



# PART-TIME MERMAIDS

## : Introducing Finswimming

by Jasmin Wong

It is not hard to spot Lee Ho-kui as he heads towards the Lei Cheng Uk Swimming Pool to attend a finswimming training session. It is not that he is wearing a conspicuous outfit but rather it is the large fin he is carrying that is drawing the gaze of various passers-bys. It is in fact a monofin, a fin-shaped piece of equipment used for the sport of finswimming.

The 34-year-old advanced finswimming instructor, who has been working for the Hong Kong Underwater Association (HKUA) for seven years, describes his interest in finswimming as “an addiction”. He first came across the then new sport in 2003 when he joined a finswimming summer course organized by the HKUA. Fascinated by the speed of finswimming, he became enthralled by it and was determined to get involved. Since then, Lee has trained dozens of

Hong Kong team athletes for open finswimming competitions.

“To put it simply, finswimming is a combination of swimming and snorkelling, a recreation and a competitive sport,” explains Lee. Finswimmers use a monofin for propulsion and a snorkel for breathing, allowing them to go much faster than conventional swimmers. The technique of finswimming is very different to ordinary swimming. All propulsion is done with a swim fin, using the legs and lower body in an undulating, up-and-down movement. The arms are placed together in front of the body and kept motionless to minimize water resistance.

According to Lee, the ranks of finswimming enthusiasts are often drawn from scuba divers and snorkellers. They choose finswimming because they

enjoy the satisfaction of achieving great speed and the experience of snorkelling.

For instance, the fastest record for swimming 50-metres free-style is 21 seconds. A finswimmer can knock five seconds off that time. Lee says it is the attraction of extra speed that appeals to so many seasoned swimmers.

Finswimming competitions are divided into different categories, namely Surface, Apnea, Immersion and Bifin. With each event having a completely different set of regulations, the equipment used is dictated by the category that the athlete is competing in.

The word “Apnea” comes from Greek, meaning “without breathing”. Competitors in Apnea races use monofins and have to keep their faces in the water for the entire distance

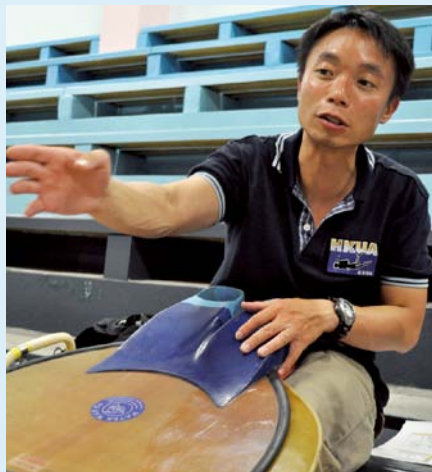
without breathing. In Immersion races, swimmers must stay under the water and breathe using a regulator and a small sub-aqua tank. For Surface races, swimmers have to keep their bodies or monofin exposed above water except during the first 15 meters of the race. Two fins instead of one are used by participants in bifin races.

The monofin is the most common piece of equipment finswimmers need to acquire. Made of special carbon fibre or fibreglass, the lightest one weighs around two pounds while the heaviest one can weigh around six pounds or more. There are several kinds of monofins, differing in weight, size and stiffness, according to a swimmer's level of strength and skill.

During the interview, Lee effortlessly picks up his enormous monofin and demonstrates how to wear it. He says that a flat surface is required in order to maintain a balance between the left and the right leg. Within a few seconds, he has slipped his bare feet into the fin, giving his body a merman-like silhouette. He makes it look easy, but Lee says it is hard to keep balanced while wearing the fin and admits that it is "not naturally comfortable" to be in one. This is why athletes rarely wear one for too long. The key to being at ease in a fin, says Lee, is, "having the right body form, posture and body movement during finswimming". Wearing the right size of monofin to ensure a perfect fit is also important.

Training routines are specially designed for athletes based on their needs while paying heed to health and safety. Athletes are first trained on bifins, which are like a pair of flippers which makes it easier to maintain body balance. Once competence is achieved with bifins, swimmers advance to increasing sizes of monofins.

"Finswimming training is not merely repetitive, mechanical practices," says Lee. With the help of mechanics theory,



Lee Ho-kui expresses his vision of promoting the sport.



Beginners usually start with flipper-like bifins.

coaches developed special theories on ways of reaching greater speed.

**"It was a matter of creating body wave in the water to ensure streamlined movement," he adds.**

A lot of research has been done to formulate the best forms and postures to enhance the performance of athletes.

"Athletes in the past used to build up strength and muscles in their thighs and lower body, while nowadays the mainstream focus is on creating body wave using mainly the abdominal muscle as a core," says Lee.

Lee explains this also allows athletes to get fit and lean instead of big and chunky.

According to Lee, forms and postures are the main strength of Hong Kong finswimmers in competitions. Having the right postures enhances speed. This means Hong Kong swimmers tend to do better at short-distances events, whereas mainland swimmers do more physical strength training.

Apart from receiving more physical strength training, Lee says mainland finswimmers are full-time athletes. That means their training is more traditional and regular - every day from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m - while competitive finswimmers in Hong Kong are all full-time students who usually attend training after school, twice a week and for three hours each time.

Lee does not consider this to be a disadvantage. "I think every coach is fighting for the medal. Although we cannot train athletes 24/7, we resort to other methods for improvements."

Lee says Hong Kong coaches rely on science and ergonomics to improve their athletes' performance and to reduce injuries.

This explains why Hong Kong athletes are keener on short-distance finswimming competitions, for example the 50-meter Apnea and 100-meter Surface races.

The HKUA is a major pioneer in this sport. Established in 1967, the HKUA is currently a member of the Sports Federation and Olympic Committee of Hong Kong, China. It is also a member of the World Underwater Federation and one of the founding members of the Asia Underwater Federation. In fact, Hong Kong was the first place in



By the poolside, a young finswimmer is ready in her monofin.



Pairs of bifins line the training venue.

Southeast Asia where finswimming became known and recognized.

Although the sport is not that widely known among the general public, local finswimmers have achieved outstanding results in international competitions in recent years. They won a record-breaking array of eight gold medals, eight silver medals and ten bronze medals in the 2010 National Youth Finswimming Championships.

Sandy Cheng Hoi-shan, a 15 year-old student, is one of the local champions. Sandy started finswimming at the age of 13 and achieved record-breaking results in the 2010 National Youth Championship by bagging two gold medals.

Despite Hong Kong's glory in the pool, finswimming remains a niche sport popular chiefly with underwater devotees. One of the reasons for this could be the cost. A set of equipment including a monofin, a bifin and a snorkel can cost some \$3,000 or more.

Lee says people who join the introduction courses are only required to buy a bifin and a snorkel, which would cost around \$300 in total, while subsidies are provided to those who show talent but cannot afford the expenses.

But apart from cost, there is another major obstacle to the sport becoming popular in Hong Kong. The city has no specific venue for finswimming

training. To the HKUA's disappointment, the government has still not approved its training in all open public swimming pools and finswimmers are required to book lanes in swimming pools to practice.

The HKUA is trying hard to promote the sport but despite their best efforts, the lack of training venues remains a hurdle to making the sport more popular. The Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) sets limits on the number of lanes that finswimmers can use in public pools.

Lee acknowledges that such regulations are meant to protect the safety of other swimmers, as there is a possibility of injuries if swimmers collide. And he is not surprised that other swimmers are reluctant to be in the same pool with finswimmers, when their sport involves giant fins and great speeds.

While the lobbying effort for a specialized venue continues, the HKUA is using other promotional means to reach more citizens. The association usually concentrates its promotions in the summer months. It also holds demonstrations at secondary school swimming events to let more youngsters know about it.

Although finswimming is an exhibition sport in the Olympics, it is not



Students of Lee Ho-kui in a training session.



Sandy Cheng Hoi-shan in a monofin and a snorkel.

yet a competitive one. Lee believes it is only a matter of time before it is.

At the optimistic coach's command, a line of finswimmers kicks and undulates through the water. Swaying hard with their monofins they make the movements known as strikes and dolphin kicks. Combining speed and gracefulness, they have the appearance of mermaids but swim with the determination of athletes. ▽