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# Thorpedo Torpedoed

It's the talk of the nation. Everywhere you go—in barber shops, on the train, in hotels, on school buses, at the bank, in Korean grocery stores and, of course, at the pool—it is Topic No. 1. Even the prime minister had to offer his opinion.

The nation: swim-crazed Australia.

The topic: Ian Thorpe's bizarre disqualification in the heats of the men's 400 meter freestyle at the Australian Olympic Trials.

According to eyewitnesses, at the command, "Take your marks!," Thorpe began to roll...and just kept on rolling, as many swimmers used to do before the no-false-start rule in an attempt to get a jump on the field. Then, *plunk!*—he fell in.

Like a nervous 8-year-old in his first meet, Ian Thorpe—the greatest middle distance swimmer in history—lost his balance and fell in.

The world-renowned "Thorpedo"—defending Olympic champion, world record holder, undefeated in this event since he won the world title in 1998 as a precocious 15-year-old, odds-on favorite to repeat in Athens—was unceremoniously dunked.

"Our Thorpie"—he of the size-18 flippers, the most popular personality in Australia, a virtual human marketing machine, invincible—*DQ'ed?*

"Yer out," said the meet referee, as if the Thorpedo were nothing more than a hapless baseball player from Mudville.

Ever dignified, Thorpe quietly retrieved his sweats and left the deck, regrouped and prepared to swim his other events later in the Trials. Oh, his team filed a protest on his behalf, but it was rejected. "The rules apply to everyone," one Australian official commented. "Even Ian."

So the 400 was swum without the

world's greatest 400 meter freestyler. Grant Hackett—the world's second-fastest 400 man, won in a quick 3:43.35, while Craig Stevens took advantage of an undreamed-of opportunity to swim a lifetime best 3:48.08 and grab the second spot.

And then all hell broke loose!

Australia, like the U.S.—but unlike most other countries—has strict, unbendable procedures for qualifying for the nation's Olympic swimming team: you finish first or second at Trials, and you're in; fail to do so, and you're out. No ifs, ands or buts. No politics. No corruption. No exceptions.

Over the years, that policy has produced some anomalies: in 1964, Australia's Murray Rose, the world record holder in the 400 and 1500 meter freestyle, was not selected. In '88, 100 meter fly world record holder Pablo Morales finished third at the U.S. Trials. So he didn't swim the event in Seoul.

Let's face it. The system stinks. But like democracy, it's the worst possible policy—except for all the others. And, though it may not produce the *best* Olympic team, it always produces the *most fairly chosen* team.

Still, many fans—and not just Aussies—would like to see the world's greatest 400-meter freestyler swim his event in Athens. A poll of top U.S. coaches found they believe—overwhelmingly—that Australia would find some loophole to let the Thorpedo swim. Are they cynics or realists?

We'll know soon.

Voice your opinion in the poll on SwimInfo's home page at <http://www.SwimInfo.com>: "Should Ian Thorpe be permitted to swim the 400 free in Athens?"