a dry-land trainer, whose task is to improve what he calls the swimmer's athletic ability.

"Chad doesn't need muscle, Chad needs a stronger core." That will improve his start, turns and underwater swimming in races, he explained.

Le Clos approached Di Nino after splitting from long-time mentor Graham Hill last year

Le Clos getting back into the swing

having surrendered the Olympic 200m butterfly title he had won from Michael Phelps at London 2012 back to the American legend in Brazil.

The South African ended fourth in that race, adding a sour tinge to the two silver medals he won in the 100m butterfly and 200m freestyle to become the country's most decorated Olympic medallist with four gongs.

"He wants to win again," said Di Nino.

"That is the first thing that he told me when we spoke by phone."

Le Clos has failed to improve on his 1min 52.96sec best 200m fly time he set at London 2012.

"Everything is improving — the 100m free, if you look back to

2012, is one-and-a-half seconds quicker; the 200m free is 2.8 seconds quicker, the 100m fly one-and-a-half seconds quicker," said Le Clos.

"It's just the 200m fly I haven't got right yet. I'll be pretty stoked with a [personal best] this year."

Le Clos says Di Nino has got him thinking about the technical aspects of racing.

"I'm thinking a lot more. In training I'm thinking about my technique, thinking about pushing off and getting a good break-out, whereas before I wouldn't."

"Technically, I think I'm a lot better than I was a year ago."

Di Nino's philosophy is based on reducing errors rather than striving for perfection: "I think the key for performance [is] not to make everything perfect because you cannot control everything. But you can try to reduce the mistakes."

Le Clos seems re-energised with his new training programme. "Now I feel I'm young enough to go another eight years for sure, without a doubt," he added, saying he's targeting the 2024 Games.

He'll be 32 then, and hopefully a fish in water.

