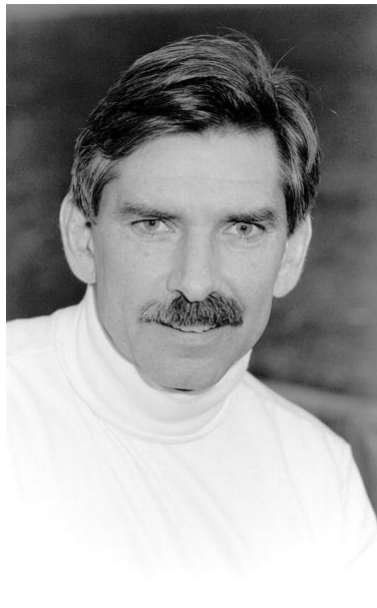


Fifty Years Ago

Dr Bernie Thorley OAM



Alex Alexander, Gold Medalist at the Commonwealth Games

Nearly fifty years ago when the Thirroul Amateur Swimming Club began, the Olympic pool was adjacent to, and an extension of a caravan park on the beachfront. The pool which was built by the ratepayers of Thirroul to increase the town's potential as a tourist attraction was unfenced, open until 9 pm in the evenings and had a high diving tower at the deep-end. Because of the pool's tourism-related focus, few locals were confident a swimming club -- one that would require restrictions on public access to the pool during competitive swimming activities -- could be established.

The motivation to form a swimming club arose when the Thirroul Public School performed poorly in the annual inter-school swimming competitions early in 1954, as it had done in the previous year. These disappointing results seemed all the more astonishing in the light of the same school's outstanding success at District, Country and State levels in athletics and in the light of the fact that this was occurring in a beach town of 7,000 citizens with free access to Olympic pool swimming facilities! As a teacher and the sportsmaster at the school I approached one of the parents Jack McCauley, who was captain of the Surf Club and did some coaching at the swimming pool, for advice.

Jack suggested that the swimming standards of the children in the town would never improve significantly unless a swimming club was established. He saw many obstacles in the way of achieving this, but, as a starting point, suggested enlisting the support of the lessee of the pool, Ted Johnson. Ted, a parent himself, President of the RSL Club, and a great community-minded man, was fortunately enthusiastic in his support and agreed to take an active part in bringing the idea of forming a club to fruition. With assistance from the NSW Amateur Swimming Association and officials of the Wollongong Club such as Martin Smith and Alf Sherrington, plus many months of lobbying, the Thirroul Amateur Swimming Club was officially inaugurated at a public meeting held in the Thirroul beach kiosk on 8 October 1954. The 22 people who attended elected Ted Johnson as President of the club, myself as Secretary; Phil Street as Treasurer and John McMahon (still living in Thirroul) as Club Captain. Jack McCauley, Bob Flynn (still living in Thirroul), Joe Rolfe and myself were elected as amateur coaches and Jack McCauley later was elected as the race-day referee.

Members of the coaching staff were amateurs and collectively agreed to provide coaching and training opportunities for all children, irrespective of their degree of commitment to the sport and their level of development (from learn-to-swim upwards). Tom Penny, an amateur coach from Sydney – and the coach of Olympic champion John Devitt – personally visited the club on more than one occasion to share his wisdom with the coaches. Joe Hillhouse, who was a longtime swimming coach at the pool and was renowned for his detailed knowledge of correct swimming style, generously shared his ideas. Numerous locals worked tirelessly in club and inter-club competitions as handicappers, timekeepers, judges, stewards, equipment managers, chaperones and the like.

Within 6 weeks of its inception the club had a membership of 142. One of those pioneer members, 9-year-old Alex Alexander, went on to win a gold medal at the Commonwealth Games held in Perth in 1962. He thus became the Illawarra's most successful ever swimmer. Alexander's gold medal success was a source of great personal satisfaction. In Alex's first 3 years in swimming I had the privilege of building the skills and condition that formed the foundation for his progression to the next level. Alex, with the unswerving support of his parents, adhered strictly to an extensive, twice-daily training and coaching regime that I conducted. Many other early and subsequent members became star performers in the pool and/or surf, but that is a story that others are better able to tell.

In 1956, I had to relinquish my official duties with the club when transferred to Sydney in my employment. By this time Thirroul Public was already becoming the school to beat in district competitions. Three years later, I read with much satisfaction that the Thirroul Amateur Swimming Club had won a trophy for the best performing swimming club in the Illawarra. Through the tireless efforts and enthusiasm of dedicated officials the problems that the club had been formed to tackle back in 1954 had been redressed: better and even earlier than many of us could have hoped.

A DVD of Bernie Thorley reading this history together with footage of the 50th Anniversary Swim and club photos are available for a cost of \$7.50.

