

Aussie swimmers struggle with swimsuit scenarios

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Their team sponsor, Speedo, has gone from providing the team with the top-of-the-range LZR swimsuit that blitzed in Beijing to providing a possible handicap ahead of the world championships in Rome.

Many only got the chance to try out the new polyurethane suits after arriving in Europe this month because manufacturers couldn't get them to Australia, creating a somewhat frantic and stressful leadup to the major meet as swimmers questioned whether their effect is psychological or physical.

And the team is split: six-time Olympic medallist and multiple world champion Libby Trickett remains unconvinced by their buoyancy effects and is loyally sticking with Speedo, who allow the Australian swimmers to use other brands.

But Andrew Lauterstein, who fancies his chances against Michael Phelps in the 100m butterfly, is convinced that wearing the old style suit could cost him a gold medal.

Others, like butterflyer Jessicah Schipper think the issue has been blown out of proportion.

"I think it definitely adds a lot of psychological help in wearing it for a lot of people, but at the end of the day, it's a suit, it's a piece of material, it can only do so much for you," said Schipper, who will be defending her 200-metre butterfly title in Rome in a new-style Adidas suit. "It has definitely been blown way out of proportion. You can chuck it in the lane next to you and it's not going to get in there and swim."

Lauterstein has also switched from Speedo after seeing the effects while racing in European meets this month. His best time in a Speedo suit in Europe was 51.4 seconds in the 100 fly.

"And three weeks later, after a couple of hard weeks training, I threw on one of the new generation suits and broke the Commonwealth record," he said of his 50.92-second swim in Milan. "That's 1.5 faster than I had throughout this whole period of racing, at this kind of one-off meet. The proof is in the pudding there for me that I couldn't be left behind. And in doing that, I have to wear one of these new suits."

"I don't want to be swimming at a handicap race by racing in a LZR suit," he added at the Australian team's training camp in Manchester.

Lauterstein says the new suits gave a wetsuit-like buoyancy that created less resistance in the water.

"With my butterfly, as soon as my feet drop, it makes me feel slower," he explained. "So anything that can help me stay nice and flat is going to help me go fast."

Trickett is not convinced and is sticking by the company that became her first sponsor. She's wary of breaking her tried and tested routine, even if her main rival, Germany's Britta Steffen, broke her 100 freestyle record wearing a new-style suit last month.

"It's a really difficult situation that the swimmers have been placed in," she said of the late decision by world governing body FINA to allow polyurethane suits to be worn in Rome even as the promise new guidelines to be implemented in 2010.

"I'll be honest, it's taking a lot of time to figure out what to do. The most important thing for me is that I feel comfortable, I know the Speedo suit, I know how I swim in it and I know that I've swum fast in it. And that's what gives me confidence and ultimately, that's going to give me the biggest edge that I can bring to this year's world championships.

"I don't believe in those suits and I find it very difficult to swim in something that I don't believe in," she added. "That's just me personally but I totally understand why people take that option, but for me, it's not right."

Trickett's 50 freestyle rival, Cate Campbell, who won bronze in the event in Beijing, believes the suit furore is overstated.

"It's almost become 'who's got the best suit' as opposed to who's done the most work, which is a little bit sad because the suits, they don't train for

you, they don't get up at 4am in the morning, they don't pour all their heart and soul into the training," she said. "They just help you race. Racing is really the easiest part of swimming."

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