

King

In Hong Kong, Grant Hackett and Ian Thorpe turned in King Kong-like performances at the 4th World Short Course Championships.

By Craig Lord

HONG KONG—"We were pretty much mucking around when we split a 1:51," explained Ian Thorpe, referring to a "sedentary" 200 meter split from that bygone era when people lived in villages and world short course records in the 400 meter free stood at a gentle 3:40 pace.

But at the 4th World Short Course Championships, April 1-4, it was time to stop "mucking around." The 16-year-old Thorpe, the only swimmer ever to have broken 3:40, had no choice but to get serious. His national nemesis, 18-year-old newborn "sprinter" Grant Hackett, was ready to race.

The result screamed from the Hong Kong Coliseum clock like cloud-busting spring sunshine—3:35.01—at first, too bright for the eye to take in, like a new dawn. It dawned most savagely on the Thorpedo, who, unfortunately, missed his target despite having sliced 4.18 seconds off his own world record and having finished a knockout seven seconds ahead of the third-place finisher, Italy's Massi Rosolino. The top honor went to Hackett, who finished a full stroke ahead of Thorpe.

The younger of the teenage trailblazers was "disappointed," even though just a day earlier he had consigned another Italian, Giorgio Lamberti, to history with a 1:43.28 world record in the 200 free. But, now, he found himself 63-hundredths slower than Hackett in the 400. It was just a little over a year since Thorpe had defeated Hackett in Perth to become the youngest ever world long course champion at 15.

Thorpe's consolation is that he and Hackett now inhabit a time zone well beyond those trapped in the past. Hackett charted the first 100 meters in 52.40 seconds and touched the wall at 200 meters with a breathtaking 1:47.11.

At that point, Thorpe turned in 1:48.19, three seconds faster than the pace he set on the way to his previous world record of 3:39.82. However, it was still too slow to enable his famous kicking feet to catch Hackett over the closing stages of the race as he had done in Perth. Hackett's 300 split was 2:42.08, and he swam the second half of the race in 1:47.90, a fingernail slower than the last man home in the 200 meter final.

Land of the Rising Sun

The enthusiasm of the Aussie guns had doubtless been triggered from the race before, in which Masami Tanaka, a star among the rising daughters of the Land of the Rising Sun, set a world record of 2:20.22 to win the 200 breast. The Japanese jet finished four seconds ahead of Olympic champion Penny Heyns.

Tanaka, who won all three breaststroke titles (30.80 in the 50 and 1:06.38 in the 100), also played a part in her country's 400 medley relay that became the first female quartet from Japan ever to hold a world relay record. The squad of Mai Nakamura (59.28), Tanaka (1:06.25), Ayari Aoyama (58.45) and Sumika Minamoto (53.64) shaved 11-hundredths off the record set by China in Palma de Majorca in 1993 to win in 3:57.62. The advantage over China came mainly on backstroke and partly on butterfly, though Le Jingyi's 52.19 split remains the fastest ever.

Tanaka, born in Hokkaido on Jan. 5, 1979, declared herself "happy" to have beaten Heyns and Samantha Riley, but said the job was not finished: "Next, I want to beat them in a 50 meter pool. I was very confident I would break the world record," said Tanaka through a translator. A student at Chuo University, Tanaka,

almost 5-5 and weighing only 127 pounds, is coached by Yusuke Takahashi at the JSS Tokyo Swim School.

Nakamura, born in the same year on July 16, 2-1/2 inches taller and weighing 145 pounds, is also at Chuo University, but she has a different coach, Yoshiaki Takemura, at the JSS Nagaoka Swim School. Her victories in the 100 and 200 back with times (58.67 and 2:06.49) close to world records brought Japan's gold medal total to six. That ranked second, just three wins behind Australia (precisely, Australia's men) and two ahead of a much improved British team.

Second Fiddle

The success of the Japanese was so impressive that three titles and a world record apiece for Jenny Thompson and Martina Moravcova played a strange second fiddle.

Thompson, in the midst of pre-med school studies, slipped up only once in her five events, losing the 50 free to Holland's Inge de Bruijn (24.35). The American lowered her national 100 free record twice, settling for a win in 53.24, the second fastest ever behind Le's 53.01 from 1993. She also took the 50 and 100 butterfly titles (26.18 and 57.65) in close contests with Swedes Anna-Karin Kammerling and Johanna Sjöberg.

But it was the fun swim that produced the best effort. Moravcova, who also won the 200 IM (2:08.55) and 200 free (1:56.11), set a world record of 1:00.35 in the heats of the 100 IM and went on to win the title in 1:00.20,

Kong

Top photo: Grant Hackett • Bottom photo: Ian Thorpe

Background photos by Darrin Braybrook, Sport • The Library



Martina Moravcova

Photo by Eric Schlegel

clearly benefiting from her experience and success in short course yards in the United States.

However, her morning mark stood less than three minutes. Thompson, conscious that she would not race the final in order to concentrate on freestyle, hit back in full measure in the heat after Moravcova's—an astounding 59.30 that caught the photographers napping.

Aussie Giants

Not even that, however, could compete with Hackett and Thorpe. The two swimmers have already suspended studies until after Sydney 2000, conscious of their importance at the helm of an Australian men's team that continues to dominate the world.

Led by the two Aussie giants, Australia set seven of the 16 championship records among the men and came up one shy of capturing half of the 20 events.

Other Australian men who brought home gold for the Green and Gold were Matthew Dunn, who took the 200 and 400 medley titles (1:55.81 and 4:06.05) for the third successive world short course championships; Phil Rogers, who was the class of the 200 breast (2:08.72); and Josh Watson, who topped the 200 back (1:54.67).

Asked about the magnitude of Australia's world record performances in the 200 and 400, Hackett

answered, "Four-point-eight seconds off a world record by Ian Thorpe is a big achievement. We are taking seconds off world records now, and I think we're just going to keep on doing it."

The fierce competition between the two Aussies is a big reason why Hackett feels there'll be faster times to come: "The competition in our country is so intense. It really shows the strength we have."

Hackett, who lives in Mermaid Waters on the Gold Coast in Queensland and has bulked up since Perth, added, "I've learned to focus on myself. I had a 15-year-old (Thorpe) who came along at the World Championships and pipped me. I was overwhelmed by him, and I took him a bit too seriously. Now, I'm focusing on myself and concentrating on executing a perfect swim."

"There's nothing between us. His kick is greater than mine. We'll keep on pushing each other, and it'll be interesting to see where we can go...he's such a phenomenal athlete, you can never underestimate him."

The view is shared by Hackett's coach at the Miami club, Denis Cotterell, who explained that his charge has conquered his fear of Thorpe's devastating kick at the finish of his races: "Thorpe is the best in the business (at strong finishes), but Grant's gone back to his old tactics (of fast starts) because he knows he's stronger. There's no argument, he's (Thorpe) still powerful, but Grant is a courageous swimmer for sure; he's like that in training, too—he pounds himself in training."

"I expect Thorpe to respond in the same way that Grant did. They respect each other, they're good friends and they're taking this to a new level. Ian will be back; if anyone of them relents, they'll lose. They're helping to keep the rest of the world at bay."

Thorpedo on Target

Cotterell's words were backed by Thorpe's 200 free effort, in which the onboard motors at the end of his legs went into turbo drive to ensure he finished a half-second faster than world

long course champion and teammate Michael Klim.

Thorpe modestly thanked everyone after his 200 free world record, but special praise was reserved for Dutchman Pieter van den Hoogenband, who, two lanes over, swam faster than world record pace for 150 meters. By doing so, Thorpe said, "He played right into my hands."

"Feet" would be more accurate—the fountain that floods from Thorpe's thunderous kick is a sight to behold. Teammates have become wise to it



Ian Thorpe

Photo by Darrin Braybrook, Sport • The Library

and admit to using tactics in heats that might qualify them for finals in any lane except the one next to the human turbine. Hackett describes racing next to Thorpe like swimming in a waterfall, while Daniel Kowalski, twice a previous winner of the short course 1500 meter free and third in Hong Kong, likened the experience to surfing in the wash when you miss a wave.

Seemingly unaware and certainly not carried away by the legend that is developing around him, Thorpe merely said, "I'm very honored and very proud to break the world record. It's great for Australia to have both the long and short course records and take an Italian right out of the books."

Hackett True to Form

Just two weeks prior to World Championships, Hackett—known as The Machine to his teammates—had demoted Giorgio Lamberti from the record books when he broke the

Italian's 10-year-old mark in the 200 meter free (long course) with his 1:46.67 in Brisbane. Then he came to Hong Kong, set a world record in the 400 and retained his 1500 title comfortably (14:32.87) over a much-recovered Briton, Graeme Smith.

Cotterell received an early warning that Hackett, who won the 1500 at the long course World Championships in Perth, might find that form again in Hong Kong: "It was when he said he felt better than he had at nationals, and I raised my eyebrows," said the coach before explaining Hackett's burst of speed: "We've worked primarily on the 200 and 400 in his preparation to secure a relay spot. He would have strangled me had I not gotten him on the relay!"

Hackett, however, will have to wait for his relay fame since the Aussie 800 squad was disqualified in the prelims for swimming in the

wrong order! The fans were, therefore, deprived of witnessing what most assuredly would have been another world record as Hackett, Thorpe and Klim, who did not swim in the heats, were rested and ready to join Todd Pearson in the final. Instead, The Netherlands took the event in 7:04.48.

Australia managed a world record in another relay—the 400 medley (3:29.88)—with a team of Matt Welsh (53.34), Phil Rogers (59.47), Michael Klim (50.69) and Chris Fydler (46.38). They also captured the 400 free relay in 3:11.21.

Not Just Australia

Other countries besides Australia represented atop the awards stand for men included Great Britain, Sweden, Cuba, Ukraine and Finland. Britain's James Hickman produced the most comfortable victory among the men—with the exception of the Australian



Grant Hackett

Photo by Darrin Braybrook, Sport • The Library

freestylers. Having finished third in the 100 fly on the second day of competition, the reigning world short course 200 fly champion left little doubt that he is the class of the field over the longer distance in the shorter pool.

"I looked at the psyche sheet before the race and thought, 'I'm the best by far—I ought to win this event even if I'm sick,'" said Hickman after clocking 1:52.71 to finish 1.97 seconds ahead of

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Mark Foster

Photo by Shaun Botterill, Allsport

Japan's Takashi Yamamoto.

Mark Foster, another swimmer from Great Britain, remained the short course sprint king, winning 50 meter titles in both freestyle (21.81) and butterfly (23.61). He is based at the University of Bath, Britain's first lottery-funded center of excellence, but receives his workouts from Dirk Lange, the Hamburg coach of Sandra Volker, winner of the 50 back (27.63) and runner-up to Thompson in the 100 free.

Research conducted by the Olympic testing center in Hamburg concluded in Hong Kong that Foster is the fastest fish off the blocks, covering the first 7.5 meters in 2.18 seconds, a relative dimension ahead of the best of the rest.

Moving up to the 100s, the pattern was similar: Lars Frolander upset Klim twice to win both the freestyle (47.05) and butterfly (51.45) crowns. The Swede's freestyle performance was the second fastest all-time behind Alexander Popov.

Cuba's Rodolfo Falcon captured the 50 and 100 backstrokes (24.34 and 52.44), while Dmytro Kraevskiy of Ukraine won the 50 breast in 27.40 and Sweden's Patrik Isaksson took the 100 breast in 59.69. Finland's Jani Sievinen captured the 100 IM in 54.18.



Yana Klochkova

Photo by Shaun Botterill, Allsport

Winning Women

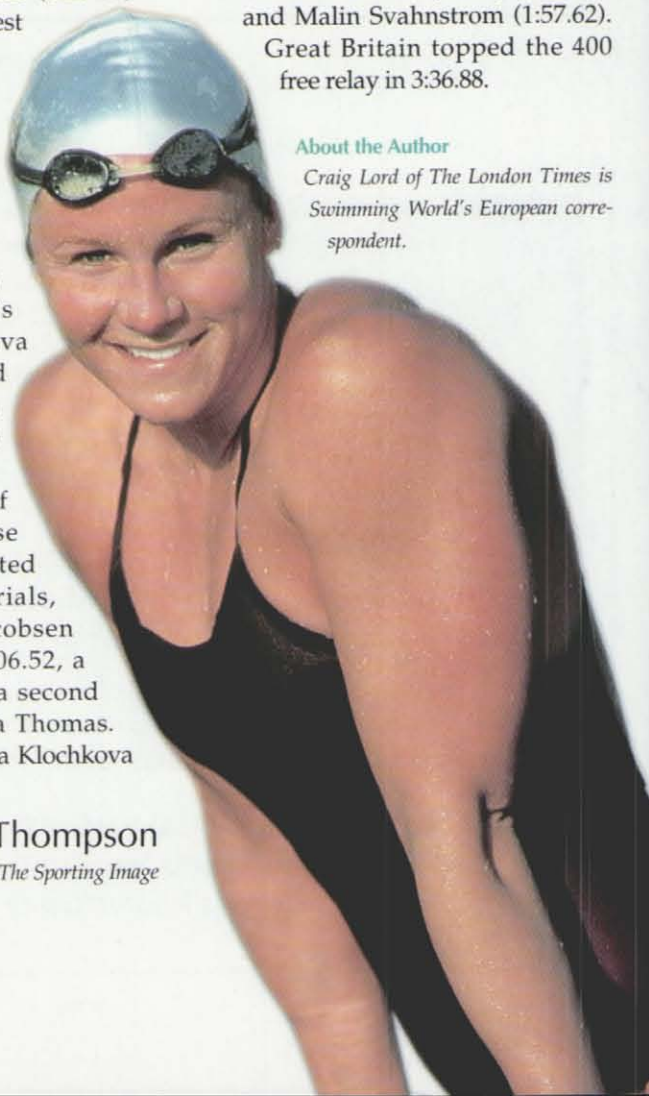
Among the women, the only freestyle championship record went to China's Chen Hua, who was pushed in the 800 to an 8:20.13 victory by Australian Rachel Harris (8:23.36). Chen's time was the best of the decade and fifth fastest time ever behind three East Germans and Sippy Woodhead. Chen didn't fare as well in the 400, suffering the double blow of being defeated by Russia's Nadezhda Chemezova (4:05.23), only to find herself disqualified for a false start under the one-start rule.

In the absence of Susie O'Neill, whose wedding date conflicted with her national trials, Denmark's Mette Jacobsen took the 200 fly in 2:06.52, a mere 1-hundredth of a second ahead of Aussie Petria Thomas. Ukrainian teenager Yana Klochkova

was impressive in the 400 IM, winning in 4:32.32. And even more impressive was Sweden's world record in the 800 free relay with a team of Josefin Lillhage (1:57.80), Louise Johncke (1:59.01), Johanna Sjoberg (1:57.27) and Malin Svahnstrom (1:57.62). Great Britain topped the 400 free relay in 3:36.88.

About the Author

Craig Lord of *The London Times* is *Swimming World's* European correspondent.



Jenny Thompson

Photo by Tony Duffy, *The Sporting Image*