

The Amazing Race(s) – A Report on the 2012 FINA World Championships in Riccione Italy

By Ron Gray – Referee from Perth, Western Australia

After weeks of planning and numerous emails to FINA's Italian travel company it was finally departure day. In scenes resembling the "Amazing Race" TV show I was due to fly British Airways to Milan and Gail was booked Qantas and on the same flights - but would we be sitting together?

At Perth Airport we were assured that seats together would be possible and we were very pleased to meet up with Warren Cassidy (Fremantle Club) for the flight to Singapore.

In Singapore, Warren surprised us by announcing that he was off to catch a plane to Paris then travelling to Bologna then travelling by car to Riccione. We were booked to Heathrow – Milan and a car trip. Who would get there first?? As it was, due to a couple of minor glitches Warren won the race and he was in the Hotel when we arrived Sunday night.

The Hotel was excellent and convenient for town and the train but 25 minutes walk from the pool complex. After walking there as a trial (and unfortunately getting caught in a rare shower) it was decided that on competition days Warren and I would use the hotel bicycles. This was a journey of approx 10 minutes on roads which were fortunately not very busy.

It was 6 days to the start of the swimming events, so all three of us spent time sight-seeing and relaxing and Warren even found time to go to the pool to watch some Water Polo and Diving. Synchronised Swimming was not quite his "thing".

In majestic weather trips to Venice, Florence, Rimini and San Marino were out of this world. Riccione on its own is a fantastic place and the locals are so friendly and helpful. Some of the meals at our hotel and local restaurants were out of this world.

On the day of the swimming briefing Warren, myself and all the officials received uniforms consisting of 2 white shirts, a baseball cap, a swim bag and swimming cap plus a pair of beige/stone coloured slacks. Sizing proved difficult but once this was sorted we all looked really smart.

At the briefing we were all told that this was the biggest ever swimming event in the World. The figures were amazing, almost unbelievable. 9,800 approx registered swimmers to swim 30,600 swims.

The first day rosters were given out and I was Referee for the 4 hour lunchtime session and as it turned out all my Referee work was to be in the Indoor Pool. Warren was allocated Turns Judge for the early morning sessions plus the evening sessions in the indoor pool every day.

There was a little concern, from all the non Italian Officials, that FINA wanted the Referee one side of the pool and the starter the other but it was pleasing to note that I would be allocated an English speaking young Italian lady as my assistant referee. This proved invaluable.

Day One - Cycled to the pool with Warren arriving 6.30am for a 7.30am start. It seemed as if every competitor was going to the pool by bicycle as there were thousands of these parked outside the venue every day. I gave as much help as possible to Debra, the Italian Referee, who was on the first shift. The Marshalling Area (Call Room) was maybe going to be a problem but I worked with everyone to get the first heat underway at 7.45.

At 12.00 noon my shift started and fortunately there were no dramas and I handed over to Neil the referee from England at 4.00pm, feeling very relieved to get my first session finished and pleased with my contribution.

Day Two - I was Referee for first session from 7.30am to noon. The first heat of 100 men's free was a hoot. All swimmers were over 90 and took an age to get on the blocks. The crowd cheered each of the swimmers as they eventually got there. The last swimmer was so impressed with his cheer that he raised his arms high in the air and promptly overbalanced backwards – thankfully my officials and the timekeeper managed to catch him and prevent him falling. I then did my quickest start ever to get all the swimmers in the water without mishap. Two World Records were set on my shift.

Day Three - Early shift again – no major problems

Day Four - Early Shift again but a big day. 50 metres freestyle. So many swimmers unsteady on the blocks. It became obvious that I had to work on the same side of the pool as the starter. This was cleared with my “FINA overseer” and with the help of a call room that was now becoming very efficient, and an excellent starter in Alastair Currie from Canada we ran 282 heats through in 4.75 hours. This was hard work and very stressful. Thanks to everyone in my team for this amazing session. There was really only one problem when the false start rope fell into the pool – pretty certain an official photographer, or a medical person walked into the support pole but it did not delay us too much.

Day Five – Relay Day – Also my 60th Birthday - 8.30am start (an extra hour in bed was appreciated). The call room was having lots of problems getting teams of swimmers to the blocks on time. Various senior FINA personalities arrived to assist. It was nice to see my wife Gail in the stands and she ended up sitting with swimmers from the Claremont Club. (Nicky Corsbie and Orla Flecker)

Day Six - Another 8.30am start - Pretty uneventful day apart from a World Record being set.

Day Seven - A 9.00am start. I was supposed to be at the first of the Open Water Swims but was requested to continue working at the indoor pool. There were a noticeable number of scratchings today but apart from that it was nice to officiate for another World Record in the 50 backstroke

At 12.30 my pool Refereeing finished for the Championships and I led my Team on a walk to farewell the swimmers and the crowd in the stand. It was obvious our efforts had been appreciated.

Pool Work (Summary)

A majestic seven days of fun, hard work and absolute, full on concentration. I was so lucky to be supported superbly by Sara (my Italian Assistant) and for one day each by Erico and Sylvia. All three were invaluable in translating my needs into Italian so that all the team knew what was required. Sara really was an absolute gem.

My officiating team from around the World all supported me superbly throughout the week and even though most of them were working double shifts they still showed up each morning with a smile on their face and a willingness to help each and every swimmer enjoy their experience.

The predominantly Italian technical team were amazing. It seemed that every time I was ready the clocks were re-set and we had very few timing problems during the whole event

The Call Room, after a tentative start, excelled in the latter part of the week and there were minimal delays in getting swimmers onto the blocks. Well done to all who worked in that area.

There were numerous Italians involved around the pool. The doctors and medics were kept busy, the lifeguards were really attentive at all times and all the timekeepers just appeared almost from nowhere and worked incredibly long shifts which was really appreciated by everyone.

All in all, the potentially difficult task of getting all the events completed in a timely manner was achieved due to excellent teamwork from a team of Worldwide Officials, many of whom have now become very good personal friends.

My Last Day – Open Water Swim

This was the second day of Open Water Swimming as there were so many entries. I was working as a Judge of Turns at the far end of a triangular course. Again pedal power got me to the venue which was approx a 30 minute cycle from my hotel.

A speed boat whisked me out to my post at 8.00am. To my amazement it was a beach paddello with a fun slide attached and much to my surprise I was suddenly on my own in the ocean approx 500 metres from shore. I remained alone on my fun craft for the next 7 hours as 22 waves of swimmers swam towards me rounded the buoy and swam away. Each wave had approx 60 swimmers and each wave was 15 minutes apart. The weather was superb – temperature not too hot and sunny but not scorching. After a week of 100% concentration this was the absolute opposite. I just kept watch on the turn and there were no hints of problems. At 3.00 pm a speed boat appeared as if from nowhere and whisked me back to shore. A quick “no problems” comment to the Chief Referee and my World Champs were finished.

To Conclude:

This was an amazing experience for me. I have already mentioned the help I received from everyone on the Officials side of things.

I really must close by thanking everyone at State, National and FINA level for supporting my application to attend this prestigious event. Throughout my stay I was supported by the FINA Family and all the hotel and transport arrangements worked out superbly. This support was 100% appreciated.

Going back to the theme of the Amazing Race(s) I had the pleasure, in general, of officiating for the more senior swimmers. They were so fit and healthy and their enthusiasm for a sport they so obviously love was infectious. They were a joy to watch and I am looking forward to meeting them all again in Montreal.

After a fortnight of touring in the UK after the event, and in a scene reminding me of the amazing race TV program it was pleasing to meet up (by sheer fluke) with Warren Cassidy in Singapore – he had been touring in France - and we both flew into Perth on the same flight safe and sound.

Ron Gray – Referee
Perth Western Australia