

# OPEN WATER WOMEN



**Edith  
van DIJK  
(NED)**  
26.80%



**Britta  
KAMRAU  
(GER)**  
10.70%



**Vio  
VALLI  
(ITA)**  
7.10%

**The best of the decade:**  
**Larisa ILCHENKO (RUS)**  
**44.60%**

Also voted for:  
Kate Brookes-Peterson (AUS)  
Keri-Anne Payne (GBR)  
Angela Maurer (GER)  
Poliana Okimoto (BRA)

## The Russian torpedo

Nine days after turning 16, Larisa Ilchenko gave the first indication that she was a candidate to become the Female Open Water Swimming of the Decade. Her outstanding career would span many World titles and, in 2008, lead her to the first Olympic victory in the 10km marathon swimming race.

On the day in question, November 27, 2004 (Ilchenko was born on November 18, 1988 in Volgograd), at the third FINA World Open Water Swimming Championships, in Dubai (UAE), Ilchenko won the gold in the 5km. She would not lose the crown until July, 2009, in Rome.

After the shortest open water race in Rome, in which Ilchenko lost in a tight finish to Melissa Gorman (AUS), the Russian ace revealed that she had a problem with her left leg, a recurrence of an old injury that emerged at the worst moment of the race. "This affected my ability to sprint for the win," she confessed. The following day, the problem had worsened and Ilchenko, off the pace, was forced to abandon the 10km race. As she left the water, it was clear that she was limping.

"Tight finish" and "sprint for the win". These are key words in Ilchenko's strategy to dominate the open water international circuit. Since her early successes, her tactics remain the same: she follows the leading group until the last few hundred metres – thus saving some energy – and then applies a strong sprint to overcome her main opponents. Ilchenko's style has often been criticised by other swimmers, who accuse the Russian of some physical roughness in the water while searching for a winning "corridor" to the finish line.

Ilchenko is aware of the criticism (despite the accusations, she has never

Photo: REUTERS - TOBY MELVILLE

been disqualified by the judges for inappropriate behaviour) and commented on it at the end of her successful campaign at the 2007 FINA World Championships in Melbourne (AUS): "Yesterday, everyone was so kind and friendly – everyone was wishing each other good luck. Today, all the smiles were wiped off. It was a fight from the first moments of the day."

To her eight gold medals in World Championships – the best in the 20-year history of women's competition – Ilchenko added the Olympic 10km marathon title at the 2008 Games in Beijing. Using her already famous "turbo finish" (and beating silver medallist Keri-Anne Payne, from Great Britain, by a mere 1.5 seconds), she made a strange revelation after the race: "Some days ago, my boyfriend called me and said he had a dream in which I was bringing home the gold medal. His premonition was correct!" she said. Ten days later, in Moscow, she was one of the happiest of Russian gold medallists during a reception with the country's President, Dmitry Medvedev. ■

By Pedro ADREGA, Editor-in-chief of "FINA Aquatics World Magazine"

## RESULTS, MEDALS

Between those last days of 2004 and the middle of 2009, Ilchenko was the woman to beat in open water races – she also had some appearances in the pool, namely in the 200m, 400m and 800m free, but never came close to the notoriety she gained while competing in the "natural" environment. After Dubai, she was consecutively world champion in the 5km in 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008, and winner of the 10km world title in 2006, 2007 and 2008. In Ostia (the coastal area of the Italian capital), she had the only "weak" performance of her career so far, a silver medal in the 5km and a withdrawal in the 10km.

Photo: REUTERS - TOBY MELVILLE



Unbeaten for half of the decade...  
Ilchenko's tactics always worked: stay behind then sprint in the last few hundred metres