

Why Are People Saying All Those Nasty Things About A Nice Irish Girl Like Michelle Smith?

By Phillip Whitten

Photo by Tim Morse

One of the great stories to come out of the Olympic swimming competition was the success of the "little" countries.

Though the United States won all six relays and dominated the medal count, and traditional powers such as Germany, Russia and Australia did well, swimmers from Belgium, South Africa, New Zealand, Costa Rica and Ireland also struck gold. Hungary, another small nation—but one that has a long history of Olympic swimming success—also did extremely well, winning three gold medals. Other countries—among them Israel, the Bahamas and Barbados—placed swimmers in the finals for the first time ever.

International parity is now a fact of life—and one that should be celebrated. It bodes well for the future of our sport.

The one discordant note in this symphony of swimming success has been the accusations of doping leveled against Ireland's unheralded Michelle Smith, a one-woman Irish wrecking crew who took three gold medals and one bronze back to her exuberant countrymen on the Emerald Isle. Smith and her supporters fired back, claiming that Americans and others who were accusing the wee Irish lass of doping were jealous or did not want to see swimmers from small nations succeed. Even President Bill Clinton got into the act, likening the charges hurled against Smith to the accusations political opponents have made against him.

But Smith and her supporters are wrong in arguing that suspicions and charges of doping are motivated by nationalism, jealousy, racism, anti-Irish feelings, anti-small nations feelings or disappointment that Janet Evans was knocked out of the final by Smith in the 400 free.



Due to time restraints, the electronic media are not suited to detailed, sophisticated, subtle discussion. So lost in all of the hype, hysteria, hullabaloo and sound bites were the *reasons* why swimming experts are suspicious of Smith's success. Here's why:

Though swimming is perceived as relatively "clean," our experience with East Germany throughout the '70s and '80s and

China in the '90s has left a climate of suspicion. It's a climate in which virtually every breakthrough swim, every world record seems to invite whispers, if not accusations, of doping. The result is that swimmers who achieve success from years of dedication and hard work are unable to enjoy their success fully. It is a sad state of affairs. But the solution is not to attack those who raise

questions of doping; it is to take whatever measures are necessary to make our sport clean again.

If Michelle Smith achieved her success legitimately, she deserves all the credit in the world, and it's a shame that the legacy of the cynical East German and Chinese regimes has cast a shadow on what should be her unfettered joy.

One thing critics point to is Smith's age: 26. Not exactly "ancient" in the real world, but quite old for a woman who has been competing at the international level for almost a decade to suddenly begin dropping her times like a 10 and under hotshot. In fact, it is unprecedented.

To most of the media in Atlanta, Michelle Smith was a complete unknown. But, she was well known to *Swimming World*. She competed in college in the U.S., swam at several USS and Canadian clubs and was always recognized as a hard worker. She swam at both the 1988 and '92 Olympic Games, coming in near the bot-

tom of the heap. Then, all of a sudden, lightning seemed to strike.

Take, for example, her 400 IM—one of the events she won in Atlanta. Between 1991 and 1993, she was remarkably consistent, swimming between 4:57 and 4:59 in her biggest meets. Then, in 1994, she dropped her time to 4:49—a very big improvement. The next year, at 25, she swam 4:42. This year, she went 4:39.18 to become Olympic champion and rank first in the world.

In the 400 free—another gold medal event for Smith in Atlanta—she had never broken 4:26 (the Irish record) until this year. Then, a few weeks before the Games, she went 4:08.86. In Atlanta, she swam 4:07.25. A 19-second drop in one year!

Contrary to what Smith claims, it is not just American writers, athletes and coaches who question the legitimacy of her achievements. At least three members of her own Irish national team have told *Swimming World* they believe she was using performance-enhancing drugs, and one, butterflyer Donncha Redmond, even took to the internet last Aug. 5 to proclaim his suspicions. Recently, some of the most respected sports journalists in Ireland—including Paul Howard, Paul Kiernegne and Eamon Dunphy—have publicly expressed their very strong doubts.

Smith's emergence from mediocrity coincides *precisely* with the appearance in her life of Erik de Bruin. At the end of 1993, de Bruin became her coach. Last year, he became her husband as well.

De Bruin is a Dutch discus thrower who was banned from competition for four years after testing positive for steroids. The Netherlands is also a nation that has seen several of its top cyclists die from overdoses of erythropoietin (EPO). Bioengineered EPO—illegal under IOC rules—is given to an athlete to increase the oxygen carrying capacity of his or her red blood cells. It is used by endurance athletes such as cyclists to increase their endurance. Though EPO is thought to be undetectable, actually it is not. Just as critics pointed to the success of Chinese swimmers in the strength and sprint events—signs of steroid use—so,

too, do they point to Smith's success in the endurance events—200 and 400 free, 200 fly, 200 and 400 IM—as suggestive of EPO.

De Bruin's career had been lackluster until he flew to the Caribbean to train under Ben Johnson's coach. Johnson, you will recall, was the Canadian sprinter who ran a superhuman 100 meters (9.79) at the 1988 Olympics before he was stripped of his medal after testing positive for steroids. When de Bruin returned from the Caribbean, he was much stronger and vastly improved, placing second in the discus at the European Championships. In 1993, just before the World Championships, he tested positive for steroids and was banned. In 1995, the ban was upheld.

De Bruin's attitude about performance-

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—Erik de Bruin, coach and husband of Michelle Smith

enhancing drugs is instructive. In a 1993 interview with the Dutch newspaper *De Volkskrant*, brought to light recently by Paul Howard in the Dublin *Sunday Tribune*, de Bruin said he admired Ben Johnson. "For me, Ben Johnson will always be *the* athlete of Seoul," he said. "Why should I care *how* he came about it?"

In the same interview, Smith's husband and coach spoke generally about drugs in sport, saying that drugs were only one of many things that make sport unfair. Athletes do not enter competition on a level playing field, he suggested.

"Who says doping is unethical?" he asked. "Who decides what is ethical? Is politics ethical? Is business ethical? Sport is by definition dishonest. Some people are naturally gifted, others have to work very hard. Some people are not going to make it without extra help."

When we asked Smith what *she* attributes her rapid rise to swimming prominence to, she cited five factors:

1. She says she works hard. Critics grant her this. Smith has *always* worked

hard, though in the past, her hard work produced only mediocre results. Why, suddenly, should the same hard work produce phenomenal results?

2. A change in her diet. Smith says she eats a low-fat diet with equal amounts of protein and carbohydrates. This dietary change, she claims, also accounts for the change in her body composition—which clearly is very low in fat. Critics argue that, at best, dietary changes might account for only a small part of Smith's improvement.

3. She swims long yardage—up to 100,000 meters during some weeks. But, again, Smith has always trained hard. Not only that, but many swimmers train long yardage.

4. She's "swimming smarter, not harder." Sometimes, she says, "my entire workout might be only 400 meters—four 100s with a lot of rest," an apparent contradic-

tion with her previous claim. Significantly, she fails to state what "smarter" means.

5. De Bruin has taught her track and field training techniques, which she says are more effective than swimming training techniques. Once again, however, she refuses to say what these techniques are. De Bruin told me after the Olympics that he *might* reveal his revolutionary training techniques—after the Sydney Olympics. (Yes, that's right—Smith plans to compete in Sydney.)

Though it is theoretically possible, say critics such as Swedish coach Glen Christiansen, that a discus thrower might develop swim training techniques that are far more effective than swimming coaches have ever devised, it seems highly unlikely.

So, to skeptics who, sadly, have been proven right in the past, Smith's phenomenal rise appears to smack of doping. It appears to be a case of two plus two plus two looking awfully like six. The circumstantial evidence is not decisive...but it is very strong.

What do you think?? ■

