

Snapped: Mark Spitz on his remarkable seven-in-seven at Munich 1972

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Tall, dark, goggle-less and, most crucially of all, moustached, Mark Spitz is one of the most instantly recognisable Olympic athletes of all time. At the Munich 1972 games the swimmer won seven gold medals in a scarcely believable seven world-record times. According to the man himself, his legendary performances were not wholly unexpected, goggles are over-rated, and the moustache was key.

“I look kind of mean and aggressive looking,” Spitz said of the mesmerising photograph above.

“Not mean in a personality way, but powerful.”

For the modern viewer, the lack of goggles, let alone a swimming cap, is one of the most immediately striking aspects of the image; that and the fact that it looks like the nine-time Olympic champion (he also won two golds at the Mexico City 1968 Games) swam with his eyes closed.

“My eyes were always open, I think it’s an illusion,” he protested with a laugh.

As for no goggles, it equalled no problem. “We swam without goggles and we did just fine,” he said with an air of finality.

“Since that time I have swum with goggles and I find that my head position is strange, a little different.”

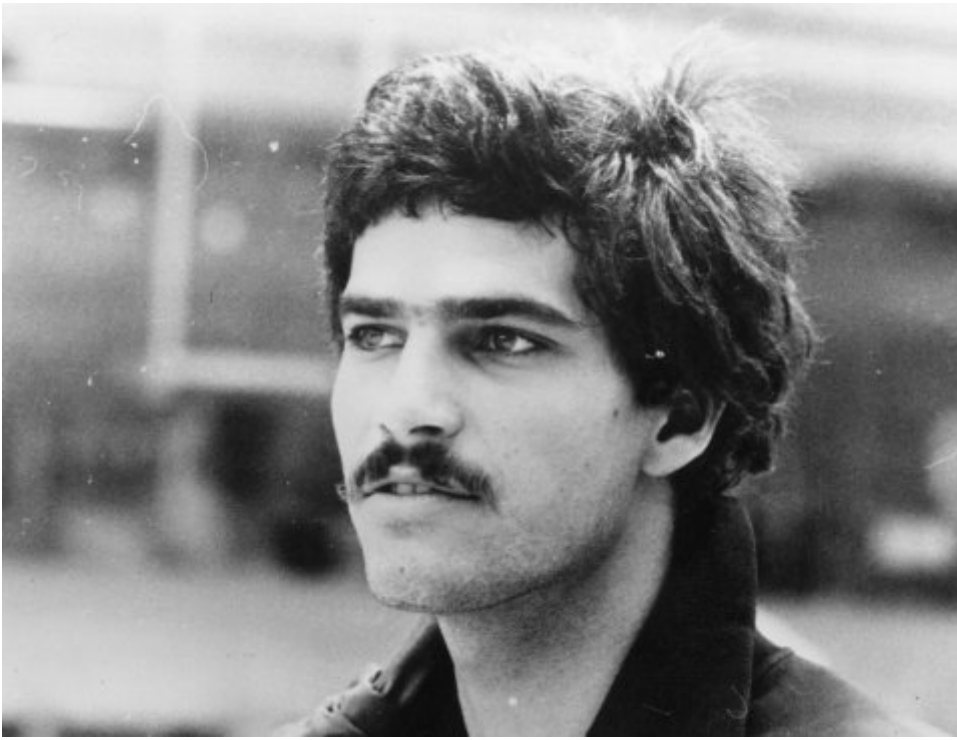


photo credit: gettyimages

The story of the magnificent moustache is a little more complicated. The 22-year-old Spitz, naturally outgoing, had let the hair on his top lip grow in early 1972 for no other reason than he could. Just a passing phase, he had intended to shave it off ahead of the Olympic trials in Chicago, but it all changed once he arrived at the pool.

“There were so many people talking about this moustache, because they had never really seen anything like that before on an elite swimmer,” he explained.

“And I thought it was kind of hysterical so I kept it. And it didn’t seem to hinder me whatsoever and maybe, in one sense, the commotion around the fact I had the moustache was distracting enough to give me an edge over my competitors.”

It did not, however, stop there. Spitz, with the by now bushy moustache, arrived in Munich a week or so ahead of the Games, and a subsequent chance encounter with the Russian team served only to increase the feeling of invincibility growing around the young Californian.

Most of the swimming finals at the 1972 Games were scheduled for the early evening and, keen to test the ambient light in the pool at that time, Spitz approached the Russians on the eve of the Games to ask if he could get in the pool for 10 minutes during their allotted training session. The Russian coaches agreed and cleared lane one for the USA swimmer. It was then that it got interesting.

“As I was swimming back and forth, I noticed there were a bunch of underwater windows and flash strobes were going off as I went past,” Spitz recalled.

“So I did some backstroke and saw half the coaching staff had disappeared – they were down in those underwater windows looking at me. So I did a really stupid-looking stroke when I got to the end of the pool – to throw them off guard, get them off the scent.

“When I got out they came up, unabashed with their cameras, and the coach who spoke English said, ‘My colleagues have never seen you swim in person; they want to know, do you always swim with that particular stroke?’ And I said, ‘Oh yes I do.’



photo credit: IOC

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The second question was, *‘I notice you have a moustache; are you going to shave that off?’* I had been planning to go back and shave it off that evening, as the ultimate psyche-out for myself, and then, all of a sudden, I realised, *‘Gosh, this is the same thing as Chicago – they are all concerned about the moustache.’* So I said, *‘No, I am not going to shave it off.’*

“And the next question was, ‘Isn’t it going to slow you down?’ And I don’t know what prompted me to say this, but I stroked my moustache and said, ‘This moustache deflects the water away from my mouth and allows me to get a lot lower and more streamline in the stroke and therefore [makes me] less likely to swallow water, and it allows me to swim faster and helped me break a couple of world records last month.’”

By 1973 the Russian men’s swimming team had, according to Spitz, all grown moustaches.

With the moustache firmly in place, Spitz’s schedule in Munich started with the 200m butterfly. It was a godsend for the record-chasing swimmer.

“It was the easiest for me because I could have a little bit of an off day and my confidence would still help me win,” he said.

“Then I went in and broke a world record, which helped my confidence.”

This soon became a familiar pattern, as the 200m events helped Spitz “taper” and “fine-tune” for the sprints. As the golds started to pile up, the USA man knew his aura was growing, something he worked on.

“Everyone comes to the pool and thinks, ‘Did I train enough? Did I rest enough? Are my roommates making too much noise?’ All those worries,” he explained. “And certainly they were thinking, ‘Well, Mark Spitz must not be worried.’”

“I would also go into the holding area before we went to swim and complain about my shoulder and my back, like I was a hypochondriac. I tried to get all my competitors psyched out that I was all of a sudden collapsing.”

After winning six out of six, a story began to circulate among the media that the big man was not going to risk his perfect record in the 100m freestyle. The journalists should have known better.

“I was always going for it,” Spitz laughed. “We let that story permeate a little bit. We spoke about it with a few other coaches and I guess the word permeated a little bit. But it was a bunch of nonsense, to be honest.”

Spitz went on to win the blue riband event by half a stroke in, of course, another world record. It was a performance that stood untouched for more than 35 years, until a certain Michael Phelps appeared on the scene.

But he did not have a moustache.
