

As France's synchronised swimmers get into hot water over their controversial Olympic routine...



The Squad 2000 team executes a precision splits manoeuvre while, at the front, Caroline gets that sinking feeling

Caroline takes the plunge with the synchro swimmers

Now Caroline attempts the Travelling Ballet Leg sequence — or is it the Sinking Lawnmower?

Synch or swim

By Caroline Phillips

Pictures by Mark Kehoe

I AM wearing a clothes peg on my nose while impersonating a paraplegic frog. Blowing underwater bubbles, with one leg up, the other bent.

Now I'm grappling with the glamorous Travelling Ballet Leg sequence — but looking like a sinking lawnmower. Next I do the Tub Turn, rotating with my knees and feet on the water's surface, like something that has gone wrong in the launderette. Meanwhile svelte women swim around me with precision, skill and co-ordination.

It's 5.45am and I'm in the pool at London's Kensington Close Hotel, training with Squad 2000, one of Britain's two national synchronised swimming teams (youngest member 15, oldest 25). Formed in January, three of its members were in the team that just failed to get into the Olympics. Today five of the 10-strong team are absent, doing GCSEs.

It's time to synch or swim. I learn sculling — the synch essential — where you move your hands from side to side to remain buoyant. The synchro girls spent weeks learning it and I've had 30 seconds' training. But now the water pressure is hurting my ears, my nose clip nags and I'm ready to doggy-paddle to safety. Liberace playing Chopsticks follows me on the team's underwater speaker.

Last week synchro was headline news when the French government stopped its national Olympics team from performing a Holocaust-based routine.

The team had planned to goose-step to the poolside to the sound of German martial music from Spielberg's Schindler's List and then re-enact the fate of Jewish women in the Nazi death



Ears hurting, nose clip pinching, but with smile intact, Caroline comes up for air

camp. Tasteless? Insensitive? "It was a powerful performance," counters Adele Carlsen, from Squad 2000. "It portrayed such misery." "Really moving," adds Katie Webber.

Synchro swimmers are short on irony. The public perceives the sport as ludicrous — girls wearing permagins and waterproof mascara doing Busby Berkeley routines in fish tanks.

More music hall than athletics. But the girls take it very seriously, each spending £2,000 a year on equipment and training. "You finance it through debts," explains Claire Whyman, who is a nurse on terra firma.

In addition, the sport requires fitness, stamina, skill, flexibility and strength. The girls train at 5am when pools are empty. Their feet aren't

allowed ever to touch the bottom of the pool. And they can spend two-and-a-half minutes underwater.

"You'd rather go unconscious than let your team down by coming up early," says Adele. "Once I almost drowned."

Squad 2000 has just spent two weeks at a boarding school training for eight hours a day. They would warm up with a five-mile run, swim for six hours, then condition themselves with step-ups on to chairs (in sets of 50). Off camp, they do four hours of water conditioning a day.

"Your skin gets sore, your hair turns to straw and you sweat chlorine," says Claire.

You would expect petty jealousies to develop in the pool, but a fly on the underwater wall would find nothing like that.

"You rely on friendship to be able to swim patterns together," says Jody Veryard, who looks like a ballerina. "There's rivalry between the girls," adds Katie, "but you never think, 'I wish she'd break her leg so that I can beat her.'"

The atmosphere at dinner at Kensington Close Hotel's Conservatory restaurant the night before our training is mostly as bubbly as the eight Diet Cokes on the table. Conversation goes swimmingly.

"I get upset when people attack us," says Jody. "We train so hard. People think you just float around and swirl up and down and put your leg in the air. Without synchro, I'd go mad."

They go to bed at 11.30, ready for their 5.40am wake-up call.

Sneer at it for being ludicrous. Call it designer drowning, if you will. But as a bit of an old synch myself, I can tell you they're swimming strenuous routines effortlessly. And with the kind of elegance, co-ordination, flexibility, fitness and discipline that makes me want to drop my mouth open.

And leave my nose clip on.

THEMES OF THE OTHER OLYMPIC TEAMS

ITALY: They're going for upbeat American, with music including Fever by Elvis Presley, and Cadillac Ranch by Bruce Springsteen. They've also got Pavarotti singing Torna a Sorriento.

RUSSIA: Not quite so upbeat... their routine is based on love, lust and death in the days of the medieval Tsars, to the strains of 19th-century Russian composer Mussorgsky's historical opera Khovanshina.

CANADA: Unity is the Canadian team's message and their choice is Ode To Joy by Beethoven. The BBC is also using it as the theme for Euro 96.