



IS COMPETITIVE SPORT STILL APPEALING?

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As an activity which teaches citizenship, sport must always be linked to youth. Sport may produce champions or simply people keen on physical activity, but in both cases, it produces citizens better prepared for life, regardless of the social and economic constraints linked to the job market, family life and the development of every nation.

It is this which constitutes sport's main attraction, its ability to prepare our children for the essential values, which should govern human relations: friendship; solidarity; fair play; respect for others; the celebration of victory and acceptance of defeat; the refusal to cheat; protection of the environment; the pursuit of a goal and definition of a timetable to achieve it; team spirit and many others.

Coaches, educators and parents need to understand this, and encourage their protégés to practise sport. They must help them understand that all physical activity is part of their socialisation and apprenticeship for life.

For our part, those of us who govern sport at the highest level must create the conditions to show our sport in the most entertaining way possible. To do this, we must hold competitions capable of attracting the top stars in our sports, in carefully chosen venues and with a programme that is both simple to understand but also attractive for television and other media.

While it is still essential for our young people to identify with these great stars and great moments, we also need to create competitions aimed specifically at these youngsters. For several years now, the Fédération Internationale de Natation (FINA) has held junior championships in diving, water polo and synchronised swimming, and in 2006 decided to organise junior swimming championships.

These events are of crucial importance in the planning of our 201 National Federations (NFs) worldwide. They encourage training, offer an opportunity to participate to those not yet old enough to face the "seniors", and constitute a superb "observatory" for future champions.

Clubs, associations and federations need to join forces in this scheduling effort and adjust their calendars to this new reality.

Many of you will tell me that these grand words do not take into account one hard reality: the lack of infrastructure around the world.

You are right! In most countries, the leaders' priorities do not yet include sports-related investment. At FINA, we know that, without a pool, our athletes cannot do very much.

And a pool is expensive, requires maintenance and must be profitable. Qualified people are also needed to direct the activities which take place there.

As leaders, it is our responsibility to alert the public authorities to this need and priority. They need to understand that encouraging our young people to practise sport means delivering them from the negative temptations that our societies offer our children.

Furthermore, sport is often linked to education, so a more active population is one with better schooling, more capable of holding the future of a nation in its hands.

For this reason, education, investment and a consistent competition calendar are the three key elements for success.

If all these factors are combined, how can young people not be attracted to our sports? For FINA, what is more beautiful than the elegance of our synchronised swimmers, the acrobatics of our divers, the speed and endurance of our swimmers, or the team spirit of our water polo players? And all that in a fascinating medium: water, the element essential to life!

Let us all fight for this ideal, and the world of tomorrow will certainly be better!