

# Out to Swim

Its beginnings were modest but Britain's leading gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender swimming club now has more than 400 members and caters for all the aquatic disciplines.

**Cath Harris** reports

**W**hen Kate Sabot decided that London was the place to continue her studies, one of the first things she did was look up the capital's swimming and water polo teams. She was choosy, searching only for LGBT clubs - those welcoming lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender people. It wasn't that Sabot sought her own kind - she is happily married and about

to start a family with Oliver, a social entrepreneur - more that the reception she anticipated at a LGBT club would easily surpass any she'd experienced elsewhere. 'In Boston, I'd found LGBT water polo teams to be so much more welcoming and accepting no matter what your standard,' Sabot says, recalling, with distaste, the mainstream club emphasis on competition at the expense of development and team spirit. 'I was at a point in my life when I just wanted to stay active and play the sport I loved. The ego side of mainstream clubs just didn't

appeal at all.'

So when Out to Swim (OTS) appeared in Sabot's search, she sensed she'd struck gold. She is now an established member of the club's water polo team while Oliver has joined gay basketball club London Knights for similar reasons. OTS welcomes all comers and is unusual in offering the five pool disciplines - swimming, diving, open water, synchro and water polo - and tuition for adult beginners in each of those sports. Unique is the opportunity for men to try synchronised swimming, the

sport at the centre of discrimination claims before the 2012 Olympics. As the club comes of age this year, that battle is still to be won. Top priority now is spearheading London's bid for the 2018 Gay Games, the four-yearly event that inspired the club's formation.

## Fulfilment

It was the thrill and fulfilment of competing at the Gay Games - which, with 12,000 athletes from 70 nations, may be the largest sporting event in the world - that spawned the idea of a

LGBT swimming club in London.

'The Games was a catalyst and formed the nucleus of what the club is about,' says OTS chair Gareth Johnson. 'It started as a small, committed group of people, who wanted a safe place to swim and compete, and with each Games, momentum grew. People got excited about training for something, they would compete at the Games and come back having had an amazing experience. That led to others getting excited and wanting to compete themselves. It was self-fulfilling.'

Membership swelled and in 2002, with funds from a millennium grant, OTS formed the London Orca men's and women's water polo teams in time for the Sydney Gay Games of that year. A Brighton branch of the club was established in 2006 and the OTS Angels synchronised swimming team in 2009, also backed by a start-up award. Enthusiasm for a relay attempt on the Channel spurred the launch of an open water section the same year. A fledging diving group now completes the set.

Water polo was a 'slow burn', says Johnson, >



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◀ 40, who moved to London from Australia 10 years ago. 'Only in the last five years has it felt strong and sustaining and now we have a squad of 80 people - one of the largest in the world.'

The club fields three teams for major events and competes in London's Thameside League. 'At least 50 per cent of our players are from countries other than Britain, including France, Italy, Spain and Australia. We also take beginners. No other club will let you just rock up and play.' Johnson trains with his Orca teammates three times a week. OTS encourages participation in other pool sports and he was

taken aback by the demands of synchro. 'The discipline is incredible. To have the ability to keep time while holding your breath under water...' his voice trails off in wonder. 'They have a fantastic coach, who took a water polo session. She nearly killed us!'

### Equality games?

If looks could kill it would have been Olympic organisers at the receiving end a year ago when calls to include men's synchro in the London Games were dismissed despite the event being billed the 'equality games'. 'We made



Clockwise, from this picture: The OTS Angels men's synchro team; water polo players Kate Sabot and Gareth Johnson; the Orcas water polo squad at a tournament in Paris; previous page (l-r): Ming Yao, Stephen Lue and Alex Davis at the 2012 Out to Swim pool party



representations to the IOC but the London 2012 organisers said it was beyond their control and washed their hands of it. The issue isn't just about gay men, it's an equality issue. And it's about having role models, which is very powerful.' Organisers blamed the fact that only a handful of countries (notably the UK and France) allow men to compete in domestic synchro competitions. 'We're still keen to progress the Olympic issue and the publicity last year has increased interest in men's synchro. If a legal challenge was mounted on discrimination grounds, the Olympic authorities would really be in trouble.'

Johnson admits that OTS synchro swimmers

are not of international standard, although they were good enough for gold at the 2011 Eurogames in Rotterdam. 'But that is not a valid reason for saying men's synchro shouldn't be in the Games. Men would train to elite level if they had an elite competition to train for.'

### British record

No such bars prevent OTS's swimmers, divers and open water enthusiasts competing when and where they like. Lizzie Bellinger is the club's top swimmer, a multiple world masters medal winner and double long-course British record holder in the 30-34 age group. Her 50m fly mark of 28.72 was set in 2008 and was followed

by 1:06.23 for the 100m fly at the Welsh Capital Masters in 2011. Bellinger led the 25-strong Out to Swim contingent at the 2012 ASA masters. Next for the team is the four-yearly World Out Games in Antwerp this August. 'It's a bit like the Gay Games but not so well established,' Johnson explains.

That success has come despite the difficulty in finding training venues in the capital. OTS uses seven London pools and is always hunting for more. 'They must get sick of us; we contact every single venue two or three times a year,' head coach Michelle Weltman laughs. 'Our sessions are jam-packed.' Weltman oversees OTS's 15 paid and volunteer coaches. She joined ▶





The Out to Swim team at the Gay Games in Cologne in 2010



British masters record holder Lizzie Bellinger



The Angels during a training session

the club after coaching Elaine Barrett and Dervis Konuralp to the 1996 Athens Paralympics. OTS was the only club willing to let the athletes join its sessions and Weltman's success with them led the club to invite her to take the vacant post. There were conditions to her acceptance: 'I wanted the club to grow and expand'.

One of the initiatives Weltman planned was adult swimming tuition. The beginners' lessons OTS now offers are 'unbelievably oversubscribed', she says. 'We had other people who could swim but were not up to the standard of club training, so we found more pool space and set up new sessions for them. Some of them have improved so much that they went to the nationals in Sheffield last year. A couple of other swimmers wanted to do a Channel relay so we set up an open water section.'

It was Simone Coetze who touched down in France for the five-person OTS Channel relay team on September 21, 2009, after 13 hours and



**'OTS sets high moral standards but members do not always get the same respect in return. One medallist was furious when the man presenting the accolade refused to kiss her as he had others'**



Backing London's bid to host the 2018 Gay Games; above left: Alex Davis; below left: Gareth Johnson



14 minutes of swimming. Team-mate Alex Davis complained of a 'salt burnt tongue' while Clinton Pascoe urged: 'Do not ever let me even contemplate doing anything like this ever again...ever!' Despite their travails, the quintet raised more than £6,600 for the Food Chain, which provides meals for those living with HIV. OTS members completed a second Channel relay in 2012 and have circumnavigated Manhattan Island. The 10k Dart is among other open water challenges they have conquered.

**Multi-achievers**

While none of those multi-achieving swimmers need lessons now, the benefits to AIDS and HIV sufferers of the club's tuition and outreach programme are immeasurable. 'There is a growing amount of research showing that staying active and being part of a sport has

really important health and social benefits,' Johnson says. 'Two of the biggest problems of being HIV positive are stigmatisation and financial hardship. People are not able to work so become isolated. Their social networks suffer.' Transgender people are also profiting from involvement with OTS.

'Feeling safe in a pool environment is quite difficult for them so we offer exclusive pool sessions. They say the opportunity to go along and enjoy swimming is very liberating. I'm not aware of anywhere else in the UK where they would have that opportunity.' Mental health is another area OTS is tackling with gay men sometimes prone to depression and other mental health concerns. 'We are obviously not qualified in the medical sense but we can refer people to the right resources or just keep an eye out for them.'

**Apology**

While OTS sets high moral standards, its members do not always receive the same respect in return. One gold medallist was furious when the man presenting the accolade at a recent event announced to her that, unlike others on the podium, he wouldn't kiss her as part of the award-giving ritual. 'We were very angry too,' recalls Weltman, 'and did get a letter of apology. But it isn't good enough to say he's an elderly gentleman and doesn't understand. In today's society, everyone needs to be accepting of each other.'

Which begs the question, and perhaps answers it too: why have a LGBT club? 'Twenty years ago, swimming clubs weren't particularly

accepting places,' Johnson says. 'It could be homophobia or internal homophobia - in other words projecting your own insecurities. I've heard from members that the value of having a safe, open environment is huge and empowering. And for many people, we provide a very important social network.'

Like other sports, coming out isn't easy in swimming. 'Because children start so young and are in the public eye if they're successful, they might risk jeopardising sponsorship if they come out. What's difficult is that there are no role models. The more we do, the more we realise the power of swimming to transform people's lives. It unlocks their potential; it seems unfair not to share that.'

**Gay Games bid**

OTS now boasts more than 400 members and managing its own success is among this year's challenges. The club isn't actively recruiting because of limits on pool space and won't need to if the 2018 Gay Games bid is successful. 'That would be amazing,' Johnson beams. 'It would mean continuing to be a strong and visible presence in the community.'

Kate Sabot is backing the bid, and hoping to compete, despite the likelihood that she'll be juggling the demands of parenthood. She is eligible because the Games is open to all and she envisages the event replicating the magic of involvement with OTS. 'There's a spirit and sense of community at the club you don't necessarily find in other teams and leagues.

But when it comes to what you are doing in the pool, it's exactly the same.' **ST**