

Sports Melbourne

A form guide for the big show, next year's Beijing Olympic Games, the world swimming championships in Melbourne in March will be the most anticipated swimming competition since the 2004 Athens Olympics. TOM WALD reports

As far as sporting entrées go, the world swimming championships in Melbourne are going to be a particularly tasty affair.

The drama from the eight days of racing will be worthy of a page-turning novel with enough twists and turns to make even author Dan Brown a little envious.

The most anticipated swimming competition since the 2004 Athens Olympics will also provide a telling form guide for the big show, next year's Beijing Games.

The last time Australia hosted the world championships was in Perth back in 1998 when Michael Klim was in his pomp.

Awkward teenagers Ian Thorpe and Grant Hackett made their mark at the same meet but it was the drug-fuelled Chinese women's team that captured the majority of the headlines.

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It will be the first glimpse of the post-Thorpe era for Australian swimming following the superstar's decision to quit the sport at just 24 last November.

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the can for the Australian men as the distance supremo returns to the blocks after missing the Melbourne Commonwealth Games because of shoulder surgery.

It will be interesting to see whether Hackett can maintain his lofty standards but the early evidence has suggested the fire still burns deep inside the 26-year-old Gold Coaster.

A milestone quietly passed by in April last year, marking a full decade since Hackett was last defeated over 1500m.

However the amiable Queenslander expected his rivals to be coming at him from all directions in Melbourne.

"We're going to see world records, we're going to see upsets, we'll see people come out of the woodwork and considering it will be just over a year out from the Olympics, there's going to be a lot of great swimming," Hackett said.

"It's going to be fantastic to watch and the Melbourne crowd will see plenty of fast swimming from me.

"I know all my competitors are going to be there swimming well and they'd love to beat me on my own turf."

And like any good production there must be some bad guys, well, maybe some well-mannered

rivals from other countries looking to steal the thunder from the locals.

Dutch sprint machine Pieter van den Hoogenband and American wonder Michael Phelps are names Australians are familiar with and both swimmers are certain to enjoy the way the sport grips the island continent.

Other major overseas acts include Italian speedster Filippo Magnini, German Britta Steffen, French superstar Laure Manaudou and Americans Aaron Peirsol, Brendan Hansen and Katie Hoff.

But just as important as the talent for any show is the setting and Rod Laver Arena, the centre court for the Australian Open, looms as an inspired choice.

A Spanish-built temporary pool will be suspended above the floor of the tennis centre and the venue will have a capacity of 13,500 for the event.

British swimming high performance director Bill Sweetenham felt the packed arena could prove to be a weapon for the home nation.

"I walked into Rod Laver Arena and was blown away," the former Australian head coach told the Herald Sun last year.

"The atmosphere will be something else when you have a packed house, and that will be a huge

