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The Suit That Changes Everything

Superfast, Superexpensive Gear Upends College Swimming; Teams That Go Without Get Left Behind

By **MATTHEW FUTTERMAN**

For the Auburn University men's swimming team, the most important moment of this week's NCAA Division I Championship meet will occur when the team arrives at its hotel and finds out whether Speedo has delivered its high-tech LZR Racer swimsuits.

With the suits, which allow swimmers to float higher and cut through the water as never before, Auburn has a chance to remain among college swimming's pre-eminent teams. Without the suits, they have no shot. "We're hoping and praying the suits turn up," said Brett Hawke, the team's assistant coach.

A controversial about-face by the National Collegiate Athletic Association in September has turned college swimming upside down this season. Programs that never spent more than a few hundred dollars to outfit their athletes had to beg, borrow and scrounge to come up with nearly \$20,000 for a season's supply of the new generation of superfast, superexpensive swimsuits like the ones Michael Phelps wore in the Beijing Olympics.

In total, swimmers have set 82 world records wearing the Speedo LZR since its introduction last year, compared with an average of 15 in the past seven Olympic years. These results have caused a frenzy in a sport that has always seemed largely immune from the influence of technology.

"It's like having one pole-vaulter using a fiberglass pole and another using a wooden pole," said Phil Whitten, executive director of the College Swim Coaches Association. "It's an absolute mess."

FINA, the governing body for international swimming, announced earlier this month that it will begin a series of tests to determine how extensively the suits enhance performance, but it may take several years before a final determination is made and any new standards can be set. Speedo, the leading manufacturer of the high-tech suits, said all swimmers who requested the suits will have them for this weekend's championships.

Flabby and Lazy

Speedo's LZR (\$550), Tyr's Tracer Light (\$320) and BlueSeventy's Nero (\$395) all compress swimmers from the ankles to the shoulder. They make swimmers more buoyant and have an ultra-smooth exterior that glides through the water far more easily than skin. Most troubling to

ultra-smooth exterior that glides through the water far more easily than skin. Most troubling to coaches, the suits seem to help the flabby, lazier swimmers the most, because their fat gets compressed but remains more buoyant than dense muscle, allowing them to float higher in the water and swim faster. Also, the suits tend to fall apart after just a dozen swims, many coaches say. (Speedo says that if properly handled, the suits can last 30 hours.)

The effects of the technology are rippling through every level of swimming as collegiate programs wrestle with the cost of the suits and junior-level swimmers beg their parents and coaches to buy them several suits each year so they can stay competitive. "If you're not wearing one, you're definitely at a disadvantage," said Ryan Signorin, a 14-year-old swimmer with Peddie School in Hightstown, N.J., who is still waiting for his suit.

Searching for Suits

"I'm very disappointed that our sport has come to a point where I have to be as concerned with the swimsuits as I am with the swimmers," said Dennis Dale, head coach at the University of Minnesota. "I've spent as much time finding suits this season as I have on anything else."

Craig Brommers, director of marketing for Speedo in North America, said the company's factory in Portugal can now produce some 80,000 LZR's annually but was unprepared for the massive demand after 91% of gold medalists in Beijing wore the suit. "There were some shortfalls," said Mr. Brommers. He explained that the high cost reflects the years of research and development Speedo dedicated to the LZR. Speedo is owned by Pentland Group PLC of the U.K. but is licensed to New York-based Warnaco Group Inc. in North America.

Tracy Huth, chairman of the NCAA's rules committee for swimming, said the group does not consider equipment costs when it sets guidelines. Once FINA affirmed its approval of the suits last year and they became commercially available to everyone, the NCAA followed suit. Mr. Huth said that "there is no empirical evidence the suits provide an advantage."

Many swim coaches say all the evidence is on the pool deck.

In January, Northwestern's Bob Groseth brought his men's team to a four-way meet in Columbus, Ohio, against Penn State, Ohio State and Michigan. Ohio State and Michigan wore the high-tech suits. For budget reasons Northwestern and Penn State had to save their suits for the Big Ten championships. Michigan eked out a 29-point win against Ohio State, but slaughtered Northwestern by 245-83 and Penn State 245-84. "It's tough sending your guys into a meet knowing they don't have the suits the other guys do," Mr. Groseth said last week.

A University of Michigan spokesman said certain swimmers elected to wear the high-tech suits throughout the season.

At the Southeastern Conference Championships last month, several rival schools tried to trade and borrow suits to keep the playing field even. Jerry Chandler, assistant coach at the University of Georgia, said he spent months acquiring used suits from the U.S. Olympic team and ordering from New Zealand-based BlueSeventy, but still made last-minute trades with University and Alabama and the University of Kentucky to try to get his swimmers in the correct sizes. Then came the ripped zippers and material tears known as "equipment malfunctions." (The suit

manufacturers blame improper handling for such problems.)

Pleas to Get Rid of Them

Mr. Chandler's women's 800-yard freestyle relay team lost the race when the back of swimmer Aleksandra Putra's suit ripped open. She swam her leg 1.5 seconds slower than usual. "If it were up to most coaches, we'd get rid of them," he said of the suits.

Lance Huber, head swim coach at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, is in that group. Mr. Huber's school sent 28 swimmers to the Division III national championships last year. This year, his team couldn't afford the high-tech suits and swam in the Speedo FSPro suits, deemed cutting-edge 18 months ago. Just one Luther College swimmer qualified.

One woman who went to the nationals last year, swam a personal record of 5:04 in the 500-yard freestyle in this season's qualifying meet in February. Last year that time would have placed her in the top 15. This year it was good for the top 50.

"It's hard looking at these girls walking into nationals that we beat earlier in the season before they got the new suits," Mr. Huber said. "Now we're just trying to move forward."

Write to Matthew Futterman at matthew.futterman@wsj.com

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