

Ellesmere College Titans – Club Visit 2018

Ellesmere College Titans started as a swimming programme in 2008 when John Pardoe started coaching his son Hector, who coincidentally, is still in the programme and has just qualified for the European Junior OW Championships, European Senior OW Championships and the World Junior OW Championships. At the time, they had zero National qualifiers.

Ten years later and in the past 2 years, Ellesmere College Titans have had 12 swimmers on International teams, spanning the European Youth Olympics, European Junior Championships, World Junior Championships, European Senior Championships and Commonwealth Games, as well as European and World Open Water events. Swimmers from Ellesmere have also won a variety of medals of all colours across each of those championships.

Alan Bircher is the Head Coach and Director of Swimming at the programme. There are around 80 swimmers across the 4 squads – National squad, Age Performance squad, Age Development squad and Sprint group. These squads work out of two training sites. A 4 lane 25m pool at the school and also a 5 lane 25yrs pool at a local school around 10 mins drive away. In 2016 Alan bought in two additional members to add to the coaching team and help expand the squads at that time. Marc Foster (previously at Royal Wolverhampton School) came in as the Head of Age Performance and Danny Proffitt (previously at Newmarket SC and West Suffolk SC) took up the role of Development Coach and head of the Sprint programme.

The National squad, under Alan's direction train up to 9 times a week in the water, with 4 1-hour land sessions available to them. Marc leads the Age Performance swimmers who train up to 8 sessions a week, with 4 x 1-hour land sessions available. Age Development squad, coached by Danny, have 7 pool sessions available to them with and the Sprint squad (also coached by Danny) having 6 pool sessions a week, with 4 x 1-hour land sessions.

Unlike most club programmes, the Titans have unlimited access to the pool as and when they require it and can dictate the water time both on site and at the local school pool – where they also have a Learn to Swim programme run by Steffi Bircher (ex-World Open Water swimmer and Alan's wife). The squads are predominantly made up of Ellesmere College swimmers, but there are also swimmers from the local area involved in the team as well as 'post-grad' swimmers who have finished at the school, but who train with the squads and work as part time swim teachers to enable them to stay living in the area.

Walking into the Ellesmere College 4 lane 25m pool, it simply shows you what can be achieved by having a tank of water. It isn't a 50m pool, only allows for around 18 – 20 swimmers per squad, meaning no more than 5 swimmers per lane and 1 coach for each squad and is a quite unremarkable oversized greenhouse. The team don't often do any form of long course training each season, outside of their annual training camp abroad (for the past few seasons, they have been out to Club La Santa in Lanzarote). There are signs and posters everywhere reminding swimmers of what the club has achieved so far and of targets for the future – e.g. signage for the 3 Olympic Games destinations. It even made me want to get in the pool at one point and have a swim! It really does show what can be done when

you find the right balance between coaches, the implementation of a training plan and the right group of athletes who come together to form a winning culture on a daily basis both in the training and competition pool.

The swimmers came across as self-motivated (although all coaches have a great rapport with the swimmers in their squads, with the occasional banter between swimming sets) and self-disciplined. My first session was on a Friday morning, where the swimmers were training in the water from 6:30am. By around 5:50am, the National squad swimmers were arriving ready to carry out a land warm up under no supervision. All swimmers were there by 6:00am, which allowed for around 20 – 30 minutes pre-pool work before the start of their first session which was an AT (anaerobic threshold) set. The swimmers were split into Freestyle and IM groups and the set worked well across the pool, with a number of swimmers executing great skills and technique throughout the set – especially under fatigue towards the end of the set, with pointers being called out to individual swimmers by Alan. Post session, the swimmers stretched and then headed off for breakfast and school.

During the day, the coaches have an office which is 10 steps away from the poolside area. This is where they spend their time having coach meetings or carrying out their admin work that we all know coaches love!

The evening gave me a chance to witness Marc coaching the Age Performance squad, prior to him leaving for a National Stroke Camp that weekend. The swimmers were working on a short rest freestyle set based around 100m swims, aiming to hold skills and technique across the set over a variety of turn-around times. The swimmers had a good amount of space within their lanes for this particular session and they put a focus on their #1 stroke towards the end of the session, with Marc picking up on areas for improvement throughout the session with the individual swimmers.

The National squad were then back in, ready to step up and perform with a best effort required in the main set of either 6 x 100 Free OR 8 x 100 IM (2 x each stroke) from the blocks. These were swum in waves, with the swimmers going off around 5 – 6 minutes for each swim and posting some fast and for the most part even times (freestyle and in the IM pairs).

The final session that I got to watch was led by Danny and combined the Age Performance and Sprint squads. This session was geared around HVOs (high velocity overloads) and incorporated some land exercises (squads / press ups etc) in between the sets. It was great to see Danny leading the session, having started on his coaching career only 2.5 years earlier, having a good relationship with the swimmers and control over the session. The swimmers followed this up with a land session.

It was a unique weekend for a club visit, as the school had an open day on the Saturday, where the Titans run a skills clinic led by an Olympian – this time around being Amy Smith. She worked on Freestyle technique, turns and starts with the swimmers. At the same time, Alan gave a presentation to the parents about the Titans programme now, what it has achieved and where they want to take it in the coming years.

A big thanks to Alan, Marc and Danny for allowing me to visit, have access to their sessions and being very open and honest during my visit.

For more information on the Titans programme, please visit their website:

<http://ellesmerecollegetitans.co.uk/>

Dan Pilbrow

Head Coach – West Suffolk Swimming Club

