

RON AITKEN

BY MICHAEL J. STOTT

With Sandpipers of Nevada, Ron Aitken has produced an Olympian and numerous national-level performers, all while teaching them to love open water swimming.

Q. SWIMMING WORLD: You have had many coaching influences.

A. Coach Ron Aitken: Charlie Powell and Steve Baxter had the greatest impact on my personal swimming and coaching career. When I was a child, Powell made the sport enjoyable and exciting. He knew exactly how to inspire fast swimming in each individual. He was a postman by profession and came to the pool every day with a high energy. He inspired us to be big fish, carrying us from a recreational program to AAU and then USA Swimming.

Steve Baxter was my high school coach and club coach when I was in college. His personality was one of fun, yet getting down to business. He consistently challenged us to work hard and feel proud conquering difficult sets. He gave me a nickname that grounded and reminded me to enjoy swimming. Steve created an environment of excellence, fun and a get-the-job-done attitude that I have taken to Sandpipers of Nevada.

SW: What led you into coaching?

RA: I attended UNLV on a swimming scholarship. My goal was to earn a degree and own a business. I finished swimming in 1990 and was doing well in the hotel industry when a former swimmer contacted me about coaching. I was given an 8-and-under group. I learned that if swim practices weren't fun, swimmers wouldn't show up. It taught me the need to make practices entertaining and productive.

SW: Why UNLV?

RA: UNLV and Cal State Bakersfield were the only two post-secondary institutions knocking on my door. My family and I were neither prepared—nor knowledgeable—about college recruiting and how to reach out to additional schools. Now I help all of our families understand the recruiting ins and outs. UNLV was the best financial option for my family.

SW: How have you grown Sandpipers from 60 to more than 400 swimmers?

RA: It's been our biggest challenge and a long story with many ups and downs. In 1994, I was the 8-and-under coach. For two years, the club continued to lose kids to Las Vegas Gold, the city's premier club that once employed 2016 Olympic coaches David Marsh and Bob Bowman.

Because our head coach routinely missed practices, I found myself coaching all groups on various days. In 1996, I became the head coach. In 1997, Ramzy Ladah became the Sandpipers' first junior national swimmer, which started a 10-year run that took us from 12th to first (2004) at the Nevada State Championships.

Sandpipers won three more state championships in 2011, 2012 and 2013. For facilities, we use the Desert Breeze Aquatic Center and other local pools, and have a great staff and supportive families.

SW: You have had Olympic Trials qualifiers in every stroke and distance. How do you coach that range of swimmers so effectively?

RA: This was a chip-on-my-shoulder for years. I didn't want to be labeled as just a breaststroke coach, distance coach or whatever. I coach what is in front of me at that time. Early on, I had swimmers great at the breaststroke, then great ones in the 200 fly, 100 fly and so on.

Each season brings a different set of athletes into my training group. They all train for the 400 IM, no matter what; they all train for distance freestyle; they all train for their specialty stroke(s) and events, and they work on every stroke and every speed. I balance some swimmers more on their specialties when needed, but their foundation is the 400 IM and distance freestyle.

Working on the 400 IM gives swimmers the opportunity to work all strokes. The distance freestyle training gives swimmers the strength, endurance and heart they need in all races. I believe that specializing in



[PHOTO BY DANIELLE BASILIO]

Coach Ron Aitken

Head Coach and CEO
Sandpipers of Nevada
Las Vegas, Nevada

- University of Nevada, Las Vegas, B.A., B.S., business management, '92
- USA Swimming Top 16 in 200 breaststroke
- Two-time NISCA All-American
- Four-year scholarship athlete and senior team captain at UNLV
- Level 5 ASCA coach, Award of Excellence winner
- Coached multiple U.S. national junior team members every year since 2009
- Produced Olympic Trials qualifiers in 2000, 2008, 2012 and 2016, with qualifiers in every event from the 50 to the 1500 free and all strokes, 200 IM and 400 IM
- 2016 USA Swimming Development Coach of the Year
- His Bishop Gorman High School teams won a record five straight Nevada state championships
- Head coach, Team USA, 2016 World Junior Open Water Championships (Hoorn, Netherlands)

Coach Aitken's Sandpipers have been four-time Speedo Sectional and Nevada State Club team champions while finishing second six times. The team has been five-time Southern California Winter Age Group champions, and Aitken is a five-time Southern Nevada Swim Coaches Association Coach of the Year.

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HOW THEY TRAIN:

ERICA SULLIVAN AND BRENNAN GRAVLEY

BY MICHAEL J. STOTT



Erica Sullivan and Brennan Gravley

ERICA SULLIVAN

Formerly a Top 10 USA distance swimmer in the girls 11-12 age group, high school junior Erica Sullivan remains a potent distance competitor. Ranked by College Swimming as the top female in Nevada and 19th in the country with a 1.78 power index, she is a national junior team member and Junior Pan Pac and Olympic Trials veteran. As a 15-year-old at last summer's Trials, the 5-7, 134-pound dynamo finished 27th in the 400 (4:14.54) and 12th in the 800 meter freestyles (8:38.94).

[PHOTOGRAPHY BY JUANA ANDERSON]

PROGRESSION OF TIMES BRENNAN GRAVLEY

SCY	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
1000 Free	10:35.31	10:16.17	9:55.40	9:32.48	9:28.97	9:11.88
1500 Free	18:12.17	17:31.06	16:52.53	16:25.66	15:52.14	—

PROGRESSION OF TIMES ERICA SULLIVAN

SCY	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
200 Free	2:03.74	1:57.16	1:55.60	1:49.90	1:47.43
500 Free	5:22.25	5:06.53	4:52.22	4:43.39	4:39.66
1650 Free	18:33.35	17:39.97	16:29.31	16:02.32	15:47.39
200 Back	2:24.46	2:13.59	2:06.29	2:00.46	1:58.48
200 Fly	2:21.74	2:13.77	2:09.38	2:05.84	2:01.53
400 IM	4:51.23	4:39.37	4:33.77	4:21.76	4:18.00
LC					
200 Free	2:18.96	2:11.23	2:08.77	2:09.33	2:03.33
400 Free	4:50.90	4:35.30	4:25.46	4:18.17	4:10.87
800 Free	10:04.30	9:33.34	9:00.37	8:44.63	8:37.92
1500 Free	19:01.90	18:03.40	17:03.36	16:51.10	16:25.92
200 Fly	2:37.46	2:28.83	2:21.72	2:22.53	2:16.30
400 IM	5:49.34	5:22.20	5:06.53	4:58.84	4:54.03

No stranger to change, she has had eight different coaches in her 10 years as a Sandpiper. "I like her story because she was always left behind when others moved to higher-level training groups," says her coach, Ron Aitken. Sullivan is the current Nevada state high school champion in the 500 yard free (4:47.44), but it is in USA Swimming where she is making a splash.

Last December, she notched SCY times of 1:47.43 in the 200 free, 4:39.66 in the 500 and 15:47.39 in the 1650. Her winter 9:29.91 in the 1000 broke the Southern California Swimming LSC record held by Tiffany Cohen from 1983. Her best 500 and 1650 times put her dangerously close to the SCS LSC records held by Janet Evans (4:37.30) and Cohen (15:46.54).

"Erica has the ability to get her game face on for practices, and she also knows how to have fun. She can make adjustments in sets and can fix technique and stroke counts during sets," says Aitken. "She swims more laps with purpose than a majority of athletes I have coached. She is one of very few athletes who has a vision of where she wants to go, and she works hard to get there, though she keeps her goals pretty much to herself. When impressive in the water at practice, she clearly has her mind on the target," says Aitken.

Following is a Sandpiper long course practice that Sullivan uses to focus on stroke/stroke counts:

3-5 rounds of the following:

- 3 x 100 freestyle on 1:30; holding time (1:14-1:16). Max DPS 36-38 strokes
- 1 x 100 freestyle on 1:30; holding time (1:10-1:06). Max DPS 44-46 strokes

Coach Aitken: "Her stroke is high—often 50 per lap—and we want to keep the rate up while improving the number of strokes taken without losing the rate."

2-3 rounds of the following:

- 6 x 100 freestyle on 1:30, followed by a 400 freestyle for time.

Coach Aitken: "On the 6 x 100 freestyle, Sullivan concentrates on descending time while trying to maintain a consistent stroke count. The 400 free is FAST AS POSSIBLE. Last summer, she made her move by going 4:40s in practice down to 4:28s."

BRENNAN GRAVLEY

Brennan Gravley, 16, is a big-time talent in a small frame—standing 5-4 and weighing 134 pounds. As an 11-year-old, he ranked sixth in the nation in the 1000 yard free. At 12, he stood fourth in the 800 meter free (9:11.01) and second in the 1500 with a SCS record time of 17:31.06.

His most recent success came in the 1000 at the Lakeside Stampede Meet in Lewisville, Texas, where he posted a 9:11.88, splitting the 500s in 4:35 and 4:36. A high school junior, Gravley has had five different coaches in 10 years. Unlike teammate Sullivan, "He has always been swimming at the top of each group and has been the hardest worker," says Coach Aitken.

"Brennan has been the pint-sized guy who conquers the battles swimming against giants. It's always exciting to watch him step up against 6-2 swimmers and race them head-to-head. Brennan is loud and can be an over-the-top motivator in practice, and his energy keeps the group sharp and aggressive during sets," says Aitken.

From 2015 to 2016, Gravley dropped his 1500 time from a 16:25 to 15:52, just missing the Olympic Trials cut of 15:49. "Brennan is looking forward to trying to make the open water junior team this May," says Aitken. "I think his size, energy and love for NASCAR gives him a big advantage in open water. He was just short of making the cut for open water nationals last summer. I look forward to watching him develop, as he is just now starting to reach elite levels." ♦

only one stroke or event can weaken athlete performances and the ability to be tough in races requiring a wide range of skills.

I'm sure I could take one athlete, focus on one event and see faster times, but that doesn't give the athlete the ability to compete in multiple races, which would offer more to college teams. Further, when coaching young kids, they may be a back-stroker for a year or two, but then excel in butterfly or the IM.

SW: What inspiration do your Olympic Trials athletes and national junior team swimmers provide to other team members?

RA: It says becoming a national team member is possible if you do work and follow the program. Having Cody Miller come home to Las Vegas to visit, as well as having Erica Sullivan, Erin Emery, Logan Houck and others on deck and in the water, conveys a clear message that the opportunity is here and that success is reachable.

SW: What benefits accrue by earning USA Swimming Gold Medal Club status?

RA: Gold Medal Status provides grant dollars and funding for new equipment that we use to improve our program and performance.

SW: What percentage of your boys and girls teams at Bishop Gorman are made up of USA swimmers?

RA: Twenty-five percent of the kids currently swim on club teams, 25 percent formerly swam club, and 50 percent have never been on a club team.

SW: You love open water swimming.

RA: Open water provides a natural reward with unique swimming locations and events that are usually finished by noon. Swimmers have the rest of the day to tour or relax. Open water swimmers work hard. I like being around that type of athlete—a swimmer must train and prepare for open water. I also like the race strategies involved.

SW: Why drag them to Florida every year since 2010 for the U.S. Open Water National Championships?

RA: We don't have to drag our swimmers to Florida. They love it! We usually fly into Fort Lauderdale. Most of our swimmers have only seen the Pacific Ocean. They love the beach, so when someone makes an open water team, they are eager to travel! We are attending the Open Water Festival in Miramar, Fla. this year as a tune-up race going into nationals, which will be held at Castaic

Lake in California.

Open water has been an avenue to making USA junior travel and national junior team rosters. We are hoping to have swimmers make the national team this summer. Our athletes have traveled to Hungary, Amsterdam and Maui, among other places, because of open water. ♦

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Coach Ron Aitken.

Michael J. Stott is an ASCA Level 5 coach whose Collegiate School (Richmond, Va.) teams have won nine state high school championships. He has been named a 2017 recipient of NISCA's Outstanding Service Award.

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