

Commonwealth Games: Mack Horton making most of training rivalry

Mack Horton and Italian swimmer Gregorio Paltrinieri.
Picture: Andrew Henshaw

NICOLE JEFFERY THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM February 16, 2018

Sportsmen are different these days. Olympic 400m freestyle champion Mack Horton was talking about his four-month training stint with Italy's Olympic 1500m freestyle champion Gregorio Paltrinieri yesterday when he offered this gem.

"It's been awesome — on the training side we push each other all the time, but also just to talk and get inside each other's mind and talk about our feelings," Horton said. "We were leaving the pool one day and he put his arm around me and said: 'Our love is platonic'."

Something might have been lost in translation with the Italian, but in times past it took a lot of beers before sportsmen would say: "I love you, mate."

This may explain why both men have Olympic gold medals. They are comfortable in their own skins, and confident enough in their abilities to be honest with each other. Nor do they have trouble separating their friendship from their rivalry.

Asked if he had figured out how to beat Paltrinieri while they were training together in Melbourne, 21-year-old Horton replied: "Yes, except I can't tell you." "It's been interesting to see him train and see how he goes in our program. We don't do anywhere near as much 1500m pace work compared to him. That's pretty much all he does, and we do a bit of everything."

Horton said this was the perfect summer for the two champions to get the most out of working together without their rivalry getting too intense, because they were aiming towards different major championships this year. "We have been basically just training the house down," he said.

The Australian is setting himself for the Commonwealth Games trials starting in two weeks on the Gold Coast, while the Italian is preparing for the European championships in Glasgow in August.

Horton has just begun his taper into the trials and said he would rest completely for that meet (February 28-March 3) because he is a notoriously average swimmer when he is unrested.

Contemplating the compressed four-day trials program, Horton said it would be "a bit of survival" for him as he takes on the 200m, 400m and 1500m freestyle. He will swim the 200m on the first day as the surprising reigning national champion, then follow up with the 400m on the next day and the 1500m on the final day. That will be a timed final so at least he won't have to swim a heat. He said his intention was to "swim fast", which will mean somewhere near his personal best times, and he is confident he can then lift to a higher level in the five weeks between the trials and the Games.

The one itch he hasn't scratched at international level is winning a major title in the 1500m freestyle and he is determined to achieve it, although it is not his only priority for the Commonwealth Games. "I have a lot that I want to do, possibly too much," he said. "But I still love the 400m and the 1500m and the 4x200m freestyle relay as well, because it doesn't get better than a team event." He is only swimming the 200m at the trials to earn a place on the relay team and said winning an individual place for the Games would be "an accident".