

SWIMMING WOMEN



**Yana
KLOCHKOVA
(UKR)**
24.60%



**Natalie
COUGHLIN
(USA)**
19.70%



**Kirsty
COVENTRY
(ZIM)**
8.20%



**Britta
STEFFEN
(GER)**
8.20%

The best of the decade:
Inge de BRUIJN (NED)
27.90%

Dutch diva of the decade

In a way, there was only one candidate for the woman swimmer of the decade, for only one woman won six solo medals at the Olympic Games, only one woman won three solo golds at one Olympic Games, and only one woman set 10 world records in a summer. Born on August 24, 1973, in Barendrecht, Dutch Diva Inge de Bruijn enjoyed legendary status relatively late her career.

When her moment came, it rushed in with the impact of a gale-force storm and paved the way to a new era in women's sprint swimming. The world records she

established on butterfly and freestyle catapulted the Dutchwoman a generation ahead of her rivals on the way to three Olympic gold medals in Sydney, 2000.

If that was De Bruijn's finest fortnight, there had been another to rival it earlier in the year: on May 20 in Monte Carlo, the swimmer from Barendrecht clocked 25.83 in the 50m butterfly, the first of six world records in 14 days. In Sheffield six days later, she lowered the mark to 25.64 and, half an hour later, equalled the 50m freestyle record of Le Jingji (CHN) at 24.51. A day later, she shattered the 100m butterfly world record in 56.69.

Shockwaves rippled around the world of swimming: not only was the average time of the fastest ten women over 59sec at the time, but De Bruijn had wiped 1.19sec off the world record that had stood to Jenny Thompson (USA) and improved from a personal bests of 58.49 in 1999, and 59.28 in 1998. Only the 57.93 of Mary T Meagher (USA) in 1981 had made such an impact in the history of the event.

De Bruijn then confined to history the 100m freestyle standard that had stood to Li since 1994 with the first sub-54sec effort: her 53.80 – faster than the time in which the men's Olympic title was won in 1960 – came just nine months after she had won what was then the biggest medal of her career, a silver in 55.24sec behind Susan Rolph (GBR) at the European Championships in Istanbul in 1999.

"I don't know where those swims came from. I'm frightened to call my

coach (Paul Bergen) – he won't believe it. But I've worked so hard and that's all I can say. I never used to work hard. I wasn't dedicated. I had no motivation. I've turned myself around," said De Bruijn in Sheffield.

Her bull run ended back home in Drachten on June 4, 2000, with a 24.48 effort over 50m freestyle. Aged 26, De Bruijn, coached at the time by Paul Bergen in Oregon, had transformed herself from a woman whose career had been marked by many a mediocre performance. Before 1999, De Bruijn's only medal at world long-course level was won in 1991 as a young member of the Dutch 4x100m freestyle quartet that claimed bronze at the World Championships in Perth (she helped the Dutch win Olympic silver and bronze in the

Photo: REUTERS – YANNIS BEHRAKIS

RESULTS, MEDALS

She won four gold, two silver and two bronze medals at the Olympic Games. In the World Championships (l/c) she earned five gold, one bronze, another 1-1-2 in the short course events and she set 12 world records in long course events.

same relay in 2000 and 2004). The same year, she won silver and bronze medals over 100m butterfly and 50m freestyle at the European Championships but then, in her own words, was "too lazy" to do the work necessary to go further.

In 1996, she was dropped from the Dutch Olympic team because she "lacked motivation" in the eyes of coaches and selectors. She watched the Games on TV and resolved to seek Bergen's guidance for a second career. After improving in 1998 and 1999, she then rolled over opponents with three of the most decisive victories in swimming history: she defeated Therese Alshammar (SWE) over 50m freestyle with a world record of 24.32, got the better of the same rival over 100m freestyle (53.83 to 54.33, after setting a world record of 53.77 in the semi-final), while her tri-

*Inge de Bruijn
is among the
greatest of all-time*

Photo: REUTERS – YANNIS BEHRAKIS



umph in the 100m butterfly by 1.36sec over Martina Moravcova (SVK), in a world record of 56.61 remains the biggest margin of victory seen since the event was introduced in 1956.

A year later, she won the 50m free and butterfly and 100m butterfly world titles in Fukuoka and retained the 50m sprint crowns in 2003. By 2004, her reign looked more shaky but she emerged from the Athens Games as the first woman to retain the 50m freestyle title, a silver (100m free) and a bronze (100m butterfly). ■

by Craig LORD, English language editor,
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