

Swimming Then & Now: A conversation with Vladimir Salnikov (RUS)

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These days, people take smartphone selfies with Vladimir Salnikov because he is the president of the Russian Swimming Federation – especially here in Kazan, the first stop of the 2018 FINA Swimming World Cup tour.

But 38 years ago, fans clamored to capture Salnikov on film with their boxy cameras and flash cubes because he had just claimed three gold medals at the 1980 Moscow Olympics where he became the first swimmer to break the 15-minute barrier in 1500 meters. By then, he had already become the first person to crack eight minutes in the 800 free and would go on to set 11 other world records (at 400m, 800m, and 1500m) by 1986.

Salnikov clinched one more gold medal at the 1988 Seoul Olympics at age 28, in 1500m, and retired.



Vladimir Salnikov in his glory days

Since then, the sport and the geopolitical landscape have changed radically, and Salnikov witnessed the evolutions firsthand – not only as the swimmer who dominated distance events during the Cold War, but also as head coach of the Soviet national team and, later, as a swimwear executive in Eastern Europe and the current leader of the Russian federation and FINA Bureau member.

During an exclusive sit-down interview in Kazan, Salnikov shared personal stories with a dash of humor to illustrate five ways the sport has changed.

Today, swimmers can make \$150,000 USD by winning the FINA World Cup series. What was it like to compete as an amateur, and what was your biggest prize?

We had some benefits, being top-level athletes in the Soviet Union, but it wasn't really much above the salaries of industrial workers. We still enjoyed the sport because when you stand on the podium as number one in all the country or the world, it's a great feeling. We wanted to achieve something to feel important. If it comes with money? Okay, that would be good as well. People were saying, 'Just achieve something and money will follow.' My biggest prize? For the Olympic golds in Moscow, I could buy a Lada car, which was Soviet made. It was okay. It had four wheels. It was red.

Do you still have your old racing suits? And do you believe in the power of today's high-tech suits?

I have some old suits, but they're falling apart. We were not so much concerned about the technology behind the swimsuits. Now they want equipment with the best hydrodynamic shape. The goggle shape will help you with hundredths of seconds. I know it's not true, but that's sports marketing. Something so little is inflated to an absolutely different level. For a few years, I was a Speedo international manager; I was responsible for

Eastern European markets. Remember the famous shark-skin idea which was brought by scientists who studied sea creatures? Of course, they choose the shark, the most aggressive, as something to copy with the fabric. The idea was that shark has different types of skin. One stripe is hard and one is smoother which makes the shark achieve better hydrodynamics and increase its speed in the water. Great marketing campaign! Everyone wanted to be the shark. But if you compare the speed of sharks and a swimmer, you come to the idea that maybe you should be sea turtle instead! We didn't have that. My only tool was hard work. I trusted if I worked harder than anyone in the world, I could achieve a better result. My coach said, 'You're not really a talented swimmer by nature, but you may be talented to withstand the hard work.'



Signing photos for the fans in Kazan

What was your training regimen, and would it hold up today?

We believed in great volume. I would swim 3,000 to 3,500 kilometers a year – sometimes up to 12 kilometers per session. And in one training session we would sprint, do general endurance sets, and something else. We believed after you finish it, you have a recovery period, and you would achieve your best results. But the recovery time for each system differs, so now, they changed the general approach and say you shouldn't do the work that will kill another type of quality you want to achieve. So you can have pure sprint: up to 20 seconds. You can have general endurance: say, more than half hour of swimming at constant speed, at around 120, 130 heart beats per minutes. And you can combine general endurance and pure sprint in one training session because those two go together. But if you add a lactic-acid generation set, like 200 meters 10 times with little rest and high intensity, you're killing other processes. So now you combine only matters which are not killing each other.

Do you know if the Soviet system was much different than the US system back then? Or were they doing similar things?

We stayed with Mark Schubert once, in Mission Viejo, California. Somehow, it was agreed that we could make an exchange program in 1978 or 1979. For us, it was very unexpected to start training at 5:30 in the morning. Normally we start at 7:30 and we thought we were very brave to do it. So to come in the middle of the night, when the sun isn't coming up, was kind of different, but when we saw 60 kids train like that, we were like: Okay. And we saw how hard the training was. Mark Schubert had these famous Animal Lanes at the far end of the pool where was everybody was so advanced, they trained like animals. If you get into the Animal Lanes, it's like a victory, an achievement you can be proud of. It was a battle. They gave us sets, thinking we would stop and we wouldn't do it. And we did it. It was really like survival.



An efficient and successful technique

What about 1500m technique? Has it changed much? Would your technique still work today?

It is almost the same, but not really. I took 40 to 50 [strokes] for 50 meters. Now top distance swimmers like Sun Yang and the Italian Gregorio Paltrinieri do 30 or 32 which requires more strength and more power applied to each stroke because the distance per stroke is much greater. And now, because the tempo is slower, they kick more frequently. I was dropping my legs because my arm strokes were very fast and I didn't have time. Now, you see some people swimming 1500 free with a six-kick beat per cycle (a cycle is two arms: one arm and the other) – which is normally a sprinting technique. Now the world record is 14:31:02, or about 27 seconds faster than I swam, but in some competitions – some international or European competition – I could still be in first three with my best time. With my best time, I could even be a winner.
