

Freedom to move, not medal hunting

Interview with champions coach, philosopher and swimming scientist
Guennadi Touretski
ŽIGA BRDNIK – Slovenia Maribor

Guennadi Touretski in Maribor, Slovenia. On the first sight you wouldn't think that this gentleman in his sixties might be champions coach and that his boys acquired many medals and broke records. He prefers to stay and act in the background, he is immune to the stress of the greatest competitions, he doesn't bask in the past successes glory. Instead he calmly and prudently realises his philosophy of swimming. In these days he surprised sports community with a statement that is quite unusual in our time of superhuman sport results and earnings: "Swimming alone as beautiful, free motion through water is more important and interesting than individual match."

Swimming engineer

Such mindset can create such a champion as was Russian star Alexander Popov or change the sports culture of the entire small country. Exactly the peace which is possible in a small country brought the Russian engineer of biomechanics, biochemistry and liquid mechanics and sports psychologist in teacher in Slovene swimming national team - and in these days he coaches in Maribor's swimming centre Pristan. Touretski explains that there is ambition difference: do you wish the success of your swimmers on the highest swimming levels or on little lower? For me this is not of great importance because I work in the same manner with the greatest champions and with the Swiss children. You always work with human beings and you feel real satisfaction in seeing that with your help they are getting better, that they develop."

The coach Touretski is trying to secure his protégés not only the knowledge and physical abilities, but also real love for swimming and to realize the essentials of swimming.

"Why do we like to swim? Because in water we do feel fresh, clean and free. The main image of swimming is elegant, effortless motion," explains sports scientist Touretski.

Searching for the best swimming technique he also studied the motion forms of fish and other water animals. This coach sometimes applied unconventional coaching methods, giving greater priority to effectiveness and technique instead to strength and speed, and herewith made great contribution to the development of world swimming, which began its real competition glory exactly in the period of greatest successes of Alexander Popov.

"In the nineties there began fundamental change of the swimming philosophy: we witnessed the emergence of swimmers who didn't stand out only due to extraordinary physical condition and talent but also due to supreme technique. Before coaches and swimmer emphasized hard training and great amount of swimming, now there began gradual transition to competition sport.

I and Popov belonged to the first transition and to give an example, in the year 1994 we made about 100 formal starts. In our times the modern swimmer competes approximately every third day, like athletes or tennis players. I don't argue that we needn't train, but we do need to coach in adequate period, for instance until the 21st year. Then the swimmer has to dedicate himself to competition," said our interviewer.

Mister Touretski thinks that exactly these first super champions with extraordinary technique served as optimal models for other swimmers: "The coaches could take them as examples and teach their protégés how to swim better. On this ground at the end of the nineties emerged new generation of coaches and subsequently of competitors, a sort of people with different, more subtle understanding of this sport." With the emergence of new technologies the knowledge and familiarity with the last details of swimming increased and enabled the globalization of swimming: almost everybody can afford the underwater camera for the observation of swim movements under water, swimmers and coaches have the opportunity to see different videos on internet and get numerous information's for their work."

Psychologist of swimmers

Working with the swimmers Guennadi Touretski never fails to see them as persons and consider their life outside the swimming pool. Mister Popov was so involved with him that he followed him to Australia and gave him one of his Olympic gold medals as present. Mr. Touretski says that working with Popov he realized that the top sportsperson can only be a result of the combination of strong personality and exceptional physical abilities. "Popov was one of the first super athletes, but he achieved this rang only due to his good character," our interviewer remembers his work with this swimmer. And surely Touretski greatly helped Popov to get such a personality with his way of work, as he wishes to create sportspersons and not machines also in this days:

"In swimmers I would like to arouse understanding and love for swimming in the first place. Champions can emerge only in a country which likes this sport. Therefore the children at first have to grow fond and feel it. I wish to give them the elementary knowledge in practice, and as competitors they can go to USA, France, and Australia. I wish them to go to study and to develop as persons; I for myself will back them and help with advices. There are never finals or Olympic medals before my eyes, my horizons are wider. You can train a muscle, but man as person grows up due to life, experiences and learning."

Exactly therefore Mr. Touretski fiercely opposes to swimsuits which in last two seasons gave rise to unbelievable world records and call into question the mission and charm of swimming: "Swimsuits like coffee, cigarettes or doping create addiction. Competitors tend more to think about the suit they swim with than about swimming. I presume that we will step by step return to old swimsuits - but this trend has to be backed by competitors themselves. We all have to struggle for clean sport, against doping and other things that cause addiction."

Mr. Touretski didn't avoid even the Phelps phenomenon: "His greatest service to sport is that the results of individual sportsperson moved the understanding and consideration of swimming on higher level. Are we now obliged to break his record of eight Olympic medals? Not. That is a message for the children all over the world: all is possible. If you have dreams, follow and realize them." From the American champion our conversation skipped to Sloven champion Blaž Medvešek who from time to time worked with Russian expert: "Blaž seemed to me the most talented backstroker, but he didn't believe me. His weakness was therein that he remained on the same level of training and reflexion. I think he didn't have firm belief in himself and in the possibility that he could become real champion. But he is a nice person and a great lover of swimming. To stay in sport and to work with the children is for him more important than to get same medal."