

What Are the Reasons for Wanting/Allowing more Material in Competitive Swimsuits?

Brent S. Rushall, Ph.D., R.Psy.

For the early part of competitive swimming history, swimsuits covered the total body. That persisted, particularly in women, while males evolved to bare the legs and cover the torso. The large amount of fabric used in suits was guided by principles of modesty and custom. [This factor has remained as a FINA Rule to this day.] Over time, competitive swimsuits became briefer, underlining the traditional lore of the sport as being an activity that tests only human factors. Swimmers came to choose the smallest briefest coverage possible. In the early 1990s, the amount of fabric in suits began to increase with the introduction of the “jammer” style of costume. By encouraging (aka bribing through sponsorship) elite swimmers to wear the “larger” suits, manufacturers promoted the idea that swimsuits could affect performance in a positive way and at the same time increased the cost of competitive suits, seemingly in proportion to the amount of material used. The relationships between hypothetical benefits and amount of material related to retail cost escalated dramatically at the turn of the century when full bodysuits were introduced.

When full bodysuits became the norm for competitive swimming, the industry of suit manufacture exploded with many new companies entering the now very lucrative market. The production cost to sale price ratio improved to such an extent that manufacturers intruded into the administrative side of competitive swimming, most noticeably at the national and international levels. The benefits of pre-2008 bodysuits remained solely in the domain of advertising as no science was able to verify any performance improvements in one or more brands of suits. The fact that superior swimmers were used in advertising content served to prolong the “belief” that such suits were performance enhancing; but they were not.

In 2008, newer and/or different materials were used in full-body swimsuits. Such suits definitely assisted performance and the explosion of world-records caught the attention of those inside and outside of the sport. The material of choice eventually appeared to be neoprene. That it would be allowed by FINA and its constituents was surprising because FINA had denied the Australians’ use of it at the Seoul Olympics in 1988. Since then, a considerable number of scientific studies have shown full neoprene wetsuits to increase swimming performances by as much as 7%. The added flotation offered by neoprene was a major factor contributing to performance enhancement, despite such an affect being against the laws of the sport. Other factors (e.g., postural integrity, mass compaction) that contributed in a minor way to performance enhancement were also incorporated into the structures of full bodysuits. As the technology increased, so did the retail cost of such suits. The manufacturers’ “gravity train” was increasing. The intrusion of this technology was sufficient to alarm the majority of competitive swimming participants who at the 2009 FIN Congress required changes in swimsuit composition and size.

In 2010, swimsuit technology was required to return to pre-2008 technologies or their equivalents. The amount of body coverage also was restricted to, at most, “jammers” for males and “backless jammers” for females. Swimsuit manufacturers continued to persist with unsubstantiated (deceptive?) advertising about the performance-enhancing qualities of these non-performance enhancing suits and technologies. Unsubstantiated claims are used to maintain the retail cost of competitive swimming suits at exorbitant levels. Those claims are accompanied by images of the best swimmers in the world wearing the garments. The first of two major current

principles of swimsuit marketing is governed by the advertising claims and pictured superior swimmers. It is, the greater the number of manufacturer claims, the greater will be the retail price of a competitive swimsuit. One might also wish to add a sub-principle to this in that if elite/famous swimmers appear in advertisements and wear suits in competitions they must be the best and most beneficial available. That is a very powerful marketing strategy – the use of celebrities always produces better sales.

While the 2009 FINA congress required the change back to pre-2008 technologies, the possibly ill-advised decision of to allow “jammer” styles still allowed the amount of material in a suit to vary. While scientific testing of the post-2009 suits is supported by FINA and guarantees that no performance enhancement is possible through the materials used, the ratio of retail cost to amount of material in a suit is still maintained. That constitutes the second of the two major principles of swimsuit marketing: The greater the amount of material, the greater will be the retail price. Thus, manufacturers almost universally promote “jammer” suits over briefs, despite a good case being made for briefs being better than the alternatives for performance. In some nations, manufacturers have seemed to have colluded and only make costly “jammers” available, thereby illegally restricting fair trade and choice.

By and large, the naïve swimming market opts for the promotions of manufacturers and the restricted availability of only “jammer”-style suits and pays the exorbitant retail prices demanded for them. A wise parent or swimmer would opt to use brief suits if the cost-benefit ratio was to be considered. As it stands at present, the swimming community is being sold a “bill of false goods” and buying it.

There are other factors that lead to the fascination and acceptance of a large-area swimsuit as being the competitive suit of choice. The placebo effect, negative self-fulfilling prophecy, and the development of superstitious behaviors are some of those factors that lead to the very common purchasing actions.

The next gravy-train-step for manufacturers would be to have FINA allow a further increase in the amount of material involved in competitive swimsuits. The coverage of the torso in males would be one possibility. That would allow the amount of material used to support an increase in retail price, although it is highly likely that such greater amounts of non-performance-enhancing material would serve to slow performance rather than assist it.

Competitive swimsuit manufacturers will not go quietly despite the overwhelming rebuke offered by the 2009 FINA Congress in wanting the performance-enhancing factors of swimsuits removed from the sport. They have tasted the profit-“gravy” once and will want it again. It is highly likely, that in the future manufacturers will promote to FINA incremental reintroductions of the volume of swimsuit fabrics that are allowable, and seek the introduction of factors that will reduce the natural obstacles that exist when humans attempt to progress through the water using their species-specific talents and attributes.

Anyone who thinks that the swimsuit situation is now stable, is mistaken. There is too much money that can be made by manipulating the rules of the sport that will justify changes in and increasingly greater retail prices for competitive swimsuits.

Spring Valley, California

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